

The Rhythm of Soundtracks and Emotional Tension: An Analysis of Sound Narratives in Lou Ye's Films

Yuan Tian, You Zhou

School of Film and Television Art, Hebei Institute of Communications, Shijiazhuang 050000, Hebei, China

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the uniqueness and narrative function of voice narrative in Lou Ye's films. Through the use of unsynchronized voice, blank and environment voice, he built an independent narrative space and strengthened emotional tension and narrative rhythm. The restraint of soundtrack and the variation of melody have become important means to promote narrative. At the same time, modern sound technology broadens the possibility of sound design and injects new vitality into Chinese film aesthetics. Lou Ye's practice provides important enlightenment for the exploration of voice narrative in the future.

KEYWORDS

Film Soundtrack; Emotion; Lou Ye; Sound Narrative

As a key element of film art, voice's special narrative function is not only reflected in the voice moment, but also in the well-designed silent moment. For the sound practice of modern movies, the absence of sound often becomes a more powerful narrative strategy^[1]. When the director deliberately chooses to leave the voice blank at a certain moment, the audience's perception is transferred to the most acute state. This unique aesthetic treatment can not only highlight the psychological state of the characters, but also play up the dramatic atmosphere tension. It is worth noting that the voice blank in Chinese films is not only a technical means, but also reflects the artistic pursuit of "the voice behind" in oriental aesthetics^[2]. The expressive force of movie sound has long surpassed the simple auditory stimulation. It weaves an invisible emotional network inside and outside the screen through the subtle changes of existence and loss. When the environment sound gradually disappears with the progress of the plot, or the voice stops suddenly at the critical moment, these carefully designed voice conversions can often trigger deeper psychological resonance of the audience. Through the dialectical relationship between the presence and absence of sound, the film narrative obtains an artistic tension beyond the concrete expression. The charm of the film sound art is precisely through this kind of ambivalent existence state, which arouses ripple like perception experience in the audience.

1 The Poetic Significance of Sound-Image Separation in Sixth-Generation Directors

Sixth-generation directors exhibit a unique aesthetic pursuit of sound within the context of urban modernization. They disrupt the traditional synchronous relationship between sound and image by employing fragmented sound design, creating poetic artistic expressions through the alienation of sound elements and visuals. This generation of filmmakers has embraced greater diversity and openness, which also signifies a return to the exploration of the essence of cinema as

an art form. Their innovation is evident not only in breaking conventional rules of cinematic sound but also in their reflection and critique of social realities.

1.1 Narrative Strategies of Asynchronous Sound

In asynchronous sound strategies, directors intentionally create a disconnect between sound and image to enhance the audience's sensory experience. The "soundscapes," comprising motorcycle roars, construction site hammering, and factory machine noises, extend beyond the confines of the screen to evoke deeper artistic meanings. When these sounds are misaligned with visuals, the audience is no longer passively consuming visual information but is compelled to seek emotional resonance within the tension of sound-image dissonance. By carefully layering sound, the films construct unique narrative spaces imbued with rich aesthetic significance^[3].

1.2 The Use of Silence in Environmental Sound

The strategic use of silence in environmental sound is a distinctive method employed by sixth-generation directors to portray collective imagery. When urban noise suddenly ceases, or an abrupt silence disrupts the established rhythm, it often prompts audiences to reflect on the struggles of marginalized lives. This silence is not merely the absence of sound; it shifts focus from visual perception to inner experiences. In this contemplative stillness, the unease and oppression felt by underprivileged individuals are subtly amplified. For instance, the prolonged silence in *Blind Massage* reflects the blind characters' deep yearning for light. Music frequently replaces dialogue, allowing viewers to more intimately experience the characters' psychological states^[4].

1.3 Autonomy of Sound Spaces

With advancements in sound technology, modern cinema has moved beyond the synchronous expression of sound and image. Sixth-generation directors deconstruct the traditional relationship between voice and visuals, granting sound an independent narrative and artistic role. Rich and precise sound design enhances the multidimensional expression of audiovisual language. In *Saturday Fiction (Lanxin Grand Theater)*, elements such as urban noise, delicate footsteps, continuous rainfall, faint human voices, and even characters' shallow breathing create a unique sound space^[4]. These seemingly chaotic sound symbols are not randomly assembled but are meticulously orchestrated into an autonomous sound system. When audiences are no longer confined by visuals, the imaginative space generated by sound becomes a vital tool for understanding the inner worlds of marginalized characters.

2 The Realistic Construction of Sound Layers in Lou Ye's Films

Sound is a critical element that defines cinematic space and unifies audio-visual imagery. In Lou Ye's films, sound not only delineates realistic physical spaces but also creates a unique state of existence through multi-dimensional sound layers. His films transcend traditional narrative requirements, elevating sound to the realm of a "language of poetry"^[3].

2.1 The Texture of Ambient Sound

In *Blind Massage*, the director uses intricate environmental sound design to imbue the massage room with a distinct vitality. The sounds of manual kneading, the faint hum of the air conditioning

unit, the swaying of door curtains, and the soft bumping noises of blind individuals navigating the space collectively create an enclosed and authentic healing environment. This precise capture of ambient sound not only reconstructs the working atmosphere of blind masseurs but also conveys the heightened auditory perception of visually impaired individuals through the textured quality of sound.

In urban spaces, the hustle and bustle of city noises—chattering crowds, roaring vehicles, street vendors calling out, and the clamor of construction sites—are omnipresent. These sounds intertwine with varying intensities and spatial depths, forming an authentic portrayal of life on the urban margins. Through carefully designed sound layers, Lou Ye's films construct unique narrative spaces imbued with profound aesthetic meaning ^[4].

2.2 The Spatial Dynamics of Dialogue

In the recording and post-production of dialogue, Lou Ye preserves the natural spatial reflections and reverberations inherent in human voices. This spatial quality is not refined for perfection but intentionally retains imperfections to emphasize environmental authenticity. By focusing on cramped urban living spaces, Lou Ye spotlights the tragic destinies of marginalized characters in society ^[3].

The interplay between human voice and space in his films often underscores social hierarchies. The dialogues of socially disadvantaged characters are frequently engulfed by overwhelming ambient noise, symbolizing their marginalized position in societal structures. Variations in tone, volume, and intonation serve as critical markers that distinguish social classes and deepen the narrative's thematic exploration.

2.3 Authenticity in Sound Details

Director Lou Ye places significant emphasis on capturing life-like sound details. Whether it is the sound of breathing during a massage in *Blind Massage* or the mechanical roar in *Suzhou River*, these seemingly mundane sounds are meticulously recorded and edited while retaining their natural texture. These soundscapes, which may appear random, reflect the director's profound observation of everyday life at the margins.

The realistic sound details not only enhance the authenticity of scenes but also synchronize seamlessly with the narrative rhythm. As the on-screen action and plot progress, subtle changes in sound often guide the audience's emotional response, creating a distinctive auditory tension. This sound design, rooted in the realities of life, maintains a documentary-like realism while imbuing the soundscape with deeper dramatic significance.

3 Emotional Sublimation of Soundtrack Use in Lou Ye's Films

3.1 Minimization and Restraint in Soundtrack Use

Lou Ye's approach to soundtrack design is characterized by its restraint, evident in his deliberate choice and minimal use of music. He frequently applies the "principle of minimization", restricting the use of soundtracks to critical plot points to avoid excessive interference with the audience's focus. For instance, in *Suzhou River*, soundtracks appear only in key scenes, subtly enhancing the audience's emotional connection with the characters without overshadowing the film's narrative core. By prioritizing visuals, dialogue, and ambient sound effects, Lou Ye ensures that music serves as a complementary emotional layer rather than diluting narrative tension through overuse.

This restrained approach does not weaken emotional expression but instead amplifies it through intentional “white space.” In *Blind Massage*, Xiao Ma's loneliness is not explicitly conveyed through elaborate melodies but rather through precise, intermittent soundtracks that metaphorically reflect his inner solitude and struggles. This controlled use of music elevates soundtracks beyond mere narrative tools, transforming them into integral elements of the film's emotional architecture.

3.2 Emotional Hints in Melodic Variations

Melodic variations in Lou Ye's films often mirror emotional fluctuations and plot development, serving as a crucial aspect of his narrative aesthetics. In *Mystery of the Floating City*, the theme music evolves throughout the film. Starting with a dark and somber tone, the melody gradually transitions to tension and urgency as the narrative intensifies. These shifts in melody directly parallel the characters' emotional escalation and the quickening pace of the plot.

Melodic variations are not merely tools for emotional expression but also symbolic representations of narrative rhythm. Through these musical transitions, the audience is guided to perceive subtle emotional shifts and narrative twists. Rain, a recurring motif in Lou Ye's films, often symbolizes tragic events, with the sound of heavy rain accelerating the narrative tempo and amplifying emotional resonance ^[5].

3.3 Dramatic Tension in Sound Rhythm

Sound rhythm is another defining feature of Lou Ye's soundtrack design, where changes in tempo, pauses, and repetition serve to propel the narrative while managing audience emotions. In *Spring Fever*, for instance, the rhythm of the soundtrack aligns closely with the emotional peaks and valleys of the characters. During moments of conflict, the music shifts from a slow ballad to an intense melody, heightening the tension and building audience anticipation for the unfolding story.

Lou Ye skillfully uses contrasts and rhythmic changes to create dramatic tension. For example, in *Suzhou River*, monologues and natural sounds, such as boats passing, flowing water, and background chatter, combine with visuals of dilapidated factories, smoking chimneys, and bustling fishing boats to evoke a sense of melancholy and decay ^[5]. These rhythmic elements, meticulously arranged, enhance the film's documentary-like realism while immersing the audience in its narrative world.

Sound rhythm in Lou Ye's films not only supports plot progression but also guides the audience's emotions toward the narrative's core. Far from being merely a temporal aspect of music, sound rhythm functions as an essential tool for structuring the narrative and expressing emotional depth.

4 Conclusion

Lou Ye's films have pioneered a new dimension of expression in Chinese cinema through their distinctive sound narratives. He transformed sound from a supplementary tool into a narrative cornerstone, imbuing it with profound emotional depth and functional significance while crafting a highly personalized realist aesthetic. With the advent of digital technology, immersive audio and multi-dimensional sound design have opened up new possibilities for sound-driven storytelling ^[11]. Lou Ye's innovative approach, combined with technological advancements, has the potential to further reshape the language of cinematic sound, fostering a deeper dialogue between sound and image.

This practice not only charts a new course for Chinese cinema but also extends the boundaries of sound aesthetics. At the same time, it offers valuable inspiration for the sustainable development of

the film industry, underscoring the vital role of sound in advancing cinematic art.

About the Author

Yuan Tian, (1993.11-), Female, Xingtai, Hebei Province, Han, Master, Teacher, School of Film and Television Art, Hebei Institute of Communications, Research Fields: Film and Television Sound, Game Audio.

References

- [1] Zhang Jinhui. Concept, Object, and Method: A Review of Sound Theory; Sound Practice [J]. World Cinema, 2021(2): 178-186.
- [2] Xiong Hui. Truth Is More Important Than Beauty [D]. Yunnan Arts University, 2013.
- [3] Gong Xuelian. Analysis of the Sound-Image Relationship in Lou Ye's Film Suzhou River [J]. China National Exhibition, 2021(19): 163-165.
- [4] Zhu Zhen. The "New Sensibility" Aesthetic of Audiovisual Language and Narrative in Saturday Fiction [J]. Western Radio and Television, 2022, 43(13): 155-157.
- [5] Guo Liang. A Brief Discussion on the Realist Audiovisual Language in Lou Ye's Films [J]. Film Literature, 2018(13): 89-91.
- [6] Shen Linfeng. Audiovisual Dynamics: The Intellectual Construction and Artistic Evolution of Sound-Image Relations [D]. China Academy of Art, 2022.