

The Image Shaping of Ordinary People in Realistic microfilm

--A Case Study of *On the Border*

Siyuan Li

School of Film-Television and Communication, Shanghai Normal University, 200000 Shanghai, China

Abstract

Wei Shujun, a brilliant post-90s rising star in contemporary Chinese cinema, has had his films featured four times at the Cannes International Film Festival, earning widespread international acclaim. With his unique artistic perspective and profound emotional insight, he demonstrates humanistic concern for ordinary people in reality. Simultaneously, his self-reflective examination of the environment transcends superficial critique, delving deeply into the intricate interplay and mutual influence between humans and their surroundings, thereby revealing a more complex and multidimensional social reality. This paper analyzes Wei Shujun's visual language style, symbolic usage, and narrative strategies in realist microfilms, using the short film *Yanbian Youth* as a case study.

Keywords

Realism, microfilm, Wei Shujun, ordinary people.

1. Introduction

In the field of contemporary film and television creation, realistic themes have always occupied a unique and important position. It is like a mirror, reflecting the social panorama and the various aspects of life. Among them, micro-films, as a new form of film and television art, with their concise and impactful characteristics, focus on ordinary people in real life within a limited time frame, showing their dreams, struggles, and growth. *On the Border*, directed by Wei Shujun in 2018, is such a highly representative realistic micro-film. Set in Yanbian, it focuses on Hua Mingxing, an ordinary teenager living in this area, and tells the story of his longing to go to South Korea to pursue his dreams. During this process, the various real-life difficulties that the boy encounters, as well as the contradictions and struggles within him, deeply reflect the survival state of ordinary people in the tide of the times.

2. The Distinctive Lens Language

“Typically, cinematic techniques not only support but also enhance narrative or non-narrative forms. In feature films, style can catalyze causal chains, create parallel contrasts, mediate the relationship between story/plot, and sustain narrative flow”[1]. In the short film, the use of static long takes stands out as a defining feature of its visual language. Although static shots lack the physical movement of the camera or adjustments in focal length, they contain an extraordinarily rich visual dynamism within. This internal movement refers to the dynamic changes and interactions of elements within the frame—such as character positioning, shifts in lighting, or background transitions—achieved through meticulous scene scheduling without altering the camera’s position or lens focus. André Bazin, a pioneer in film theory, emphasized the importance of *mise-en-scène* in creating realism and a sense of spatial depth when discussing the practical application of long takes—a principle equally applicable to the intricate

construction of internal movement within static shots. The film's opening two minutes unfold through eight static long takes, establishing the story's backdrop: Boy stands beneath a withered tree in Yanbian, watching his friend Fat Boy depart for South Korea while he can only kick a ball aimlessly. The television at home loses signal, and after venting his frustration with a forceful kick, Boy embarks on a journey. These scenes predominantly employ static long takes, where the internal movement grants the audience an active viewing experience. Observing the boy kicking the ball, the flickering TV error message, and the pessimistic dialogue of elderly onlookers, the frame becomes an open window, inviting viewers to traverse the image freely, exploring and focusing on the protagonist's life. This approach encourages independent interpretation, allowing the audience to select and synthesize visual information to form personal impressions. In contrast, handheld shaky camerawork appears notably in scenes at the arcade and on the pirate ship. Departing from static long takes, the director employs subtle camera tremors to externalize the characters' inner turmoil and struggle. The boy and sister experienced unprecedented speed and passion on the arcade machines; the hairdresser sister sheds her exhaustion, abandoning the numbing sense of responsibility imposed by reality, while Boy steers his ideal car. When the game time ends, the camera returns to its fixed position as the two characters' ideals shatter and they are forced back into reality, unable to escape. On the pirate ship, after Boy pushes it into motion, the two sit aboard as the slightly shaky shot merges the audience's perspective with the characters'—a visual manifestation of their restless minds. The boy's act of pushing the ship symbolizes his desire to escape Yanbian. At this moment, the rocking of the pirate ship and the car refer to the same thing, except that now the two have shifted from simply wanting to go to South Korea to discussing what they want to do there. The pirate ship thus carries not only the ideal of spatial transition but also the expression of inner yearning, rendered larger and more turbulent than the car.

From the perspective of shot size, the film exhibits an aesthetic of medium and small frames. The director employs tighter compositions to shape the audience's perception of detail, atmosphere, and overall dynamics, forging a unique spatial-emotional bond. As Almendros once remarked, I need this four-sided frame. I need this limitation. The frame is a great discovery—it offers a way of observing the world, a tool for analysis. In this film, director Wei Shujun masterfully deploys shot size to weave delicate yet profound emotional tapestries, endowing the film with a distinctive medium-small frame aesthetic. This choice reflects not only an obsession with visual minutiae but also a deliberate construction of emotional depth and spatial ambiance. As the camera lens gradually approaches the subject, whether it's the subtle expressions on a character's face or the details of a landscape, everything is meticulously captured and magnified, revealing an unprecedented texture and sense of realism. This close-up gaze not only makes the audience feel as though they have transcended the boundaries of the screen and stepped into the scene where the story unfolds, but also allows them to experience deeply the emotions and warmth carried by the subject. The joys and sorrows of characters, the changing seasons of landscapes—all are vividly captured within this compact frame, amplifying the visual impact and emotional resonance of the imagery, thereby deepening and elevating the audience's emotional experience. During the climax, Wei Shujun avoids verbose dialogue, instead using tight frames and symmetrical compositions to silently articulate the protagonist's suppressed struggles. The close-up shot of the two sitting in the Ferris wheel is particularly impressive. In this confined space, the boy and his sister are brought infinitely closer, appearing intimately back-to-back, yet each harbouring their own secrets and dreams unknown to the other. The use of close-ups allows the audience to clearly observe every subtle change in their expressions, capturing the confusion and bewilderment of adolescence, as well as their yearning and pursuit of love and ideals. This intimate portrayal not only enhances the visual impact but also silently conveys the tumultuous emotions within Young Hearts.

Simultaneously, Wei does not overlook the role of wide shots. He employs them to showcase the vastness and depth of Yanbian's countryside, transporting audiences to a world both familiar and alien. The rural landscape serves not merely as a backdrop but as a vessel for the film's values and ethos. Wide shots fully render the region's natural and cultural scenery, crafting a uniquely disorienting realist atmosphere. The cool-toned rendering further intensifies the weight of this atmosphere, allowing the audience to visually and emotionally perceive the stark contrast between the harsh reality and idealistic pursuits faced by the young protagonist Boy. Through the alternating use of close-ups and wide shots, the film constructs a narrative space that is both delicate and grand. Close-ups focus on the inner world and emotional shifts of the characters, while wide shots showcase the vastness of the countryside and the weight of reality. This skillful combination of shot scales not only enriches the film's visual effects but also profoundly reveals the complex relationship between characters and their environment, as well as the various challenges and choices faced by adolescents during their growth. Ultimately, the film tightly captivates the audience within the story through this unique spatial-emotional bond, collectively experiencing a profound exploration of youth, dreams, and reality.

Light is the soul of cinematic imagery. Early film theorists such as Ricciotto Canudo and Louis Delluc consistently emphasized the significance of light and shadow, just as Canudo described film as "born from visible narration painted by the brush of light" [2]. In this film, a striking contrast between warm and cool colors can be observed. When Boy waits outside the house for the barbershop sister, the shot reflects boy's subjective perspective. The red tones diffusing from the left and the yellow tones of the decorations on the right create a stark contrast with the cold, austere blue atmosphere inside the barbershop. The interior of the barbershop externalizes reality—here, the barbershop sister can only perform her professional duties without indulging in grand dreams. "In the portrayal of key plot moments, lighting and shadow may be employed more intensely to create dramatic effects, further immersing the audience in the storyline" [3]. For example, when two people are sitting on a pirate ship, boy is placed in the foreground while his sister sits in the background. The director employs a very shallow depth of field at this moment, causing the sister to completely blend into the warm-toned lighting of the background. Here, the warm colors symbolize safety and warmth, conveying that the sister provides boy with a sense of security and an unprecedented feeling of warmth. In the latter half of the film, when boy finds his father, the audience can perceive that his father does not offer him much material support. Even in the entire short film, the father appears for no more than a brief minute, from which we can infer that the daily communication between father and son is rather limited. The father has his own repair shop to manage and pays little attention to boy's dreams. At this moment, the color tone has returned to its usual austere and severe cool-toned character.

Notably, when the boy finds his father, most of their dialogue occurs through a glass door. After the father calls him inside, the director deliberately refrains from showing any interior scenes, leaving the audience to observe from an outsiders perspective outside the door. In contrast to the elder sister at the barbershop, who understands him better than his own father during their moment on the Ferris wheel, this starkly highlights the young boy's confusion and loneliness.

3. The Ingenious Semiotic Script

Film semiotics was first proposed by French scholar Christian Metz in his article *Film: Language or Speech*, applying Saussurean semiotics to film studies. Metz argued that cinema constitutes a unique linguistic sign system, where images, music, and text serve as constituent elements of film language. Their interplay forms the syntactic and paradigmatic structures of a film's thematic content, while the signifier and signified construct its connotation and denotation.

First, the object signifier. Vehicles like cars and motorcycles function as crucial narrative symbols in the film. The opening scene depicts the protagonist boy watching fat boy ride away in a dump truck to South Korea—the city of his dreams and the cultural homeland embedded in his language. Later, boy rides a motorcycle to seek out his father, hoping to negotiate his own passage to South Korea. Here, the motorcycle emerges as a realistic means of transportation, reflecting the actual conditions of Yanji, as director Wei Shujun noted in an interview “The main means of transportation locally is motorcycles, with only one bus running per day. Even in the rural outskirts of Yanji, the urban area is very small” [4]. Underneath the profound meaning, the four-wheeled car symbolizes an idealized vessel that could ferry this lost child to his dream harbor, while the reality is a second-hand motorcycle that frequently fails to start. When boy first visits the hair salon to meet the hairdresser sister, he arrives on his motorcycle. When boy first went to the barbershop to find the hairdresser sister, he was also riding a motorcycle. When the sister got off work and the two went to look for the father, the motorcycle wouldnt start. They didnt find the person they were looking for, and the narrative lingers within the arcade, immersed in the neon-hued ambiguity of the game hall. There, boy and the sister experience the thrill of racing in a game—a fleeting joy marked by the only smiles in the entire film, which soon vanish. The game “Racing” here serves as a mirror of reality, embodying both the aspirations of the real world and the dual-directionality of physiological desires. As earlier implied, the four-wheeled car represents the boy’s dream of reaching South Korea, while the sudden warmth of female companionship leaves him disoriented. These emotions coalesce in the racing game segment, only for his fantasies to shatter like colorful bubbles once the game ends. In the film’s closing sequence, boy rides his motorcycle resolutely toward South Korea. The director employed two consecutive long shots and a nearly ten-second black screen to depict the boys final whereabouts. Emerging from the tunnel, boy’s motorcycle travels alongside a car heading toward South Korea. At this moment, ideals and reality appear to be moving forward together. But the good times did not last long. The roads were blocked, cars and motorcycles were intercepted together, and reality and ideals were cut off by an invisible border line. The young man riding the motorcycle away first represents the grounding of reality, while the absence of the car in the shot symbolizes how ideals remain forever suspended at the border. The roar emitted by the motorcycle focuses the audiences full attention on the sound, just like a close-up shot, firmly gripping their minds. Just as early film theorist Hugo Münsterberg stated, “becoming the only thing visible on the screen” [5]. Beneath the surface of motorcycles lies the helpless submission and insincerity of the young boy, as well as the youthful desires concealed beneath the frozen soil of Yanbian.

Second, the sound signifier. The world on screen is created through both sound and visuals. When crafting this world, directors must consider not only visual elements but also auditory factors. Sound and image are like inseparable lovebirds, holding equally vital positions. The film “On The Border” employs a plethora of sound metaphors, prominently featuring human voices. The opening scene depicts the protagonist Hua Mingxing standing beside a thatched cottage, surrounded by elderly individuals conversing in Korean about topics such as “the cycle of life and death” and “earning money in South Korea.” The next shot transition shows a fat boy taking a bus to South Korea, encapsulating both new life and passing in a single scene, all perceived by this fifteen- or sixteen-year-old boy. Later, the elder sister transformed into boy and sang four lines of a Korean song, with the general meaning of the lyrics being “Even if its just a passing brush of shoulders, my gaze is still speaking its message.” At this moment, the vocals represent the elder sister shared longing for Korea, as well as an externalization of her feelings toward boy. Yet before the song concludes, the director cuts to daylight, deferring the sound and rupturing boy’s dream a fantasy of South Korean life and bittersweet love shattered in an amusement park security booth. Then he returned to the entrance of the hair salon, started his motorcycle this time, and upon looking up, saw the sister who had shone like a “girl group” the

day before, shouting disciplined slogans at the door of the barbershop. Boy paused for a moment before realizing that the warmth he had received the previous night was nothing more than a pipe dream. Moreover, the use of sound effects in the film is exceptionally outstanding. According to the definition in the "Dictionary of Film Art," sound effects refer to the collective term for all sounds in a film, excluding dialogue and music. "Sound effects can enhance the atmosphere of the environment, imbue the visuals with specific depth and breadth, intensify dramatic impact, and accentuate the emotions and personalities of the characters" [6]. Boy and his sister sat on the pirate ship, with the entire scene compressed into a very small portion of the frame. Boy pushed the pirate ship, generating noise. In the subsequent nearly one-minute-long shot, this prolonged noise persisted, starkly contrasting with the dreamlike moment of the two sitting on the pirate ship. The noise splits apart appearance and reality, which also seems to remind the audience in front of the screen that the ideals emerging at this moment may shatter at any time, preventing viewers from immersing themselves in the imagery. Moreover, the main body of the film features no background music until the final shot, when the single-melody-dominated background music "Lin Chong Flees at Night" emerges. This piece originates from a traditional Kunqu Opera martial arts drama, narrating the story of Lin Chong, the chief instructor of the 800,000 imperial guards. Moreover, the main body of the film features no background music until the final shot, when the single-melody-dominated background music Lin Chong Flees at Night emerges. This piece originates from a traditional Kunqu Opera martial arts drama, narrating the story of Lin Chong, the chief instructor of the 800,000 imperial guards. Because he offended Gao Qiu by opposing powerful officials and was subsequently framed, he was then pursued to kill Lin Chong, who fled overnight to join the Liangshan Marsh. The most classic line in the entire aria is "A man does not shed tears easily, its just that he hasnt reached the point of heartbreak." Originally intended to express Lin Chongs inner sorrow, helplessness, and melancholy after being forced to join the Liangshan rebels, this piece of music was perfectly timed as the ending theme in "On The Border." Boy and his sister are merely insignificant figures in reality, confined by the patriarchal system and era. Like Lin Chong, the Boy continuously struggles against his own conscience and the times, showcasing his confusion and turmoil amid adversity. This predicament stems not only from the present but also from the future.

Finally, there character is signifier. There are four main characters in the drama: the protagonist, the Korean ethnic teenager Boy; the sister working as a hairdresser; boy's father; and the repair shop owner. Apart from the protagonist, the director did not provide specific names for the remaining main characters. Boy is a Korean ethnic teenager living in Yanbian, a small border city. He yearns to leave his familiar surroundings and go to South Korea, a place that is both his cultural homeland and full of novelty and opportunities for him. His motivation stems from a yearning for the outside world and the pursuit of self-worth. In the process of chasing his dreams, Boy also faces the pressures of reality and inner conflicts. He longs to escape his current circumstances, yet must confront his fathers rejection and the obstacles imposed by reality. This psychological contradiction is profoundly depicted in the film. The father plays a significant supporting role in the film, and his relationship with boy is complex and nuanced. On one hand, he serves as an obstacle on boy's path to pursuing his dreams. The father exhibits a strong sense of realism and conservative thinking in the film, fully aware that going to South Korea is no easy feat and fearing that his son might encounter misfortunes while venturing abroad. As a result, he refuses to provide travel expenses, hoping that his son will stay in their small town for a stable life. On the other hand, he is also a pivotal figure in boy's growth, with his words and actions profoundly influencing the young man.

The barbershop sister is a pivotal character in the film. She not only serves as a crucial lead in boy's quest to find his father but also stands as the sole female figure who offers warmth to this young boy. The director ingeniously constructs this character through two subtle elements:

glass mirrors and singing. First, there is the dual mapping concerning the mirror. Boy's first encounter with the barbershop sister was separated by a pane of glass, where the two were at a considerable distance. Boy observed this female figure from a voyeuristic perspective, uncertain how to approach her and even afraid to do so. Simultaneously, through each frame of this moment, the audience is guided into the directors meticulously crafted dreamscape belonging to adolescence. Viewers walk side by side with the characters on screen, their breaths intertwining and emotions resonating, persistently aligning with the solace and empathy of a young soul. This is not merely a unidirectional feast of visuals and emotions but a profound and nuanced two-way dialogue. At this moment, the image serves as a magic mirror, reflecting not only the intricate life trajectories of the characters but also allowing the audience to subtly examine themselves while peering into others' stories. Amid the interplay of light and shadow, they seek a mirror of the soul, thereby generating situational awareness and identity resonance. Secondly, when the two arrived at the game arcade, they were in the same temporal and spatial dimension. Boy stared intently as her sister applied makeup, with the sister's reflection cast upon the glass mirror. The reflection on the glass is actually her true self, harboring dreams of going to South Korea to pursue a "girl group" ambition. Standing in the same position, it feels as if she were right beside boy. This conveyed that the woman was only now beginning her authentic life, while simultaneously serving as a projection of the adolescents' subjective consciousness. In the disarray of the sister turning her head, boy shifted her gaze to the glass, and the two exchanged a knowing smile. This mirror and its reflection create a rich sense of spatial depth and layering for the film through their unique reflective properties. When mirrors are skillfully employed in cinema, they not only expand the physical space of the frame but also extend the inner world of the characters. On a deeper level, it represents the complex relationship between reality and illusion, the internal and the external, and the self and others. When boy faces the mirror, he is essentially engaging in a dialogue and reflection with himself. This dialogue and reflection not only reveal the characters' inner world but also create an atmosphere that blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion, leaving the audience to wander and ponder between the two.

4. Spatiotemporal Narration from a Historical Perspective

Following its development in the 1970s, film narratology became an integral and indispensable part of film analysis and criticism. Film narration should address both functional and structural aspects, making the concepts of "statement" and "discourse" particularly significant. On the surface, the meaning and characteristics of a film are primarily conveyed through dialogue. However, in reality, "narration serves as a hidden storyteller that controls overarching aspects such as the scene scheduling and camera movement—linguistic elements that invariably encompass the narrative function of sound" [7].

4.1. Omniscient narrative paradigm

In the film, the third-person omniscient narrative perspective functions like an invisible eye, hovering above the story, guiding the audience through every nuanced plot detail and delving into the depths of each character's soul with its boundless vision and profound insight. From the very opening scene, this perspective unfolds a vivid tableau of a small town in Yanbian with its unique grandeur and delicacy. The long shot leisurely glides over the staggered streets and alleys, while the wide shot generously reveals the environment inhabited by the protagonist Hua Mingxing—a world both familiar and one he yearns to escape. As the narrative unfolds, the audience not only witnesses the boy's profound dissatisfaction with the status quo and his urgent desire for change, but also, through the subtle strokes of an omniscient perspective, captures the deep yearning in his heart for the unknown world of South Korea and his struggle against the constraints of the present situation. Meanwhile, the lens skillfully intersperses scenes of

Hua Mingxings father frequently disappearing—a detail that serves as a puzzle piece, quietly revealing the insurmountable chasm and deeply buried emotional estrangement between father and son. The use of an omniscient perspective allows this complex and delicate family dynamic to be fully and profoundly presented to the audience, with emotions already brimming without the need for words. As the film approaches its conclusion, the omniscient perspective once again exerts its unique charm, guiding the audience to witness a seemingly mundane yet deeply poignant father-son conversation. Boy's fruitless exit after entering the house, followed by the scene of the two parting on bad terms, suggests the father had not yet become aware of his sons transformation at this point. Yet under the omniscient narrative perspective, these moments reveal deeper underlying implications. The audience clearly understands that although no consensus was reached on the surface, boy has already made up his mind in his heart—he is determined to embark on a journey to South Korea, even though the path ahead is unknown and fraught with challenges. This ability to transcend superficial appearances and delve into the depths of the soul is precisely the unique experience that the third-person omniscient narrative perspective offers to the audience. More ingeniously, the omniscient perspective also foreshadows the hardships and difficulties of Hua Mingxings journey. In a nearly prophetic manner, it allows the audience to sense before the film concludes that this journey will by no means be a smooth adventure, but rather a fantasy of ones own making. This forward-looking narrative technique not only intensifies the storys tension and appeal but also fosters a profound emotional resonance and connection between the audience and the protagonist. Through the adept use of a third-person omniscient narrative perspective, this film successfully constructs a story world that is both expansive and nuanced. While indulging in a visual feast, the audience is also deeply immersed in the tumultuous inner worlds of the characters and the unpredictable twists of fate. This narrative approach not only enriches the film's layers and depth but also delivers a soul-stirring and cathartic experience to the viewers.

4.2. Realistic Narrative Style

The so-called realism, in the vast starry sky of aesthetics, guides the neo-realists to build upon the foundation of documentary authenticity, constructing an unremitting pursuit and profound exploration of the veracity and life likeness in cinematic art. This aesthetic concept not only innovates traditional narrative techniques but also represents a profound return to and reshaping of the essence of cinema. The New Realism film movement, with its unique perspective and courage, directly turns the camera lens toward the texture of life, abandoning lavish sets and deliberate staging in favor of embracing raw, unpolished, and authentic real-life scenes. In this visual feast, the creators of the film seem to transform into time travelers, weaving through the streets and alleys of Yanbian. Whether it's the frozen soil of Yanbian in the bitter cold or the profound depths of the descending night, all become their canvas for capturing reality and freezing moments in time. Director Wei Shujun approaches with an almost reverent attitude, striving to restore the most unadorned and authentic essence of Yanbian—the newly constructed roads in Yanji, the timeworn tube-shaped apartment buildings bearing the marks of years, and the Ferris wheel that has faded yet remains eternally engraved in memory, all of which narrate the unique stories and emotions of this land. It is particularly worth mentioning that every detail in the film reflects an extreme pursuit of authenticity. For instance, when boy steps into the long-abandoned tile-roofed house, the camera slowly pushes forward, not only showcasing the dilapidation of the space and the vicissitudes of time but also profoundly revealing the complexity and struggles within the characters inner world. This scene undoubtedly serves as a true reflection of rural life in Yanji, Yanbian in the 21st century, evoking profound emotions. In terms of musical application, the film also demonstrates extraordinary craftsmanship and boldness. The song softly hummed by the two protagonists on the Ferris wheel, performed by the actress herself without any post-production embellishment, embodies purity and sincerity. This approach not only aligns with Bazin's "realist" film theory but also

subtly enhances the documentary style of the film. It allows the audience to appreciate the charm of the music while gaining a deeper understanding of the emotions and themes conveyed by the film. Music here is not merely a vessel for emotions but also a bridge connecting reality and art. With a gentle yet resolute force, it transcends the boundaries of traditional realistic creation, endowing the film with richer meaning and depth.

5. Conclusion

"On The Border" has provided valuable experience for the creation of Chinese realist-themed micro-films and achieved new breakthroughs in the fields of narrative mode and character image creation. Since the 21st century, Chinese micro-films have taken root in real life, with ordinary people as the protagonists. They use vivid stories and unique narratives to showcase the joys, sorrows, dreams, and pursuits of ordinary people, triggering a strong resonance among the audience. In the future, digital technology will become a powerful booster for the development of the film industry and social transformation. Therefore, filmmakers need to closely follow the pulse of the times, accurately grasp the changing trends of public aesthetics, actively explore new themes and character paradigms, and boldly expand the narrative mode. While enhancing the entertainment value of films, they should also strengthen their ideological depth and artistic value. At the same time, by meticulously crafting each work, filmmakers can inject a continuous stream of vitality into films about ordinary people, enabling them to maintain their vitality in the highly competitive future film market and become an important artistic force that records the times, reflects society, and nourishes people's hearts.

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