

The Storytelling Rhythms of Chinese and Korean Films

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Abstract

In literature it is not only the meaning of words which matters, but also their texture matters i.e. their rhythm, colour and style are relevant and none of these natures can be reduced to an item of information. The texture is also important in film languages, especially the rhythm. In order to make the storytelling rhythm visible, a new concept of ‘the Rhythm Chart Analysis Method (RCAM)’ has been devised in this research and used for analysis. By analyzing original films and remakes in Korean and Chinese, one can find out that different countries have different storytelling rhythms i.e. the same story can be told in different rhythms. The central idea in Korean films is portrayed at the end, which is a typical characteristic of Korean films. And as the defining moment does not occur suddenly the audience can naturally get immersed into the story. But Chinese films communicate with the audience in a more direct way. It directly mentions characteristics of each actor in such a way that it is telling rather than showing. The information of the movie is given to the audience in the initial stages of the movie. Rhythm is as important as story and information. And through this we can find out the cultural differences from the different storytelling rhythms.

Keywords: *Remake film, story-telling rhythm, cultural difference, Korean-China, the Rhythm Chart Analysis Method (RCAM)*

1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a comparative cultural study on the storytelling rhythm of Korean and Chinese films. Rhythm has been studied in many different fields, such as music and dance. “the issue of rhythm in cinema is enormously complex and still not well understood.”¹ This paper develops ideas about how the rhythms make differences in storytelling, especially in films. It also defines and describes a kind of movement that a storyteller works on, and some possible approaches to it.

In order to make a comparison, three sets of films were chosen for this research. The first case is the comparison between ‘Blind (2011)’ which is a Korean film with its Chinese remake ‘The Witness (2015)’. The second case is the comparison between ‘Silent Witness, (2013)’ which is a Chinese film with its Korean remake film ‘Heart Blackened (2017)’. The third set is Korean film ‘Intimate Strangers (2018)’ and Chinese film ‘Kill Mobile (2018)’, both of which are remake of the 2016 Italian film ‘Perfect Stranger’. A proposal is suggested by analyzing one set of movies, which is used to verify the other two sets of films, and then the final conclusion is presented.

Films are a transnational media in its own nature, and it is not easy to clearly distinguish nationalities of each film. It is more than just a joint-venture of capital and is also an exchange of cultures. First of all, film

¹¹ Bordwell, D., and Thompson, K., *Film Art: An Introduction*, pp. 196 – 197.

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text will be compared to analyze how the original story is translated into a new receptive context when crossing borders. In doing so this research would help to understand each other's culture codes, which is one of the very important elements in reproducing cultural contents both in Korean and Chinese.

2. WHAT IS STORYTELLING RHYTHM?

Literature and films have many similarities and differences. In literature it is not only the meaning of words which matter, but their texture which is to say their rhythm, colour and style are as well important and none of these can be reduced to an item of information.² The texture is also important in film languages, especially the rhythm. Sometimes the rhythm is as important as story itself. This paper begins with the question: Do the same story in different countries have different rhythms? This question leads to an in-depth study of the functions of rhythm in films. Movement in film is shaped into rhythms. It describes the psychosomatic effect of rhythmic cycles of tension and release and the effect of synchronization that a film's rhythm can have on the rhythm of a spectator.³

As Linda Aronson, author of 'Scriptwriting Updated' writes: In fact everything about film, about moving pictures is connected with time and movement in time, that is to say action, in every sense. Film consists of movement in all ways, physical, emotional and spiritual. In screenwriting, story is a kind of movement and the characters in the story move through their own mental landscapes.

Aronson makes distinction between different kinds of movement when she refers to "physical, emotional and spiritual". Making distinctions between these kinds of movement creates the possibility of articulating subtly different approaches and it leads to the shaping of each kind of rhythm. These three types of rhythm, physical rhythm, emotional rhythm, and event rhythm are cumulative. The physical rhythm sets up a kinesthetic empathy. The emotional rhythm relies on the physical presence, which is reframed as emotionally laden to have its impact. And the event rhythm relies on both the movement of image and sound and also the movement of emotion to communicate or to convey its information⁴.

Storytelling rhythm is very close to event rhythm. An event is the release of new information or change of direction for characters as they pursue their goals. Each significant change in a story or structure is an event. Some events are big and have repercussions for the whole plot; others are minor changes which doesn't affect the direction of the plot entirely. In some films, events occur rapidly and sometimes even haphazardly and in other films, there may be little changes over the course of the whole story as it may consist of just one substantial event. In either case, an event is a perceptible change at the level of story or structure. Event is what happens in a story and is distinct from the emotional exchanges (which may, of course, be the source of changes in the story) and image flow (which expresses and reveals the events). Event rhythm is the shaping of time, energy, and movement of events i.e. the rate and strength of change over the course of the story or the structure as a whole. The event in the remake film is the same as that of the original film, but illustrates the story in a different rhythm, which is newly suggested in this research as 'storytelling rhythm'. The same story in different countries can be told in different ways. So storytelling rhythm also plays an important part in cultural difference.

3. HOW TO MAKE 'STORYTELLING RHYTHM' VISIBLE

One can think that rhythm can be felt, but it is invisible. In order to make the storytelling rhythm visible, a new method has been devised and used in this research which is called 'the Rhythm Chart Analysis Method (RCAM)'. RCAM uses the Film Shot Analysis Data (FSAD). The Rhythm Chart Analysis Method is based on the five-act structure which was developed by German playwright Gustav Freytag and is commonly used to analyze classical dramas. He attributed a particular function to each of the five acts.

² Haase, Ullrich, Large, William, *Maurice Blanchot*, Routledge, pp28, 2008.

³ Karen Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit*, Focal Press, pp84-87, 2009.

⁴ Linda Aronson, *Scriptwriting Updated*, pp. 40., Allen & Unwin Pty, 2000.

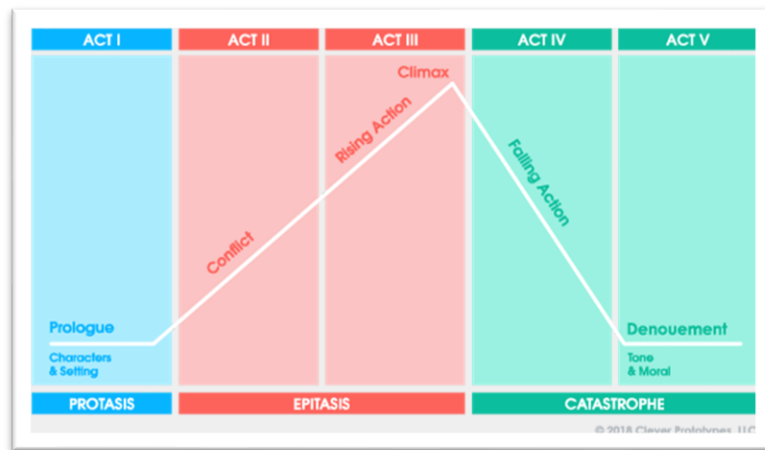


Figure 1. The five-act structure

The typical plot consists of rising action, climax and falling action. There is conflict in every story, and in this pyramid you can see the preparation, the ascent, the climax, the descent and the end of the conflict. The ‘Rhythm Chart Analysis Method (RCAM)’ is a new research method proposed in this paper. A new method was implemented in this research to express the rhythm, which is often used to produce statistic data. Cumulative Area Chart can make it easier to help in identifying the trend, as it shows the relationship between time flow and number of shots, which in turn illustrates the changes. Thus, the time-dependent changes of each variable or item can be identified on each side which never comes out as a straight line.

Timing and pacing are used to describe a variety of aspects of rhythm or the rhythm making process. They are tools that can be used to create rhythms in the editing process. The definition of ‘shot’, as given in the Dictionary of Film Terms is as follows:

“SHOT: The basic unit of film construction. A shot is the continuous recording of a scene or object from the time the camera starts until it stops. In the edited film it is the length of a film from one splice or optical transition to the next.”⁵

In simple terms, ‘shot’ is the minimum unit in the film, and all the shots in the film are connected. So the area chart is more connected using the shots than through other expressive ways. The ‘Rhythm Chart Analysis Method’ provides a clear overview of the flow and rhythm of the film. One can easily see how many areas the character occupies. As film is a visual art, it is will be meaningful to visualize the analysis results as well.

4. THE THREE STORIES

Different countries have different storytelling rhythms. Comparing original film and its remake film could be a good case study. Three sets of films are analyzed in detail for this research. First one is the comparison between the original Korean film ‘Blind (2011)’ with its Chinese remake ‘The Witness (2015)’. It is a crime thriller film in which a female university student who is involved in a missing person case and the victim in a hit-and-run case appears to be related. Detectives look for a witness. Two different witnesses appear, one of whom is blind. At first they don’t believe each other, but later they start working together to catch the killer.

And the second set is the original Chinese film ‘Silent Witness (2013)’ and its Korean remake ‘Heart Blackened (2017)’. The two films tell the same story about a father and his daughter. The daughter of an influential businessman becomes the murder suspect of her father’s fiancée, who is a famous singer. The

⁵ Frank Beaver, ed., Dictionary of Film Terms, New York: Twayne Publishers, pp.311-312, 1994.

businessman hires a lawyer to clear his daughter's name.

The third set is the Korean film ‘Intimate Strangers (2018)’ and Chinese film ‘Kill Mobile (2018)’, both of which are remake of the 2016 Italian film ‘Perfect Strangers’. It is a story about lifelong friends of who are married couples. They are invited by their close friends over for a housewarming dinner. They end up playing a game where they must share all new incoming messages and calls on their cell phones. Initially the game starts off lightly but it gets more and more uncomfortable as hidden truths start to surface. It makes them to feel more like strangers.

These three sets are representative in telling the same story in different country, which means in different contexts. By analyzing these six films, we can get a general idea of the impact of rhythm on storytelling, and also can find out the differences between China and Korea in storytelling.

5. THE STORYTELLING RHYTHM IN CHINESE AND SOUTH KOREA FILMS

The original Korean film ‘Blind’ has 2,615 shots and its Chinese remake ‘The Witness’ has 2,394 shots⁶. These shots were used as basic data to analyze the rhythm of each sequence. Every character was given a different color so that we can see how much territory each character occupies in the story.

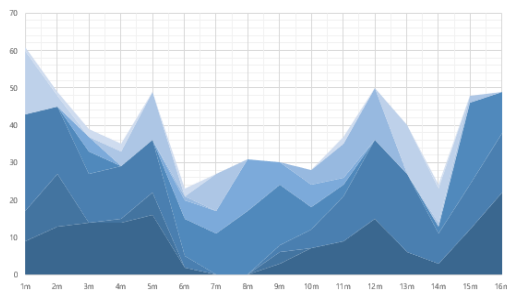


Figure 2. <Blind> Sequence 8

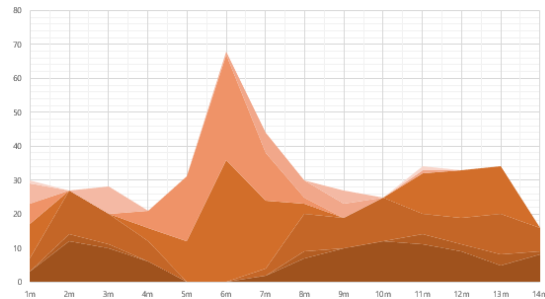


Figure 3. <The Witness > Sequence 8

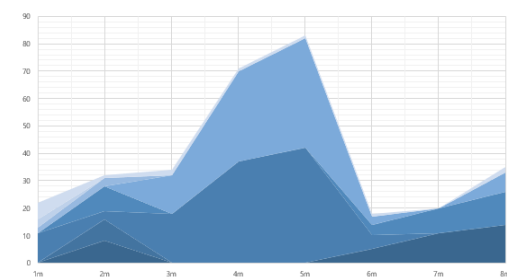


Figure 4. <Blind> Sequence 11

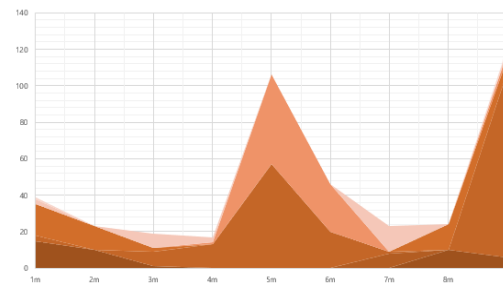


Figure 5. <The Witness > Sequence 11

Two representative rhythm charts from the film's climax have been presented above. These are chase scenes. As one can see, the storytelling rhythm in the film ‘Blind’ is slower than in the film ‘The Witness’. ‘Blind’ doesn’t show the chase scene very quickly and has longer setting and preparing time. It then gradually advances to the climax of the movie. On the contrary, ‘The Witness’ directly presents a longer chase scene. The audience doesn’t want to wait longer to get to the climax, as they just enjoy the speed and passion in the chase scene. The summary is that, the storytelling rhythm in Korean is slower than that of Chinese, even when presenting the same story.

In order to verify this speculation, another two sets of films were analyzed. One is the original Chinese film

⁶ Data from “WU JUAN, A Comparative Study of Cultural Dimensions and Culture Codes between Korean Original Films and Chinese Remake Films, Ph.D. Thesis. Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea, 2019.”

‘Silent Witness (2013)’ and its Korean remake ‘Heart Blackened (2017)’. The two films depict the same story about a father and his daughter. The daughter of an influential businessman becomes the murder suspect of her father’s fiancée, who is a famous singer. The businessman hires a lawyer to clear his daughter’s name. The Korean film uses many shots to describe the love between a father and his fiancée, but the Chinese film starts with a court scene. The opening of the film starts with the climax. The storytelling rhythm is consistent according to the speculation drawn from the analysis of the first set of films. And the third set is the Korean film ‘Intimate Strangers (2018)’ and the Chinese film ‘Kill Mobile (2018)’ which also shows the same characteristics.

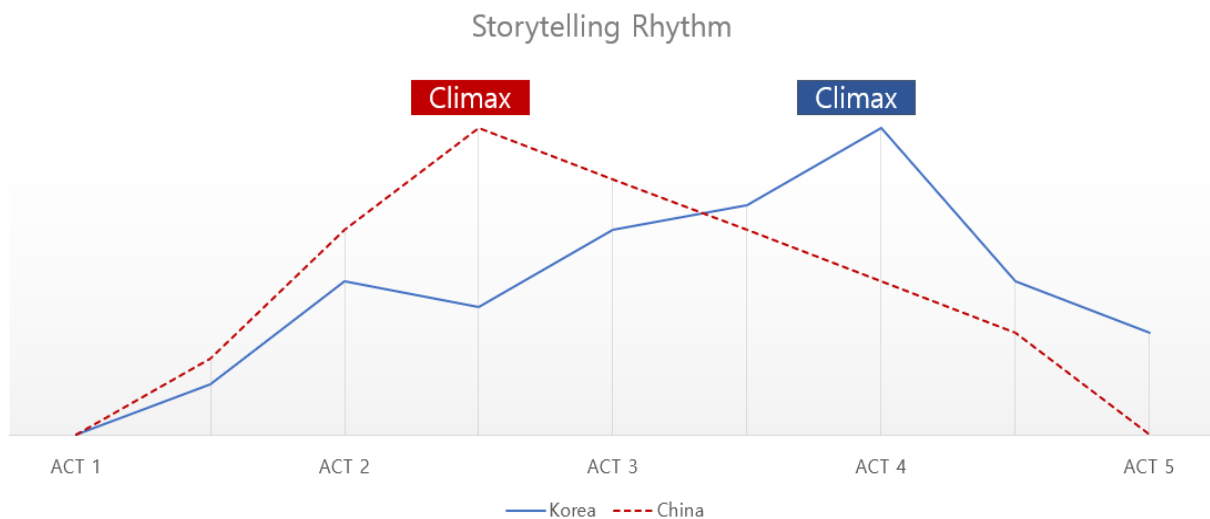


Figure 6. The Storytelling Rhythm of Korea film and Chinese film

Through Figure 6, we can simply sum up the differences of storytelling rhythm. In these Korean films, each significant change in a story happens very naturally, giving audience enough time to get immersed in emotions portrayed in the film. But in the Chinese films, the focal point is presented in the initial stages and the film reaches its climax at a very early stage. Some audience may feel it hard to fully understand the background details of the ongoing story as the film ends even before one can go deeper into it. So when the Chinese audience watches a movie, he or she focuses more on the actions, the spectacle, and the actor rather than the story. In other words, Chinese audience enjoys watching the fast-moving images more than following and sympathizing with the on-going story.

6. CONCLUSION

Korea and China share a lot in common through a long history, and culture is definitely one of them. However, we cannot deny the fact that there exists cultural difference as well. Films are a transnational media in its own nature, and it is not easy to clearly distinguish nationalities of each of them. A transnational remake film can be considered as a new production method by which creators and audience successfully co-exist. It is more than just a joint-venture of capital and can be taken as an exchange of cultures.

By comparing and analyzing original films and their remakes in Korean and Chinese, the research presents that different countries and cultures have different ways to present the same story. Rhythm plays an important role in storytelling. The sound, texture and rhythm of the words take precedence over their meaning. The storytelling rhythm of Korean film is slow paced and the defining moment is not presented suddenly. So the

audience can naturally get immersed in the emotions shown in the film. But Chinese films communicate with the audience in a more direct way. It directly mentions characteristics of each actor in such a way that it is telling rather than showing. The information of the film is fast paced. It can be interpreted that Korean and Chinese audiences have different habits of watching movies.

Chinese films began in stage plays. Early films were mainly a product of the process of filming traditional plays and it is likely that the Chinese audience accepted the film as a variation of the play. They give more attention to the actions, the spectacle, and the actor than the story. But Korean audience focuses more on the story and they need more time to get immersed in the story. So, one cannot ignore the role of rhythm when producing movies or transnational contents.

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Film <Blind, 2011>

Film <The Witness, 2015>

Film <Silent Witness, 2013>

Film <Heart Blackened , 2017 >

Film <Intimate Strangers, 2018>

Film <kill mobile, 2018>