

Disclosing the State of Fear in Contemporary Taiwan- the Indeterminacy of the Taiwanese Film Noir, Who Killed Cock Robin

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Abstract

Film noir, a genre named by French critics in the 1940s, has been attracting the interests of academics and the public since then. Although the base of the genre's production begins to thrive prominently in English-speaking countries and France, film companies in other countries, regardless of their individual film's differences of success, have also plunged in the pool of noir's mass production to excite the audience with the *dark* allurements. Such practices, if inscribed with social indictment, can be provocative and problematic. This paper anchors its root to decode the ambiguity of a Taiwanese film noir, *Who Killed Cock Robin* (2016), to elucidate the film's ambivalent contribution-- while on one hand, the film does employ the techniques to enrich the film's dark milieu to symbolize Taiwan as a grim, fearful and deceptive society; on the other hand, despite its active criticism to the problems in Taiwan's society, the film falters halfway into a kitsch by overly manipulating the noir essence to please the audience which dis-empowers its social criticism. But such ambiguity of misusing the genre ironically exacts the true fear of contemporary Taiwan-- a masquerading process to cover the real danger with sugar frosting. As neither character's recount of the crime in the film is assured to be reliable, nor is the film itself trustworthy.

Keywords: film noir, Taiwan social realist film, indeterminacy, kitsch

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Introduction

This paper embarks its discourse from the history of film noir and digs up its core in Taiwan's social realist movies. Then, it comes to contextualize a recent film noir in Taiwan and encapsulate its problematic in its structure and story that suggests a state of ambiguity in critiquing social disorder through making a feature-length film.

1. Contextualizing Film Noir in a Taiwanese Surrounding

Film noir has a history. The name is coined by French scholar Nino Frank who categorizes a group of American films during the 40s in which there are cutting-edge deceptive plots, private eye's investigation, and the twisted romance which is usually a byproduct of the corruption of humanity and unfulfilled desires. These early noirs feature some typical noir characters such as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, as well as the essential roles as *femme fatale* or the presumed innocence that constitute the basis of this genre.

The genre, as time goes by, spawned subcategories to appeal to the fans of the different era. Many critics called them neo-noir, but if examining from the perspective of production, it is more proper to distinguish them from the 40s' pictures in the respect of the time period they are produced with the additional value of varied elements. Erotic thriller, such as *Body Heat* (1980), re-modeled the original noir by adding more graphic sex scenes and the tech noir (such as *Blade Runner*, 1982) begins to appear in the 80s and flourish in the 21st century. But no matter it is because of a higher tolerance of sex or the advancement of special effects, the unresolved core of mystery, the grimness of the society and the sluggishness of human imbecility remain there in all noirs.

Film historians point out that noir's origin of birth accounts for the reason of its emergence and elucidate its significance behind the screen. WWII is the background in which the first generation of noir appears, but the Cold War later instills noir's historicity. America's gradual degeneration into the political powerlessness gives its welcome to the mass production of noirs since in the 40s many canonical films such as those of Frank Capra were losing their box-office charms, but film noir sprouted to stimulate a lingering fear of losing or submission to the infectious communism rises in the 50s. It is as what critic William Luhr describes, "*Film noir* appeared as the US was emerging from two national convulsions: the Great Depression and World War II. The postwar world, however, brought not a return to the idealized "normality" of prewar years but rather a defamiliarized society that had changed in profound ways." (33) All of these seem to suggest that Hollywood's classical genre can no longer capture the audience then and a more dark-toned genre is rising to replace the classic trope of filmmaking.

In a general view, the history of film noir in Asia is associated with the gothic and gothic as noir is a term of the west. The films under these category are usually bizarre in story and has a dark overtone, no matter it is for nature's cause or human maneuvers. For example, Japanese film noir evolved from their gangster and horror films tradition. Ishihara Yujiro-starred *Rusty Knife* (1958) and *Sunset Hill* (1960), though largely influenced by the west noirs, have their own Japanese interpretation of noir essence. Needless to say the famous Japanese horror films like *Rings* (1998) is a

typically Asian type of gothic and there are even noir produced under the category of pink films in Japan.¹

Hong Kong's many gangster films, such as *Infernal Affairs* (2002) further intermingles the action films with gothic fear and a noir-like atmosphere that pervades the whole film. Moreover, Shaw Brother's many later costume films, such as *Human Lantern* (1982) displays a quasi-horror essence with a tone of noir even though the story is set in the ancient time. Therefore, gothic, noir and horror seem to embrace each other on the screen for the Asian audience and the over-lap of mystery is much extended through various genres and many of these gothic noir can be interpreted with Julia Kristeva's abjection.



Fig. 1&2: The quintessential social-realist films *The Women's Revenge* (1980) and *Fury of a Virgin* (1982).

In Taiwan, whether film noir as a genre exists is rather a debatable question. There are plenty of so-called "social realist" films made during the late 1970s to early 80s. Their main contents are about the gangsters' stories who lingers on the verge of remaining evil to the society or reforming to be good as a normal person. Many of these social realist movies do contain some extent of noir essence, but they lack the artistry of their western counterparts and many of them resemble more to the B slashers in the west. The low-quality of the many social realist films soon incurs to their termination as Hong Kong's action movies took the reign of the box office in the mid-80s.

However, there is a small string of filmmakers who dedicate themselves into producing some spectacular individual noirs, such as *Exposed to Danger* (1981), *Dark Night* (1986) and *Who Killed Cock Robin* (2016) over the years. These films feature some of the noir's use of shadow and dim lights to enhance the suspenseful quality of the films and set the entwined plots like labyrinth. Those techniques both serve as the ingenuity of making movies and the intention to elevate their commercial value. The results varied as some films won critical acclaim (*Dark Night*, *Who Killed Cock Robin*), others became so ephemeral that quickly vaporizes in the movie-goers' memories.

¹ Pink films are the soft porns produced in Japan. It appeared after the WWII and came into prominence in the late 60s all the way to the 70s. Nikkatsu company acquits itself in the popularity of it owing to the fact that its exclusive theaters offer a great chance of the promotion of pink films. But lately, there remains only a small number of pink film theaters in Japan and its fan base is mainly the elder citizens.

Film noir didn't foster a Taiwanese root because there is a difference between Taiwan and the US in history. As American noir can be retrieved to its root in the 40s, Taiwan's noir is only a small subcategory of the social realist movies which don't prove its historicity long enough before they are killed by Hong Kong's more stylish action movies. Also, whether the audience mind their noir essence is in question so that even some of the films surpass the others, they will never be deemed as important as the Taiwan New Films that appeared at almost the same time. In the magazine *Films Today*, critic Liang Liang wrote a special article in which he states: "Films like *Queen Bee*, *the Lady Avenger*, *The Women's Revenge* are not eligible to be called 'Social Realist Films' because in these films people can not see the society, not to mention the social reality. What are there in the films are the crazy female tigers who utilize all brutal means to punish those stinking guys who molest them!" (10) (trans by the author) It is suggested from the quote that those critics prefer the films with high artistic values or serious themes but meanwhile despise the commercial feature-length films with visual elements of violence and pornography. Film noir, hence, is not well-received in Taiwan.

In fact, aggressive content does not necessarily translate into bad movies. Many of the social realist films, in today's views, can be good cult movies. They feature a brazen type of beauty in its own right. Moreover, censorship system completely relies on the tastes without keeping an eye on the problems of its subjectiveness. Instead of criticizing the Ministry of News and Media why this film is banned and the other is not, the better way may be to provide the Ministry of News and Media a better criterion with which they can build a better censorship. However, before the government can finally become aware of such a problem, many noirs, due to the dark contents and pervasive sexuality, have already been banned or extensively cut off or re-edited. *Chinatown* (1974), for example, when released in Taiwan, has its whole plot of incest been removed. Therefore, many noir films' astonishing strength has been weakened and distorted.

This paper, however, does not mean to eulogize or to address an epitaph for the black films. Its main focus is the problems of the noir films, if examined from the perspective of its history, can explain its ambivalent status in Taiwan. One of the obvious example is *Who Killed Cock Robin*.

2. The Narrative Structure and Indeterminacy in *Who Killed Cock Robin*

Who Killed Cock Robin is a neo-noir film set in contemporaneous Taiwan. The major storyline is inducted by the protagonist, a newspaper reporter who investigates his car accident and gradually finds himself entrapped in a multi-layered mystery of media corruption, money games and a pervert, atrocious romance. When it was released in 2016, it had won the acclaim from the critics and both the leading and supporting cast have been nominated in the Golden Horse Award. But despite the acclaims, it poses more problems than believable acidity with its anchor in the backdrop of modern Taiwan.

The story begins with a car accident which the protagonist, Wang, a reporter witnesses. Then it is 9 years later that Wang has a car accident himself and finds out that his car is a re-furnished one from the same car accident he came across 9 years ago.

As a reporter, Wang begins to use all his connections, such as police and hospital staff, to search for the reality of the car accident. He first finds out from the news archive that the surviving girl in that car accident is missing, so he traces the hospital record and goes to the girl's address. She resolutely refuses the reporter's visit and reveals her unwillingness to get further involved in his quest for the truth. However, when Wang goes to see her for the second time, he discovers a man sneaking out of her room and the man drives away in a Benz. Wang uses the number of the plate of the Benz and finds out it belongs to his supervisor, Chiu. Chiu eventually confides to Wang that he had bumped into a car 9 years ago, but because he was going to get promotion at that time, he asked a car repair guy to exchange the plates with another Benz. Unfortunately, the repair guy died mysteriously so there is no way to testify Chiu's account.

By this time point, audience may wonder what happens to the surviving girl, who the sneaker is and who kills the repair man. Wang is also confused as he moves on his investigation, so he put his finger in two pies: to search for the girl and follow Chiu surreptitiously. In one occasion, he discovers that a policeman is living in a possible apartment of the girl's existence. He then checks the place out while at the same time Wang discovers another scheme: Chiu has a love affair with Maggie who is also Wang's supervisor and secret lover. Chiu seems to manipulate many things to do him good.

Feeling heart-stricken, Wang goes to peep into the policeman's apartment and surprisingly finds that the police is chopping something. Wang then breaks into the room and wrestles with the police. Both are severely traumatized, and the police tells Wang the truth. In fact, the car accident 9 years ago is a scheme. The girl, the driver and the police set up a hostage of a child, but they quarreled and the driver and the girl took away the ransom and drove away. Wang witnesses the car accident coincidentally and the police reminds Wang that he is also a conspirator in the scheme. There is an untold part in the accident: after the car crash, Wang secretly took 2 million dollars away from the bag on the backseat which was the ransom three outlaws got. When the police came to seize the bag, the money ran short. When everything seems to break up, Wang suddenly stabs the police with a screwdriver.

In the end of the film, he is sentenced not guilty to kill the police out of self-defense. Wang gets a promotion. He is addressing a speech of inauguration. Maggie sits in front of him, staring him suspiciously..

Similar to many neo-noir, the film allures the audience with speedy camera movements and gore while the montage is used skillfully to introduce or fade out events. Some shots in the film are quite sophisticated such as in the last scene, the reverse shots catch the male and female protagonists set face-to-face, reflecting their doubt to each other while the male character gives a wicked smile and quickly the credit starts to roll.

If a simple concept of narratology is applied in the textual analysis,² it is clear to unfold the frame of the film. Every single sequence is absorbing its antecedent

² Structuralist criticism is divided into many schools. Prop, Greimas, Todorov, Genette and Barthes all had their individual contribution to the discipline. However, this paper does not adhere to the ontological study of the narratology. A general concept is adapted to describe how the film works in a semiotic way.

sequence so the story proceeds in a spiral shape. Although Wang is the protagonist, the narration does not all depend on him. All the recounts in flashback comprise of those of different characters (the girl, the police and his supervisor) make up the story as Wang incessantly retrieves the mystery of the car accident.

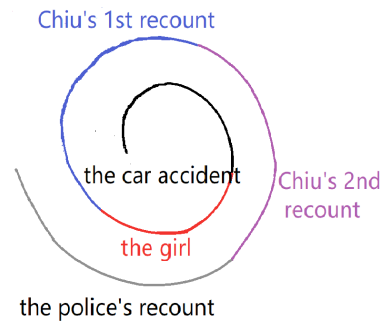


Fig 3: The spiral of narration.

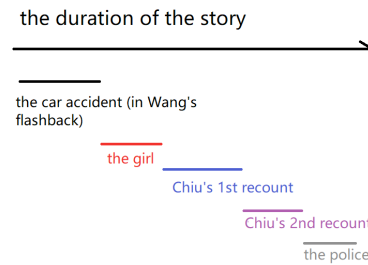


Fig 4: The proportion of the recounts.

The narrative structure of the film is not surprising at all for the fans of thrillers, but it is innovative in comparison with most Taiwan-made movies. Fig 1 gives a spiral of the story while Fig 2 extends the frame of time of the story. With its multi-layered structure, the audience is told only a part of the story by different characters, and the panorama of its whole story can only be collected by Wang's narration. But even so, there is no proof for each person's recount to be trusts-worthy. For example, in Chiu's first recount, the repair man is the car driver who crashed the car in the accident, but when Wang tells him that his recount is not possible for certain realistic reasons, Chiu tells him another version of the story. But in the second recount, the death of the repair man becomes itself a mystery. In other words, the film is leading the audience into believing something, but quickly deconstructs that belief since all the recounts are only partial. As the whole film is made up by those recounts, the story's reliability will always be unattainable even when the films ends.

Indeterminacy is the key throughout the film, especially in the level of narration. Unlike other genres like western that coagulates a chronotope in which good and evil is easy to distinguish, such distinction in noir films is often futile. The roles of evil-doer and the victims are often entwined. Although finding the truth behind the car accident in *Who Killed Cock Robin* is the incentive to activate Wang's investigation, the story guides us to disbelieve because everyone is both good and evil, and at the end even Wang himself is the object to distrust. It is impossible to distinguish the goodness from the story. But as indeterminacy may be a ubiquitous nature (or problem) in noir films to keep the story suspenseful, it is difficult to critique whether it is the director's deliberation or a flaw in the screenplay. *Who Killed Cock Robin* manipulates the tension and suspenseful milieu as a good noir film does, the problem, however, lies in the film's half-baked panorama to address its social issue. Maggie, Wang, Chiu, the police and the girl all have their selfish purposes in the story whether it is for money (the ransom) or the social uplifting (the promotion). The uncontrollable desires and conspiracy are the common mobilizers in film noir, but the lack of a holistic and accountable point of view resemble the film to a modern kitsch. As a result, the movie is once again a repetitive noir to disclose a solemn society filled with lies and maneuvers without self-improvement.

Indeterminacy in hermeneutics plays an important role to give the endless and anarchic interpretation, so every reading is an attempt to get access to the undetermined quality of the text. But because of the indeterminacy, no account is the authoritative answer and the audience may enjoy to decode the film again with the evidence that glimmers upon the reflection of the truth. The quest for the truth is both infinitely absorbing and finitely segmenting. In *Who Killed Cock Robin*, every account can be partly true and partly false so the interpretation is thus maximized. It is perhaps a grafting of parts of every characters' account that is closest to the ultimate truth-- once when something occurs (like the car crash), the indeterminacy crystallizes the truth or there is no truth. Everyone gets involved in it will only choose to recount what does him/her good and every reading of these accounts thereafter will serve to tarnish the indeterminacy, not grasping it.

As for a noir film, if the semiotic game is the solution of which the consequence satisfies the protagonist, every other thing becomes only unimportant. It is a regret that a noir film holds everything on its verge. *Who Killed Cock Robin* poses a question to look into self-reference on which the film gives no answer. In the end of the film, the police is put all the blame. Wang won a desirable work and Maggie may still hooks up on him. Everything seems to work out fine but why the fear still lingers? This question has to be dealt with by analyzing its political analogies in a Taiwanese context.

3. The Allusion of Power Struggle in Media

As the film centers itself on human selfishness and the media corruption, the film has its allusion to the condition of modern Taiwan, a place full of indeterminacy and unreliable accounts of its past, now and future.

Who Killed Cock Robin, which starts from a pure car accident, swiftly changes its subplot into media corruption. Wang does not know that the promotion of Chiu has to do with the car accident initially but soon finds out Chiu has been dating Maggie and they seem to conspire to frame Wang. As the public is often mesmerized by the media, once the accident has been disclosed, Chiu will not only be caught but his rising political career will be terminated, so he has to stop Wang from furthering investigating the case. Therefore, he gives his first recount to Wang while trying to use another excuse to fire Wang. Media corruption is, so to speak, such a complicated thing. In Taiwan, as described and insinuated in the film, media falls into the control of those demagogue (thinking of Chiu and his political background) and news media like TV news program, public talk show and news paper contribute to trigger certain emotions to annihilate others. Controlling the anger or fear against the political rival with media often equals to gaining more ballots from the public, so stigmatizing or blackmailing a public figure becomes a major business for the media which is supported financially by the parties and entrepreneurs.

As a result, the one who maneuvers the media can easily trigger public fear or anger. Fear is a product managed by the media and is often used to do good or bad for specific purposes of a demagogue or a group. At the end, when Wang gets all he wants, the audience still feels the consternation because now an experienced and tactful Wang becomes a person succeed power. Again, as many noir films all suggest, power is so attractive.

For the past 30 years, Taiwan has gone through a series of transformation in economy and politics. Egalitarian democracy, carried out in a form of party politics, seems to go extreme since the KMT had lost in the presidential election in 2000. At least on the surface, media has become one of the greatest propellers to accelerate the changes in Taiwan with numerous news talk shows broadcast on TV every day and they awaken the public conscious to use their right of voting. In a fashion of social philosophy, the sprout of a vast amount of media makes the social polyphony becomes more prolific, but a “centered” authoritative public consensus no longer exists. News program, talk shows and media including newspaper and online news becomes sensational and biased. People’s opinions vary and media often serves to punctuate the heterogeneous opinion and widen the gulf between people of varied interests so that social disorders are further aggravated.³

The movie undermines the problem of the distortion of media in its treatment of Taiwan’s media environment. As the protagonist goes further into unraveling the complicated car accident, he finds himself effaced by a group of people who desire to get their best advantage in the same event. Ironically, the protagonist eventually discovers that he is not better because he is also one of the them. If he dies in the last fight with the police, he will lose everything as he does not hold the right to anchor his rights. But he wins in the fight and with all these evidence he finds, it will suffice him to rationale himself in the court and those people like Chiu will definitely be willing to cover him up. Therefore, as the famous line of the detective in *Trial by Jury* (1994) goes, “It doesn’t matter who dies. It is who dies first.” Truth, then, as realized by Wang, is no longer important. The important thing is for those who beat others to survive to explain for their justice (the protagonist may had a second thought when the police tells him he took away the 2 million dollars in the bag of ransom.) and media is never a tool with which people can find out the truth. It is a medium for those winners to rationale themselves and dance on the loser’s grave.

The film ends up with an insight that once the accident is over, the truth is lost. All the recounts of the past only belong to the participants who want to seize the right to do him good; hence, they are not trustworthy. As fore-mentioned in the previous paragraphs, if indeterminacy is what the film intends to shed light upon, it is also difficult to solidify this ground as indeterminacy is null in its core value. It is impossible to figure out whether it is a movie the director manages to capture certain misleading similitude of the society or it is only an awkward screenplay with many un-answerable questions. For example, if Wang finally remembers that he took away the 2-million ransom in the police’s recount, it is difficult to explain for Wang’s motivation to find out the truth of the accident since he was already the beneficiary of the whole thing. In addition, the love triangle between the police, the girl and the other outlaw is not persuasive in the story and how come the police and the girl can be reunited so easily without a trace when there is already a man who seeks for the girl so desperately.

³ Due to the production cost, TV companies in Taiwan had switched its main business into making small-scale programs such as gossip talk shows. News talk show is one of these programs proliferated in Taiwan. Unlike traditional news program, it attracts the audience with attendants addressing varied point of views but their subjective opinions to government and current policy are acrid and sensual.

Here lies the problem of noir film. As the penetration of the movie's suspension, anticipation, and mystery into lurking the danger and fear in the real life becomes a prerequisite in film noir, the error of inexplicability should be avoided, otherwise noir films can become a kitsch that only manifests its technical allurements without self-introspection as the problems in the media today. In other words, a higher expectation in its production should precede its intention to attach any social allusion. Without it, the power of the social indictment will be whetted down. It is also an illogic perplexity posed in the movie- if the movie suggests there is no ultimate truth behind an occurrence, why should the audience believe in the film's own right? Will the film become absorbed by itself, as it is the spiral structure of the story?

Conclusion

Film noir has its impact in the industry and its influence is worldwide. Technology may have brought film noir into a higher ground, but the content may not advance. As film noir often refers to the darkness of society, it is not easy to elevate its essence into a more sublime form. *Who Killed Cock Robin* demonstrates an ambivalent example of insinuating a solid social criticism under a thrilling clothes, but loses its way when it succumbs to employ an indeterminacy to link with the noir's classic form. Examining the film's structure and its moral message, it is clear to see the twisted plot becomes a kitsch when the film leaves many unresolved questions. While indeed its criticism toward media corruption remains true, the film can not give sufficient rationalization to deal with its own flaws. Film noir still has its draws, but how it will renovate itself and explore its into finesse remains a question brought along with its fearful doubt toward society.

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