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NEW MODEL AND GENRE CONVENTIONS: A DEEP ANALYSIS OF THE INNOVATIONS IN CRAZY STONE

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes how Ning Hao's Crazy Stone (2006) inherits and innovates the genre conventions of Chinese black comedy films. Since the 1980s, Chinese black comedy films have absorbed Western creative techniques and developed a unique genre style. Crazy Stone successfully breaks the traditional framework of black comedy by blending genres, employing multiple narrative lines, and incorporating localized expressions. The film combines absurd humor, social criticism, and cultural symbols, creating a new genre model that has had a profound impact on subsequent films of the same genre. However, as this model has been widely imitated, genre innovation now faces the challenge of aesthetic fatigue. Film creation must continuously break through conventions and drive the innovation of genre development.

Keywords:

Black comedy, Genre film, New model, Inheritance And Innovation

Introduction

Since the economic reforms of the 1980s, Chinese cinema has explored the development of genre films, with black comedy being one of the key types. The first Chinese black comedy film is widely considered to be Black Cannon Incident (1986), directed by Huang Jianxin. Later films such as The Filial Son and Dutiful Grandson (1993) by Chen Peisi, Keep Cool (1997) by Zhang Yimou, and The Funeral of the Famous Star (2001) by Feng Xiaogang became

representative works of this genre. These films borrowed creative techniques from Western black comedy, such as absurd plots and humorous yet sharp satire, while combining highly stylized audiovisual language with realism. This led to the early formation of the genre conventions for Chinese black comedy films.

In 2006, director Ning Hao's *Crazy Stone* became a commercially successful, low-budget film with its unique approach of genre fusion, multi-threaded narrative, and localized visual expression. The release of this film sparked strong anticipation for the genre of "black comedy" among Chinese audiences, to the point that *Crazy Stone* was once seen as synonymous with black comedy. Subsequently, more similar films emerged, and black comedy became an important genre in the Chinese film market.

This article aims to analyze the relationship and evolution of *Crazy Stone* (2006) with some earlier representative films through genre theory. It will explore how the film inherits the genre traditions and conventions of Chinese black comedy. Special attention will be paid to contemporary genre theories such as "corpora" and "genre elements" to analyze the breakthroughs the film made in terms of genre innovation. Furthermore, the paper will reassess the position and impact of *Crazy Stone* in the context of Chinese black comedy, while providing valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges faced by Chinese black comedy films in the development of contemporary cinema.

Literature Review

Since *Crazy Stone* was released in 2006, over 370 papers about the film have been published in both Chinese and English journals. Through reviewing the literature, it is evident that the research mainly focuses on areas such as black comedy, character portrayal, narrative strategies, linguistic features, and postmodern characteristics, offering important perspectives for understanding the film.

In the field of black comedy, studies explore the absurd plot, anti-hero character design, and the depiction of psychological confusion. In terms of character portrayal, the film successfully creates images of lower-class characters through collective concepts and a networked structure. As for narrative strategies, multi-perspective, networked narratives, and nonlinear storytelling are central topics. In terms of linguistic features, scholars have focused on the use of dialects, intertextuality, various rhetorical features, and the application of black comedy. The deconstruction of the text, social life, and ethical norms, along with the collage and appropriation of visual elements, parody, irony, and gamified plot design, showcase strong postmodernist traits. Some studies also analyze the film from multiple dimensions, including carnivalization, existentialism, communication theory, and semiotics.

Overall, research on *Crazy Stone* is broad and deep, but unfortunately, existing studies primarily focus on closed-text analysis of the film itself, lacking exploration of the film's relationship to other films of the same genre. Therefore, these studies fail to fully uncover the film's contribution to the development and evolution of the Chinese black comedy genre, which is the main focus of this article.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative content analysis to explore how Ning Hao's *Crazy Stone* (2006) inherits the conventions of black comedy genre films and makes breakthroughs and innovations in the genre. The main text for analysis is the film itself. In addition, genre film theory, black comedy, and film narrative theory provide the necessary theoretical support for the analysis. The research approach is to analyze the film's text to identify the conventions of the Chinese black comedy genre it inherits and to examine the breakthroughs and innovations it brings. By doing so, the study aims to evaluate the film's influence on subsequent films of the same genre and reassess its contribution and position in the development of Chinese black comedy.

This study strictly follows the ethical standards of published materials and acknowledges its limitations, such as possible subjective interpretive biases. The scope of the research is limited to a few mainland Chinese black comedy films and does not cover Hong Kong black comedy films. As such, the conclusions may not apply to the broader trends of genre film development in various regions of China.

Analysis

Inheritance and Innovation

Tudor proposes that genre is a collection of cultural conventions, something we all believe in together. (Neal, 2000) Therefore, the creation of any genre film must adhere to certain "genre conventions." *Crazy Stone* inherits the traditions of early Chinese dark comedy films, particularly the realism found in *Black Cannon Incident*, which critiqued and reflected on social issues through humor. The film depicts several groups of characters vying for a jade stone, showcasing social issues such as the gap between the rich and poor, moral dilemmas, legal gaps, human flaws, and the struggles of the lower classes. As such, the film is not just a comedy but a work filled with social reflection.

The use of paradoxical plot setups is another convention of dark comedy. Regarding "paradox," The Encyclopedia of China: Philosophy, Volume 1 defines it as: "A type of proposition in which affirming its truth leads to affirming its falsehood, and affirming its falsehood leads to affirming its truth. This type of proposition can also be expressed as: a proposition A, where A implies not-A, and not-A implies A, making A and its own negation, not-A, equivalent" (Xiu, T. 2019). As we can see, the two contradictory aspects of a paradox form a self-referential, circular loop, highlighting the limitations of formal logic and the dilemmas of rational thinking. It represents the ultimate form of comedic contradiction. Compared to ordinary comedy, the "self-reversing" nature of paradoxes are stronger, making them even more absurd and laughable. *Crazy Stone* continues this tradition. The film uses a multi-threaded narrative where each thread revolves around a paradox. For instance, a real estate mogul spends a fortune hiring an international thief, Mike, to steal a gem, but it is Mike's appearance that leads to the plan's failure. The head of security, Bao Shihong, who is the most committed protector, unknowingly exchanges the real gem with a fake one, making him the thief. These paradoxical plotlines are both humorous and expose the absurdity of fate, prompting reflection on life and destiny. Through social critique and paradoxical plot design, *Crazy Stone* inherits the genre conventions of Chinese dark comedy while also showcasing innovation.

One major breakthrough in *Crazy Stone* is its genre fusion. The film boldly combines elements of black humor, comedy, and crime genres, preserving the absurdity and satire of dark comedy while incorporating the humor and gags of comedy and the tension and thrill of crime films, providing a rich audiovisual and psychological experience for the audience. This fusion of genres has had a profound influence on later films of the same genre.

Multi-threaded storytelling is another innovation. Director Ning Hao breaks from traditional linear storytelling by adopting the multi-threaded narrative strategy seen in *Two Smoking Barrels*. The film revolves around a jade stone, with four groups of characters competing for it. These story lines intertwine, and especially in the latter part of the film, when the story lines converge, the plot becomes more exciting. The use of multi-threaded narrative greatly enhances the film's sense of humor and absurdity, offering a fresh aesthetic experience for Chinese audiences.

If the innovation of genre blending and multi-threaded storytelling is influenced by Western genre films, then the presentation of local cultural symbols reflects a learning from Chinese art cinema, marking a breakthrough in the genre of dark comedy films. In terms of spatial representation, the film showcases both modern high-rise buildings and old alleyways, reflecting the urban-rural integration characteristic of China's modernization process. In language, the widespread use of Sichuan dialect not only adds to the comedic effect but also emphasizes the film's local flavor. In terms of cultural concepts, the film presents Chinese-specific notions such as the concept of face in Chinese culture, collectivism, luck and fate, which resonate with the audience's lives and emotions. Through these localized symbols, the film not only enriches its cultural connotations but also resonates deeply with the audience.

The Birth of a New Model

"Altman tends to combine genres into a category, creating a film corpus. This perspective emphasizes that the composition of genre films is a cognitive treasure trove, containing elements such as images, sounds, scripts, characters, expectations and conventions. Paul Watson points out that contemporary Hollywood films are essentially composed of genre elements." (Neal.2000) As a result, a new concept of genre has emerged, which suggests that each genre film has its unique "genre components", and these components make up a richly nuanced film corpus. The repetitiveness of genre films is reflected in their use of "genre components" from the film corpus, while the innovation of genre films lies in the unique ways these components are combined.

By applying this new concept of genre cinema to *Crazy Stone*, we can see that the social satire, paradoxical plots, genre fusion, multi-threaded narrative, and localized symbols in the film are actually common components of the genre film corpus. "These elements have always appeared in various genre films in the past. The true innovation of the film lies in how it reconfigures these traditional elements in a unique way, creating a new "genre model" for Chinese dark comedy films. Following the massive success of *Crazy Stone*, this "new model" became the "classic formula" for similar films in China, giving rise to many imitative works.

However, over time, this "new model" has gradually evolved into an "old convention." The mechanical imitation of the formula has led to aesthetic fatigue among audiences. Many imitations have been criticized for lacking innovation and breakthrough. The vitality of genre films lies in their continuous breaking of old conventions and innovations. As literary critic

E.D. Hirsch said Genre is an expectation system (Neal.2000), and how to break through old conventions and models is key to the expectation system of genre films.

Conclusion

Through inheriting and breaking genre conventions, Crazy Stone successfully created a new model for Chinese dark comedy films. Rooted in realism, it integrates absurdity and satire from dark comedy while skillfully blending crime, comedy, and other genres. The use of multi-threaded narrative and localized symbols showcases unique cultural appeal and profound social critique. These innovations have had a lasting impact on the development of Chinese dark comedy films.

However, as the "new model" created by Crazy Stone has been continually imitated, genre innovation faces the challenge of aesthetic fatigue. The vitality of genre films lies in breaking through old conventions and constantly reconfiguring the components of the film corpus, thus driving breakthroughs and innovations in genre cinema.

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