

# *Uncharted Surrealism: the Emotional Cartography in Diao Yi'nan's Films*

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**Keywords:** Chinese cinema, Diao Yi'nan, surrealism, emotional cartography, urban space.

**Abstract:** In the contemporary time, the Chinese cinema has seen the emergence of various cinematic strategies in representing filmic cities. Among the sixth-generation directors, the topophilia strategy is most frequently discussed. However, Diao Yi'nan, an often neglected sixth generation director, emerges to the spotlight with his ground-breaking crime drama, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and continues to gain attention ever since. Differing from the typical topophilia approach, Diao adopts distinct cinematic strategies to explore the intersection of individual sentiments and urban spaces. This essay builds itself on past research to analyze these strategic differences. The key theory adopted is the 'emotional cartography', a psychogeography concept that explores the intersection of spatiality and subjectivity. Viewing filmic city as an 'emotionally heightened space', the emotional cartography allows for the unveiling of hidden social relations as mediated by feelings and sensibility in a specific spatial system. The anxiety of living in a fleeting material world and changing social relation could be thus seen as the implicit political message hidden in Diao's narrative. The second part is built on past research and analyzes the narrative force of Diao Yi'nan's film. Affirming the logic of 'atypical affects' (奇情) proposed by Qi Wei, the second part argues that the logic of atypical affects is also the underlying force for Diao's emotional cartography. Last but not least, the essay argues for Diao's use of surrealism adheres to the logic of affects and externalize characters' psychologies.

## 1. Introduction

In 2014, *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, a crime drama set in Northern China, won the Golden Bear for best film at the Berlin International Film Festival. The success of the film is groundbreaking as it allegedly opened the gateway to the 'new era of Chinese filmmaking' [1]. The mastermind behind *Black Coal, Thin Ice* is Diao Yi'nan, a director typically recognized as a sixth-generation filmmaker. Like most sixth-generation filmmakers, Diao Yi'nan's works show an interest to represent the dialectic between the material city and urban sentiments, focusing on marginal social groups and locations. However, Diao's thematic and narrative focus fairly differs from that of the typical sixth generation. Adopting the scope of 'emotional cartography', a psychogeography concept that explores the interactions between human sensibilities and material spaces, Du Liang argues that Diao focuses on how the marginalized resist material and social alienation in a rapidly modernizing China [2]. Unlike the

‘topophilia’ motif typical of the sixth generation, Diao’s films are more concerned with characters’ quest for ‘spatial justice’, as they actively travel and gaze in the fleeing urban space [2]. Examining Diao’s unique narrative focus, Qi Wei coins the term ‘atypical affects’(奇情) to describe the driving force of Diao’s narrative. In Qi Wei’s opinion, the atypical sensibilities of Diao’s characters are the results of their marginal social status and the motivation for them to engage in various urban adventures, therefore guiding the filmic cartography of their (and others’) emotions.[3]. This is affirmed by Shen Chaohui as he affirms the Diao’s depiction of characters’ complex psychologies, which allows his films to transcend the moral binaries and evoke audience’s sympathy [4]. Several scholars have also noted the surrealism from Diao’s films. Shen argues that the surrealistic moments implicitly reveal the social anxiety that haunt the characters on screen [4]. Liu Juan argues that Diao’s use of surrealism contributes to the construction of a cinematic heterotopia, an imagined space with ‘orders and rules different from that of the reality’ [5].

In this essay, I argue that Diao’s films present emotional cartographies of filmic cities, charting the changing urban landscapes and individual sentiments, providing an alternative perspective in observing the transforming materiality and subjectivity of urban life. Moreover, I will examine in depth the subjectivity of Diao’s characters and discuss how they contribute to a distinct logic of narrative, the logic of strange affect, that instructs the film’s index of emotion and the urban space. Concomitantly, I also seek to explore Diao’s use of surrealism along his cartography of filmic cities and argue that it externalizes characters’ psychologies and contribute to the overall tragic overtone of his cinematic space. My discussion of Diao Yi’nan will focus on the four films (*Uniform*, *Night Train*, *Black Coal*, *Thin Ice*, and *the Wild Goose Lake*) where he is involved as director. Films or TV series with which Diao receives credits upon as producer or screenwriter will not be discussed. Furthermore, this essay only aims to analyze the materiality of the ‘filmic cities’, urban spaces as imagined and constructed on screen, rather than their real-life counterparts.

## 2. An Emotional Cartography Mapped and Traversed

The sixth-generation directors, or the urban generation, are known for their focus on urban stories. Jia Zhangke’s *Xiao Wu*, Guan Hu’s *Dust*, Lu Xuechang’s *Making of steel*, Wang Xiaoshuai’s *the Days*, and Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastards* have all explored individual sentiments in the context of rapid modernization [2]. The thematic concern of these films, as Du Liang points out, is generally ‘topophilia’, originating from the nostalgic affections for a geographical location.[2][6] These films often present nostalgia as the outlet for their characters’ anxiety in face of a changing society. Despite the similar focus on urban stories, Diao Yi’nan differs from this ‘topophilia’ trend and turns to a different direction [2]. To examine this difference, Du Liang approaches Diao’s films with the concept of ‘emotional cartography’ and analyzes how the material cities and individual sentiments interact to manifest the underlying social relations [2]. A comprehensive definition of emotional cartography could be found in Giuliana Bruno’s essay, ‘Motion and Emotion: Film and the Urban Fabric’. In the essay, Bruno suggests that film bears the potential to stimulate cultural travel and charts emotionality with materiality, forming a map of intersubjectivity she refers to as ‘the cartography of emotions’ Like the material city, cinema itself is also capable of being traversed. As a film’s protagonist travels through the city, his fictional navigation connects distant moments, places, and his own subjectivity, instructing spectators on the imaginary travel, producing a ‘topography of affects’ [7]. Bruno’s emphasis on cinema’s cartographic function could be viewed in tandem with the concept of ‘mapping impulse’, a term coined and discussed by Tereasa Castro. Castro uses ‘mapping impulse’ to denote the ‘mode of thought’ that instructs the spatial configuration of filmic landscapes. Castro proposes three typical mapping strategies: the first is linked to the ‘topophilia fascination’, which refers to the unsystematic representation of geographical locations stemming from a strong sense of nostalgia; the second is the ‘urban portrait’ which conforms to a descriptive and autonomous

representational structure; the third is ‘surveying’, which serves to construct a more ‘mobile and peripatetic experience of bodily mapping the urban spaces’[8].

Adopting both Bruno and Castro, Diao’s films fall into the ‘surveying’ category of emotional cartography, as his filmic cities are simultaneously mapped and traversed. Following characters who travel in the city with or without purpose, Diao indexes their emotionality with the location where it emerges, presenting a cartography of emotion that the spectators could countlessly revisit. His directorial debut, *Uniform*, follows a young tailor Xiao Jian who accidentally claims a police Uniform and uses it to practice fraud. In the film, Xiao Jian travels fluidly between dilapidated residential areas, industrial complexes, and video game arcades. This is due to the emergence of ‘merged areas’, or in Du’s words the ‘融叠地带’(in pinyin: ‘rongdiedidai’) [2]. As a result of incomplete urbanization and partial demolition, the ‘merged areas’ blurs the boundary between residential, industrial, and commercial areas, affecting its inhabitants’ emotional experience [2]. Though Xiao Jian benefits from the convenience of the multi-functionality of his city, it nevertheless induces pressures of various forms. At home, Xiao Jian is often scolded for not being capable of prospering the family; as he wins money from the arcade, he is randomly robbed by local hooligans and beaten to the ground; when he seeks pension for his half-paralyzed father at the factory, he gets physically abused by the security guard and the workers who mistook him as the ‘evil’ administrative staff. The withered apartment, arcade and the gritty factory constitute the material source of his oppressed emotion, which leads to his eventual descend to crimes. His familial and social frustration are indexed by the location where these events take place. A similar cartographic approach is seen in *Night Train*. *Night Train* sees bailiff Wu Hongyan travel routinely at night between cities in search for a lover. As Wu embarks on the bus back home from a ball party, the camera pans across the bus station, the labyrinth-like roads, and lingers on the factories afar. Conversing with her new worker lover, the gritty city exterior is kept visible, fleeting as their chemistry builds. In Wu’s apartment, when her lover attempts to rape her, the camera sees they fight to the spectacular city panorama. Covered in clouds of smoke, the city is filled almost entirely with factories. The dark and grim colors echo Wu’s unfortunate incident and the decline of heavy industry implied by her lover, who verbally claims that ‘the production is bad... I do (a bit of) everything now’. This is often seen as a potential critique of the declining heavy industry, whose workers have lost track of their own social identities as they struggle to survive [9]. As her lover abandons his sinful thoughts and gazes into the tacit city exterior, it’s as if he is lamenting the unpredictable fate that oppresses him both economically and emotionally.



Figure 1: Wu resists her lover’s sexual assault.



Figure 2: Wu's lover watches the city exterior.

Diao's more recent works *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and *The Wild Goose Lake* are more genre-oriented, revolving around crime investigations. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* tells washed-up detective Zhang Zili's investigation of a mysterious murder that cost his career years ago; *The Wild Goose Lake* follows Zhou Zenong, a thief who kills a cop by accident and runs for his life. The two films feature significant stalk sequences to index the material cities. In *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Zhang Zili stalks the mysterious Wu Zizheng, wife to the serial killer Liang Zhijun. His stalking connects worn-out residential areas, workspaces, and entertainment sectors. Luminated by colorful neon lights, the grittiness of the city is cast in a romantic and ethereal atmosphere, outlining the delicate emotions between Zhang and Wu. The simultaneous depiction of character emotion and the material city is also seen in *The Wild Goose Lake*, when Zhou Zenong chases prostitute Liu Aiai for selling him out to local gangsters. The sequence sees Zhou on a motorbike, chasing Liu through alleys, highway, residences, and factory workshop. In this sequence, Liu becomes the agent that instructs the filmic mapping of the titular inner city, the Wild Goose Lake [2]. Running from the highway into the Wild Goose Lake, she maps the route from the exterior city to the interior city. The interior city, also a merged area (融叠地带, 'rongdiedidai'), incorporates sectors of various functions that are usually geographically confused, with no clear boundary to distinguish themselves. The billiard she runs into is also connected with a factory workshop, in which the local factory owners discuss who should move out because of economic downturn. Unexpectedly, a factory owner attempts to rape Liu but is brutally stopped by Zhou who catches up in time. Returning to sanity, Zhou merely asks Liu to buy him noodles as he is 'extremely hungry' from the prior bloodbath. This sequence charts Zhou's emotional turn from vengeful fury to righteous indignation, representing his final efforts for redemption, implying his potential 'goodness' despite being a criminal [5]. Zhou's heroic act is rewarded as Liu ultimately shares his bounty with his widow rather than holding it for herself.

Situating his stories in the merged areas (融叠地带, 'rongdiedidai'), Diao underlines the atypical materiality that serves as his characters' emotional source. Following his characters' urban adventures, Diao indexes their emotional trajectory with the fleeting materiality of the city where they bodily travel, producing a distinct filmic cartography of emotions. Charting withered material cities and the struggle of marginal individuals, Diao's emotional cartography is imbued with social anxiety in times of rapid modernization and the uncontrollable socio-economic changes it brings upon.

### 3. the Motion of Emotion: 'Atypical Affects' as the Narrative Force

In the preceding paragraph, I have argued to situate Diao Yi'nan's films outside the typical topophilia spectrum of the sixth-generation directors. Instead, Diao's characters confront social alienation by actively engaging with the urban space, producing a distinct emotional cartography. However, it should be noted that the cartography of emotion is not strictly a one-way route: emotion is not only the subject to be indexed but also the agent that instructs the narrative's thematic production. This is especially seen in Diao Yi'nan's films. In his films, he assigns emotion a more central role: instead of simply elucidating the character emotions as a spectacle as does the melodrama genre, Diao sets 'affects' as the driving force of his narrative and the catalyst for the escalation of events. The typical cause-and-effect logic is replaced with the logic of affect, which emphasizes the experientiality of individual sentiments. The logic of affect not only instructs the progression of story, but also determines the cinematic strategy Diao imposes to present the emotional cartography against alienation.

In general, Diao's logic of affects revolves around the principle of 'atypical(or strange) affects' (奇情)[3]. Coined by Qi Wei, the two concepts aim to describe respectively the narrative and stylistic characteristic representative of Diao Yi'nan's films. To start off, Qi Wei identifies '奇情' as the driving force of Diao's narrative. The character '奇', which literally means strange or uncommon, refers to the marginal social status and atypical interpersonal relationships of Diao's characters; the character '情', while literally means emotion or sentiments, is used by Qi Wei to denote these character's 'desires of romantic purposes'. '奇情' is used also by Qi Wei as a unified term to denote resultant emotional theme produced through the dialectics between 奇(the marginal status of their sentiments and background) and 情(their romantic desires). Indeed, it is the characters' '奇情', their atypical affects, that instruct the cinematic mapping in Diao Yi'nan's films. A typical Diao character comes from incomplete or fractured familial background [9]. Xiao Jian, Wu Hongyan and Zhang Zili are all caught in dysfunctional family relationships. Xiao Jian is economically and psychologically pressured by his paralyzed and unemployed patriarch; Wu Hongyan remains celibatarian for years despite her regular efforts in search for lover; Zhang Zili becomes divorced right before a failed investigation that results in his resignation. The desperado Zhou Zenong has also been separated from his ex-wife for years due to the nature of his 'business'. Accompanying their atypical domestic status is their marginal social status: Xiao Jian barely makes a living and gets bullied for no reason; bailiff Wu Hongyan monotonously executes convicts, a job that makes her indifferent to human sentiments; Zhang Zili lives on being the security guard of a declining factory, with none respects him as a former policeman [9]. Another common feature of these characters is their desires for romantic relationships [3]. Wu is perhaps the most explicit in this respect as she goes to dancehalls and travels regularly by train to seek for romantic encounters; Xiao Jian's love is requited after being mistook as an actual police officer; both Zhang and Zhou become romantically involved with femme-fatale characters that will have fateful influence in their life.

The characters' atypical affects push them in search for 'justice' in their urban adventure, embarking on their 'quest for spatial justice' [2]. *Uniform* sees Xiao Jian pretends to be traffic police to practice frauds, transferring the unfairness he suffers to the society [2][3]. Armored with the invisible authority from the uniform he wears, Xiao Jian stops cars and fines them in random locations. Protected by the uniform's authority, he physically avenges the factory guard and walks out with no consequence, claiming dominance over the place where he was humiliated. This is similar in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. Featuring various stalk sequences to produce the emotional cartography, the film's core story is essentially Zhang Zili's redemption to win back his detective job. His atypical affects stem from both the domestic and social aspects. Single and broke, Zhang is constantly mocked for



being a ‘middle-aged drunk bachelor’. It would be no surprise that he voluntarily joins the reopened investigation, engages romantically with femme-fatale Wu Zhizhen and then reports her for his reinstatement. In Lan’s opinion, Zhang craves for a ‘patriarchal phallus’ return to power. Over the investigation, Zhang threatens Wu with the evidence of her crime in exchange for sexual intercourse. Zhang then unhesitatingly deserts her, thereby claiming his justice by dominating and conquering the female body [9].

In short, emotion is not only the result but also a fluid agent that actively participates in the narrative progression of Diao Yi’nan’s films, alternately instructing the cartography of emotion and material cities. Adopting the logic of ‘atypical affects’, Diao invites audience to dive deep in the delicacy of individual sentiments and evokes profound reflection on their motivation.

#### 4. Diao’s Surrealism: Externalizing Character’s Psychologies

In the close examination above, I have argued that Diao’s emotional cartography is driven by the logic of affects: a map of intersubjectivity on the material basis presented through its audio-visual spectrum and the interplay of which results in a production of a distinct cinematic space. Scholar discussion have noticed the ‘surrealism’ in Diao Yi’nan’s films and have addressed it to various extends. Some have argued the surrealism is simply an unconscious, random choice of director trademark, which only contributes to the mysterious atmosphere of his films [10]. Others have argued that the poeticism adds to the construction of a heterotopia, a place ‘whose members are few or no intelligible connections with one another’ [5]. Adopting a Freudian perspective on surrealism, I argue that Diao’s surrealistic moments serve to externalize characters’ ‘atypical affects’ and contributes to their eventual sublimation, while also forming a heterotopic space that expands his films’ interpretive possibilities.

In general, surrealism revolves around the true revelation of human nature, often manifested in depictions of dreams, fantasies and unconsciousness [11]. In *Manifesto of Surrealism* as cited by Gaston Criel, Andre Breton asserts that surrealism is ‘psychic automatism in its pure state...Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from aesthetic or moral concern’ [11]. It is such automatism that truly reveals the people’s unconscious world, their truest ‘operations of mind’ [11]. While Diao’s films contain no traditional surrealistic moments like memory or flashback sequence, they do contain externalized representation of character’s subjectivity. As Liu Juan points out, at some point in the film’s narrative, characters tend to sink in his own internal world and deviate from actual plot [5]. When Zhou Zenong hides in a shabby cabin near the goose lake, he faints due to a gun wound from the police. Gazing at the newspapers on the wall, Zhou is submerged in the imagination stimulated by their pictures. The sound of car accident, football match and quarrels echo along the quick montage of the newspapers. Zhou essentially enters a momentary mental seclusion from worrying being caught. The rapid montage and overlapped sound and the lively world show his instinctive need for survival and his despair of being forever cut off with the earthly world, either as a fugitive or a must-die convict. The externalization of his desperate psychology sets the ground for his brief romantic involvement with Liu Aiai on the fleeing boat, as a last earthly comfort Zhou will ever get before his fateful demise [5]. Other moments like this could be seen in *Uniform*, *Night Train* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. While *Night Train* simply shows Li Jun, the husband to the convict executed by Wu Hongyan, gazing into the foggy void on a stolen boat near the factory he works, *Uniform* and *Black Coal, Thin ice* distorts temporality and spatiality to externalize character’s frustration. In *Uniform*, a spinning shot departs from a close-up of Xiao Jian who tries to figure out where he has fled to in the factory. The camera spins to imitate his first-person perspectives, moving to the right as he gazes. After two spins the camera lands on Xiao Jian in a third-person perspective and sees him leaning motionlessly against the wall. This shot seamlessly connects the factory’s claustrophobic surrounding and his internal activities, briefly disrupting viewers’ spatial recognition

to create a sympathetic disorientation as Xiao Jian. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* contains a similar spin shot that disrupts audience's temporality. In the opening where Zhang Zili drives out of a tunnel from a failed investigation, a reverse shot from the front window is given to the exit ahead, where a man could be vaguely seen lying by the roadside. The camera, supposedly from Zhang Zili's perspective, moves to survey the man. Surprisingly, the man reveals to be Zhang Zili himself from 5 years later. The first person-turned-omniscient perspective generates a mysterious and fateful overtone to the narrative, for both Zhang Zili's emasculation frustration and femme-fatale Wu Zhizhen's eventual demise [9]. Originating from character's subjectivity, these surrealistic moments do not give a reification of their internal world with flashbacks or monologues. Instead, they are objective records of the characters' presence in the cinematic reality, carefully arranged to externalize their psychologies, revealing unwittingly the most delicate of human sentiments.



Figure 3: The film transits from Zhang Zili's perspective to an omniscient perspective and sees himself 5 years later (1)



Figure 4: The film transits from Zhang Zili's perspective to an omniscient perspective and sees himself 5 years later (2)

Diao's rejection of direct representation of character psychology produces a distancing effect, contrasting with his realist mise-en-scene with which the audience often resonates. This furthers the unintelligibility of relationships in Diao's films. In an interview with Li Xun, Diao reveals that he favors a sense of 'uncertainty' among characters, creating a 'sandbox' cinematic space filled with ambivalent symbols and events [12]. This is especially shown in sudden intrusion of unrelated plots in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. When the police ask assistance from Wu Zhizheng's residents committee, someone reports a horse to the lost and found department. Revealed to be lost by a scavenger, the horse is given a close-up and remain the focus of conversation before investigation resumes. The horse sparked audience discussion on whether its 'confined and lost' status is a metaphor for Zhang Zili's lost manhood, or atmospheric device to adds a sense of anxiety to the film's narrative [13]. Another sequence from *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, sees a random person screaming and smashing the computer during Zhang's investigation, possibly due to losing in video game. The sudden intrusion of this event distracts the camera as it moves away from Zhang to frame the internet café which is covered in smoke. Seemingly illogical and unrelated to the investigation, this sequence provides a glimpse of the other atypical affects that exist in Diao's cinematic world, evoking contemplation on its uncertainty. In this way, Diao's surrealism not only adheres to the narrative logic of affects but also enhances and expands it, conforming to the fateful tone of his films.

## 5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have examined Diao Yi'nan's cinematic strategy in the scope of emotional cartography. While emotional cartography is a commonly used technic of the sixth-generation toolbox, it is used differently in Diao's films. Instead of adopting a topophilia approach, which revolves around nostalgia for lost materiality and emotional bonds, Diao focuses on the marginal's quest to defy alienation and obtain spatial justice in a vastly transforming society. Characters' atypical affects, originating from the fleeting materiality and changing social relations, also react to instruct Diao's narrative. Directed by the logic of affect, characters travel bodily through different urban systems, with their emotionality indexed on screen with different locations, forming a map of intersubjectivity which could be revisited countlessly. Diao's emotional cartography is also rendered with surrealism as it pushes the boundary between subjectivity and objectivity, illogically inserting unrelated plot to expand the room for interpretation, tinging a sense of fatefulness to his films' tragic overtone.

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