

A Study on the Emotional Narrative Strategies in the Anti-Japanese War Film "Dead To Rights"

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Abstract: As a carrier for inheriting historical memory and promoting national spirit, anti-war films can provide a continuous source of spiritual motivation for national prosperity and rejuvenation. On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Anti-Japanese War, the film "Nanjing Photo Studio" was released. The film adopts a perspective of ordinary people to look back on history, and based on respecting historical facts, it relies on emotional narration to gain widespread acclaim from audiences, triggering emotional resonance and social discussion among the public. Therefore, this paper takes Nanjing Photo Studio as the research object to systematically analyze its emotional narrative strategy. The study finds that the film revolves around three major emotional motifs: family love, friendship, and love. On the emotional level, it creates immersive sensory impact through audiovisuals, evokes deep empathy by showing the arc of fate, and reflects on oneself and others to construct a connection between ancient and modern times on the action level. This strengthens the authenticity and appeal of historical memory, achieves modern translation of historical memory and deep-level interaction with audience emotions, and also provides a practical example for anti-war films to inherit spirit and establish values in contemporary contexts.

1. Preface

Films on the theme of the War of Resistance Against Japan represent a significant genre in film history. They serve not only as carriers of historical memory but also as transmitters, builders, consolidators, and promoters of national collective memory, as well as shapers of cultural identity. On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the victory in the China People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War in 2025, the film "Dead To Rights" adopts the Nanjing Massacre as its narrative backdrop. Through the story of an ordinary photo studio and its characters, it approaches history from the perspective of ordinary citizens, using the symbolic act of "photography" as a narrative thread to transform macroscopic historical events into the personal life experiences and emotional struggles of individuals. This approach not only expands the artistic scope of films on the War of Resistance but also provides a new narrative paradigm worthy of in-depth study for how such themes can effectively construct collective memory and inherit national spirit in contemporary contexts. The Beijing News commented, "It allows the audience to naturally immerse themselves in the characters and empathize with them, subtly transmitting values layer by layer." [1].

Consequently, the author takes it as a case study to examine how innovative emotional storytelling techniques enable the modern expression and effective dissemination of historical memory.

2. Analysis of the Emotional Motifs in the Film "Dead To Rights"

2.1. Family Affection: Psychological Support in Extreme Environments

Family bonds represent humanity's most fundamental emotional connection and serve as a crucial source of emotional security in times of crisis. The film "Dead To Rights" offers an individualized portrayal of familial love through the experiences of Lao Jin's family, Achang, and Lin Yuxiu amidst the turmoil of war. When Japanese troops entered the city to arrest Achang, he fled to a photo studio and unexpectedly discovered Lao Jin—hidden in a cabinet while his family had taken refuge in a cellar to protect their children. To avoid detection, Lao Jin guided Achang into the cellar, where the film captures how he had meticulously prepared ample food and supplies for his family, ensuring their basic needs were met throughout their hiding period. During the thorough search by Japanese soldiers, when the scent of children's excrement threatened to reveal the cellar's location, Lao Jin prepared fecal coverings to mask the odor and stood guard at the entrance, using himself as a shield to safeguard his family's survival. Later, after enduring humiliation and great hardship to obtain a pass for processing photos for the Japanese army, Lao Jin chose to leave it with his wife and children, insisting they escape first while he remained in the cellar—knowing its location might be exposed at any moment. Amid external threats and internal struggles, family bonds became the driving force behind the characters' emotional growth and spiritual awakening. Through Lao Jin's actions in protecting his family and uncovering the truth, the film highlights the enduring strength of blood ties even in desperate circumstances, offering a powerful example of familial devotion.

2.2. Friendship: A Test of Human Nature in Times of Crisis

In the life-or-death predicament, friendship transcends mere daily camaraderie—it serves as a touchstone for human nature. Under the shadow of war, Nanjing was under strict blockade, and survival became the sole objective during days without food or water. In the film, Wang Guanghai obtains the last two permits—the only means to escape the lockdown zone and save his life. The remaining soldiers remain trapped, facing certain death; Lao Jin draws a permit but sacrifices his own chance to save others. Meanwhile, Ito needs help developing film negatives, while Achang demands a permit—a mutually beneficial deal. When Achang realizes the negatives conceal crimes, he tamper with the development process. Discontented, Ito plots to eliminate witnesses and secretly orders that any Japanese soldier encountering Achang or Lin Yuxiu with the permit be killed. Leveraging Achang's skills and trust, Ito ultimately leads him to ruin. True friendship isn't verbal intimacy—it's conscience and goodwill upheld in adversity. The film contrasts two opposing characters: one embodying righteousness in crisis, the other revealing how friendship can degenerate into exploitation—a stark revelation of humanity's dual nature in interpersonal relationships.

2.3. Love: A Spiritual Resonance through Suffering

In the war narrative of "Dead To Rights", love is reinterpreted as a spiritual bond transcending individual suffering. When Old Jin and his wife take refuge in a cellar, supporting each other through adversity, he steps forward to shield her from the approaching Japanese troops just as their hiding place is about to be discovered. Seizing the chance for escape, he resolutely leaves the path open for his wife to stay behind and cover them—this selfless devotion becomes the most poignant light in the

darkness. Initially posing as a married couple to deceive others, Achang and Yuxiu encounter a pivotal moment when Yuxiu recounts her shining moments as an actress during photo development. Achang captures every trace of her nostalgic gaze, discerning the tender emotions she harbors within. He quietly develops old photographs for her, each subtle gesture revealing unspoken care and concern. One form embodies the profound marital bond forged through enduring companionship; the other represents a flame of love ignited silently amidst war. Together, these two manifestations of love illustrate the power of spiritual resonance. Love in the film never exists in isolation—it serves as both a spark in the darkness and a fragmented yet genuine happiness, shaping our collective imagination and reflection on love.

3. Analysis of the Narrative Strategy in the Film "Dead To Rights"

3.1. Enhance audiovisual impact to create an immersive experience

The immediate emotional impact of audiovisual language serves as the starting point for empathy. This mechanism facilitates emotional contagion through audiovisual symbols, employing elements like camera techniques, lighting, color schemes, and sound design to directly engage viewers' senses, evoking instinctive emotional responses and creating a superficial empathetic experience. In terms of visuals, take the change in film tone as an example. Before the fall of Nanjing, the camera still captured a hint of everyday warmth. As the city fell, the images sank into a gloomy blue and grayish black, and the panic and unease after the collapse of order almost spilled out of the screen. Audibly, the sound design is equally masterful: when Japanese photographer Hideo Ito freely photographs Nanjing using a Leica camera, his posture mirrors the Japanese troops' indiscriminate shooting and massacre of civilians—the camera functions as a "reproductive apparatus of invasive violence" [2]. Taking the emotional use of the pervasive sound symbol "camera shutter sound" as an example, in the film, the Japanese army wantonly shot and killed civilians, immediately photographing each corpse with a camera after killing them. The shutter sound is short, harsh, cold, and mechanical, with gunshots and shutter sounds alternating one after another. The "click" sound seems to be the rhythm accompanying the violence. Each sound signifies the loss of a life, stimulating the audience's hearing and making them feel the direct cruelty and brutality of the Japanese army. At the end of the film, when the survivors stand upright and face the camera, preserving their identities and remembering the suffering through images, the shutter sound is no longer violent and harsh, but becomes steady and solemn. The same shutter sound, on one end represents atrocities and destruction, while on the other end represents resistance and remembrance. Through this highly tensioned audiovisual contrast, the film constructs a thick emotional field at the sensory level, making people feel as if they are immersed in that period of history, and laying the foundation for deeper emotional resonance.

3.2. Revealing the trajectory of fate, evoking profound empathy

The civilian narrative paradigm rejects the simplification of characters into moral symbols, and instead reveals the complex spectrum of human nature in crisis situations through the presentation of existential dilemmas[3]. After successfully evoking basic emotions, the film's emotional narrative delves into the inner world of the characters, revealing their true state of survival amidst the cracks between survival, conscience, and power. It presents the characters' trajectory from confusion to clarity, and from retreat to responsibility. Jin Chengzong, as the owner of a photo studio, only wanted to seek stability and self-preservation in troubled times. However, when he personally developed photos of Japanese atrocities in the darkroom and saw the faces of the victims under the bloody red light, his inner barriers were completely breached. He decided to pass on the truth by replacing the

negatives, completing his identity transformation from "survival" to "preserving the truth". Liu Yuxiu's life and dignity were blatantly trampled upon after the Japanese army invaded the photo studio. Watching the people around her fall one after another, her gaze shifted from trembling to firmness, and ultimately to risking her life to hide the film. This outlined the process of courage generation in a small figure in a desperate situation, showing the growth of a woman. Wang Guanghai stood on the edge of good and evil, having to succumb to power while also enduring the scorn of his compatriots and inner guilt. The film repeatedly features his clenched fists that he cannot let go, with anger and fear repeatedly swaying in his eyes. It vividly presents a soul that is tormented by fear and responsibility, until finally, he used his body to block the bayonet and achieved self-redemption at the cost of his life. Through the ups and downs of the fate of small figures, the film reflects the scars left by the great era, making the grand history no longer abstract and empty, but rather transformed into vivid life experiences with warmth, choices, and pain, reaching straight to the heart.

3.3. Reflecting from others to oneself: Building a Bridge Between Past and Present

The film's emotional narrative ultimately aims to inspire audiences to engage in profound historical reflection after deep empathy, establishing a transcendent spiritual connection between historical memory and contemporary reality—transforming emotional experiences into value-based recognition. The climactic temporal contrast at the end elevates this reflection: black-and-white negatives developing in the darkroom capture past suffering and resistance, while the camera transitions smoothly to showcase Nanjing's vibrant, peaceful urban landscape today. This visual design powerfully conveys that our current peace and stability were achieved through the relentless efforts of ordinary individuals who sacrificed their lives to protect the truth. Many viewers shared and discussed the film on social media, noting that stepping out of the theater into the colorful world became the film's greatest "egg" revelation. The ensuing discussions about honoring history, cherishing peace, and celebrating the humanity of ordinary people reflect the audience's profound inner transformation as they empathize with the characters' fates. By transforming the trauma of the Nanjing Massacre into an enduring emotional legacy, the film encourages viewers to transcend the story itself and contemplate their relationship with history, fostering deep historical awareness and a commitment to peace—a complete cycle bridging emotional storytelling with social impact.

4. Research on the Social Value of "Dead To Rights"

4.1. Reenacting historical scenes to deepen historical memory

In December 1937, Nanjing fell to the Japanese army. More than 300,000 Chinese civilians and captured soldiers were collectively shot, burned, buried alive, and executed by other methods. One-third of the houses were burned down, and almost all shops were looted. The property losses were innumerable. The Japanese army strictly sealed the news to cover up their crimes, while burning the bodies to erase evidence and destroy incriminating documents. This catastrophe is not only a wound that can never heal in the hearts of the Chinese people, but also the heaviest chapter in modern history. "Nanjing Photo Studio" explores a more immersive and emotionally penetrating way of expression, presenting scenes related to the Nanjing Massacre through plain and restrained camera language. While relying on image details to sort out and present historical facts, it deepens memory through emotional narration. For example, the historical atmosphere of wartime Nanjing is portrayed through low-saturation gray tones and cool colors, with an overall dark tone. This color treatment not only fits the visual characteristics of historical images but also gives the images an "archival" effect, allowing the audience to feel as if they are immersed in historical memory [4], laying the foundation

for the emotional explosion in subsequent plots. In addition, all restored scenes, objects, including language and lines, construct an immersive sense of historical presence, making the Nanjing Massacre no longer a distant event being told, but rather a present memory that the audience and characters jointly "witness".

4.2. Deepening Collective Memory and Inheriting National Spirit

For young generations who have never experienced war firsthand, the Nanjing Massacre remains merely a passage in history textbooks or an overview derived from accounts and archival materials. While these texts allow us to grasp the brutality of war and the savagery of invaders, they rarely foster genuine emotional resonance. "Dead To Rights" transforms this collective memory into a tangible medium through visual storytelling. Departing from conventional approaches that solely emphasize atrocities, the film employs photographs, negatives, and photographic evidence to vividly expose the brutal nature of Japanese aggression while reconstructing the true details of historical crimes. It also highlights the resilience and resistance of ordinary citizens in desperate circumstances. These individuals resisted by concealing negatives and preserving images—this courage hidden within everyday actions infused the otherwise tragic collective memory with a spiritual core rooted in conscience and truth defense. The film elevates the national spirit embodied by these ordinary people's perseverance beyond individual lives, achieving authentic emotional resonance that deepens public understanding of this history and ensures its transmission. It transforms the ancestors' unwavering commitment to justice into motivation to cherish life and protect their homeland, ensuring the enduring legacy of this invaluable national ethos across generations.

4.3. Building social consensus and strengthening national identity

The prevailing understanding of the Nanjing Massacre generally encourages a rational perspective on the nation's historical suffering and appreciation for the hard-won nature of contemporary life. However, certain groups hold misconceptions: some, influenced by historical nihilism, question the authenticity of casualty figures and seek to downplay or even deny the atrocities committed by Japanese forces during their invasion; others argue that "past events need not be revisited," claiming that constant remembrance of trauma hinders national reconciliation and attempts to erase history. Such views partially undermine the formation of social consensus. Yet the role of visual historical textbooks lies in guiding and shaping audiences' fundamental understanding of the War of Resistance Against Japan. The true societal consensus sought is neither to incite hatred nor to dwell repeatedly on pain, but rather to help us, while honoring history, better comprehend the preciousness of peace when reflecting on past suffering. This understanding does not encourage indulgence in the past but rather inspires gratitude for the present and commitment to safeguarding the future. Through its historically immersive narrative atmosphere, "Dead To Rights" guides viewers to experience firsthand the devastation of war and appreciate the beauty of peace, gradually fostering a deeper interconnected understanding between individuals and the nation, as well as between history and reality. The film's conclusion seamlessly integrates historical photographs from the 1937 Nanjing Massacre — showcasing its ruins and victims—with contemporary scenes of Nanjing's bustling streets: the crowds at Confucius Temple, Zhongshan Road shaded by plane trees, and the scenery of Xuanwu Lake. This creates a dialogue between past and present. As viewers leave the theater and return to their daily lives under streetlights, that sense of stability and ordinariness naturally continues the film's narrative. It prompts audiences to reflect more deeply on the historical events depicted and cherish peace within their own realities. Through reflecting on suffering and embracing the present, they strengthen their commitment to remembering history and loving their country, reinforcing their sense of belonging,

identity, and responsibility toward the nation. Thus, the national spirit is passed down through generations, fostering collective strength for progress, while national identity becomes ever more solidified through remembrance and inheritance.

5. Summary

Outstanding historical films enable audiences to immerse themselves in the cinematic narrative space within a short timeframe, offering an immersive experience that transcends ordinary empathy and facilitating the rediscovery of historical memory through the convergence of past and present [5]. The artistic exploration in "Dead To Rights" provides a valuable reference for creating historical works—particularly anti-Japanese war films. By grounding history in concrete details, the film deconstructs the weighty national memory into individual choices through the lens of a photo studio and the fears and concerns of ordinary people. Through common human emotions like family bonds and friendship, it engages viewers with its authentic storytelling, allowing the spirit of history to resonate deeply and be passed down across generations. This approach enables audiences to comprehend history through firsthand experience while offering a new narrative paradigm for constructing collective memory and preserving national spirit in contemporary contexts.

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