



# On the Application of Dramatic Techniques to Film—Taking *Chicago* and *Anna Karenina* as Examples

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**Abstract.** This article argues that the application of theatrical style contributes to the representation of crime romance and emphasizes female perspectives in film narratives. Using *Chicago* and *Anna Karenina* as examples, I will show that drama can better convey the storylines of crime romance. The dramatic designs of backstage and stage successfully integrate these two films with literature and art. Along with using literary plots and oil paintings, *Chicago* and *Anna Karenina* also pay homage to classic works, which uses dramatic expressions to rationalize the struggles of women.

**Keywords:** *Chicago* · *Anna Karenina* · film technique · theater · drama film

## 1 Introduction

As a common theatrical tradition, the opening ceremony initiates performances on stage. Such a theatrical tradition has also been applied to films. For instance, *Anna Karenina* [1], released in 2012, begins with a canvas curtain with the texture of an oil painting, which then leads to shots of the stage itself and subtitles. Another example is *Chicago* [3]. Released in 2002, this film uses a black screen to pick up a close-up of the protagonist Roxie's eyes, opening the story from her perspective, which is then followed by a follow-up shot in the back area of the stage. The dramatic techniques of the stage and opening ceremony are combined with the film's audio-visual language to form a distinct style. *Anna Karenina* is a drama film directed by Joe Wright. He frequently employs aesthetic visual elements in literary adaptation films, and his films resemble oil paintings with emotions of the stories. *Anna Karenina* is based on Leo Tolstoy's novel of the same name. It employs stage designs, a dramatic multi-screen structure, and his iconic long shot, which concentrates on Anna's tragedy in marriage, love, and freedom in a small theater. The plot revolves around a lady named Anna who, fed up with her husband's indifference, bravely pursues love. She then has an affair with Vronsky and is eventually forced to commit suicide because of that. *Chicago*, directed by Rob Marshall, is based on the Broadway musical of the same name. This film includes genres such as musical, crime, and comedy. It tells the story of two Chicago crime cases. After two female prisoners, Roxie and Kelly, commit murder and then go to prison, they are finally free

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and become female stars with the help of a glib lawyer, called Billy. Rob Marshall worked as a Broadway choreographer and director. The protagonists in his films are always women. He distinguishes himself with the adoption of dance and music, light and shadow, beauty and poetry, and a high fusion of film and drama in his films. There are currently few comparative studies of these two films in view of their adoption of theatrical techniques. The research gap makes this article unique and innovative. Taking the opening ceremony and the styles of these directors as the starting point, I would claim that *Anna Karenina* and *Chicago* adopt theatrical elements, as seen in their adoption of stage settings and backstage, as well as theatrical performance. I also argue that their application of dramatic style contributes to the representation of the crime romance and emphasizes the female perspectives in the narratives.

## 2 The Dramatic Effects

First and foremost, I believe that drama can better convey the narrative of a crime romance. In his book *Walter Benjamin, Or, towards a Revolutionary Critique*, Eagleton argues that “Aesthetics provides an imaginary solution to contradictions [4]”. This is applicable to the solutions of *Chicago* and *Anna Karenina* that are full of dramatic colors. Taking *Chicago* as an example, this film is adapted from a Broadway musical and retains its original theatrical form. After the main character, Roxie enters the prison, warden Matron Mama Morton’s (referred to as Mama in the following analysis) opening and musical monologue, in which the warden introduces himself and Mama dancing on the stage, construct a parallel montage. This vividly expounds the characters’ personalities. The film editing techniques also create dramatic exaggeration. In the scene of the prison, the lighting is dark and natural without external artificial effects. In contrast to the gloomy real world, the stage is designed like a paradise, full of colors, enthusiasm, and dynamism. The lighting effect also highlights the artificial sense of refinement, which is also reflected in the exaggerated stage makeup, such as the typical stage costume. This switch between passion and melancholy creates a visual contrast for the audience. Mama dancing and singing on stage completely restores the performance of *Chicago*’s on-stage performance. The film even innovated by allowing the interaction part to exist on screen and break the fourth wall. This kind of space limitation intensifies the outburst of emotion, and the interaction between song and dance is also full of physical aesthetics, which pushes the style to the extreme, highlighting the charm of the story itself.

In contrast to *Chicago*’s exaggerated expression, *Anna Karenina*’s dramatic form incorporates the film’s authenticity. *Anna Karenina* does not use as much complicated and beautiful *mise-en-scène* as *Chicago*, and many of the designs are shown in detail [7]. In the scene where Anna and many women watched fireworks, their action of looking up is designed as a high-angle shot. While other characters are bending down, Anna only looks up, which allows her to then turn around and notice Count Vronsky, adding to their ambiguous and warm feelings. With such restrained dramatic action, the stage effect of the drama is reflected in the supporting roles, and the reality of the film remains in the protagonist. This classic critical realism about family, contingency, and self-cognition, because of its style, amplifies the tragedy of literature. The combination of drama and film also adds aesthetic elements to the film.

### 3 The Adoption of Stage and Backstage

Second, I believe that drama's backstage and stage design successfully integrate film with literature and art. The way in which the design of the stage and the existence of the backstage show slight differences between the two selected films in terms of the camera language. The rotating camera in *Chicago*, combined with the digital sound of shouting dance beats, initially sets the tone. The musicians on stage are performing, and the audiences in front of the stage are inebriated [8]. Close-ups and moving cameras are cut together, and the overall schedule is tight. Then, from the close-up, a tracking shot follows the protagonist, explaining the scene and atmosphere of the stage, as well as other dancers, corridors, and makeup areas backstage. In *La Chambre Claire*, Roland Barthes mentions two concepts about pictures: the legal perfection of "studium" and the unintentional influence of "punctum," both of which are explained in greater detail in the two films [2]. The presence of the stage and backstage areas adds to the drama of the role. For instance, Roxie's story combines the reality of being the wife of a boring man with her fantasy, where she performs her daily encounters as a singer on stage. The intercut of these two different expressions reveals the duality of her identity. Anna embodies the same duality as the protagonist [10]. She desires freedom and true love, but her social role as a wife prevents her from fulfilling her wishes. In the scene in which the servants dress her up layer after layer as if putting shackles on her, the stage environment and even the staff of the theatre around her are completely exposed. The director incorporates the transitional intervals in stage performances into the film, showing the process of stage setting directly to the audiences. Such awkward changes of scene are usually done behind the stage curtains in a stage play, but in this film, Wright intentionally keeps this process to highlight the film's unique style. The unique and clever features of movies have been used in *Chicago* to eliminate the traditional awkward transition. It is worth mentioning the parallel montage to figure out the dark reality and dynamic drama. In a unity of opposites, reality and visual space on stage are intertwined in this film. By contrasting reality and stage, reality and exaggeration, the juxtaposition and transformation of the two spaces create a sense of absurdity and comedy.

When discussing the sublimation of film artistry, we must mention the oil painting background in both films. The use of oil painting in stage design better reflects the film's literature and artistry, and oil painting plays a major role as the scene's background. *Chicago*'s oil paintings can be seen in the following scenes, which depict the stage atmosphere from the start. Men and women are intertwined in the social spaces before the oil paintings, echoing the contents of the oil paintings. In contrast, in *Anna Karenina*, the background of an oil painting appears in Anna's brother's warm and peaceful family atmosphere, which satirizes the ideal harmony and is full of contradictions with reality [9]. Both films use oil paintings as static backgrounds, echoing the story's content and reflecting the complexity and breadth of interpersonal communication.

Aside from using literary scripts and oil paintings, the two films also pay homage to classic theatrical works. The supporting actors in *Anna Karenina*, for example, fan and whisper together as Anna prepares to cheat and attend a dance with her affair. The narrative here is similar to the staging of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. It is frequently used in drama and has an excellent effect when asking the critics within the stories to speak out in order to spark discussion among the actual audiences. *Chicago*'s

first song comes from the 1979 film *All That Jazz*. The on-stage death scene of Joe also pays homage to *All That Jazz*. The actors remain polite and wear short skirts, recreating the debauchery and glitz of the United States in the 1920s for the audience and displaying the edge of an extreme entertainment spirit. The design of the drama elements of the two films sublimates the literariness of the characters and themes.

#### 4 The Theatrical Expressions and the Female Viewpoints

Third, I argue that the film's female perspective can rationalize the story through dramatic expression. *Chicago* begins with Roxie's eyes, and the zoom shot sets the story from Roxie's viewpoint. In the scene where Roxie answers reporters' questions, the film becomes very playful with the adoption of puppet drama on screen [6]. It also combines the symbolic narration of parallel montage, which makes the plot of the story more rational and emotional. Roxie is one of many puppets. She is manipulated by Billy, her attorney, to respond to interviewers with scripted answers and fabricated statements. As a result, the design of the Muppet stage allegorizes their relationship. In addition, as a special prop, the curtain not only embodies the drama form but also expresses the connection between women and their surroundings. In regard to the background information, *Chicago* is set in the 1930s in the United States with a more rebellious spirit, for which women owned more autonomy and power.

In *Anna Karenina*, however, the setting is Russia in 1870, when women were socially repressed and not allowed to express themselves. Anna lives under constraints and makes more passive decisions. The performance of the curtain is different from that of the environment. The curtain is thick and large, and Anna has little control over the transition of the backstage scene. Actors and stage managers can be seen on the big screen. However, Anna, the protagonist of the story, is unaware of these stage workers and set designers. In the racetrack scene, for example, Anna discovers her husband on the sidelines just before the horse racing begins. The director makes the noise and hooves on the racetrack disappear in order to show Anna's uneasy state of mind. She is also the only character who is allowed to move as the focal point. The depicted image is an expressive way of creating the focus characters from the movie image's dramatic illumination. This surrealist treatment, the expansion of time and space, the deft integration of characters' emotions, and the overt peeping and oppressive whispers of the group performances have always worked in tandem with the mutual gaze and sublimation of love of the two protagonists, putting Anna's characters and love in the midst of immense oppression. Furthermore, the picture's rhythm becomes more interesting as a result of the appropriate pause. The effect of such a pause, known as a "comma splice," can be traced in Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* [5]. The application of it in different places can produce amazing effects. The rhythm of the scene at the racetrack is similar to a literary writing technique.

Finally, I believe that dramatic effect in conjunction with a female perspective rationalizes extreme stories. In terms of genre, *Chicago* is a crime story, full of violence and legal debate. In the storylines of women challenging authority, violence becomes a source of entertainment, and women are the ones who commit crimes but receive happy endings. In this film, the prison tango is the biggest highlight of the whole film. The

dance sequence combines the rhythm of the sound, the lighting of the stage, and the power of the dance. Six different words serve as the subject headings of the six murders to elicit why each woman commits the crime. The six murders are also interpreted with different dances. For female characters who confess to their murders, the tone of the stage is harsh red. The Ukrainian woman, in contrast, has a white light throughout her performance because she is the only one who insists on her innocence. This also foreshadows the later “Death of the Innocence” plot. There are elements of bondage in all of their costumes. The silhouette design also visually creates an iron cage. This means that even though these women are in jail for murder, they remain strong and powerful. Their dances demonstrate their rage.

In contrast, Anna Karenina’s infidelity and love themes portray Anna’s desperate and moral sense. The film also uses the ensemble to put pressure on the protagonists, with their peeps and whispers setting off the atmosphere. In the first dance scene, a long shot shows the beautiful postures of the protagonists. When Anna and Count Vronsky look at each other affectionately, time freezes. All the dancers become still and only two people dance for love under the lights. Every time they pass a person, that person starts dancing again. Then, a dim yellow light circle shines in the middle of the stage, illuminating the two people. Everyone else disappears. Instead of focusing on the audience’s attention with close-ups or extreme close-ups, pauses and chasing lights put focus on the actions of the characters. Other than focus, it also conveys a sense of danger. This kind of technological innovation is also a breakthrough for the director himself. As mentioned in the book *The Elements of Styles*: “Your whole duty is to satisfy yourself, and always plays an audience of one” [5]. By this standard, Joe Wright did an excellent job in his stylization of the film. In terms of plot, Anna Karenina establishes a character who challenges morality and tradition, seeks self-expression. But the woman ends in a tragic death.

## 5 Conclusion

To sum up, *Chicago* and *Anna Karenina* are adaptations. Film creation must integrate with contemporary people’s emotional cognition of self-feeling and expression techniques. This breakthrough in filmmaking is the most rewarding. The characteristics of the drama include definite spatiality, temporality, and conflict. It requires the completeness of the story through the performers and the stage. These features are combined in both films to elevate the storytelling in terms of style. The dramatic atmosphere and artificiality make the film move away from realism and towards a more stylized expression.

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