

# Interpreting the Film "Sherlock on the Plain" from a Semiotic Perspective

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**Abstract:** *Although Sherlock on the Plain is a small-budget film, it was released in 2019 to rave reviews and has been highly praised and recommended by numerous film gurus on various social media platforms. The film's unique style, which incorporates various seemingly conflicting elements, is of great learning value both in terms of film text and aesthetic style, and the analysis of various symbols in the film is extremely instructive for the author's personal professional learning. This paper will attempt to analyze the meaning of various symbols in the film from the perspective of symbolic narrative, to understand the director's observation and reflection on the social reality in the film, and to explore the resonance between the Chinese emotion in the rural "earthy" film and the audience.*

**Keywords:** *Semiotics; film text; aesthetic style*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Origin of the study

The film "Sherlock on the Plain", the debut work of non-technical status director Xu Lei, has received a lot of praise since its public release. The film was not only nominated for Best Feature Film at the 13th FIRST Youth Film Festival as well as the Best Film Text Award, but was also nominated as the most popular comedy film in Douban's 6th annual list of films. This paper attempts to analyze the meaning of various symbols in the film from the perspective of symbolic narrative, and to explore the resonance between the Chinese emotions and the audience in the rural "earthy" film.

### 1.2. Literature review

In all the literature reviewing the film Sherlock on the Plain, most scholars start from the film's vernacular theme, analyze the film's absurd magical realism narrative style, and interpret the setting of plot and characterization in the film text. In addition, regional characteristics are also a part of the scholars' focus. From the title of the film, we can feel the combination of two very different words, "plain" and "Sherlock", and the combination of the plain in North China and the famous detective in London, such a collision of Chinese and Western elements has produced a unique chemical reaction. The film's regional characteristics and vernacular themes make the whole film is filled with a unique oriental aesthetic style, the film for the urban-rural gap, class confrontation, police relations between the people of some social issues are also shown, "Sherlock on the Plain" fully expressed this marginal society in the vernacular style, in some of the absurdity of the surface show Behind the absurd and humorous plot, the most fundamental characteristic of Chinese rural society - human society - is accurately reflected.

The slightly ambiguous genre of the film has also been discussed by scholars, some of whom argue that "it is biased to measure Sherlock on the Plain by the realization of genre, because the logic applied throughout the film is never the logic of genre"<sup>[1]</sup>. The author argues that the logic of genre is to make the independent vacuum of drama real and self-consistent, but the logic of life and characters in Sherlock on the Plain is real enough, "when the logic of life and the logic of characters are real enough, it acquires an unknown and powerful power to disregard, break through and abandon the logic of genre". There is also a view that "Sherlock on the Plain" is a pseudo-detective genre film, which contains many detective elements, but in the end, the film is still based on the fate of the characters, and until the end of the film, the audience still does not know the identity of the perpetrators.<sup>[2]</sup> "Sherlock on the Plain" is, according to the author, "a detective film in appearance, but in reality a drama about the life of a country character.

Sherlock on the Plain" is indeed a "dark horse" of 2019 theatrical films, surprising many scholars with a lot of praise, but there is no lack of criticism, some scholars believe that the film contains some

vulgar and suggestive representative words, "Sherlock on the Plain The jokes or baggage used in "Sherlock on the Plain" are of an exhibition and curiosity nature, at the expense of mocking and poking fun at the ignorance of the countryside"<sup>[3]</sup>, the author believes that the film extracts the peasants' selfishness, love of taking advantage and other traits of national inferiority to the fullest, satisfying certain eccentricities and psychology of the audience, with considerable pandering and catering.

### **1.3. Research methodology**

The meaning of various symbols in the film, including character symbols (the two main characters, the scoundrel's nephew, the police, Mr. Fan, etc.), scene symbols (the fields, the city, the main character's home and the forest, etc.) and prop symbols (the goldfish, the horse, etc.), is analyzed, and the role of various symbols in the film's narrative is analyzed in the context of the film's narrative text. The film's unique narrative style and aesthetic style are analyzed in the context of the narrative text.

### **1.4. Research significance**

Sherlock on the Plain has attracted the attention of many filmmakers since its release, and director Guan Hu once praised the film without mincing words, saying that Sherlock on the Plain "is the birth of a new genre in China and has set a precedent". The film has a strong learning value both in terms of its smooth narrative text and unique aesthetic style, and the analysis of various symbols in the film is instructive for the author's personal professional study.

## **2. Plot Summary of Sherlock on the Plain**

As the debut film of non-graduate director Xu Lei, the film has received a lot of critical acclaim since its release. The film was not only nominated for Best Feature Film and Best Film Text at the 13th FIRST Youth Film Festival, but was also nominated as the most popular comedy film in Douban's 6th annual list of films. The film is made entirely by vegetarians, the main character is the director's own father, the film is mostly local dialect and rural scenes, can be said to be "full of earthy flavor", but this seemingly "can not be in the hall of fame" earthy film, but received a lot of praise. It is a dark horse in the 2019 theatrical movie.

The film is 98 minutes long, the camera starts with a cow hanging in mid-air slowly falling, the main character of the film: Chaoying, he sold the family cow in order to meet his partner's wish to build a new house before he died, the old house was knocked down a moment of dust, the title of the film appears. The other two important characters of the film: Zhan Yi and Shu He, who are good friends who come to help Chao Ying build a new house, but on the way to the construction site Shu He is involved in an accidental car accident, the hit-and-run driver escapes, and the comatose Shu He needs a lot of money for hospital treatment. Like Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, Chaoying and Zhan Yi embark on a ridiculous and ludicrous journey together to pursue the murder.

These two "detectives" are not like the two English gentlemen, compared to the two Chinese peasants in the countryside is more unprofessional, less sophisticated and clumsy. As Fei Xiaotong says, the interpersonal relationship in a vernacular society is a poorly ordered pattern, with human relationships presented as an overlapping and interlocking interpersonal network, which is centered on the individual and bounded by blood, region, and emotion<sup>[4]</sup>. The two of them first went to the godmother Daxian to ask for the location of the real culprit, and they continued to trace it according to the direction pointed out by the godmother; when the store owner refused to check the surveillance, they called the relatives of the grandmother's family to intercede, and through the surveillance video they finally locked the three suspect vehicles, and the next step was to check them one by one; through the insurance company They learned the owner's information through an acquaintance of the insurance company, and could not find a way to enter the neighborhood after entering the city, so they had to seek help from relatives working in the bathhouse. The contrast between the countryside and the city in the film is very stark, as Chaoying and Zhan Yi come to the city, the way to rely on friends and relatives in the countryside, and the telephone pleading seems to have failed, and the ruthless security guards and indifferent police officers make the pursuit of the murder more difficult.

However, at the end of the film, it is still not clear who the real driver is, and Shu He is discharged from the hospital. Chaoying, Zhan Yi and the discharged Shu He drive their tricycle through the countryside, and the young and energetic closing song of the rock singer starts, and the three of them walk together towards the sunlit green forest. The film ends here, the whole film is sad with joy, in many

sad plot, the director added some dark humor elements, the protagonist's bitterness and happiness also makes the film has a few romantic meaning.

### 3. Characters, Scenes and Props Symbols

#### 3.1. Character symbols

##### 3.1.1. Chao Ying

From the name of Chao Ying, it is easy to see the significance of this character in the whole film. Chao Ying, a name from the 1950s, implies the desire to "catch up with Britain and the United States"; at the same time, it extends to "superhero", which is precisely the image of Chao Ying in the film: he believes that his best friend cannot be injured in vain and thus The nephew of the tree river gave up the proposal to use the new agricultural cooperation to cover the costs, did not hesitate to pay the medical bills for his friend, after learning that the horse sold is "kill stubble", rather than pay 200 yuan to redeem the horse, the face of the money temptation of the boss Fan also did not think twice to refuse, the rainy day will be goldfish dumped in the roof of the plastic sheet to watch The image of ..... Chao Ying is extremely idealistic in the whole movie, such a chivalrous, virtuous, honest and romantic person seems to be difficult to find a prototype in reality, he is too loyal and stubborn, but the natural performance of the vegetarian actors in the movie and the addition of simple Hebei dialect, all make the image of Chao Ying more three-dimensional real and chivalrous. The director has also said that the film was inspired by real events that happened in the countryside, which is his tribute to the rural fathers who still made decent choices in the face of the valley of life, "You get that feeling when you look at the rural people, they have been abandoned by this era, but they know it themselves, but they are still trying to live."<sup>[5]</sup>

##### 3.1.2. Zhan Yi

Unlike Chaoying, Zhan Yi's image is less idealistic and closer to reality. "He can look for the real perpetrator for his good friend Shu He, but he has never come up with a penny to help Chaoying share some of Shu He's medical expenses. Of course, this does not mean that Zhan Yi is hypocritical or heartless, but indeed Zhan Yi's approach seems more real, he is righteous, warm, but also stubborn, stingy. In addition, the character of Zhan Yi has an important role in the film: to add interest. If Chaoying's image is simple and honest, then Zhan Yi is a ghostly and witty one, always suggesting some "ghost ideas" for Chaoying, such as going to the godmother to ask which direction the escaped vehicle is, leading Chaoying to climb over the wall into the campus after entering the city, posing as a delivery boy to blend into the neighborhood, Chaoying dressed in "Meituan delivery "The "hungry" delivery man borrowed clothes to the scene, greatly adding to the comedic effect of the film. Whether impersonating a delivery boy was caught in the scene, or to avoid fines will be spit in the hands as a baking cream wiped on the hair behavior, all for the film added an element of absurd humor.

##### 3.1.3. Tree River

The whole film can be said to be "because of the tree river," although the tree river in the film is not much and most of the scene is lying in a coma on a hospital bed, but this role as a narrative thread throughout the film, in the tree river's help Chao Ying can start to build a house, and because of the construction of the house tree river was involved in a car accident, because of the tree river's Because of the car accident, Chao Ying and Zhan Yi formed the "earth cool detective", embarked on a journey to chase the murderer. In fact, Chaoying, Zhan Yi, Shu He these three men in life have the same point: the sense of lack of family. Chao Ying's wife died, Zhan Yi still has not yet started a family, Shu He's daughter broke up with her parents, perhaps because of this, the three men formed an "iron triangle", in the absence of children to assist in life, they become each other's strongest reliance. Whether life is sad or happy, they will often sit together to drink and chat, talk about the smallest things in life, facing the dilemma of life but still optimistic life, optimistic about life, which is also the symbolic meaning of this "iron triangle".

##### 3.1.4. Tree River's nephew and the man who bought the horse

These two characters appear in the film for a very short time, but implies the director's sensitive observation and thinking about society. Shu He's nephew, as Shu He's blood relative, is not only unwilling to pay for his uncle's treatment when he is in a coma, but even justifiably goes to Chaoying's home and asks Chaoying to be responsible for all of Shu He's medical expenses, rightfully saying, "My uncle was in a car accident because he was working for you, so of course you have to pay for the medical expenses". The buyer Chao Ying meets when he is forced to sell his horse in the market, and when Chao Ying insists on redeeming the horse he has already sold to him, he says a meaningful line in the film, which is already

short on dialogue: benevolence and justice are not worth much. The six words are sharp and cold, piercing the beautiful atmosphere of chivalry and goodness created in the front of the film and provoking the audience to think deeply about it.

### **3.2. Scene symbols**

#### **3.2.1. Sunflower field**

The large field of sunflowers in the film, in which Chao Ying squats in a hat to relieve himself and casually pulls off two leaves as hand towels, is a fusion of idyllic poetry and primitive savagery, as the director explains: "Like life, it's a mixture of sadness and joy, and there's no way to know." I think the intention of the sunflower also echoes the "hope" expressed in the film many times. Although the whole film is essentially a sad story, the symbol of the sunflower field gives the story a more positive and optimistic feeling.

#### **3.2.2. Ruins**

Many times in the film, Chaoying stands in front of a wall of landscape tiles with "Happy Home" written on it and stares at it thoughtfully, but until the end of the film, Chaoying's "Happy Home" is not built and he has to live in an old abandoned school with old windows and doors and a leaky roof. However, Chao-Ying comes to his wife's grave and describes to her how bright and exquisite the new house is, with "four bright and four dark" houses, and he speaks so sincerely that he doesn't know whether he is lying to her or to himself. Chao Ying's old house was turned into a ruin, and the banner on the original door frame was lying on a pile of ruins: Good Life. In the midst of a rural civilization that is constantly being dismantled by urban civilization, the knocked down tiled house is not only a testimony of history, but also Chaoying's aspiration and hope for life. Even though Chao-Ying's "lies" in the movie are paired with dilapidated houses, they feel very tender, and this emotional warmth dispels the sadness and does not give people a sense of obscurity.

#### **3.2.3. City**

The film's main location is the countryside, where several episodes are in the city to find the real perpetrators. The scenes in the countryside are almost always sunny, with golden fields and so on, giving people a vibrant, positive and sunny sense of hope, but in the scenes in the city, the tones are greenish-blue, with almost no bright colors, the weather is also cloudy, and the tightly packed high-rise buildings make people feel breathless. He keenly captures contemporary urban life and the indifference and alienation of the people therein.

#### **3.2.4. Forest**

At the end of the film, Chaoying, Zhan Yi and Shu He walk together towards the forest, the picture is shrouded in soft sunlight, looking dreamy and romantic, accompanied by the lyrics of the closing song "Your life is not long, you can't use her to grieve, all that bad weather, it will finally pass; let what should come, we are waiting here, we just sing, sing, sing, sing .....", this field once again carries great hope, and the audience's sadness is greatly comforted.

### **3.3. Prop symbols**

#### **3.3.1. Monitoring**

The whole film is the third point of view, and the perspective of the surveillance and the overall match. First of all, at the beginning of the story, it was because of the lack of surveillance that they could not identify who was the "real killer" who hit the tree river, and then it was after viewing the surveillance images of the vehicles on the road that they identified the three cars suspected of being the killer; through the above, Chaoying and Zhan Yi went to the city to look for more clues. In the course of their search, they encountered surveillance when climbing over the wall, and then hit the surveillance in the elevator when they were in the neighborhood, and finally the surveillance footage from the car recorder, and the whole movie became the climax here. In the rural environment, surveillance is driving the steps of Chaoying and Zhan Yi pursuit of the murder, but to the unfamiliar city, the existence of surveillance seems to have become a kind of oppression, cold machines no longer care about the human feelings of acquaintances in society, the two are clearly standing at the other side of the whole situation to watch the "detective" in the position of being watched, for the whole film Adding a few absurdity.

### 3.3.2. Goldfish

Chao Ying lives in a dilapidated school, it is raining heavily outside the house, the leaky roof can only be covered with transparent plastic sheeting, Chao Ying slowly walked up the stairs, goldfish was poured by him in the plastic sheeting, this can be called the most classic image in the entire film, the entire film's aesthetic style are very unique, and here is the ultimate expression. The goldfish swimming in the air is reflected in the transparent plastic sheeting, and Chao Ying's face is shimmering with golden water, the picture is extremely poetic.

### 3.3.3. Horse

Like the goldfish, the horse also gives the film a high romantic significance. When Chao Ying takes the horse to the market and has no choice but to sell it, he strokes the mane of the old horse and says to the buyer, "He is very kind." This episode enriches Chao-Ying's "superhero" image of loyalty and goodness in the film. At the end of the film, in the deep darkness of the night, Chao Ying rides alone to the dangerous city-rural area in order to prevent Jim Yi from falling into the trap of Mr. Fan. The old horse is like Chao-Ying's "Losinante", and Chao-Ying is the romantic knight who always takes chivalry and integrity as his most loyal belief. Chao Ying is more like "Don Quixote on the Plain" than "Shylock on the Plain", stubbornly struggling in the sad and happy episodes of life, but always insisting on benevolence and morality.

## 4. Accompanying Text: Presenting Vernacular Society

Through the various symbols in the film, the director conveys to the audience the personal aesthetics and emotions hidden beneath the story, and it is not only the symbols in the film that can help the audience understand the deeper meaning of the film, but also the environment created by its accompanying text. In the book "Principles and Deduction of Semiotics", Professor Zhao Yiheng proposed the "accompanying text". He believes that every symbol is a combination of a text and its accompanying text<sup>[6]</sup>, so if one wants to interpret a symbolic text in more detail, one has to build a complete textual environment. In the movie "Sherlock on the Plain", when the audience sees the sunflower field and the divine woman asking for a divination, they will also mobilize their own knowledge and life experience to naturally associate with their own impressions and understanding of Chinese vernacular society or their own life in the countryside, thus making the meaning of the symbols in the text richer.

It is also because the accompanying text forms a complete textual environment that deepens the audience's resonance with the film's content. In fact, the film brings the audience a complex viewing experience, its "earthy" sense is familiar to most people, such as witchcraft, the fields or the primitive and barbaric practice of using leaves as hand paper, these behaviors are in line with the stereotypical image of Chinese rural society and rural peasants in most people's minds, and the character of the characters. The characters' personalities and their various acts of adherence to benevolence and morality can also create an ethical resonance with the audience. However, the film's unique oriental aesthetics are unfamiliar to the audience. Take the most iconic scene in the film: Chao Ying pours a goldfish into a transparent plastic sheet on the roof in the middle of a rainy night. The image of the "little man" is a simple and unpretentious Chinese peasant, and such a quiet and beautiful picture cannot help but make the audience, who are now mostly in an accelerated society, unable to breathe even in the face of difficulties and pressure, feel a poetic and warm romance.

## 5. Conclusions

Director Xu Lei once said in an interview that the laughter from the audience time and again at the screening was something he did not anticipate, because he did not want to make a comedy, he just wanted to express emotions and aesthetics. In the film, he showed the audience a group of familiar and unfamiliar rustic farmers, who are both rough and real, earthy and romantic. Even in the face of many difficulties, they still have good wishes and aspirations. The reality of their predicament does not shock Chaoying and Zhan Yi, their passionate souls, but makes them bloom golden flowers of hope in the countryside with a more optimistic attitude and sense of life.

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