

Knife in the Clear Water: Reflection of "Life and Death" in the Image

Ziluo Shao

The College of Literature and Journalism
Sichuan University
Chengdu, China

Abstract—The film "Knife in the Clear Water" highlights the image of "water" and "bull", and then reflects the binary opposition of "life and death". Through the display of the ritualized cleansing activities such as Ma Zishan's Ghul and others, it conveyed the concept of cleanliness in Islam. In the screen picture, through the mapping of "water", the old man and the bull have completed their identity replacement; the bull is also transcendent to the nature of animal and is placed on the altar of ritual worship. Death is a big topic in the field of religion. This film, adapted from Shi Shuqing's novel with the same name, refers to the true nature of life with its profound metaphor. This article mainly discusses the symbolic significance of video narrative with specific images.

Keywords—*Knife in the Clear Water; metaphor; concept of life and death*

I. INTRODUCTION

Wang Xuebo's film "Knife in the Clear Water" is derived from Shi Shuqing's novel with the same name. This is a story about the old man and the bull. The place where the story happened: Xihaigu, Ningxia, the people who live here are the determined believers of Islam. In the arid and dehydrated Northwest, the material life is extremely scarcity, in the face of death, people have to make difficult choices, either they have to renounce their beloved bulls, or rescue the dead souls. When psychoanalytic theory was introduced into movies, the movie screen was regarded as a mirror, and the viewer peered into the lives of others through the "mirror", in fact they are watching themselves. The people outside the mirror and inside the mirror are both the subjects of observation. Mr. Le Daiyun pointed out: "As a mirror, the feature that is first emphasized is fidelity, not only the fidelity in appearance, but also the substantive fidelity; not only it reflects a true external world, but also the inner soul; not only it is static reflection, but also dynamic reflection." [1]

II. SYMBOLIC REFERENCE OF "WATER"

A. Water and the Cleanliness Concept of the Hui Nationality

The film shows the Hui Muslims' concept of cleanliness by shooting water. The Hui people's concept of cleanliness originates from Islamic doctrine. The original Arabic word for cleanliness is "taharat", which means that it is clean from legal impurity and filth. From the relevant expositions in the Koran

and Sunnah, the word "cleanliness" has appeared many times, showing the importance of this value to religious practice and human life. [2] At the beginning of the movie, the wife of the old man passed away, and only children with mourning apparel standing outside the wall, passing the kettle in their hands one by one, the sound of washing and chanting came from the house, after a while, four men carried the deceased body wrapped with white cloth and walked out of the house. It was speculated that the water just passing in was used to wipe and clean the body of the deceased in order to bury her. When the son Yel Guba offered to slaughter the bull to rescue his mother, the old man looked at the old bull silently, then Yel Guba holding the water to clean the old bull and feed it with water so that it can meet the program norms of the ritual.

"Knife in the Clear Water" shows a total of three times of "Ghul" and "Wudhu" for the elderly Ma Zishan. Before every cleanliness, the old man first meditates and prays, and then opens the pot, let the water flows slowly, and the old man cleans himself according to a specific procedure. And this kind of life-like scene looks like a rather ornamental ceremony. "The ceremony is a social constraint, a set of commonly used languages, and a bond." [3] This cleaning procedure is recognized by the entire Hui society, so it is inherited to this day. In essence, the self-cleaning with water is only an external sign people use this external behavior to complete the "washing" of their inner soul. "In other words, posture is an ideographic symbol, or a symbol." [4] Using water for body cleansing has become an ideographic symbol; this symbol refers to the pursuit and recognition of cleanliness in the entire Hui culture.

B. The Materialization of the Inner World

In addition, water changes into rain, snow and other forms, shows the inner activities of the people. Throughout the movie, Ma Zishan's are taciturn, but his introversive character gathers huge emotional power. The solemnity and sadness experienced by the audience, in addition to being moved by the actor's performance, a large part of it also stems from the image's setting and precise depiction of the surrounding environment. Several scenes of rain and snow in "Knife in the Clear Water" all coincide precisely with the characters' inner emotions. Director Wang Xuebo also said in the interview: "The psychological activities of the old man in the graveyard can only be handled through images and artistic objects." [5]

So the old man buried his dead wife. When the crowd dispersed, the old man stood beside the newly added mound, his figure was small, the sky was raining, a black back, the old man wiped his face, the rain was getting heavier, he got up, looked back, and stared at the mound again, the rain rendered his sadness, at this time he was sad and hurtful, although he had not spoken before, he was only standing far away at the corner, silently watching the funeral his wife, and bowed his head slowly followed the funeral procession. But from this rain, audience realized his reluctance to his wife. On the day when the son offered to slaughter the bull for his mother's forty-day sacrifice, the old man's heart had been fighting fiercely, and he came to the graveyard again. Snow was falling from the sky; Ma Zishan knelt beside his wife's grave, twisting dirt in his hands. On one side is his dead wife, and on the other side is the old bull who sticks with him through difficulties. He looked at the grave and then back at the old bull, his action implied his psychological activity. It seems that he was telling his wife that he is going to kill the bull to rescue her. The falling snow was silent, but extremely cold. No matter what choice he made, it was a big challenge for him, and the snow is a metaphor of his inner silence. The rain was pouring, and the children took out the containers at home to receive water. The old man sat on the rafters again, and looked at the old bull outside the window. The rain sounded like a drum, and it was also a stir in his heart. The old man's heart was also raining to kill the old bull. When the sacrifice day came, the sky was snowing again. When the sky was bright, the old man came out of the bull shed. The ground was white and covered with snowflakes, symbolizing the solemnity of sacrifice and cleanliness. In order to avoid witnessing the bull slaughtering scene, the old man left early, he gave his son a piece of white cloth and left without hesitation. The north wind hissed, the old man was walking alone on the road, his son pulled out the old bull, and covered its eyes with the white cloth, and the imam took the knife, the old man seemed to know what is happening and tears came from his eyes. The shepherd chased after the flock, but at this time, the old man lost the old bull and he passed by the snow tomb again, he just watched from a distance, like infinite comfort to the deceased wife.

C. Water: the Mirror in the Shadow

In the movie "Knife in the Clear Water", water serves as a mirror to reflect the meaning of death. The old bull didn't eat or drink because he saw the knife in the water. The water mapped the death of the bull. Apart from the so-called emotional animals, thought animals, and language animals, humans are some kind of mirror animals. [6] The old man saw the reflection of himself and the old bull in the water, so he unconsciously completed the equality and replacement of identity. The skinny old bull can not plow anymore, and has become a livestock that has lost its main function, and he was also old and weak, his destiny is similar to that of the old bull. An old bull who has quietly cultivated his whole life, even when he gets old, his life was controlled by others, and in the end, he will still be drained of the last remaining value of life. Through the fate of old bull, Ma Zishan thought that he would also have to face the "impermanence" (also known as "return to the original state", which is a daily term used by Chinese Muslims). The hidden worry forced him to start planning for

his own death. The old man reflects his own fate through the "impermanence" of his bull and his wife, and his thinking about fatalism has led to his next action: asking the village leader to approve a graveyard for himself. It was also because he was confused that the old bull saw the knife in the water, and did not eat or drink, and then find an old man in the village to answer for them, and then he said "We are not as good as bull, we don't know what is going to happen", which once again raised the status of bull to the equal place with man. This sublimation is precisely caused by the shadow of water. One issue that has to be paid attention to is that bull can see the knife in the water, but it is only a legend in the Hui culture. When this symptom really occurs in real life, the collective unconscious will directly lead it to myth and religious doctrine level. In this legend, the functions of animals and water are exaggerated.

From the perspective of the viewer, as the object, the viewer has witnessed the perception of death by the bull and the old man through the reflection of water. At the same time, the perception of the meaning of death will also evoke the memory and reflection of the object. Water, as the mirror in the shadow, is also the mirror of the viewer outside the screen. The object completes the observation and cognition of the self by watching this action. According to the designation of the space in the video image, the object expands and extends the northwest image inside the screen to the real world. In northwestern China, watching the death of others traces back to the questioning and thought of their own bodies

III. THE METAPHOR AND MAPPING OF "BULL"

A. Devotees and Psychics

Just as Marx and Engels said: "Humans have the support of other entities in their development, but these entities are not high-level entities, not angels, but low-level entities, the animals. Thus the animal worship are born." [7] In Islamic culture, bulls are regarded as big animals, and the relationship between humans and animals has always been a topic worth pondering. In the ethnic groups of the Altai region and the Islamic tradition, the bull, like the turtle, belongs to the symbolic range of creation support and cosmic bearing, and is sometimes placed in overlapping supports; in the order from high to low: the turtle supports the rock, the rock supports the bull, and the bull supports the earth. [8] Bulls support the universe and are important animals. The big animal is said to be auspicious, and in "Knife in the Clear Water", the bull is not only a devotee, but also a psychic.

Yel Guba wanted to use the slaughter of bull to rescue his dead mother. From this perspective, the bull is sacrificed, but its sacrifice is precisely to "save" the dead souls. Therefore, the sacrifice of bull also means redemption. The two complement each other. Therefore, when the color of redemption covered sacrifice, it becomes an irreversible fact that the bull has reached the end of its life. According to Freud: "The sacrifice animal is regarded as a member of the tribe; the sacrifice people, gods, and animals all have the same bloodline and are members of a family." [9] The deep identification and attachment from the old man's heart to the bull made him walk with the bull before it is slaughtered, and then pick up the oil

lamp to guard the old bull at night. In order to answer the doubts, Ma Zishan found the old man in the village and got the answer that "The bull is big animal, it did not eat or drink because it is cleaning itself to prepare the ritual, so it is noble." The divine nature of the bull is beyond the animal nature, return to the original state is the end of behavioral motivation. The sacrifice ritual was endowed with the meaning of God, and the sacrifice animal became an image that could communicate with God. Animal bones are considered to be the development of gods, and humans use bones to fabricate a discourse system for ancestors to communicate with living beings.

B. The Empathy Between the Bull and the Old Man

In addition to sacrificial devotees and psychics, between the old bull and the old man, it is through the development of the water that the old bull metaphorically refers to the old man, they are all old and both can't predict the death problem. The old man "watches" the bull several times through the window and pours his own destiny on the old bull. Water helps the bull to complete the prediction of the future destiny, and also completes the old man's self-identification. The cycle of the human world and the animal world are interlinked. Human beings use all their lives to domesticate animals, to achieve the last farewell-die. Animal life is the same as human life, obeying the orders of nature and undergoing tragic trials. [10]

The old man and the old bull are both weak individuals of life. Due to the length of life, they struggled on the edge of life and death. During "watch" and "being watched", the subject completes his self-examination by staring at the other. At the end of the movie, the slaughter of the bull is actually the killing of the old man. The moment the bull died, the old man in the snow filed shed tears. At the same time, two parallel spaces seemed to get a sense of destiny and complete the empathy. In "Knife in the Clear Water", the bull is the old man's loyal companion. The character of the old bull's quiet work and speechlessness also reflects the image of silent father. After the death of his wife, the old man also gradually lost his position as the master of the family, his son Yel Guba took over his function. He silently helped his wife to pay back the five Yuan owed before, and quietly watched his son handle everything in the family. He was sitting on his knees in front of the dead wife's grave, without a word, only the old bull stay with him. When the family shoved vegetables in the field, the distant farmer raised his whip and slashed the old bull, but the bull still walked slowly and bore everything alone. After the death of his wife, the old man was holding his wife's little shoes in a daze, his children worked outside all the year round, this bull was his inner dependence, but in the end, the bull had to leave him too. In the movie, the sound of clock running appeared many times, every minute and every second, clear and rich in rhythm. In Xihai, time seems to freeze, and the pace of life is slow. It is in this lagging sense of time that deepened the relationship between the bull and the old man, so that the old man carried the oil lamp to the bull shed in the middle of the night, squatted in the corner, the old bull gasped heavily, the old man pulled the bull chain, full of the reluctance and deep love of life. Under the laws of nature,

humans are equal to bulls, and the balance of life is not unbalanced.

IV. FOLK MYTHS WRITTEN BY BELIEVERS

A. Survival and "Impermanence"

In "Knife in the Clear Water", death is called "impermanence", and life and death are essentially a dualistic relationship. In the movie, it is this old bull that connects the two spaces of life and death; it is the bridge that connects the secular human relation and the divine realm. It is precisely the "impermanence" in the world that has aroused the attention and philosophical thinking of the impermanence. In the Hui culture, when people died, the body needed to be cleaned before buried, the bull was slaughtered on the sacrifice day after many days of cleaning, and death was given a ritualistic hue. The moment when life is born, it means that there will always be an end, and the discussion of death in "Knife in the Clear Water" is based on the incident of slaughtering a bull.

Besides that, in order to highlight the power of life, the movie deliberately arranged the scene of neonatal production. Through the thin screen, the scene of the pregnant woman was extremely shocking, the simple and rough delivery method also set off the tenacity and persistence of life. With such a scarcity of material, the newborn came into the world with a cry, and the moment he was born would also cause compassionate thinking. Such a small life will one day continue to talk toward "impermanence".

With the death of his wife, the bull was waiting to be slaughtered, and the imbalanced life dispelled the old man's firm will to survive, he began to plan for his own death. A frank outlook on life and death deserves recognition. Under secular observations, humans often taboo about death, death is considered as unspecified and conclusion. But in "Knife in the Clear Water", death was elevated to the same level as survival, and it is no longer a taboo that people are so secretive about. The sacrifice of the bull is considered to be "Tell the soul to going on a good road" under the interpretation of religious beliefs. Leaving does not mean the end, the soul is not figurative, but on the spiritual level, the soul is immortal. Therefore, life and death are no longer a simple dualistic relationship, it is a cycle around life itself, and life and death are interdependent.

B. The Ritual Norms of Refrain

"Knife in the Clear Water" shows the daily life of the Hui people, so that many religious rituals and standardized behaviors appeared in the movie. The reason why faith can rise to a common level: people living here follow and agree on a common set of codes of conduct and believe in the same mythological system. Jung once said: "Unlike individual psychology, the content and behavior patterns of collective unconsciousness are regionally and ethnically universal. In other words, the collective unconsciousness of all people is the same, which constitutes a common psychological matrix that transcends the individual which we all have." [11] In the Hui people, people believe in Islam and respect Allah as true god. Imam is a leader of Islam and a local religious leader. As a

result, when people died, Imam led everyone to read the Scriptures and pray together, and to redeem the dead. When the newborn arrived, he was asked to come again and name the new born baby; when it was time to sacrifice the livestock, Imam was invited to carry the knife, highlighting the piety and sincerity of the Hui minority as a group.

For any reason, religion is an extremely effective form of ideological control. Like all successful ideologies, religious activities rely mainly not on clear concepts or systematic doctrines, but on images, symbols, habits, rituals, and myths. They are emotional and empirical, and thus enable themselves to interact with the deepest roots of the unconsciousness of human subject. [12] In the movie "Knife in the Clear Water", the ceremony is presented in a polyphonic manner. At the beginning, people greet across the curtain: "Allah's peace is on you", "Allah's peace is on you as well". The simple and routine behavior of meeting is also given a sense of ritual. When people redeemed the dead soul, they all shout "Aminai", accompanied by the gesture of touching their faces from top to bottom. This behavior also appeared after naming the newborn, touching face as a figure symbol, and also a symbol, symbolizing the end of the ceremony. Even when the old man performing "Ghusl" and "Wudhu", they need to abide by a strict code of conduct. Before slaughtering the bull, Imam is also praying. Ritual, as an abbreviation of religious culture atlas, not only recapitulates the charming of Islamic mythology, but also the expression of the rituals directly points to the differences of regional cultures, and the standardized procedures also shows the order beauty of religious culture.

C. Deities and Heterogeneous Space

Undoubtedly, there are different mythological systems in different cultural backgrounds. From ancient Greek to Roman myths to Arab myths, and to ancient Chinese folk myths, myths show the care of human values between different races. Myths often override real life, condensing the imagination and perception of life of ancient ancestors. Myth is the product of collective creation, as Jung mentioned: "The essence of literature is to express collective or human beings' unconsciousness, writers or poets express their collective and human unconsciousness as individuals. Art form belongs to collective, not individual. If someone thinks that the art form belongs to an individual, then this person must be mentally ill." [13] As the seventh art, movie is also the product of collective creation. "Knife in the Clear Water" depicts a devout Islamic world, it has a deep human spirit, in the mysterious Northwestern land, and the coverage of religious myths adds a mysterious color to it, reflecting the sacred consciousness of the Hui people. In Roland Barthes' "Mythology", he believed that "Myth cannot be an object, a concept, or a kind of imagination; it is a mode of signification, a form." [14] Religious myths are special myths and ways of ideological manifestation. Myths often have symbolic and metaphorical meanings.

Allah is the creator of the common belief in Islam. Allah is supreme and has a supreme status; people worship Allah religiously and pray for blessing. According to Fry, "Most of Gods are considered to be infinite and immortal, and rising from the dead is the constant factor of all myths. The cyclic

abstract structure of myth is an extension from life to death and from death to rebirth." [15] Allah is the only thing that dominates all things, demonstrating absolute authority. The movie highlights the supremacy of the gods through the display of the heterogeneous space. For example, Ma Zishan verified the legend to the old man that the knife can be seen in the water a few days before the bull being slaughtered. The old man only answered: "The secrets of Allah are opaque, people cannot understand." He clearly clarified the boundary between man and God, when the bull transcended the animal nature to the divine nature, Ma Zisan sighed: "We are not as good as bull; we don't know what is going to happen." Bulls are grouped in psychics and are superior to humans in the height of spiritual space. People believe in the existence of spiritual space, God supervises their behavior and guides human beings to be good.

V. CONCLUSION

Water is regarded as the source of all things and the foundation of human existence. In the dry Northwest, the importance of water is self-evident. The movie "Knife in the Clear Water" conveys the concept of cleanliness in Islam by showing ritualized cleaning activities such as Ma Zishan's "Ghusl". At the same time, whether it is rain or snow, this way of expressing water in different climate forms, it also echoes the inner world of the characters, it is the materialization of the inner soul of the individual. At the same time, it is because the old bull saw the "Knife in the Clear Water", so it did not eat or drink in order to clean the inside and get ready for the sacrifice. However, the director did not show the so-called "knife in the water" on the screen, instead, he uses a water reflection shot to place Ma Zishan and the old bull in the same frame. Under reflection of water, the old man and the bull completed the replacement of identity, the old man observed himself through the situation of the old bull and his wife, people always have to face the "impermanence".

Undoubtedly, bulls are an important tool in farming society, they help humans to conduct material production activities such like ploughing and sowing. This is the traditional concept of bull, in essence, in the "Northwest Mirror" filmed by Wang Xuebo, bulls have transcended the function of animal itself, and they played a role. The bull in the movie is the "big animal" in Hui's religious belief, everything has spirit, and animals are endowed with divinity and anthropomorphic characteristics. It is not difficult to appreciate that in the myths writing by images, the secret of life is muttered.

REFERENCES

- [1] Le Daiyun, "Cross-cultural Bridge" [M], Beijing: Peking University Press, 2002: 209. (in Chinese)
- [2] Ma Ying, Zhang Shiya, "Implications and Functions of the Cleanliness View of Hui Nationality from the Perspective of Cultural Philosophy", *Guizhou Ethnic Studies* [J], 2017 (7): 118. (in Chinese)
- [3] [Hungary] Yvette Piro. "Secular Myths: Wild Thinking of Movies" [M]. Translated by Cui Junyan, Beijing: China Film Publishing Company, 2003: 51, 47.
- [4] Same as [3]

- [5] Wang Xuebo, Ye Hang, Zhou Tianyi, "Life and Death, Complex and Simple- Interview with Wang Xuebo, the director of "Knife in the Clear Water"" , "Journal of Beijing Film Academy" [J], 2017 (3): 94. (in Chinese)
- [6] Dai Jinhua. "Film theory and criticism" [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007: 183. (in Chinese)
- [7] [German] Marx, Engels, "The Complete Works of Marx and Engels" [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing Company, 1972 (27): 63.
- [8] [French] Jean Chevalier, Alain Helbrand, "Dictionary of Symbols of World Cultures" [M], Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing Company, 1994: 260.
- [9] [Austria] Sigmund Freud, "Totems and Taboos" [M], edited by Che Wenbo, Beijing: Jiuzhou Press, 2014: 131.
- [10] [Canada] Northrop Fry, "Anatomy of Criticism" [M], translated by Chen Hui, Yuan Xianjun, Wu Weiren, Tianjin: Baihua Literature and Art Publishing Company, 2006: 158-160.
- [11] [Switzerland] C.G. Jung, "Prototype and Prototype Image"[M], Edited by Gao Lan, Changchun: Changchun Press, 2014: 3-4.
- [12] [British] Terry Eagleton, "Western Literary Theory of 20th Century" [M], translated by Wu Xiaoming, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007: 21-22.
- [13] [Switzerland] C.G. Jung, "Psychology and Literature"[M], translated by Feng Chuan and Su Ke, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing company, 1987: 141.
- [14] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Translated by Annette Lavers, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972, P109.
- [15] Same as [10]