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Urban Characteristics in Lou Ye's Cinematic Films

Yuhan Fu

School of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology, Macao, China
1240022704@student.must.edu.mo

Abstract. In Lou Ye's films, a multitude of urban scenes are presented, where the imagery of cities serves to reveal the historical context and convey cultural connotations. The urban landmarks featured in his works—such as Shanghai, Chongqing, Taiwan, and Guangzhou—have become enduring cultural symbols amidst societal and epochal transformations. The individuals connected to these cities also constitute a part of urban culture, further highlighting the humanistic dimension. This paper explores the narrative spaces and cultural values constructed by different cities across varying spatiotemporal contexts through an examination of the audiovisual language, character relationships, and directorial emotions in Lou Ye's works. The audiovisual language employed in urban cinematography remains consistent with Lou Ye's distinctive filmmaking style, which exhibits populist and fragmented characteristics under the influence of French New Wave cinema, thereby constructing the urban collective space as perceived by the director. The character relationships predominantly revolve around marginalized groups inhabiting the urban underclass, with the urban collective serving as a stage for the expression of their inner emotional worlds. It is evident that the cities in Lou Ye's films are imbued with humanistic concern and potential for growth. The urban environment evolves with the times, and the theme of growth often exhibits a complex correlation with the urban identities of the characters.

Keywords: Lou Ye, city, humanism

1. Introduction

As a prominent figure of the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, Lou Ye has developed a distinctive cinematic style influenced by the French New Wave, characterized by a hazy, ambiguous postmodern aesthetic. In examining the cinematic imagery of Lou Ye's films, one finds one fundamentally inescapable. This urban representation encompasses but is not limited to his distinctive close-up depictions of urban environments, his evocative atmospheric renderings of cityscapes, and the psychological states and predicaments of urban underclass populations that resonate dialectically with the city itself. His films delve into the psychological states of characters, capturing their confusion and sense of loss in love, while the urban settings in his works serve as a platform for his cinematic and ideological expression. This paper examines the urban imagery in his films through audiovisual techniques—such as the long take, jump cuts, disordered sequencing, and

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shaky camerawork—as well as the relationship between characters and the city, all of which are hallmarks of New Wave cinema.

2. Urban imagery constructed through long takes and disordered shots

Cinematic language serves as a medium for emotional communication between the film and the audience, and Lou Ye places great emphasis on its role in shaping his directorial style. As Yang Yuanying notes, "For Lou Ye, the audience enters the cinema first and foremost to experience the allure of the 'medium' itself, so the filmmaker must present them with cinematic pleasures beyond mere storytelling." [1] Influenced by François Truffaut and other French New Wave auteurs, Lou frequently employs long takes, handheld shots, jump cuts, and abrupt shifts in framing to construct urban spaces that are marginal, dynamic, and imbued with a sense of transience.

The long take, as the term suggests, refers to a shot with extended footage duration and prolonged temporal continuity. It stands in conceptual opposition to traditional montage techniques. While montage emphasizes the juxtaposition and transition of images, scenes, and shots, the long take prioritizes the director's mise-en-scène during filming - the orchestration of actors and spatial arrangements - while intensifying the camera's kinetic quality. Consequently, the long take places greater emphasis on environmental narrative construction and sequential progression. In Lou Ye's cinematic works, employing long takes to depict urban environments infuses them with vitality and dynamism. This technique preserves spatial and temporal continuity while simultaneously maintaining the audience's visual engagement through sustained freshness of perspective.

In the opening sequence of Suzhou River, Lou Ye opts for handheld camerawork to document the desolate riverbanks, immersing the audience in the disorienting reality of this neglected waterway. Close-ups of crumbling concrete buildings slated for demolition starkly contrast with the distant high-rises, while the narrator’s voiceover begins a first-person retrospective: "I often take my camera to shoot Suzhou River alone, following its flow from west to east, across Shanghai. For nearly a century, legends, stories, memories, and all kinds of garbage have accumulated here, making it the dirtiest river... If you watch long enough, the river will show you everything." Throughout the film, Lou deliberately avoids showcasing Shanghai’s modern skyline, instead focusing on marginalized urban spaces—derelict buildings, nightclubs, underground KTVs, and piles of refuse—that reflect the city’s uneven modernization. In this film, time and the river sway with the unsteady camera movements, while the lovers' affection gradually dissipates within the increasingly protracted long takes. The jump cuts dissect indiscernible fragments - whether remnants of memory or shards of reality remains ambiguous. As the camera drifts from one urban margin to another, the essence of love remains persistently elusive. What Lou Ye constructs transcends merely a decaying metropolis; it is the profound love story buried beneath the city's surface. Beneath these tremulous frames lies the palpable fluctuation and unease of human emotions, mirroring the instability of interpersonal connections.

In The Shadow Play, material spaces actively participate in narrative construction. Extended tracking shots and shaky handheld footage capture a densely packed urban village encircled by skyscrapers, mirroring the dramatic transformations of southern China during the reform era [2]. Rather than depicting natural landscapes or cosmopolitan vistas, the film opens with a sweeping shot of the village’s chaotic maze of dilapidated structures, clouds of dust from demolition sites, and the simmering unrest of residents resisting eviction. Through these techniques, Lou establishes a tone of upheaval and disorder, framing the city as a site of perpetual flux.

The outbreak of World War II significantly integrated handheld cinematography into filmmaking practice. Initially employed for battlefield reporting, this technique offered superior mobility and

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authenticity, enabling cameramen to navigate combat zones while documenting events in real time. These distinctive characteristics were subsequently adopted into cinematic production. James Wong Howe, the renowned Hollywood cinematographer, observed: "The inevitable shaking, jolting, and often blurred images produced by mobile handheld cameras in battlefield conditions have become synonymous with realism in the audience's perception." Lou Ye similarly expressed his perspective on handheld techniques in an interview: "It represents a mode of documentation - cinema is fundamentally a form of documentation. Handheld shooting constitutes the simplest and most immediate recording method, comparable to using a mobile phone. It possesses crucial documentary value. Observers on my sets would notice that many shots are genuinely captured moments rather than meticulously staged compositions. While this approach may result in some instability, these spontaneously seized instances embody cinema's most essential elements - the very core of visual storytelling."

Lou's pervasive use of handheld cinematography generates a paradoxical sense of immediacy and detachment, immersing viewers in an experience that is at once visceral and dreamlike a fitting analogue for the alienation and rootlessness of urban life [3]. This approach eschews grand narratives in favor of an unflinching realism, documenting the lived experiences of individuals within shifting urban landscapes.

3. The city as a stage for inner lives

Lou's cities are fluid and damp, perpetually lagging behind the tide of progress—much like their inhabitants. "To him, every city is like a person, dressed in clothes, but what he truly wants to see is what lies beneath: the body and its veins." [4]. His lens rarely centers on society's elites; instead, he amplifies the joys and sorrows of marginalized figures, articulating their anxieties amid rapid urbanization.

Lou frequently trains his camera on interstitial zones—where gleaming towers meet urban villages—and the ruins inhabited by society's outcasts. In Weekend Lover, he portrays 1980s Shanghai as a wasteland of crumbling edifices. When A-Kai seeks out Lala to relay a message, the wide shots frame him against a backdrop of debris; later, as friends welcome Lala after his release from prison, the camera pulls back to reveal the same desolate surroundings. These ruins, set against a city undergoing industrialization, underscore a stark reality: Old Shanghai's glory has faded, while the contours of the new remain uncertain. The aimless youths who populate these spaces are neither beneficiaries nor architects of urbanization; they are born from the city's decay and lost in its reconstruction. "Not everyone profits from urban development." Ruins become forgotten pockets within the glossy metropolis, and their occupants—the discarded relationships of modernity—are equally overlooked [5].

Another recurring space in Lou's films is the bar, a sanctuary for marginalized communities. As consumerism ascends, bars emerge as rare sites where suppressed emotions can surface. In Suzhou River, the bar is a utopia for Mardar and Meimei, a temporary refuge from the river's decay and the city's relentless churn. Similarly, in Spring Fever, the gay bar offers not just revelry but a semblance of "home" for its patrons. Only here can characters like Jiang Cheng shed societal masks and reclaim agency—briefly escaping the oppression of daily life.

Lou's cities are also defined by movement, embodied in rivers and vehicles. "The traffic coursing through streets—buses, bicycles, subways—not only extends urban space but links its fragments into a dynamic whole." [6]. In Suzhou River, the motorcycle symbolizes both livelihood and love. Initially a delivery vehicle, it becomes Mardar and Mudan's chariot, carrying them through neon-lit nights until their relationship fractures—mirrored in the bike's violent toppling.

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Cars, meanwhile, signify wealth and power yet also modernity's alienating effects. In Spring Fever, the car becomes a mobile haven for Jiang Cheng and Wang Ping, a rare space where their forbidden love can exist. As a quintessential emblem of progress, the car's role in their tragedy underscores the dissonance between rapid development and human vulnerability [7] .

Lou Ye's films consistently employ natural environments as emotional signifiers, with rain emerging as a recurrent motif. His cinematic landscapes are perpetually imbued with precipitation - ranging from the fine, incessant drizzle that mirrors the viscous undercurrents of anxiety in cities like Nanjing and Suzhou, to torrential downpours that engulf the entire frame. This deliberate meteorological phenomenon has evolved into a signature element of Lou's visual vocabulary, functioning simultaneously as an expressive medium for character psychology; a narrative pivot for crucial plot transitions; and a fundamental atmospheric conditioner that profoundly shapes the aesthetic and thematic dimensions of his filmography.

Lou's characters oscillate between clinging to these marginal spaces and yearning to escape them. As The City: Suggestions for Investigating Human Behavior in Urban Environments observes: "Physical movement reflects psychological instability... We dream of fleeing this oppressive world rather than confronting or transforming it." For Lou's protagonists, the decaying urban landscape externalizes their dislocation in a society caught between past and future.

4. Urban space and directorial emotion

Lou's films are ensemble portraits of society's fringe—LGBTQ individuals, sex workers, the disabled, the homeless—all adrift in emotional limbo. He houses them in dim, rain-slicked cities that mirror their precarious lives, seeking to expose "the ambiguous pain and love concealed beneath modernity's surface—the collisions between marginalized groups and societal progress." As Lou himself states: "Ask me to shoot a rural film, and I might fail—I lack that lived experience. But in Shanghai, I don't even need to scout locations. Whatever I want to film already exists in my mind." [8]. Rejecting sanitized metropolises, Lou thrusts the margins into the spotlight.

In the 1990s, an era marked by the emergence of individualistic narratives, the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, including Lou Ye, propelled societal transformation to the forefront of cinema. Positioning himself as "merely a camera documenting real life," Lou sought to integrate the people he observed—or wished to be observed—into the broader discourse of urban existence. His films deliberately excise vast swaths of urban geography and social networks, instead confining the narrative to claustrophobic spaces that fragment the social fabric. Yet, Lou's ambition extends beyond portraying the confusion and dissociation of individuals during China's period of opening-up; he strives to reveal the unadulterated radiance of human nature that persists beneath the chaos of upheaval.

Lou's films invariably orbit around the theme of love—its contemplation, pursuit, and transcendence. In Weekend Lover, the narrative explores the naive emotions of youth, where protagonists A Xi and La La, devoid of anchors in reality, mirror countless young people seeking emotional sustenance in romance. For them, love is idealized, and its loss plunges them into a loneliness that obliterates any sense of belonging or future. By contrast, Suzhou River presents a more pragmatic portrayal of love, one rooted in the act of searching. Mardar, torn between materialism and idealism, ultimately grasps the essence of affection. When viewed as a continuum, Lou's filmography reveals an evolving philosophy, yet his core preoccupation remains unchanged: the authenticity of emotion. He exposes the fragility of human connections in an era of economic boom, where prosperity masks an emotional void.

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Lou's characters navigate concrete jungles with no discernible origin or destination, their emotional moorings severed by the demands of modern life. His films dissect this alienation with unflinching precision, laying bare the simmering resentment of individuals crushed under societal pressure. In Weekend Lover, Li Xin and his peers ultimately dissolve into the faceless crowd, dismissing the passions of their youth as absurd. In Suzhou River, Meimei vanishes like the mermaid of legend, while the photographer, desensitized, simply awaits the next iteration of "real" love. These narratives coalesce into a scathing critique of urban existentialism, where emotional poverty thrives amidst material abundance.

Lou's stylistic choices—handheld camerawork, erratic jump cuts, and protracted long takes—mirror the disintegration of social coherence. The camera's unsteady gaze mimics the instability of human relationships, while the deliberate omission of establishing shots reinforces the characters' disorientation. This aesthetic of fragmentation does not merely replicate urban dissonance; it elevates it to a metaphysical inquiry into the nature of connection. The river in Suzhou River, for instance, functions as both a physical artery and a metaphor for the ceaseless, yet futile, flow of human yearning.

Lou Ye's oeuvre constitutes a radical reimagining of urban cinema, one that substitutes sweeping historical narratives with intimate, often painful, portraits of emotional truth. His characters' relentless pursuit of love—whether idealized or debased—serves as a proxy for the broader human struggle to reclaim agency in an increasingly impersonal world. By exposing the fractures beneath China's gleaming urban facades, Lou does not merely document alienation; he transforms it into a poetics of resistance, where the very act of feeling becomes a subversive gesture against the dehumanizing tide of modernity.

His choice of spaces carries profound social critique. Bars, for instance, become microcosms of fleeting equality—where people interact freely, yet their very existence underscores capitalism’s crises. By staging societal issues within urban theaters, Lou interrogates collective futures with unflinching empathy.

5. Conclusion

Lou Ye’s cinema is singular, merging French New Wave techniques with China’s sociocultural specificities to dissect cities and their inhabitants amid transformation. The urban environment serves as explicit cultural text—ruins telegraphing upheaval, skyscrapers masking disparity—while its people embody implicit commentary. From drifters to criminals to disillusioned youth, Lou’s characters crystallize urban pathologies. The city, as stage and subject, demands not just reflection but reckoning: a meditation on inequality, belonging, and the price of progress. In Lou Ye's own words: "What I emphasize more is the universality of people's authentic experiences and states of being when confronted with confusion and adversity, rather than striving to reconstruct an irretrievable historical reality. The existential conditions of contemporary individuals and those of the past, when facing life-and-death situations, crises, or predicaments, remain fundamentally identical." Lou Ye's cinematic oeuvre demonstrates profound contemplation on urban spaces and the youth inhabiting them. His persistent intellectual exploration continues to yield revelatory insights that challenge and surprise audiences. Through his distinctive lens, urban environments become more than mere backdrops; they transform into psychological landscapes that externalize the internal struggles of a generation caught between tradition and modernity. The director's preoccupation with capturing raw human vulnerability amidst societal flux positions his work as a significant contribution to the discourse on post-reform Chinese identity formation.

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