

HOW SMALL EVENTS CAN LEAD TO TRAGEDY.

THE BUILDING OF NARRATIVE DETAILS IN THE SHORT FILM *DA BAI*.

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Exegesis

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Introduction

“If the flap of a butterfly’s wings can be instrumental in generating a tornado, it can equally well be instrumental in preventing a tornado” (Edward Lorenz, 1963)

The notion that a small incident can create huge consequences through multiple connected actions is real and readily relatable. The movie industry has been prolific in presenting this idea and one of that few modern films to capture the Edward Lorenz’s quote above is the Eric Bress and J. M. Gruber directed *Butterfly Effect* (2004). However, short films and stories have, perhaps, been more effective in highlighting this phenomenon. *Da Bai* is a screenplay based on the short story, *Da Bai Coming Back To Life* by Fu Ta Ning Meng Cha. It is written to illustrate how the small actions of people, made in the ignorance of the feelings of others, can create irreversible tragedy. In my film, *Da Bai*, I have used narrative structure, cinematography, mise-en-scene, sound and editing, to show how a collision of traditions and a powerful drive for success have created a series of small acts that ultimately lead to the death of an innocent child.

Synopsis

The effectiveness of *Da Bai* in presenting meaning is through its compactness; a small number of characters, and a straightforward storyline. Thomas is a New Zealander and established writer, living on the fourth floor of an apartment building. He writes children's fictional stories and has two bestselling books. Ms. Zhang and Mr. Liu are young Qiqi’s parents. They live on the ground floor of the same building and they expect their child to excel in his exams given the struggle they went through to save for his education and their New Zealand apartment. The boy loves the children's book “Da Bai” given to him by Thomas. A continued confrontation with his father over his study habits leads to his father killing the boy’s adored pet dog, and burying him in their courtyard garden. This pushes the young boy into isolation. Meanwhile, on the second floor of the same building is another Chinese family’ a teenage girl, Miaomiao, and her father.

Miaomiao came to New Zealand over six years ago for her education and has recently been joined by her divorced father. He is Mr. Zhou, a retired teacher, prideful and arrogant. The breakdown of his

TV set leads to him buying a new, yet counterfeit, television set against the advice of his daughter. Their increasing arguments lead to him throwing the set out of the window in frustration. Below, Qiqi, the boy, is mourning the killing of his dog; lying on the grave, wishing its return, just like in *Da Bai*, the children's book. The falling TV crushes him to death. Ms. Zhang confronts Thomas believing his book to be the cause of her son's death. But really, she is confronting both her, and her husband's, guilt. The narrative structure of the film is splintered, following these multiple storylines, and how these small moments tragically combine, resulting in the boy's death.

Analysis

Setting

The setting is an important element that helps to drive the storyline and style of the film. The three apartments where the three families live is the triangle of physical locations - they reveal a conflicted neighbourhood. The apartments are strategically positioned to achieve their effective roles in the development of the story. Miaomiao and her father's apartment being above Qiqi's parents precipitates the falling of the TV onto the boy. The triangular setting of the locations allows for the fast cutting between the three main storylines - achieving a singular story.

Camera Placement

The camera work is effective in introducing the story through the use of movement and close ups in the beginning. In this introduction, the camera begins still, portraying the silence in the hallway before Mr. Thomas is confronted by Ms Zhang. Then, in the close-ups, it captures the surprised faces of Mr. Thomas and Mr. Liu as well as the angry face of Ms. Zhang, contextualised by wider shots of the building.

Conflict of Cultures

At the center of the story is a conflict of traditions; the old generation feeling superior to the new generation. There is so much pride coming from the older generation, chiefly among the Chinese in the film. They feel they are more knowledgeable, and entitled to displaying arrogance - even dictatorship - to their children. Mr. Thomas, the only European, is depicted as calm and collected,

perhaps a comment on how Europeans view the “melodrama” of Chinese family life. We also see that the teacher (Miomiao’s father) blindly believes in cheaper prices from China, to the point of buying a fake TV from a Chinese website. When advised to pick a New Zealand store by his daughter, Zhou yells out that:

*Oh! You think because you came to
New Zealand before me, then you’re
the expert? I know these things.
I’ve been buying stuff since before
you were born!*

(Wang, 2022, p. 6)

He is so prideful of having been a teacher in China that he now looks down on the opinion of others, including his own daughter. Lui, Qiqi’s father, has a similar dictatorial arrogance. When he confronts his son who is supposed to be studying:

LIU
*Look at your son! I thought he was
studying hard. Turns out he’s
reading a picture book! Now I know
why he didn’t do well in his exams.
What are you thinking?*

Although his mother is more understanding, and patiently explains to the boy the pressures on the family;

ZHANG
*Qiqi, you are not a little kid
anymore. It’s not easy for dad and
me to make money, we’ve worked so
hard to move here and get this*

*apartment, so you can get a better
education. If you don't study hard,
it's a waste. It's for you,
everything we do is for you.*

(Wang, 2022, p. 4)

The fathers of the two Chinese families seem not to understand the behaviours of their children. They dictate their will and opinion to their children to devastating effects. Zhou, the teacher, even wishes that he had a son to help fix his broken TV - a distasteful degradation of the female gender and a reflection of his traditional beliefs. The distance between European and Chinese culture appears even more pronounced as its being observed in a foreign land. Although Chinese are a minority culture in New Zealand (where the Liu and the Zhou families are new immigrants) the persistent desire to sustain traditional Chinese culture undermines New Zealand's multicultural society, where tolerance is fundamental to co-existence. This display of arrogance and intolerance in the clash of modernity and traditions, ultimately culminates in the death of the young boy.

Lighting

Lighting is an element that is intentionally utilized to define outside and inside spaces, but also to convey the mood of the film. The emotions of regret and sadness are portrayed through dark lighting, while brighter emotions are relatively lighter. The television series *Bad Kids* (2019), has a similar theme as *Da Bai*, and is a showcase of how effective lighting can have a profound impact on the mood of a film. In *Bad Kids* extremes of black and white are used effectively with varying intensities for defining the nature of the scenes and their emotional impact. The brightest lighting in *Da Bai* is when the police are gathered to investigate and retrieve the body of the boy. Lighting is also used to distinguish the inside of the building from the outside, with, for example, the windows inside Miaomiao's apartment being allowed to overexpose. The rest of the film is dark-themed. Qiqi is confronted by his parents in darker lighting. This is to communicate the grimmer moods in this family compared to the teacher's, initial fight with his daughter. The most intense arguments in the

two families occur concurrently, and at night. Zhou is having a fierce exchange with his daughter after he acquired the fake TV while Liu is having his angriest engagement with his son after he has been caught playing with the dog at the expense of his homework. Liu's angry shouting disturbs the peaceful neighbour Mr. Thomas, who cannot concentrate on his work in his candle-lit room. The film also has about 5 seconds of total dark screen after Qiqi whispers;

*When you wake up, let's leave
together and never come back here
again.*

(Wang, 2022, p. 10)

It returns to a bright exterior shot to depict the death of the boy and the dawning of a new day - and a life in prison for Mr. Zhou, who is handcuffed.

Sound and Theme

Live sound and music are also extensively employed throughout the film to communicate various emotional situations including peace, commotion, anger, and intensity. Baron (2007) indicated the importance of sound beyond its synthetic value to carry out various important facilities in the narration. The hallway is calm and silent at the opening of the film only. The clicks of Mr. Thomas' locking the door and Ms. Zhang's footsteps can be heard. The abruptness with which the yelling and physical attacks against Thomas begin can be related to the overall theme of the film; unpredictability, movement from peace to war, and from order to chaos. It is with the same unpredictability that Liu confronts his son upon learning that he was more interested in the children's storybook (and his dog) than his school work. This abrupt change of events is also seen when Zhou grabs the TV in anger after feeling humiliated by his daughter. The volume of the voices and the music are intertwined and heightened to communicate the increase in intensity in this exchange. The scene where Thomas is interrogated by the detective gives way to a calm night scene that has Zhou increasingly arguing with his daughter. The argument is presented as casual at first,

given the slow pace of exchange between the two, but then the background music matches the increasing heights of the argument. Liu's most intense scene with his son, confronting him for his failures in homework, pushes the boy to leave the apartment and lie on his dog's grave in the courtyard. It uses this same background music and similarly rises with the intensity of the argument. As the arguments in both scenes increase, the background music becomes faster, louder, and more intense, matching the intensifying voices until the boy (and the daughter above) can not bear it any longer. As noted, this movement of mood in the film is echoed in the background music and sound design. Sound is used to help communicate the final fallout in the two families, which precipitates the brutal death of the boy.

Silence and quietness are also used to communicate emotion. With silence, the audience is invited to take part in the emotional journey of the character, or situation (Gonçalves & Majhanovich, 2016, p. 116). The film turns back to the silence after Zhang slaps her husband for coming between her fight with Thomas. This helps give a reflective time to the incident as the husband comes to terms with what has just occurred, and also emphasises the surprising turn of events. The film turns almost soundless after Qiqi finds peace in the courtyard. With voices giving way to just the sound of insects, indicating a moment of calm. As the screen goes black for about 5 seconds to signal the shift from night to day, the music and voices are also muted - until the silence is broken by the clicking handcuffs on Zhou as he is escorted away by the detective. Silence in the film achieves variously; surprise, helplessness, the time of the day, and the nature of the surroundings but it is also effective in displaying what kind of thoughts are going on in the mind of the characters in relation to their current situation.

Editing

Friers (2018) offers that editing is the primary way to manage on-screen time. It is, also, most important in bringing shots together to achieve continuity in narrating the development of the story (60). *Da Bai* achieves the development of its story through the selective choice of shots that build scenes and character relationships. There are both long and short shots, normal angle, worm, and

bird's-eye views as well as close-ups and wides which are brought together with intentional transitions that range from slow to fast, depending on the intended mood and the details of the specific scene. The film, for example, opens with a fixed camera angle that has a wide view of the hallway of the fourth floor where Thomas resides. Then there is a slow transition of shots to show Thomas' apartment number, and finally the camera returns to a fixed medium shot to capture a detailed unfolding of the fight. Short close-ups then accelerate the pace, showing the facial expression of the woman and the two men. While this form of cutting is the dominant approach to editing throughout the film, Zhou's arguments with his daughter utilize the *movement* of the camera from one person, or angle, to another, instead of cutting distinct shots. The camera is dragged from the father to the daughter using a tracking shot as Zhou says that;

*Hey! You are not helping! If only I
had a son, I mean, how hard could
it be to fix a TV...*

(Wang, 2022, p. 3).

This offers real-time tracking of the development of the story while giving a glimpse of the items in the setting. The types of camera angle, length of shot, distance from subject, and most importantly the transitions employed, help in building the story. The editing selects specific details depending on the emotional focus of each scene.

Conclusion

Qiqi would not have lost his life if his parents understood his natural needs. Instead, they blindly forced their expectations on him. Equally, the fatal incident could not have occurred if Zhou (the teacher) was a more considerate father with less pride in his own knowledge. If he had, instead, embraced learning and new information, the outcome would have been very different. Another seemingly unconnected emotion/event, the boy's strong desire to escape, pushes him outside his family apartment, and to the grave of his beloved dog. This coincides with Zhou's anger, which leads him to throw out the TV that kills the boy. One small thing connects with another small thing to

cause a major effect. It is through the choreographed cinematic elements of *Da Bai*; the deliberate use of mise en scene, cinematography, editing, sound and lighting, that we feel the weaving together of these events into a singular, tragic story - one spurred by a collision between traditional and modern values. The butterfly wings here are arrogance and high expectations.

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