

A brief analysis of Guy Ritchie's postmodernist style in *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*

Mingyi Yin

Abstract:

Black comedy is not a strictly critical concept of literary theory, but with the application of postmodernism in movies, the application of black humor in black comedy subverts the traditional way of humor. As early as the 5th century BC in Greece, comedian Aristophanes created literary works with humorous black color. In the 1960s, the publication of Friedman's short story collection *Black Humor* marked the formal birth of black humor literature. (Thompson Bordwell 78) After the popularity of this school for several years, its influence penetrated the film field. *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* by Guy Ritchie is a typical representative of contemporary black comedy movies.

Keywords: Black comedy, critical concept, literary theory, postmodernism

I. Introduction

Art is a symbol created by people to capture and master their organized emotional imagination and the rhythm of life. (Hegel 43) Art should have its depth, its power. Through Guy Ritchie's film *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), we can find a stubborn attitude in the post-modernist trend of thought: the suspicion and alienation towards the sense of holiness, nobility, mission, and tragedy are gradually distancing themselves from the eternal emotions and anxieties created in past cultural concepts, replaced by secular dreams and cultural gamification. Postmodernism has ushered in a new era, which signifies cultural disintegration as well as the diversification of forms of expression and ideological consciousness.

II. The manifestation of black humor

Black comedy is not a strictly critical concept of literary theory. Still, with the application of postmodernism in movies, black humor in black comedy subverts traditional humor. As early as the 5th century BC in Greece, comedian Aristophanes created literary works with humorous black color. In the 1960s, the publication of Friedman's short story collection *Black Humor* marked the formal birth of black humor literature. (Thompson Bordwell 78) After the popularity of this school for several years, its influence penetrated the film field. *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* by Guy Ritchie is a typical representative of contemporary black comedy movies.

2.1 The Portrayal of anti-heroic Marginal Characters: deconstruction and Subversion

of Traditional Film Representation Subjects

In traditional crime movies, the protagonist is often a positive character in the hero category, and occasionally there is a dual protagonist situation with a positive and an antagonist, but most of them end in the hero's success. Exploring its causes is largely influenced by mainstream societal concepts. The marginalized groups, from controversial identities to moral concepts, cognitive logic, ethical norms, etc., are not in line with the requirements and expectations of mainstream social concepts and even have conflicts and oppositions. Therefore, they have always been excluded by mainstream forms of artistic expression. However, breaking traditional rules seems to have become a reasonable theme in the black humor elements of post-modern-style films. The film no longer portrays the scenes of upright police officers subduing criminals, heroically rescuing hostages, and defending national interests. And rarely does the narrative follow the trope of the hero defeating ugliness and ferocious, saving mankind, and holding a beautiful woman. Marginal characters become the film's main theme and the main force in achieving black humor.

The movie *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* focuses its lens on Eddie, a small-time gangster who is idle and lives off the land by nibbling at the elderly but whimsically wants to turn over a new leaf through gambling; Soap, a timid and money-hungry cook; Bacon, who traffics in counterfeits; Tom, a petty thief; Harry, a devious and sinister loan-sharking boss; Dog, a ruthless drug dealer; and Roy, a violent and rampant triad leader.... The story unfolds around their respective desires, colliding with

more opportunities for image display and discourse space in the intertwining of multiple narratives. Deconstructing the traditional order from the perspective of marginalized characters has become an effective means for the director to critique the dark side of society.

However, the film doesn't stop at focusing only on portraying marginalized characters; it also portrays marginalized characters by dismantling the meaning of the positive characters of the traffic police who have very few shots. The police officer who is supposed to punish parking violations is beaten and hijacked by a gang of drug dealers and punks and is powerless to fight back. The reason for this is simply out of the disgust of the marginalized characters, for the righteous may seem unconvincing, but this is the effect of the comedy of the absurd, which breaks the fixed mindset that justice is always fearless in the face of evil. Crime is justified in black humor films, and the defense of justice is not. This subversion makes the movie's mockery of the police necessary, and the traffic police become an important means of anti-heroic expression in this film. The righteous characters in the mainstream perception are trampled under the feet of the marginalized people in the film, looking up at the deconstructed sacred order from the perspective of the lower class and completing the dissolution and critique of the meaning of reality.

2.1 Black Process and The Humorous Back Opposition Nature of Tragic Fate is ironic

Different from the expression of traditional comedy and conventional humor, black humor is strongly satirical. It accomplishes satire on the funny and absurd factors of real life by intensifying the conflicts in these scopes, such as man and man, man and society, man and environment. The back opposition structure of humor is a portrayal of the absurdity and irrationality of the plot or logic in the film, amplifying the audience's psychological feelings about the perceived difference between it and the real world. As in the novel *Catch-22*, the Air Force was never able to return home because they were required to fly more and more times than they could ever meet the standard. The logical paradoxes give the characters a sense of oppression they cannot escape. Instead, they amplify the sense of relief that the onlooker is outside the movie, thus achieving an absurd comedic effect. (Shi 90-91)

The contradiction between the black process and the tragic fate can also produce strong humor. In *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*, the director portrays the marginalized characters with black humor through the mocking function of the back opposition structure. The black background of crime, drugs, violence, and killing shown in the film is a distant and low-contact area for the audience. Still, the audience will gradually numb to the

casualties and sufferings that should not be numbed while watching these marginal characters fight for money and desire. The supplier engaged in cannabis cultivation was shot dead by the drug dealer with a machine gun; the drug dealer's Dog suffers from Cash'n Guns. He died when he crashed into Charles' car door while tracking drug money, and his men died at the hands of triad leader Roy; Roy died at the hands of an unimportant follower who had already suffered badly wounded and harmless. People who risk their lives for their desires in the darkness take huge risks without getting corresponding rewards. The ironic contradiction of the fate of the marginalized characters completes its self-disintegration in the back-to-back structure of the noir process and the tragic ending, making the blood-soaked death into a kind of ironic punchline. (Xiu 52-56) The logical difference between virtual and real perceptions of marginalized people exerts great humorous potential, creating both gloomy and hilarious black humor in the audience's perception of an otherwise unfamiliar marginalized group.

III. Gathering of violent elements

3.1 Violence in British Cultural Expression

The dark humor is one of the highlights of *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*, and the violence is another. A part of the world always loves violence, and Guy Ritchie is obsessed with it. Hao Jian, a professor at the Beijing Film Academy, writes, "The aesthetics of violence is a broad aesthetic concept, which is presented primarily display aggressive, exaggerated, and unconventional acts of violence in an aesthetic way and poetic picture. In violent aesthetic works, viewers are immersed in artistic and exaggerated forms of expression, weakening the essence of violence, thus ignoring or weakening the social function and moral education effect." (Hao 90-91)

If Quentin's violence is blood-soaked, John Woo's violence is beautiful and soft, Kitano Takeshi's violence is full of Japanese martial arts spirit, then Guy Ritchie's violence is full of British flavor, that is, his violence portrays British social life. The violence in *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* focuses more on absurdity and black humor and is cloaked in British form with a different flavor. Whether it is a gang leader or a street gangster, when showing violence, their body and voice always reveal a sense of playfulness and comedy. Through the director's understanding of the form of violence to express the real life of Britain, the film returns to the national plot, expressing the unique British culture under the movie appeal.

3.2 Violent Entertainment Pursuits

The expression of Englishness is Guy Ritchie's inner loyalty to his country and nation, while the entertainment of violence is a feat to satisfy the audience's will and taste buds. The entertainment of violence not only does not make the audience feel fearful in the gory scenes but also enables the audience to enjoy it and realize the film's true meaning. Guy Ritchie once mentioned in an interview, "I wanted to add every entertainment element I could think of to the movie." (Dou Ban, 15 Sept, 2019, movie.douban.com/review/5350148/) This quote marks the director's attitude to filmmaking: education through entertainment, using as many entertainment elements as possible to convey serious life lessons while entertaining the masses.

In this film, scenes that turn violence into entertainment are everywhere. For example, when the four brothers of the protagonist group accidentally learn that their neighbor has an unexpected wealth and take action, they make jokes in English style. The four people, some holding knives and some holding guns were supposed to be in a violent and bloody scene, but they were like playing a hide-and-seek game of cats and mice. This seemingly robbery operation did not present a sense of fear to the audience, and its comical meaning made them laugh. Another film highlight is that two thieves hired by Bailey, Dean, and Doug staged a farce about an antique house. The clumsy image of two thieves is already hilarious. In the act of stealing two large smoke guns, there are scenes of kidnapping, beating, coercion, and gunfights. In the chaos, the scene of a thief being blown off his just-permed curly hair makes the audience laugh. Only violent scenes are boring, and the entertainment of violence throughout the film always fully unleashes its aesthetic value while winning box office and word-of-mouth.

IV. The aggregation of unique, expressive techniques

4.1 Unique presentation of the dialogues

4.1.1 English dialect and ironic dialogue design

Dialect and unique dialogues play a role in the film in shaping the characters and explaining the story's background but also as an expression of the postmodernist style. The formation of different humor styles in the world is closely related to the characteristics of their respective languages, and the British accent in the film makes the dialogue more ironic. In the book *Feeling British and American Culture by Examples of English Irony*, there is this discussion: "People are used to calling American humor hot humor; in contrast, British humor is cold jokes, which have a more ironic feeling." (Fang 56) This cold satire is

in line with the reserved and introverted personality of the British.

A conversation that occurs in minute 52 of *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* when Plank's gang hijacks Winston's drugs, "What's going on down there, shit, Charles, get the guns, we're getting screwed." "Can you guys get some decent guns?" "They hit me with a gun." "Then hit them back." "What the fuck are you doing? No, talking back, or you're fucked." "I'm going to break his legs right now, so come on out and open the door." This piece of dialog is designed as a comparison of the two groups of people, one stupid enough to use a fake gun and the other with a real gun in their hands but not knowing how to use it. The upturned accent of the British dialect and the ironic lines give the film a cold humor. It is an ironic way to remind people that evil will be rewarded.

4.1.2 Compensating for psychological lines to portray the character's heart

"The more a person lacks something, the more they want to flaunt it; it's called the compensation mentality." (Xiu 58) The movie's gun-stealing duo, Dean and Doug, fully reflect this. When Barry assigns a mission to the duo, Doug says, "Who are our bosses? Simply put, we'll just rob post office vehicles, rob banks and stuff like that, act like thugs, and carry out the mission like a 007." But later in the story, the duo proved to be neither thugs nor so-called 007 at all, but rather two idiots who screwed up the deal. The compensatory lines of this gun-stealing duo are designed to make the audience laugh at them while doubly saddened by the fact that perhaps everyone wants to be more powerful. If things don't work out, they disguise themselves as powerful. Our time makes our movies; a movie is a mirror (Chen 2). The characters in it map our group of nobodies.

4.1.3 Use other people's words to create a character

The lines spoken by others can also play a role in shaping characters. Compared to some hilarious voiceovers, immersing oneself in the perspective of different characters in the film to observe another character can allow the audience to continue immersing themselves in the story while feeling objective. After hanging up the phone with Eddie in the film, the gambler Harry asks his assistant Barry, "Who the hell is this Eddie?" Barry replied, "He's just a little thief. He's very talented and can see through cards." Harry interrupted him, "So he's an awesome guy. He's a smart gambler." Barry replied slowly, "Not good, but he's just a gambling saint." Then Harry picked up a sex bat and slammed it heavily on the table to end the conversation. In this dialogue, the audience learns Eddie's image, career, and expertise from Harry and Barry, and

a series of information is presented to the audience from the mouths of others. This scene answers the audience's doubts about why Eddie and his gangster friends dared to participate in this gambling game. Eddie, who seemed to be the most unreliable, turned out to be a trump card among the four. However, they had already become lambs waiting to be slaughtered in the trap of the organizers, and Barry's contemptuous tone and Harry's hand movements hinted at the fate of Eddie and his team. At this point, the audience has a further understanding of Eddie's characterization and a preliminary judgment on the roles of Barry and Harry, which can be said to be the best of both worlds.

4.2 Fast cutting creates movie flashpoints

The large number of quick cuts is a unique feature in this movie. This anti-conventional editing method is a subversion of modernism and a greeting to postmodernism. The rapid editing in the film serves a multilinear narrative, in which the director splits a complete story into multiple parts that develop independently and then connect them. In the process, the quick cuts and the interspersed appearances of cross-cutting make the movie appear to be multiple viewpoints and flashpoints. The three scenes of Eddie in the casino, the three companions waiting in the bar, and the two bungling thieves stealing the antique gun use quick cuts and cross-cut each other so that the audience is amused by the antics of the inept thieves while worrying about winning or losing the bet, and then tense over the fate of the three men in the bar. The scene where Dog and his gang rob the marijuana and then are robbed by Eddie's gang also uses quick cuts and is handled in a lifelike way. Guy Ritchie also used rapid editing in his other films to create flashpoints to make them stand out, injecting a novelty force into the world of cinema. The audience is immersed in Guy Ritchie's style while developing a deeper understanding of postmodernism.

4.3 Essential rock

Music is quite an abstract, pure form, but the meaning is also more easily conveyed when music is paired with images. (Giannetti 197-198) Rock music is one of the synonyms of British music, and its rock bands have a long history and are famous worldwide. Guy Ritchie is so obsessed with rock music that he wants the world to learn about British rock music through his movies, which is an essential element in his films. The quickly edited visuals in the film match the rock music, repeatedly creating dramatic conflicts and climax points. Therefore, rock music is referred to as a plot accelerator by Guy Ritchie.

Rock music can emphasize the psychology of characters and portray their image. In the opening scene of the movie, Tom and Bacon are selling stolen goods in the streets

of London,

and the sudden appearance of the police makes them run away in a hurry. At this moment, the fast rhythm and exciting rock music start, and with the premiere scene, the tension of Tom and Bacon's escape is amplified by the rock music. When Plank's gang robbed the drugs, the elevated camera shoots machine gun fire, the street gangster firefight picture with the sound of gunfire, rock and roll bass drums stimulate the audience's senses. At the same time, the sharp sound of metal rock music is also very consistent with the brutal character of Plank's gang. The appearance of the drug makers was chosen to use comical rock music. This is the only place in the film where female rock music is used, which is very harmonious with their mesmerizing eyes and swaying pace.

The rock music used almost from beginning to end also serves the plot of *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*. The rock music in the appearance of Eddie and Bacon seems to be the prelude to their destiny; the rock music in the appearance of Dog and his gang brings a strong gangster flavor, and the rock music in Eddie's gambling is more entertaining. It can be seen that Guy Ritchie loved rock music, and its use played a great role in this film.

V. Pandect

To sum up, this thesis mainly studies the strong post-modernism style of Guy Ritchie in the film *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*. It discusses several features of post-modernism that represent the film: black humor and violence are the main elements in the film. Ironic line design, fast editing, and rock music apply the director's style in the film. The postmodernism that the film provokes is thought-provoking. The unique charm of this film has been sought after by fans worldwide, and professional film professionals have studied its value. It can be said that *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* are representative of postmodernism films but also of today's social trends of thought.

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