

Roots and Scenes: An Innovative Study on the Three-Act Narrative Structure of the Anti-Crime Drama *The Knockout*

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Abstract

The realist-themed anti-crime drama *The Knockout* features cracking down on black and evil forces, follows a fight between right and wrong, and advocates compliance with the law. Since its inception, it has been recognized by viewers and has set off a ratings boom at one point. The narrative structure in the drama is mainly a three-act narrative, incorporating innovative narrative structure elements such as fractal and restructured time settings, reverse dual itinerary hedging, and the closed ending of the classic narrative, making the whole and part of the TV narrative structure more reasonable and innovative.

Keywords: anti-crime drama, three-act narrative, innovation, *The Knockout*

1. Beginning: Fractal and Reorganization Time Setting

“Structure is the selection of a series of events in a character’s life story. This choice combines events into a strategic sequence to stimulate specific and specific emotions and express a specific and specific outlook on life”, Robert McKee argues. (Robert McKee, 2001) Simply put, the story focuses on the narrative, and the narrative focuses on the structure. The traditional three-act narrative structure begins with a motivating event, highlights conflict and confrontation in the middle, and resolves the conflict at the end. The anti-crime drama *The Knockout* turns to a traditional three-act narrative structure in terms of narrative structure, and uses the three time points of 2000, 2006, and 2021 to develop a detailed narrative based on

the needs of the plot. The year 2000 was selected as the beginning of the drama. Gao Qiqiang is a heavily bullied fish seller. An Xin is an energetic criminal police officer. Gao Qiqiang accidentally met An Xin due to a fight and brawl. Since then, Gao Qiqiang gradually deviates from the right track in life and has gone astray. Some of the motivating events at the beginning were mainly for Gao Qiqiang to give up voluntarily and become evil. The story unfolds from here. Combining orthographic narration promotes the progressive development of the story, the flashback structure goes back to the roots to restore the truth, and fractures and reorganizes time, which in turn makes the plot even more ups and downs.

1.1 Orthographic Storytelling: Fractals of Time

Any phenomenon or object of study that is similar in time is called a time fractal. Some people also call it a “one-dimensional time fractal” or “repeated fractal” or “process fractal.” (Zhang Guoqi, 1998) One of the main lines of the TV drama *The Knockout* is to fractionalize time through orthographic storytelling. The orthographic narrative mainly narrates in the order in which things have developed, focusing on “first cause and effect” and “First come, first served”. The main story in the drama tells the story of the provincial education rectification guidance team, represented by Xu Zhong and Ji Ze, arriving in Jinghai City to carry out education rectification, and then thoroughly investigate the “umbrella protection” incident in Jinghai City. The investigation began with CPPCC Vice Chairman Gong Kaijiang, and then Shun Tung, who led to the “case where Huang Cuicui was killed and thrown,” and then on to the “Fenglvzi Incident.” The whole investigation process had a clear main line and clear side lines. The purpose was to gather clues step by step, grasp the evidence little by little, and finally investigate the facts of the case clearly, give the victims an explanation and give the audience an explanation. Furthermore, the drama also uses a process fractal approach to target the criminal’s motives, crime execution, crime scene, crime investigation, and crime results. Take Lao Mo, a character in the drama, for example. Her motive for the crime was that she chose to become Gao Qiqiang’s executioner because she wanted her daughter to live a normal life. Execution of the crime: Under the direction of Gao Qiqiang, he successively murdered police officer Cao Chuang, worker Li Shun, Dai Yongqiang, who applied for a false certificate, person involved in drugs, Zhong Ah Si, a waste factory, and Li Youtian from Mangcun. Crime scene: According to the victim’s order, it was an abandoned building, a construction site, Dai Yongqiang’s store, a casino, a scrap factory, and Huanshan Road. Criminal investigation: Criminal investigations are mainly divided into two parts. One of them is An Xin’s perseverance will surely wipe out all criminals. Therefore, over the years, he has never given up and insisted on restoring the truth behind the case, even if one person persists in the investigation. Second, with the arrival of rectification teams such as Xu Zhong and Ji Ze, An Xin decided to join the organization to conduct an in-depth

investigation. Fact of crime: Silly admitted intentional homicide; the crime is an established fact. Fracturing the entire process of a criminal case can clarify the specific and detailed execution sequence and target requirements for each investigation step, thereby avoiding confusion. Simply put, fractal time art, as an aesthetic experience, can guide and stimulate our perception of reality, that is, “reality is humanized and aestheticized at the same time.” (Xie Xuemei, 2006) Some of the content in the entire drama uses this orthographic narrative structure to fracture time. Its advantage is that the story progresses layer by layer, the cases are intertwined, leading the public’s perspective while at the same time making the people in the drama interact well with the audience. The downside is that the fractals of time in orthographic narration tend to weaken the suspense of the drama. The ending is too obvious and entirely unexpected, so it will greatly reduce the audience’s expectations.

1.2 Retrospective Tracing to the roots: Reorganizing Time

Gérard Genette called the inconsistency between story time and narrative time a “time error”. Time inversion is often caused by flashbacks or pre-narrations in the narrative. (Wen Fengshun, 2023) In terms of timing, the TV drama *The Knockout* mainly uses flashback storytelling techniques to trace the case back to its roots and reorganize the time with a highly dramatic story. The flashback narrative makes the series have bizarre twists and turns, creating suspense while also achieving fascinating artistic effects. The flashback techniques in the drama are mainly divided into two main lines: one is to review the history of the origin of the powerful dark and evil group represented by Gao Qiqiang from the perspective of An Xin; the other is to recite the battle between right and evil represented by An Xin from Gao Qiqiang’s perspective. The first act of the story in the drama was in 2000. “Xu Lei’s Accidental Death Incident” led Gao Qiqiang and the Down Brothers to prepare for a crime. The second act of the story was in 2006. Beginning with the “Mang Village Demolition Incident”, to Meng Dehai luring a wolf into the house, and Li Xiang’s death, the narrative time was straight, the story time was flashback. The error in time made the opening act not directly reveal the background of the story in the traditional sense, but instead used flashbacks to specifically conceal the facts of each case and trace the cause

and effect of each case. Through a series of core events related to the main line of the story, the story time was reorganized, the story time was reorganized, increasing the narrative flow while maintaining suspense, and further encouraging the development of the story. Another example is the beginning of the series with the “Political and Legal Team Education and Rectification” in 2021, and then the “Accidental Death Incident of Xu Lei” in 2000 and the “Mang Village Demolition Incident” in 2006. All three key time stages are to first throw out the outcome of the incident and then explore the cause of its occurrence in depth. This style of narration from result to cause is a typical flashback method. Looking at the overall narrative structure of the series, the biggest innovation lies in the new application and presentation of the “two-line” structure. Whether the orthographic story is progressive or retrospectively traced back to the roots, the fractal and restructured setting of time in the beginning of *The Knockout* enriches the three-act narrative structure innovation through the two-line narrative; on the other hand, it highlights the complex choices of the character’s fate, whether it’s a strong interest, or An Xin’s unforgivable original intention. This evil, black and white battle is both intricate and intricate. Turn around. In short, using flashbacks in television narration can avoid the monotony of structure and flat narrative, and also enhance the plasticity and appeal of the story.

2. Middle Stage: Reverse Dual Stroke Hedging

The second act, or middle of the three-act narrative structure, can be summed up as “conflict” and “confrontation”. Usually, as people or events are complicated deduced, unexpected questions or directions will arise. And as this kind of “conflict” and “confrontation” intensifies, the overall direction of the story, changes in pace, and the fate of the characters continue to change at an accelerated pace. The middle section of the anti-crime drama *The Knockout* is 2006. The drama brings the story to a climax through the hedging of criminal and anti-criminal itineraries and a two-line parallel narrative structure.

2.1 Offender and Anti-Criminal Itinerary Hedging

Youssef Courtay pointed out, “The narrative itinerary of the two narrative texts — the subject’s itinerary and the anti-subject’s journey — developed in opposite directions and simplified into a compensation formula.

According to this formula, after being destroyed, the social order was immediately followed by the return of the social order, and alienation would be restored by regaining lost values.” (Yusuf Courte, 2001) The main plot of anti-crime TV dramas is a fierce battle between criminals and anti-criminals. Most of the conflicts involve current hot issues or stem from social reality. The itinerary hedging between the criminal and the anti-criminal in *The Knockout* mainly shows two aspects: identity conflict and action conflict.

First, let’s take an identity conflict. Take An Xin and Gao Qiqiang as an example. An Xin’s identity is defined as a criminal police officer. He strictly abides by the duties and missions of the police, is the embodiment of justice, is the main anti-crime force, and is a fixed character setting. The identity conflict mainly stems from conflict between characters, that is, conflict between opposites. On the other hand, Gao Qiqiang, from an ordinary and kind fishmonger to a representative of a dark and evil force covering the sky, is a diverse character set up. Its contradiction and conflict mainly stems from the three complex levels of social conflict, personality conflict, and conflict with others. When Gao Qiqiang was a fish seller, he was a small person at the bottom of society. For the sake of his livelihood, he disregarded his dignity and humility, bowed down only to be able to keep his own fish stand. Despite extreme internal contradictions and grievances, it is impossible to change society, which shows conflict with society. Regarding personality conflicts, in the early stages, Gao Qiqiang was always a heavily oppressed and humble character, but as a brother and sister, he had great responsibilities, which forced Gao Qiqiang to change his cowardice and become powerful. The duality of his personality exacerbated this character’s reversal. Finally, there was a conflict with others, mainly in a contest between right and wrong with An Xin.

Going back to operational conflict, operational conflict is mainly a behavioral confrontation between crime and anti-crime. According to the two main lines in the drama: Gao Jia’s growth line and An Xin’s evil line, Gao Qiqiang went step by step from the “Xu Lei Accidental Death Incident” to the abyss. First, he made Lao Mo kill Xu Jiang, Cao Chuang, Li Shun, Dai Yongqiang, Zhong Laosi, Li Youtian, etc., and then to Bai Jiangbo, Chen Jinmo, Gao Qisheng, and Li Xiang, who died indirectly at the hands

of Gao Qiqiang. Gao Qiqiang's criminal actions led to an imbalance in the origin of An Xin's anti-criminal actions. Furthermore, in addition to identity conflict and action conflict, this conflict between crime and anti-crime has led to a "reconstruction" of the story. (Gao Lei, 2015) Seen from the perspective of the characters in the drama, the anti-crime drama *The Knockout*, at the beginning of the three-act narrative structure, throws up a conflict between Gao Qiqiang's crimes and An Xin's anti-crime. Other than that, not too much other information has been released, so there are many information gaps and hidden information between the criminal and anti-crime sides. Seen from the viewpoint of the audience, the audience saw the outcome of the crime. An Xin and other police don't know if the criminal will eventually fall into the net, and the criminal, Gao Qiqiang, also doesn't know if he can escape. At this point, the audience doesn't know the final outcome of both the criminal and anti-crime parties. Finally, the audience began to speculate boldly, and An Xin investigated further. As the incident unfolded, the audience's speculations and An Xin's original investigation were overturned, forming a reconstruction of the story.

2.2 Cross-Cutting and Parallel Narrative Structure Layout

In "The Face of a Novel," English writer Foster said, "A well-laid out plot should contain some 'secrets'. As the storyline develops, the 'secrets' will be revealed in front of readers, and the whole story will show the beauty of the complete structure." (Zhu Wen, 2020) Throughout the *The Knockout* series, the unique aspect of its plot and structure is that it breaks with the traditional sense of linear narrative and uses the structure of "double line intersecting narrative" and "double line parallel narrative". There are two intersecting narratives in the drama: one is in an orthographic manner, about the education and rectification team visiting Jinghai City to thoroughly investigate the dark forces in Jinghai; the other is a flashback style, which reveals the illegal and criminal activities of Qiangsheng Group from the perspective of An Xin. The previous article discussed the orthographic and retrospective narratives in detail, so I won't go into too much detail here. Cross-line storytelling is common in movies and TV, but the two-line cross-narration method is really not common in TV dramas. The main reason for this is that double-line intersecting

narratives can lead to confusion in narrative logic, breakdown in plot structure, and a high threshold for watching movies. However, in *The Knockout* this kind of two-line intersecting narrative brought a new experience to the audience. On the one hand, it focuses on the present. The story begins with Jiuchang Street and places the black and white clash in a real environment, reflecting a strong sense of society, reality, and the times. On the other hand, while deepening the theme, it also deepened critical thinking. As the guidance team and others reviewed the history of Jinghai City, An Xin and Gao Qiqiang, who chose the opposite fate of the two characters, couldn't help but be amazed. The three key time points selected in the drama, 2000, 2006, and 2021, are both independent units and interspersed with each other, showing all of the changes in Jinghai City over the past 21 years, social trends, grudges, grievances, and contests between right and wrong. This two-line intersecting narrative in a three-act narrative structure is an innovation in the TV narrative structure. It not only avoids the singularity and flatness of the story, but is also extremely inclusive and expressive. Anyway, it is a successful application of the TV narrative structure.

The two-line parallel narrative in *The Knockout* is also one of the highlights of the drama. In particular, in recent years, TV narratives have also drawn creative experience from movie narratives, and many TV narratives have also been dug deep into multi-line parallel narratives. Films with multi-line parallel narratives often set up two or more narrative clues, so that these storylines can develop in parallel. (Lu Changhe & Wu Kexin, 2021) This kind of multi-line narrative is favored by directors. On the one hand, it stems from innovative additions to the TV drama's story structure; on the other hand, it is due to the rigor of its logical clues. In *The Knockout*, a two-line parallel narrative is carried out with "events" as the core under the three-act narrative framework, so that the main plot and side plot are narrated smoothly according to a certain logic. For example, the "2000 incident where Wong Tsui Tsui was killed and thrown away" contains two or more narrative clues. Mainline: Xu Zhong and Ji Ze inquired about the latest investigation into An Xin's Huang Cuicui case in 2021. Branch 1 An Xin is undercover; branch line 2 Gao Qiqiang relied on An Xin to protect himself. Another example is the "Mang

Village Demolition Incident". The main line is for An Xin and others to investigate the Mangcun village renovation project. Branch Line 1 Gao Qiqiang met with Li Youtian and Li Hongwei's father and son from Mangcun; Branch Line 2 Gao Qiqiang met Lao Mo and instructed Lao Mo to kill Li Shun; Branch 3, Li Youtian, and Li Hongwei's father and son used a knife to kill people, causing chaos; branch line 4, Li Qing, was murdered. It can be seen from this that the anti-crime drama *The Knockout* is a multi-line parallel and progressive development between the main line and many branch lines in the overall narrative structure.

The Knockout combines a two-line parallel narrative with a two-line cross-story, prompting many storytelling clues to unfold in parallel. In the process, the audience was able to understand the plot in all directions and at multiple levels, deeply understand the diversity of the characters, and thus develop empathy. At the same time, the intersection of the two lines and the parallel lines can extend time and space, broaden the original story structure, complete the inheritance and alternation of character relationships, and make the characters more three-dimensional and full.

3. Conclusion: Closed Ending of a Classic Narrative

Closed endings have always dominated narrative art, and TV series are no exception. (Yu Jie, 2007) In a three-act narrative structure, when the conflict in the second act reaches its peak, it means the climax of the story and the beginning of the ending. At this stage, all the storylines, characters, and events will be brought together. Both sides of the conflict and confrontation need to resolve the final conflict and wait for the final outcome. The main reasons why the anti-crime drama *The Knockout* has a fully closed ending are as follows:

First, it is in line with the plot settings. *The Knockout* is an anti-crime drama. The drama uses a time span of 21 years. On the one hand, it shows the courage and determination of frontline police not to forget their original intentions, keep their mission in mind, and resolutely fight blackmail and evil. Despite the twists and turns of the process, the dedication, sacrifice, and selflessness conveyed by the frontline police is worthy of awe and admiration from the audience. On the other hand, it conveys that everyone is equal before the law; we must

not flout the law, transcend the law, let alone take precedence over the law. Second, it matches the character settings. An Xin, one of the main characters in the drama, is a frontline police officer. In the fight against blackmail and evil, even though it was difficult and suppressed, An Xin never wavered and never gave up. In the end, with her mission and responsibilities, she eradicated black and evil forces and returned a pure land in the Jinghai Sea. Gao Qiqiang, the second major figure, was originally the most common member of the lower echelons of society, but later became a dark and evil force dominating the Jinghai Sea. In the end, Gao Qiqiang was sentenced to death for 11 crimes, including the crime of organizing and leading a mafia organization, intentional homicide, intentional injury, kidnapping, illegal management, and bribery. The character settings of An Xin and Gao Qiqiang are both an expression of conflict and a fateful end. Third, it is in line with public expectations. As far as the audience is concerned, *The Knockout* involved nearly 20 large and small murders in the CCP. The causes, circumstances, and results of these cases are all results that viewers are anxious to know. The ending of the protagonists and villains is also a point of great concern for the audience. At the same time, it also requires an explanation for the audience. Therefore, *The Knockout* uses a completely closed ending for both events and characters. The drama enhances the overall integrity by strengthening the closure of each narrative dimension, so that the interlaced story lines and parallel timelines are interconnected, further strengthening the logic of the story. The anti-crime drama *The Knockout* uses a completely closed ending from a classic narrative. That is, the main characters have achieved their goals, the conflict has been fully resolved, and the events have been handled properly. Things have gone from balance to breaking the balance to being in a new state of balance. The story in the drama has been completed, and the story system has come to an end.

4. Conclusion

The anti-crime drama *The Knockout* is a social picture showing the development and changes of the times under a three-act narrative structure. It uses group narratives to express fundamental issues such as social pain points, management difficulties, and hot public opinion topics. It is an excellent television work that combines

realism, speculation, artistry, and viewability. *The Knockout* is both integrated and innovative in its narrative approach. The initial time fractionation and restructuring in the three-act narrative structure used in the drama, and the reverse dual stroke hedging in the middle are all innovative points in the TV narrative structure. In addition to this, the drama focuses on the overall construction of the narrative structure, focuses on the setting and layout of the plot, tells about the formation of dark and evil forces based on social reality, exposes the complex and varied changes in human nature, and at the same time strongly criticizes illegal and criminal acts. From a social perspective, *The Knockout* calls for social fairness and justice, and a strict crackdown on illegal crimes. It has sparked strong social reactions and has the characteristics of the times and social logic. Seen from the audience's perspective, the drama is based on reality and real human logic, and shows through the difficulties and obstacles of anti-crime and evil at the grassroots level, and uses emotion, care, and effort to achieve empathy with the audience. In short, whether at the creative level, communication level, or acceptance level, the anti-crime drama *The Knockout* has already sparked a boom in watching the drama due to its popularity, social attention, and popular topics.

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