



On the Rhythmicity of Film Music: Overall Dramatic Construction, Characterisation and Story Metaphors

—Taking "Shadow" as an example

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Abstract. This paper uses the film "Shadow" as an example to explore the role of film music in the construction of overall dramatic structure, character shaping, and story metaphor. An analysis of the changes in musical melody and rhythm shows that music plays a crucial role in the construction of the film's overall narrative. The emotional and rhythmic elements of the music are closely integrated with the film's narrative, foreshadowing plot developments and enhancing the audience's emotional engagement with the storyline. The paper points out that film music can shape the expression of characters' emotions and the construction of their images. For instance, specific melodies can reflect a character's inner emotions and outward appearance, thereby creating more nuanced and rich character portrayals. Additionally, the paper emphasizes the metaphorical function of film music, which uses recurring thematic melodies to foreshadow specific events and plot developments. This musical element connects the storyline and illustrates the dynamic changes in character relationships, enhancing the overall dramatic narrative.

Keywords: Film Music, Rhythm, Wholeness, Musical Function, Zhang Yimou Films

1 Introduction

Film music, as an important part of film art, has a contributing role in film narrative. Not only that, the music rhythm has an important influence on the overall plot construction of the film, the portrayal of film characters, as well as the expression and metaphor of the storyline to some extent.

Many researchers have now studied this part of film music in cinema. For example, Zhang Lei discusses the various characteristics of film music rhythm, including structural change, intensity change and speeding. These characteristics can portray the plot, characters and emotions of the film in detail, and enhance the artistic expression and viewability of the film.^[1] Zhang Lei's study takes the perspective of the characteristics of the music itself, while Wu Aifang's study argues that understanding film music requires attention to the music's historical and cultural values. She argues that music is epochal, stresses the influence of historical and social factors on music, and

points out that film music reflects the era in which the film and television drama works were born, as well as the role of music in creating the atmosphere of the story's era and expressing the characteristics of the era.^[2] Wu Di explores the relationship between music and images in film from an aesthetic perspective and analyses it in terms of form and content, whole and part. He constructs a functional cognitive model of "one axis and two tracks" to help understand and analyse the relationship between sound and picture, and suggests that these musical forms are tailored to the needs of the plot, the characters and the environment and that the music and the picture work together to serve the plot and the narrative structure of the film.^[3] Wang Xin, on the other hand, combines the film *City of Love* with his analysis and highlights the multiple functions of film music in dramatic narratives, including: rendering atmosphere; advancing the plot; controlling the pace of the film; and coherent images.^[4] Yu Yafei's research focuses on the important role of the piano in film and television music composition and its unique expression in performance. In particular, she points out that free playing and harmonic ornamentation allow piano music to flexibly adapt to different plot needs and increase the artistic impact of the film.^[5]

However, traditional folk music is also frequently used in Chinese films because traditional Chinese folk music has a deep historical and cultural heritage. Therefore many scholars have also studied folk music in films. In Li Yi's study, he mainly discusses the use of traditional Chinese folk music elements in Chinese films, such as opera, folk songs, and traditional musical instruments in film music and their artistic value.^[6] He Tielong, on the other hand, studies the creative characteristics of contemporary Chinese martial arts film music and stresses the multiple functions of martial arts film music in narrative and cultural expression. He points out that martial arts film music not only contains traditional folk music but also integrates a variety of musical elements and styles, making the music experimental and pioneering. He believes that this innovation in compositional techniques and aesthetic concepts shapes the audience's imagination of oriental culture and enhances the poetry and artistic innovation of film music.^[7]

Current research on film music is more concerned with the role of film music in film. There is less discussion of the analysis of specific films and detailed analysis of the combination of musical rhythm and film narrative. And the existing research allows us to understand more comprehensively the multidimensional impact of different kinds of film music, so as to explore more deeply the role of the rhythmic nature of film music in the overall dramatic construction, characterisation and storytelling metaphors.

In terms of the use of music to express storytelling in Chinese cinema, Zhang Yimou, who is known for his combination of music and images, is more prominent in this area, and it is worthwhile for us to study the mechanism behind it in depth. On the other hand, in the field of cinema, Zhang Yimou has a wide influence in the international film industry, and his film works are not only popular in China, but also have a high reputation internationally. Zhang Yimou's film music often fuses Chinese folk music and Western music, and this fusion of music from different cultures can promote music and cultural exchange and innovation in the context of globalisation. Analysing Zhang Yimou's works and his use of music can help us better grasp the relationship

between music and narrative, and then, in the context of "telling a good Chinese story", create more works that appeal to both domestic and foreign audiences.

Among Zhang Yimou's many works, his recent *Shadow* has research value. On the one hand, *Shadow* is Zhang Yimou's most recent costume work since the new era. On the other hand, "*Shadow*" adopts the style of Chinese ink painting, which creates a unique visual aesthetic and a special viewing experience. The film's music and sound design, which is closely integrated with its visual style and narrative, enhances the film's emotional depth and creates a sense of atmosphere. This provides a case study for exploring the dramatic construction of musical bodies, characterisation and storytelling metaphors in film.

2 The Wholeness of Musical Rhythm: Dramatic Plot Construction and The Overall Rhythm of the Film

Wholeness is an important condition or pursuit in artistic creation. Holism is about the effective unity and integration of all parts within the whole. [8] Some scholars have pointed out that "a successful living work of art should first be an artistic whole. The artistic whole mentioned here is not only the integrity of the structure and form but also includes the content, which is a complete aesthetic image composed of many aesthetic elements in which the content and form are unified." [9] In fact, there is also a holistic relationship between music in film and the overall narrative in film. The music facilitates the production of the film as a whole and gives tone to the film as a whole, and the film as a whole becomes more holistic because of the music.

To better analyse the interaction between the dramatic plot and the overall musical tempo of the film, this study constructed a chart for analysing the changes in the mood of the film's soundtrack. In the chart below, the Y-axis represents the different levels of intensity of the music mood, from no background music to the climax, and the X-axis is divided into several intervals, with every ten minutes of the film's length as a node "1-10" until "101-110", a total of 11. There are 11 nodes in total. (See Figure 1)

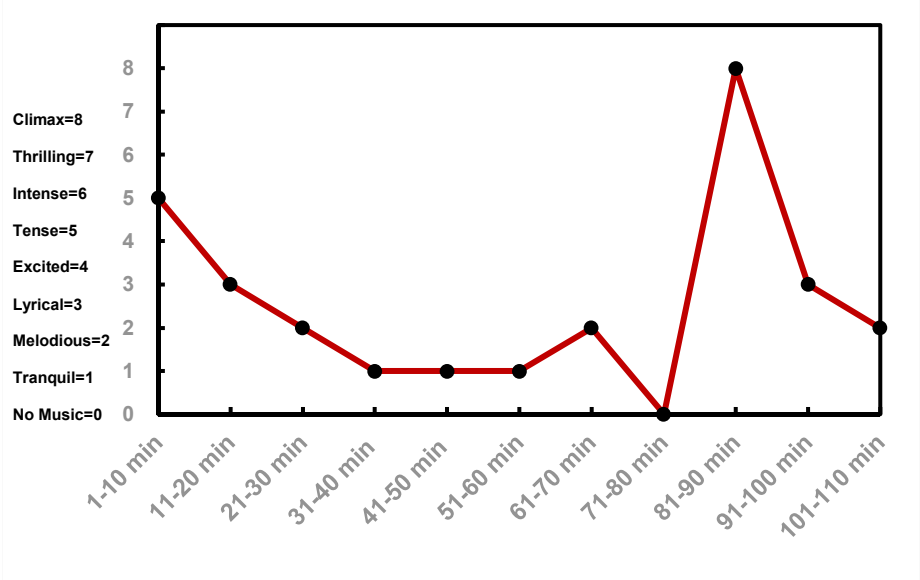


Fig. 1. Emotional Changes in the Background Music of the Film "Shadow"

Firstly, we look at the relationship between the music and the film as a whole in terms of the overall view and the overall change in the music. According to the chart the beginning of the film, at 1-10 minutes the emotional intensity of the music is higher and then decreases. In the middle of the film, 11-70 minutes, the intensity fluctuates less and the intensity stays low. Near the end, at 81-90 minutes the musical mood intensity rises sharply from its lowest point to its highest point in the entire film and then drops again. The musical mood of the middle and end of the film is presented at a low intensity, corresponding to more plot development in that of the emotional exchange section between the main characters, where the music is more subdued to support the narrative. In terms of the film's narrative, according to conventional storytelling logic, a film story tends to begin with a compelling story, and then enter a second phase of gentle development in the middle of the story. By the climax, the tangle of emotions and fights between the characters keep the story in a high mood and finally develop into the story ending. From the above chart, we can find that, on the whole, the pace and changes of Shadow are closely related to the whole of the film's narrative.(See Figure 1)

Secondly, wholeness is also reflected in the creation of rhythm and climax, and the role of music in the film's wholeness can also be found in the layering of climaxes and the structure of the music. As shown in the chart, there are two emotional high points in the music, the first one is 1-10 minutes which corresponds to the beginning of the film and creates a tense atmosphere. King Pei wants to hear Jingzhou and Xiaoi play together as a way to kill Jingzhou's momentum. Xiaoi, to protect Jingzhou's secret of being a shadow, offers to break her finger and refuses to play together. But the king of Pei forced Xiaoi, and she had no choice but to play the piano, the music at this time is

rushed, and tense in the beginning of the film on the overall rhythm to a small climax, but it also sets the tone of the entire film, is tense, with intrigue. In the second climax which comes before the 61-70 minutes in the gentle development of the story reaches small ups and downs in the stage, followed by 71-80 minutes, there is no soundtrack here, here is the eve of the war, to make the final battle to make the preparation, and the climax of the latter in sharp contrast. As the music theorist, Cohen's view states "A beginning downbeat is signalled by an implied crescendo, and conversely a terminating downbeat suggests a crescendo." The implication is that different structural positions in the musical movement embody the significance of different rhythmic rises and falls, that in a diatonic section, the preceding part may be regarded as the starting beat of the following part and that a complete work has a consistent character. ^[10] So too, such similar features can be found in the totality of the film. In the film, the mood of 61-70 minutes is highest in the middle of the film's story in 31-70 minutes. In terms of the storyline, this is already the end of the second phase of the film's gently developing story, which can be seen as a terminating downbeat, which simultaneously brews up the musical mood that follows from the lowest point of the entire film dramatically intensifying to the film's climax. The second emotional high point 81-90 minutes is the most intense part of the film, this is where the plot of the film takes a turn for the worse, where all the conflicts between people erupt in full force. Ziyu discovers Xiaoi's betrayal. Xiaoi then fights with Ziyu, using the zither to express her resentment. The sound of their zither serves as the soundtrack, and the footage is of the showdown between Ziyu and Yangcang outside the city of Jingzhou. The tense and rapid pace of the music is used to determine the speed of the shots, and the extreme fusion of sound and picture pushes the mood of this film to its highest peak. The music here serves to intensify the mood.

So it seems that the melodic rhythm of music plays an important role in the overall construction of the dramatic plot. Musical emotion and rhythm are closely integrated with the film's narrative, foreshadowing the development of the plot and reinforcing the storyline's impact on the audience through changes in melodic rhythm. Dramatic plot construction is deepened by the building of musical rhythm. The chart effectively shows the relationship between the rhythm of music and the plot of the film "Shadow". It can be seen that music is an important tool for conveying emotions and strengthening the narrative rhythm in the film, and through the change in the intensity of the music, we can predict the degree of tension and emotional depth of the film's plot.

3 The Shaping of Music Rhythm: Characterisation and Storyline Promotion

The mature use of music plays a unique auxiliary function to the expression of images. Generally speaking, music plays an important role in characterisation, emotional expression and spiritual transmission. For example, in the current academic circles, there are articles combining music research with film and television drama research - such as "On the Shaping of Music in Revolutionary Historical Theme Dedication Drama", "Taking "The Age of Awakening", a revolutionary historical theme dedication drama

as an example, we can see from the unity of historical truth and artistic creation, the true presentation of heroic characters in historical images, and the emotion of the heroes and heroines. Taking *The Age of Awakening* as an example, the article "analyses from the unity of historical truth and artistic creation, the real presentation of heroes in the historical group image, and the emotional expression of the spiritual inheritance, to explore the shaping of music in the revolutionary historical theme gift drama in terms of scenario, character and emotional expression."^[11]

According to this thinking, to think about the relationship between music shaping and film and television characters, stories and plots, should be able to discover the mystery. In the film, characterisation is important. Usually, characters are portrayed according to their backgrounds and personalities, but music is also important in characterisation. The film *"Shadow"* can also reflect the musical melody on the character and image of the character.

Firstly, music can mould the emotions of the characters. Generally speaking, emotions are difficult to express, but music as a kind of "lyrical art" can let people grasp the change of certain emotions in its tone and melody, which is the case of *Shadow*. At 20 minutes and 02 seconds of the film, Jingzhou and Xiaoai are in the same bedroom, and when the servant leaves, he hobbles to the next floor to sleep, dragging his injured body. The music playing at this time is full of sadness, and this is the main theme representing Jingzhou, describing Jingzhou's people who live under Ziyu's shadow, becoming his shadow, and also being threatened by him. The slow tempo and melancholy melody are used to portray the inner emotions of the characters at different latitudes and to make the audience more empathetic to the inner world of the characters.

In addition, music can shape the image of the characters. Usually, characterisation is shaped by the storyline, but music that matches the character's personality and the plot provides different perspectives on the character's personality and character relationships. For example, at 31:25 in the film, the lord and the Princess are confronting each other. This uses two rhythmic melodies to complement each other. One is serene and the other eerie and has a dense rhythm. The serene melody portrays the Lord's superficial hypocrisy, while the eerie and densely rhythmic melody embodies the Lord's inner intrigue. These two rhythms create a strong conflict, and together they shape the character of King Pei. When King Pei's mood reaches a climax, the rhythm of the music is gradually sharp, and then the camera switches scenes. It can be seen that the music here not only shapes the character through the change of melodic rhythm but also guides the audience's emotion and foretells the upcoming plot twist, which plays a key role in the promotion of the story.

Film theorist Balazs Bella points out that in sound films sound will be the source and cause of action, and also play a decisive role in the development of the plot, which makes sound more important in the whole plot of the film. In *Shadows* the soundtrack, through the control of melody and rhythm, can create an atmosphere for the storyline, guide the audience's emotions and prepare for the upcoming plot changes.^[12] For example, at 9:42 here is used a corresponding rhythm that is consistent with the rhythmic characteristics of the picture. Xiaoai plays the guqin, and the melody of the piece is very impactful, the rhythm and melody from the beginning of the rush to slow and then to rush, getting faster and faster to push the mood to the climax at the same time Xiaoai

stops playing and picks up a knife and wants to cut off his finger. The music here creates a tense atmosphere for the film scene, and the control of the rhythm of the music is coordinated with the rhythm of the film, e.g., Xiaoi plays the zither at a fast pace to reflect her inner tension and anxiety, which strengthens the viewer's feeling of the storyline, and also promotes the role of the plot for the later episodes.

The role of background music in advancing the plot is also reflected in the fact that it can also be used as a tool for transitions, visually smoothing the transition from one scene to another. For example, in the film *Shadow*, Zhang Yimou is good at using a single tone in the background music to drive the plot. When Ziyu suspects that King Pei is committing fraud at 31 minutes, the music plays a single tone and the scene switches to King Pei. Also at 87:08 the soldiers bring back the dagger with which the Princess killed Yang Ping to the Lord, and the Lord feels grief, the background music plays a tone to let the transitions begin. This can all be found that film music has the role of transitions and articulation, transitioning from one scene to another through a tone.

Therefore, by analysing the specific plot of *Shadow*, it can be found that the clever use of musical rhythm greatly enriches the character, which increases the depth of the character's emotion. At the same time, music plays an indispensable role in the advancement of the plot through the change of rhythm and melody. It can guide the audience's emotions and foreshadow the plot's twists and turns, thus increasing the drama of the film.

4 The Metaphorical Nature of Musical Rhythm: Narrative Foreshadowing and Character Allegory and "Objects in Place of People"

Many symbols in cinema are given a metaphorical meaning. Music is often used as a means of expressing emotions and is also metaphorical. Some scholars, for example, have analysed musical compositions and integrated them with social historical and cultural studies, thereby discovering the role of music as a metaphor for ethnicity, politics and culture.^[12]

As mentioned above, music in film has a role in shaping the characters and promoting the storyline. However, film music is not only a carrier of emotions, it can also have a deeper symbolic and metaphorical role on the characters and the plot, which foreshadows the development of the film's plot through the different melodies and rhythms, as well as allegorising the characters' personalities. This function of music is revealed in the film at 56:59 in *Shadow* when the princess questions King Pei, "Is it also your move to make me a concubine?" The soundtrack features an eerie melody and short and rapid rhythms. This is an allegory of the Princess speaking the King's true thoughts and also reflects the King's inner turmoil. The tense and rapid rhythmic melody alone depicts the inner state of the characters, creating a tense atmosphere at the moment and hinting at the next plot developments.

The metaphorical nature of film music about characters and storylines is also reflected in its foreshadowing of specific events. As an elemental symbol in a film, background music can foreshadow key story twists and developments by repeating the

same melodic rhythm as the storyline progresses. This repetitive music can be a "clue" throughout the film, thus deepening the specific emotion expressed by the melody. Thus, the metaphorical nature of film music about characters and storylines is also reflected in the foreshadowing of specific events. In the film *Shadows*, musical themes that recur several times are also used to foreshadow specific events and the inner world of the characters. For example, at 16:57 minutes and 84 minutes the melodic rhythm is the same, the same melodic rhythm is used as a symbol of Jingzhou's deep feelings for his mother and the emotional bond between them. The first time it appears, the episode in which Ziyu tells Jingzhou that he has found his mother is accompanied by a lyrical and sad musical melody with a soothing rhythm, which both allegorises Jingzhou's deep affection for his mother and suggests that his mother's discovery is a threat to Jingzhou from Ziyu. The same melody appears again in the 84th minute of the film, accompanied by the tragic murder of Jingzhou's mother, and reinforces the foreshadowing nature of this musical theme.

In the film, the emotions between Xiaoi and Jingzhou are also metaphorically demonstrated through the melodic allegory of a particular theme. At 20:14 minutes into the film, Xiaoi looks at the injured Jingzhou with concern, and the music in this episode foreshadows Xiaoi's heartache for Jingzhou and her gradual love for him. As the film progresses, this theme recurs at various key moments, such as at minute 60, when Xiaoi expresses to Jingzhou that she cares about his life and death, and at minute 104:54, when Ai looks at Jingzhou in fear as he kills Ziyu. The appearance of these melodies allegorises the emotional changes between them and also foreshadows every shift in their relationship. Through this clever use of film music, the dynamic changes in the characters' relationship and the development of the narrative plot are demonstrated.

The metaphorical nature of music can be seen not only in characterisation and plot promotion but also in deepening the emotions between the characters. Through changes in melody and rhythm, music shapes the inner emotional state of the characters and foretells the development of the storyline, and through the recurring musical themes in the film, it serves as an emotional link between the characters and connects the overall storyline, foreshadowing the development of the story and its twists and turns.

5 Conclusion

By analyzing the film "Shadow," we have understood the significant role that musical melodies and rhythms play in the overall dramatic construction, character development, and narrative propulsion and metaphor in the film. Through this research, specific graphs were created to analyze the changes in musical emotion and rhythm at different points in the film. We found that film music advances the overall rhythm and narrative of the film. Different musical melodies and rhythms correspond to different plot points in the film, forming an overall structure that echoes the film's narrative, thereby demonstrating the role of musical rhythm in constructing the overall narrative of the film.

The analysis shows that music not only shapes characters but also advances the storyline. Through specific melodies and rhythmic changes, music intricately portrays the inner emotional states and psychological changes of the characters in conjunction with different plot points, thus shaping character images and emotions. In the film "Shadow," music also aligns with the visual rhythm characteristics, creating a corresponding rhythmic pattern that enhances the film's atmosphere, guides audience emotions, and propels the plot. Furthermore, film music also serves a metaphorical function, with recurring thematic melodies foreshadowing significant events and plot twists in the film. This use of musical metaphor enriches the narrative layers of the film, enhancing its artistic expression. Through the analysis of the film "Shadow," focusing on the aspects of musical rhythm in overall dramatic construction, character shaping, and story metaphor, this paper provides new insights for further exploration of the multidimensional role of music in different types of films.

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