

# The Affective Turn in the Cinematic Lens of Ann Hui: A Case Study of *Love After Love*

Qianyu Xing<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Film and Image, Cheongju University, South Korea

Correspondence: Qianyu Xing, Department of Film and Image, Cheongju University, South Korea.

doi:10.56397/SAA.2024.06.31

## Abstract

Ann Hui, a prominent Hong Kong female director, is renowned for her distinctive auteur style, primarily focusing on realist themes. Her creations often stem from a unique feminine perspective, showcasing her profound understanding and contemplation of society. Hui's work is characterized by her delicate portrayal of characters from the lower echelons of society, delving deeply into ethical issues of human nature, and providing a reflective and insightful view of real-world social conditions. The emotional expressions in Hui's films resonate deeply with audiences, fostering a strong sense of empathy. By integrating multiple paths from diverse fields, this article mainly explores Hui's film *Love After Love* through the lenses of psychoanalysis, feminism, and sociology, aiming to reinterpret the emotional expression, bodily experiences, and the reflection and impact of socio-cultural phenomena in Ann Hui's films.

**Keywords:** affective turn, Ann Hui, feminine emotions

## 1. Introduction

The film *Love After Love* is adapted from Zhang Ailing's novel *The First Incense Burner*. It tells the story of the female protagonist Ge Weilong, who initially believes her aunt will provide her with warmth and assistance. However, she is instead used by her aunt, Mrs. Liang, as bait to attract men. After being captivated by the handsome appearance of George Qiao, Ge Weilong gradually loses herself in a life of debauchery and extravagance. To maintain her luxurious high-society lifestyle, Ge Weilong resorts to selling her soul and uses all her cunning to marry George Qiao. Ultimately, she becomes a tool for her aunt and George Qiao to amass

wealth. Through the depiction of Ge Weilong's tragic fate, the film exposes societal vanity and human greed. With its poignant plot and delicate performances, the film portrays a girl's struggle and sacrifice in her pursuit of love and power. Ann Hui strives to make the film as faithful to the original work as possible, delving deeply into the complexities of human nature and the quest for freedom and dignity, while revealing the cruelty and ruthlessness of real society against a dark backdrop.

## 2. Metaphor of Desire-Driven Behavior

Deleuze classifies moving images based on their relationship with objects, suggesting that close-up shots represent a "quality-force" that

transcends spatiotemporal coordinates with their own fictional particularity and potential connections.<sup>1</sup> In the film *Love After Love*, director Ann Hui frequently employs close-up shots to convey emotions and cognition to the audience, creating an effect that surpasses the narrative of time and space.

Ge Weilong, compelled by life's pressures, seeks refuge with her aunt in Xiaobai Building. On her first night, the camera contrasts a close-up of the roast suckling pig on the guests' table downstairs with the food in Ge Weilong's room upstairs. This not only highlights the starkly different circumstances but also metaphorically conveys Ge Weilong's longing for a new life. Additionally, Ann Hui utilizes numerous close-up shots between Mrs. Liang and the male college student, Lu Zhaolin, compressing the characters' space and magnifying their facial expressions to convey the ambiguous relationship between them. "The displayed woman operates on two levels: as a sexual object for the characters within the screen's story and for the audience in the theater, creating a constantly shifting tension between the two sides of the screen."<sup>2</sup> The film uses close-ups of Mrs. Liang's legs to create a visual impact, triggering emotional resonance and further arousing the audience's emotional tension, achieving an effect of sexual implication. However, in their relationship, close-up shots are predominantly centered on Mrs. Liang, with the narrative action line dominated by her, symbolizing her desire to take a leading role in a male-dominated society.

American affective theorist Lauren Berlant posits that love is a cognitive, ideological structure with stability, yet it is generated by desires full of uncertainty and fluidity. This is related to the individual's persistence before moving from the realm of the real to the symbolic, and the energy produced by this persistence is the affective driving force.<sup>3</sup> The opening scene of *Love After Love* features a circle

of aloeswood burning in an incense burner, an important affective symbol that recurs in Mrs. Liang's house throughout the film. The burning aloeswood in the incense burner symbolizes the contradiction between Ge Weilong's desire and love, suggesting that the pursuit of love and material desire are mutually exclusive. It metaphorically indicates that her inner world will suffer fragmentation and annihilation, just as the aloeswood is burned and consumed into nothingness.

### 3. Emotional Narrative from a Female Perspective

*Love After Love* unfolds its narrative from the perspective and emotional experiences of the female protagonist, Ge Weilong. The film also presents different female figures in various situations. From her initial naivety to her eventual adaptation and integration into high society, Ge Weilong's journey mirrors that of her aunt, Mrs. Liang, showcasing female figures who break free from the shackles of old societal norms. The film also includes characters like Zhou Jijue, who has been educated in Western ways, and the helpless maids of Xiaobai Building. However, influenced by the cultural and social context of the time, the emotional destinies of these female figures all end in failure for different reasons.

In the film, Ge Weilong's female image continuously emanates emotional anxiety. Initially driven by survival anxiety, she turns to her aunt's home but is acutely aware that she and her aunt are distinct individuals, unable to rely on each other. She persistently seeks her own footing. The appearance of Qiaoqi Qiao provides Ge Weilong with an emotional anchor, helping her gradually adapt to high society. However, the beautiful illusions are quickly shattered by Qiaoqi Qiao's dissolute character, leading Ge Weilong to question her self-identity and contemplate how to gain power as a woman in a male-dominated society, so as to have the man she loves depend on her. Yet, by the film's end, with Qiaoqi Qiao's repeated infidelities and her witnessing of prostitutes being taken away by foreigners on Temple Street, Ge Weilong is forced to ponder whether her marriage is merely a game of power, with female anxiety perpetually haunting her.

Similarly, as a significant female figure in the film, the aunt also experiences her own emotional anxieties. With the death of her

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze [France]. (2016). *Movie 1: Movement—Image*. Translated by Xie Qiang and Ma Yue. Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 165, 192.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Mulvey [American]. (2006). *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, translated by Zhou Chuanji, edited by Li Hengji and Yang Yuanying in *Selected Works on Foreign Film Theory*, Beijing: Life-Reading-New Knowledge Sanlian Bookstore, p. 644.

<sup>3</sup> Chen Yishui. (2022). Three dimensions of film theory and practice under the affective turn. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, (05), 51-60.

wealthy husband, Aunt Mrs. Liang gains freedom and material satisfaction, thus achieving social rights for women. However, she still grapples with the anxiety of emotional emptiness. "Even when women have achieved equal social status and rights with men, they still need to grow and exist under the gaze of invisible ideologies, symbolic orders, and social orders, which are long-standing, inquisitive ideologies left over from a patriarchal society."

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, Mrs. Liang still needs to revolve around men, who not only fulfill her emotional void but also serve as a ticket to her extravagant upper-class social life, thereby achieving self-identification and power within a patriarchal society.

Influenced by patriarchal society, both Ge Weilong and Mrs. Liang find it difficult to satisfy their emotional needs, and their attempts to break free from the old society's shackles ultimately fail. The director employs montage editing techniques to intercut between the aunt and Ge Weilong. In the Shanghai club, Ge Weilong in her gorgeous attire contrasts with the aunt in black and white tones. The mutual gaze and interweaving of their bodies suggest a transmission of an era and identity, metaphorically indicating that their lives are becoming increasingly similar, foretelling that Ge Weilong will become a woman like her aunt in the future.

#### 4. Emotional Refraction in the Context of the Times

Ann Hui's film *Love After Love* is adapted from Zhang Ailing's novel *The First Incense Burner*. Set in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society in transition, the social status of women remains dependent on men, which also determines the tragic fate of the female characters in the film. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's habitus theory, we analyze how emotions are shaped and expressed within the social structure. The emotions of the characters in *Love After Love* are closely linked to their social status, class, and cultural background, reflecting the interaction between emotions and social structure.

In the film, Ge Weilong transitions from a plain student's attire to increasingly colorful and figure-hugging, gorgeous clothing. The transformation of the female body is seen as discipline, indicating the control and operation

of the power mechanism. <sup>2</sup>Moreover, due to her own female anxiety, Ge Weilong experiences a negative affective impact, leading her to use feminine means to establish herself in the old era, similar to her aunt.

Deleuze's theory of affective turn emphasizes the influence of affective forces and emotions on individual behavior and psychological processes. The narrow path for women's survival against the backdrop of the times and the entrenched feudal thinking of the old family are among the factors leading to Ge Weilong's tragedy. "In the male social symbolic order, women are constructed according to the requirements of the 'male other,' women are not women of their own, but women positioned by the male social order."

<sup>3</sup>Both in the public and private spheres, there is a clear inequality between men and women. At the dinner table where the aunt invited Mrs. Qiao, the director used a panoramic shot, placing Mr. Qiao in the center of the frame, implying that men occupy a dominant position in today's society. This inequality hinders women in realizing their desires and pursuing happiness. Moreover, the spiritual dependence on men and the lack of independent consciousness among women are also important reasons for Ge Weilong's tragedy. Women are often bound by the expectations of society and family, and they depend on men's relationships and support. In the film, Ge Weilong tries to get love, marriage, and economic support from Qiaoqi Qiao, but ultimately suffers the opposite result; in addition, the maids in Xiaobai Building also want to use Mrs. Liang's socializing to get the opportunity to rise from the phoenix. This reflects that women in the old society did have the right to speak, and the emotional needs and dependence on men of women in the old society made women fall into an unequal and unhealthy relationship. Affective forces may stimulate women's pursuit of happiness and satisfaction of needs, but due to social and family restrictions, the lack of self-awareness and autonomy of individual women leads to the tragic fate of female characters.

#### 5. Conclusion

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault [French]. (2012). *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Liu Beicheng and Yang Yuanying. Beijing: Life-Reading-Xinzhi Sanlian Bookstore.

<sup>3</sup> Zhang Xuqing. (2006). "Other" and "Deconstruction" - Keyword Interpretation of Feminist Film Theory. *Journal of Xuzhou Normal University*, (01), 54-57.

<sup>1</sup> Sun Feng. (2018). "Gaze" Theory and Feminist Film Research. *Film Literature*, (24), 22-24.

The film *Love After Love* represents Ann Hui's third adaptation of a novel by Zhang Ailing. Although it did not achieve commercial success at the box office, the film serves more as a continuation of the narrative from *The First Incense Burner*. Director Ann Hui fills in the gaps left by the novel, allowing the audience to fully comprehend the narrative content and to liberate themselves from the inherent recognition of spatial differences and mainstream notions. By transcending these boundaries, the film's conclusion offers a more open, inclusive, and diverse perspective. This paper, utilizing affective theory, uncovers the complexity and multi-layered nature of emotional expression within the film. This complexity not only reflects the internal emotional conflicts and struggles of the characters but also mirrors the gender inequality and power relations within the socio-cultural context.

Firstly, through Deleuze's theory of affective, this paper analyzed the use of close-up shots in the film and their metaphorical meanings, showing the deep desires and emotional conflicts in the hearts of the characters. Secondly, starting from the female perspective, we explored the emotional experiences and struggles of female characters such as Ge Weilong and Liang in a male-dominated society, revealing the multiple dilemmas they face in the pursuit of self-identity and happiness. Finally, combining Bourdieu's habitus theory, we analyzed the emotional refraction of the characters' fate in the context of the film, showing the profound impact of social structure on emotional expression.

The constraints of socio-cultural norms, coupled with the lack of self-awareness and autonomy among female individuals, lead them to encounter setbacks in their pursuit of happiness and fulfillment of needs, ultimately resulting in a tragic fate. Finally, by integrating Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, this paper analyzes the emotional refraction of the characters' destinies within the context of the film, demonstrating the profound impact of social structure on emotional expression.

By conducting a detailed analysis of Ann Hui's film *Love After Love*, this paper illustrates how affective theory provides a new perspective and theoretical foundation for understanding the emotional expressions in Hui's films. It reveals how emotional expressions in Hui's films

transcend personal experiences and become a reflection of socio-cultural phenomena. Additionally, it offers valuable insights and inspiration for further research into the application of affective theory within the realm of film art.

This translation aims to maintain the academic integrity and clarity of the original text while translating it into English. The text has been adapted to ensure that it flows naturally and is understandable to an English-speaking audience, preserving the scholarly tone and theoretical depth of the analysis.

## References

- Chen Yishui. (2022). Three dimensions of film theory and practice under the affective turn. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, (05), 51-60.
- Gilles Deleuze [France]. (2016). *Movie 1: Movement—Image*. Translated by Xie Qiang and Ma Yue. Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 165, 192.
- Laura Mulvey [American]. (2006). *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, translated by Zhou Chuanji, edited by Li Hengji and Yang Yuanying in *Selected Works on Foreign Film Theory*, Beijing: Life·Reading·New Knowledge Sanlian Bookstore, p. 644.
- Michel Foucault [French]. (2012). *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Liu Beicheng and Yang Yuanying. Beijing: Life·Reading·Xinzhi Sanlian Bookstore.
- Sun Feng. (2018). "Gaze" Theory and Feminist Film Research. *Film Literature*, (24), 22-24.
- Zhang Xuqing. (2006). "Other" and "Deconstruction" — Keyword Interpretation of Feminist Film Theory. *Journal of Xuzhou Normal University*, (01), 54-57.