



Metaphors for Puzzles, Time, and Dreams: Ambiguous Narratives in *Kaili Blues*

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Abstract: In the film “Kaili Blues” by Bi Gan, intricate clues create complex connections between the plots steered by various characters. This relationship manifests in splitting time and alternating between dream and reality. This article analyzes Bi Gan’s approach to temporality and dreams by focusing on how he employs various film metaphors to deal with poetic narratives in his films. The article consists of three sections: First, it introduces the (puzzle) storytelling form of “Kaili Blues” as a promising area in many Chinese films. Second, it examines how puzzle films contribute to the ambiguity (plots) between characters from the perspective of infinite games. Moreover, third, the article discusses the two levels of metaphors in “Kaili Blues” that result from the condensation and displacement of metaphors, including the mutual projection of roles caused by the time-forking effect and the audience’s associations caused by the significance of dreams in Chinese tradition (or local) culture.

Keywords: *Ambiguous Characters, Bi Gan, Film Metaphor, Kaili Blues, Metaphor Condensation and Displacement, Puzzle Films*

Introduction

My film is only talking about time, memory and dreams.—Bi Gan (2016a)

The 2015 Chinese film *Kaili Blues* by Bi Gan¹ has a unique presence, reflected in its narrative style, which is distinct from the Chinese academy film tradition. Bi Gan has no direct or indirect ties to the sixth generation of Chinese filmmakers, which has undoubtedly dismayed Chinese film historians. From a different perspective, this severed relationship simply reveals *Kaili Blues*’ concealed ambition. According to researcher Huadong Fan, the film “embodies the desire to break through the hegemonic paradigm of realism in Chinese cinema” (Fan 2021, 24).²

Bi Gan has stated in various interviews that the film aesthetics of former Soviet film master Andrei Tarkovsky (Bi 2016b) and Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien were his primary influences (Bi 2019).

¹ In the context of English culture, “Bi Gan” ought to have been spelt “Gan Bi.” In common usage, however, the Latin alphabet names of Chinese-language film directors frequently have two distinct forms. For instance, “Wong Ka-wai” is a permutation of surname + given name, while “Ang Lee” has the opposite order. Because Bi Gan is a new director, there is no widely accepted full name arrangement; therefore, this article uses the order surname + first name to make keyword searches easier for other academics.

² China’s film academy system has caused researchers to classify directors by the era in which they entered the film academy, and the college Bi Gan attended is not a film academy. His accumulation of film viewing at the Communication University of Shanxi resulted from self-study during college (Bi 2016b).

However, he denies having borrowed specific cinematic techniques from them, describing the inheritance relationship as methodological rather than formal.³ Even if there are scenes in *Kaili Blues* that are reminiscent of Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) and Hou's *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996), these intertexts do not reflect Bi Gan's true intentions.⁴ If Bi Gan's inheritance of other masters of art film is studied in terms of style, it will inevitably fall within the scope of discussing art films, thus failing to demonstrate its uniqueness. Although some researchers have thoroughly analyzed *Kaili Blues* from the standpoint of film aesthetics, the film's narrative rather than aesthetics is unique. Shelly Kraicer stated in her film review, "this isn't standard art-cinema-approved social realism" (2015). Fan believes this deviation from "social realism" results from Bi Gan's distinctive hometown aesthetics (2021, 4). However, Kraicer admits that Bi Gan's defining characteristic is poetry, not local aesthetics (referred to in the article as "social realism").⁵ Like the audience's initial reaction, Kraicer emphasized that *Kaili Blues* has "intricate skeins of narrative [strands]" that result in complex character relationships (2015).

Researchers should reassess the complicated plot of *Kaili Blues*. Kraicer (2015) argues that these intricate narratives have numerous entry points, but he does not elaborate on them in his remarks due to space constraints. Andrea Termini (2018) enumerates the objects that appear in the film, but he stops further analysis after comparing them with the others in the works of other film masters. The complex narratives triggered by these entry points (or objects) are characteristic of puzzle films, which are uncommon in China, but scholars have not addressed this.

"Puzzle film" is a subgenre of postclassical narrative. Eliot Panek (2006) first proposed this concept in his article "The Poet and the Detective: Defining the Psychological Puzzle Film."⁶ In the article, Panek defines puzzle films as "possess[ing] narratives in which the orientation of events in the plot to diegetic reality is not immediately clear, thus creating doubt in the viewer's mind as to how reliable, knowledgeable, self-conscious, and communicative the narration is" (2006, 65). *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, edited by Warren Buckland, honestly treats puzzle films as a particular research topic. Buckland defines puzzle film in the introduction by stating that "the puzzle film is made up of non-classical characters who perform non-classical actions and events" (2009, 5). For instance, *Lost Highway* (1997) by David Lynch is a typical puzzle film. It is divided into

³ In an exclusive interview with ifeng.com, Bi Gan described his understanding of Hou's influence on him as a relationship such as "after observing Hou plant grains, he considered planting fruit trees" (Bi 2022). Moreover, Bi Gan believed that Tarkovsky's availability of resources during the Soviet planned economy era was beyond his reach, so Tarkovsky's influence on him was limited to aesthetics (2022).

⁴ Several scholars have discovered this similarity. For instance, Andrea Termini (2018) described in his review how certain scenes in *Kaili Blues* intertextualize certain scenes from *Stalker* and *Goodbye South, Goodbye*. Huadong Fan (2021) also discovered this in his master's thesis, but he stated that this does not indicate that Bi Gan imitated Tarkovsky or Hou Hsiao-hsien.

⁵ "While it is clearly deeply embedded in contemporary culture, its poetry—not its politics—makes meaning" (Kraicer 2015).

⁶ The term "puzzle film" was coined by Norman N. Holland in his 1963 article titled "Puzzling Movies" (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 19). However, based on research conducted after the Hollywood narrative revolution of the 1990s, the puzzle films mentioned in this study differ from Holland's theory.

two parts, with Fred's transformation into Pete in prison serving as the dividing line. The plots of the two parts are nearly unrelated, except for this inexplicable character mutation. How Fred's marital crisis in the first part transitioned into Pete's love adventure in the second part is confusing to audiences accustomed to conventional storytelling.

In *Kaili Blues*, Chen Sheng's entanglements with multiple friends and relatives in the first part and Chen Sheng's daydreams in the second part have a Lynchian relationship, that is, an ambiguous narrative relationship. In a film, this manifests as a tenuous connection between the narratives of characters A and B. Specifically, the following conditions must be met for a story to be an ambiguous narrative:

1. A's life (or a particular stage) resembles that of B. It indicates that the events in A's life are similar to those in B's life.
2. In addition, an object (or person) in A's life is strikingly similar to one in B's life.
3. This double similarity allows the audience to connect characters A and B mentally, but there is no other intuitive evidence in the story to confirm the audience's association.

In *Lost Highway*, for instance, Fred's crisis of confidence in his wife also occurs in Pete's narrative, and the actor who portrays Renee, Fred's wife, also portrays Alice, Pete's underground lover.

This relationship is further complicated in *Kaili Blues*. The lifestyles of the young Chen Sheng and the middle-aged Crazy Face are comparable. Like the elderly former gang leader Monk, the middle-aged Chen Sheng aspires to be an ordinary person. Monk and one of Chen's fellow physicians share the loss of a child. Chen Sheng had a childhood experience similar to that of his nephew Weiwei. Chen Sheng and Weiwei have a mirror disco ball in their residences, and Weiwei and Monk each have a clock in their homes. In Chen's dream, the actress who played his wife in real life was a hairdresser.

Ambiguous narration is an essential feature of puzzle films. Panek argues that, in such films, "the smaller mystery is only related to the larger mystery thematically. Possible answers to these larger mysteries are never made especially clear" (2006, 77). If the mysteries develop in such a pattern, as if chaotically, what is the inner dynamic of the plot within the framework of this narrative? An ambiguous narrative uses puzzles to create identity projections between characters to elicit (excessive) associations in the audience.

Setup of Puzzles—Simulation of Infinite Games

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 —Eliot 1963, 175

In Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), there is a narrative that can be summarized as Mr. X and Ms. A may or may not know each other. There may or may not have been a

passionate love between them. There does not seem to be a helpful plot here at all. Still, this abandonment of thrust and purpose reinforces the narrative's complexity, making viewers obsessed with explaining complex character relationships rather than watching a complete story from start to finish. Marsha Kinder classified it as a database narrative. In her view,

database narratives refers to narratives whose structure exposes or thematises the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are crucial to language: the selection of particular data (characters, images, sounds, events) from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales. (Kinder 2002, 6)

Moreover, she classified narratology-influenced art films like *Last Year at Marienbad* together with the cyberfiction-influenced mainstream independent films produced in the 1990s as this narrative aesthetic emphasized their "arbitrariness of the particular choices made, and the possibility of making other combinations which would create alternative stories" (Kinder 2002, 6).

Panek proposed the concept of Psychological Puzzle Film to try to analyze this atypically complex film narrative. In his view, the standard narrative features of these films are that they "promote ambiguity and sudden narrative fluctuations over brief isolated fluctuations and clarity of classical narration" (Panek 2006, 65). Panek sees David Lynch's two films *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* (2001) as the ideal case studies for ambiguous narratives. In analyzing these cases, he cites an illuminating point made by Angela Hague (1995) while studying David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* series (1990–1991). In the plot of *Twin Peaks*, a mysterious murder fully aroused the spectator's enthusiasm to solve the case, but no substantive clues appeared until the end, which made the spectator confused and frustrated (Panek 2006). "Postmodernism's reaction against the psychological and mythical structures of modernism inevitably led to its appropriation and exploitation of the detective narrative as a parodic model...an operation which denies the ability of the human to solve problems through 'syllogistic order'" (Hague 1995, 132). Hague likened this narrative mode to an infinite play. For the concept of infinite play, its creator, philosopher James P. Carse, described it as follows:

there are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play. (Carse 1986, 3)

It is like the Card Game scene in *Last Year at Marienbad*: Mr. X and Ms. A's husband are in the game; whenever X thinks he has discovered the law of the game and intends to get a quadra to kill in the next round, he is always greeted by defeat. He keeps finding new rules but still loses the game again and again. This is an excellent example of the visualization of an infinite play.

In the same way, Hague thought the chess game in *Twin Peaks* meant "Carse's metaphorical interpretation is literally true" (Hague 1995, 134). The spectator in front of the screen, like Mr. X, tries in vain to find connections between clues in the film or TV series. Still, the author's real

intention is to continue the filmic narrative as an infinite game, as the creative principles revealed by *Twin Peaks*–influenced director Damon Lindelof:

You have to have a plan for what to do once you resolve the central mystery. And the answer has to be, there just has to be multiple, multiple, multiple mysteries, so every time you knock one off, there's still two unresolved ones in its wake, and you see how long you can play that game. (Lindelof 2017)

Lindelof's creative method is close to what Panek has summed up:

These films prompt the questioning of the qualities of their narration by exhibiting one or more of the following: unusual story structure, violations of causal logic, or flaunted, unresolved gaps in the causal chain of the story. (Panek 2006, 65)

These “questioning” in the narrative effect are reflected in the similarities between events and events, characters and characters that create confusion, which Isador Coriat called reduplicative paramnesia (1904), Henri Bergson called false recognition (1975), or Gilles Deleuze called “the illusion of *déjà vu* or already having been there” (1989, 79).

For example, in Theo Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* (*To Vlemma tou Odyssea* 1995), the protagonist A and the historical figures—Manakis brothers—are subtly overlapped in different plots, making it easier for the spectator to perceive that he has found some underlying connection. However, he cannot connect to A's mission in the plot. Thus, Producer A can be classified as an ambiguous character who sometimes goes beyond the category of an individual and seems to be a coalescence or projection of multiple individuals.

Not all projections between individuals fall into ambiguous roles. The plot of some films explicitly presupposes schizophrenia so that all clues effectively serve the puzzle, such as *Perfect Blue* (1997), *Fight Club* (1999), and *Black Swan* (2010). An ambiguous relationship means that all character settings are not for the plot but instead rely on the imitation of the rules of the infinite game in narrative mode. In this case, there are often unsolved puzzles in the plot, and there are lying flashback-like techniques to make one character seem like the shadow of another. However, those spectators who are used to the three-act structure of the classic narrative are often reluctant to explore these clues and thus fall into the trap like the card game in *Last Year at Marienbad*.

Following the preceding discussion, it is clear that setting puzzles generates ambiguous narrative effects. Returning to the point made at the beginning of the article, the distinctiveness of *Kaili Blues* in Chinese cinema lies in its narrative style rather than in its aesthetic style, as it exemplifies the ambiguous narrative of puzzle films. In this film, Bi Gan has set up a large number of puzzles that reflect the *past* similarities between multiple characters in order to encourage *collating* behavior in the audience's association area. Similar to putting together a jigsaw puzzle, you “can get hints about the general groupings of the differently colored pieces—those blues will represent water, these blues are the sky, these buildings are brown and tan, and so on” (Gozzi 1996, 448). This type of collating, which resembles assembling a jigsaw puzzle, causes the audience to become detectives off-screen.

In well-known cases of ambiguous narratives such as *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Dr.*, or *Ulysses' Gaze*, their authors build narrative structures by simulating film elements with valuable clues, often detective tropes. As Panek (2006) argues, ambiguous narratives “use the detective trope to provoke the audience into looking for answers that the film doesn’t provide” (76), and if there are no actual detectives in the play, “the protagonists play roles comparable to detectives throughout the narratives” (76).

Ambiguous narration advances the plot by establishing detective metaphors, so this type of film is typically not considered a narrative genre but rather an alternative film style. In the same way that Bordwell believed these films with intricate plots were appropriations of European styles,⁷ *Kaili Blues* researchers preferred to examine the film within the context of Chinese art cinema. They tried to identify Bi Gan’s aesthetic style by researching the genealogy of the Chinese Film Academy, but they ignored the significance of *Kaili Blues* in film narrative research. This article attempts to refocus attention on *Kaili Blues*’ narrative research for this reason. It also details the film’s narrative techniques and analyzes its intricate puzzle settings.

The plot of *Kaili Blues* is based on a seemingly loose narrative structure. The connection between each narrative module has shifted from hints to coincidences: after being released from prison, the protagonist Chen Sheng began a new life. He interacted with an old doctor, Crazy Face, and Weiwei on an everyday basis. These characters’ histories are strikingly similar. When Chen learned that Weiwei had been sold, he boarded the train to track him down. During this process, Chen had a daydream in which everything that transpired mirrored reality.

The story is divided into two parts in the narrative structure, and they respectively use different types of metaphors to make similarities between the narrative modules. In the first part, Bi Gan used cross-editing to express the daily life of Chen and his relatives and friends, and there is a sense of *déjà vu* between these characters. In the second part, a highly long-take records Chen’s daydreams. “Dream” is simultaneously a metonymy (or metaphor) for the reality of the first part and a metaphor for the cultural significance of the dream. The second part enhances the first part’s multi-projection effect, making the projection more layered and bringing more complex feelings to the viewer.⁸

⁷ “The strongest argument for a New Hollywood rests upon the claim that the directors’ works constitute a non-classical approach to narrative and technique. . . narrative structure had splintered, genre conventions had dissolved, linearity had been replaced by ambiguity, and the individual protagonist could no longer be seen as heroic. . . . As the ‘old’ Hollywood had incorporated and refunctionalized devices from German Expressionism and Soviet montage, the ‘New’ Hollywood has selectively borrowed from the international art cinema” (Bordwell and Staiger 2005, 614).

⁸ In the first part, several actual narrative characters project to each other, as evidenced by Chen Sheng and Crazy Face sharing Monk’s life. The second section depicts a dream, implying that the actual narrative is projected into the false narrative.

Metaphors in *Kaili Blues*

Time Forking Caused by Metaphor Condensation and Metaphor Displacement

In his paper “Metaphor and Ideology in Film” (2011), Dr. Carlo Comanducci studies metaphors in film. Comanducci observes that when attempting to use the metaphor identification procedure (MIP) to analyze filmic metaphors, the lexical units of the film cannot directly apply the conventional meaning of the metaphor in the text. He believes all metaphorically identifiable elements can be lexical units because they can be split shots and sequences and corresponding actions, objects, or characters in the same scene, even sound, light, and angle.

After some adjustments, Comanducci proposes two metaphor modes—metaphor condensation and metaphor displacement—based on Noël Carroll’s description of the two processes “fusion and fission” in the construction of symbolic formations (Carroll 1981, 18). Condensation means “different conceptual metaphors can be present in the same element of the film discourse” (Comanducci 2011, 31), and displacement means “different elements of the discourse may concur to determine a single conceptual metaphor” (31). A further explanation of these concepts is: Condensation is “a result of the interaction of all condensed implications” (32), and it tends to take the form of metaphor clusters that are “all grounded in the same conceptual metaphor, or a specific group of conceptual metaphors that are linked together” (32). As for displacement, like Carroll’s fission, it “can regard emotions or parts of an individual’s personality” (33), and it is often used to show a different ending of a narrative “by representing as different behaviour of multiple characters, what could be interpreted as different choices of the same individual” (33).

The first part of *Kaili Blues* can be analyzed as follows, based on Comanducci’s two metaphorical modes:

1. Several primary characters exemplify the metaphor condensation of the concept “regret.”
2. The projection between multiple main characters can be understood as a metaphor displacement that anthropomorphizes the personality.

Therefore, we can conclude that the reason *Kaili Blues* is valuable for narrative research is because the narrative structure’s ingenious and complex character relationships add more nuanced techniques to the metaphor of puzzle films.

The first part of the film uses cross-editing to describe the daily life of Chen and his relatives, colleagues, and friends. These narrative fragments can be roughly summarized into the stories of four characters (Table 1).

These stories were split into multiple segments by Bi Gan. From the perspective of character combination, the plot can be roughly summarized into four: Chen-Old doctor, Chen-Crazy Face, Chen-Weiwei, and Weiwei-Crazy Face. Among these four sets of narratives, the story of Chen-Old Doctor explains Chen’s mother’s last wish: she (mother) hoped that Chen could live an ordinary life, and the old doctor’s past: she (doctor) left her boyfriend

when she was young; The story of Chen-Crazy Face explains the irreparable contradictions between the brothers, including the preference for Chen in the mother's will (but during Chen's sentence, Crazy Face took care of mother alone) and Crazy Face's indifference to Weiwei in reality. In Chen-Weiwei's story, Chen takes exceptional care of his nephew Weiwei, and in Weiwei-Crazy Face, Crazy Face seems to care about his son—he worries about his son's future and does not want him to be a gang member.

Just like X and A in *Last Year at Marienbad* have or have not been in a relationship, there are contradictions between the four sets of plots in *Kaili Blues*: Crazy Face is both indifferent and caring toward his son, and while Chen, a former gang member, was serving his sentence, his brother Crazy Face took care of his mother alone until her death; however the mother thought that Crazy Face had nothing to do, and then she gave the entire estate to Chen. In a similar manner, not only are there inconsistencies in the narration, but there is also an incompatibility between the various plots: Crazy Face has never appeared with the old doctor; similarly, Chen, Crazy Face, and Weiwei rarely coexist in the same scene⁹; moreover, at the moment, Monk only had contact with Crazy Face but never interacted with Chen. With the above question in mind, all the characters in the story are placed in the past-present structure to re-observe their relationships to obtain the situations in Table 2.



Figure 1: Chen Sheng, Crazy Face, and Weiwei

Note: This is the only scene where Chen (middle), Crazy Face (right), and Weiwei (left) appear simultaneously. They are separated by composition and cannot coexist.

Source: Bi 2015

⁹ Except for the scene in the playground. Even though three characters appear in the same scene (playground), the director compositionally separates one of them from the other two (see Figure 1).

Table 1: The Experiences of Each of the Four Characters in *Kaili Blues*

	<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Related Roles</i>
<i>Chen Sheng</i>	Former gang member, nine years in prison. While serving his sentence, his mother and wife each passed away.	An ordinary middle-aged man.	Deceased ex-wife; Deceased mother; Brother: Crazy Face; Nephew: Weiwei; Former gang boss: Monk; Colleague: The old doctor.
<i>Crazy Face</i>	Chen's half-brother cared for their mother alone until her death while Chen was in prison.	He is idle all day and (probably) sold his son for lack of money.	Son: Weiwei; Friend: Monk.
<i>Monk</i>	Former gang leader. His son died in vendetta.	An older man who owns a watch shop and likes children very much.	Deceased son; Friend: Crazy Face; Friend's son: Weiwei; Former subordinate: Chen.
<i>Old Doctor</i>	She had a boyfriend when she was young, but she chose to leave him.	An old doctor jointly runs a country clinic with middle-aged Chen.	Ex-boyfriend; Colleague: Chen; Friend: Chen's late mother.

There is a contrast between the past and the present in the film (Table 2). Some of these are the result of the same event, such as the fluctuating relationship between Chen and his mother. The remaining portion derives from various events with apparent similarities, and the viewer subjectively connects them, such as the current Weiwei and the childhood Chen, the son of Monk, or the son of the old doctor, who are linked by their typical son identity.

Table 2: The Relationship between the Characters' Past and Present in *Kaili Blues*

<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>
The young mother left Zhenyuan Town and abandoned her child Chen.	Chen's mother died, and he got the whole inheritance, but Crazy Face got nothing.
Monk's son loved clocks during his lifetime.	Monk returned to Zhenyuan Town to open a watch shop. He liked Crazy Face's son Weiwei very much. Weiwei also likes clocks.
The old doctor's son died in a car accident.	Chen took good care of his nephew Weiwei.
Chen met his ex-wife at a disco bar.	Chen's ex-wife died before he was released
Chen was jailed for revenge for the Monk's son.	According to his mother's last wish, Chen is now working with the old doctor in the clinic.
Chen has a half-brother, Crazy Face, who has lived with his mother since childhood.	Crazy Face's son Weiwei is often left at home alone.
The fate of the former gangster: Chen was jailed for nine years; Monk lost his son.	Crazy Face reprimanded his son Weiwei who painted on his arm, saying that this is a mark of a gang and warned him not to be a gang member in the future.

Similarly, by comparing the experiences of several vital roles, several sets of parallel connections can be obtained:

Table 3: The Extremely Similar Experiences Shared by *Kaili Blues*' Characters

Characters	Similar Experiences
Mother—Old doctor	They both left Zhenyuan Town when they were young and gave up another close person.
Chen—Monk	They were all gang members and paid for it.
Crazy Face—Monk	They each have a son who likes clocks.
Monk—Old doctor	They both lost their sons.
Crazy Face—Mother	They are all ruthless toward their sons.

As shown in the relationships in Table 3, these characters have a coincidence of experience—they all have regrets. At the same time, this regret comes from denying one's past, centered on relationships with one's spouse or son. For example, the dialogue between Old doctor and Chen explains the mother's guilt toward Chen and the doctor's nostalgia for her old lover.

Combining this coincidence with the contrasts in Table 2, a phenomenon can be observed, characterized by an ingenious connection within the entire narrative framework. The different characters have a metaphorical relationship—a metaphor for regret. The old doctor mentions two regrets in her recollection: leaving the town where her ex-boyfriend lived and losing her son in a car accident. This is a metaphor for the experiences of others: the mother left Chen alone in the town; Chen's wife died when he was in prison; Monk lost his son. The Monk can also be divided into different stages: a former gang member who lost his son; he likes children very much now that he is old. These are metaphors for Chen's identity as a former gang member. Continue to expand the scope, Crazy Face is a metaphor for Monk, who did nothing when he was young, and Weiwei is a metaphor for Chen's unfortunate childhood.

The events in each narrative are metaphors for a character's past, so the first part of the film deals with the regrets of different characters. Metaphorical condensation comes into play here—different roles work together to embody metaphors for the same theme, so there are similarities between other narrative modules. In addition to the similarities between the narrative modules of the film triggered by metaphorical condensation, there is another metaphorical quality of ambiguous characters. Condensation means that the theme is shared by multiple characters, while displacement represents the split within a character. This split is often manifested in the personification of one individual into two or more other characters (Comanducci 2011).

Before discussing this, let me continue with the two questions raised earlier: first, why are there logical contradictions in the four plots? For example, Crazy Face loves and ignores his son. Second, why do some stories have impossibility? Chen-Crazy Face, Chen-Weiwei, and Weiwei-Crazy Face are three narratives independent of each other in the play, but it is evident that they coexist in the present.

These two contradictions recreate the contradictory accounts of Mr. X in *Last Year at Marienbad*. Gilles Deleuze refers to this phenomenon as “the simultaneity of peaks of present” (1989, 101). This means “there is never a succession of passing presents, but a simultaneity of a present of past, a present of present and a present of future” (101). Therefore, if combining the summaries of the characters in *Kaili Blues* in the three tables mentioned above, the conclusion is that the rules of the narrative game precisely cause these contradictions,

“narration will consist of the distribution of different presents to different characters, so that each forms a combination that is plausible and possible in itself” (101). Crazy Face, Chen, and Weiwei are metaphors for one individual in different periods. For example, in the narrative of Chen-Crazy Face, Chen cares about Weiwei, and Crazy Face ignores Weiwei. The two brothers have irreconcilable contradictions and even almost cause a conflict. This is a metaphor for Monk’s attitude toward his son at different stages of life: as a gang leader, Monk once ignored his son’s passion for gangsters, and in his old age, he showed self-blame for his son’s death. There is a strong contrast between these two stages. In another example, Crazy Face-Weiwei’s narrative indicates that Crazy Face loves his son—when he is bathing him, he warns him not to draw a gang mark (tattoo) on his arm. As Deleuze once pointed out,

since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to split the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. (Deleuze 1989, 81)

After splitting the past and present of Monk, they became Crazy Face and Chen (see Figure 2). As a result, the spectator always finds each other’s shadows in Monk, Chen, and Crazy Face in the film. This constitutes another kind of similarity besides thematic similarity. The former is reflected in that several characters’ regrets between parents and sons or between a pair of lovers. In contrast, the latter is reflected in overlapping a particular life stage of one character and another at the moment.

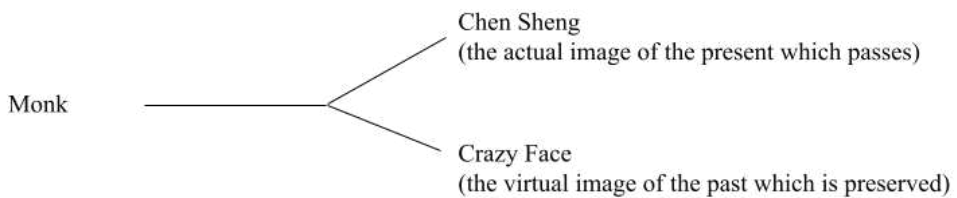


Figure 2: Schematic Depicting the Link between Character Prototypes and Variants

Note: According to Deleuze’s description of crystals of time, here past and present are not chronological but coexist.

Then Chen and Crazy Face can be regarded as displacement metaphors for Monk. Similarly, displacement is also reflected in other roles. For example, the old doctor can also be another origin to fork into Chen’s mother and Chen. The contradiction between Crazy Face’s different attitudes toward his son and the impossibility between Chen, Crazy Face, and Weiwei are resolved because these two are false propositions. Some characters are bifurcations of an individual, and they are initially personifications of different probabilities or stages. In addition to Monk being the object of the metaphor, so is Weiwei, who can be seen as an agglomeration of metaphorical displacements of multiple characters—as a prototype for metaphors for sons, such as childhood Chen, son of Monk, and son of the old doctor, the

relationship between the three of them is both a metaphor for the past (parents do not love their sons) and for the present (parents regret losing their sons). In this way, the film's first part continues the cycle of A metaphors B, B metaphors C, and C metaphors A again.

When the two metaphors of condensation and displacement are combined, a unique narrative framework is further obtained, in which the narrative modules reflect each other and the same concept. This framework replaces the three-act structure of the classic narrative. Following this line of thinking, the film's first part can be classified into a narrative framework that includes several sets of metaphorical modules—mother and son, father and son, husband and wife (or lover). “Mother and son” and “father and son” are similar, and couples and lovers are close. Each group of modules has a corresponding role, and these roles are branched in time, and each branch is a displacement metaphor for the origin, thus enhancing the connection between the modules. In addition, some red herring clues in the film visualize the metaphorical process, prompting the spectator to start thinking about the rules of the jigsaw puzzle.

Assuming that the protagonist Chen is the core of the narrative, this framework comprises:

1. the narrative of Chen that includes “mother and son” and “husband and wife”;
2. Weiwei, Crazy Face, and Monk, which are metaphors for Chen's childhood, youth, and old age. A mirror disco ball will appear in different scenes (flashbacks) related to Chen.

When Chen and other characters appear together in a scene, there will be a corresponding metaphor (condensation or displacement) and an object clue. Continuing to expand according to the above assumption and shifting the core to any role metaphorical to Chen's displacement, such as Monk, it will be the following:

1. The narrative of Monk includes father and son;
2. Crazy Face and Chen are metaphors for the Monk, who is a gang member, and the Monk, who loses his son;
3. Other accounts show that Monk's son liked clocks during his lifetime. The clock serves as a clue connecting Monk and Weiwei, who also enjoys them.

In this sense, the narrative's core automatically shifted to Weiwei: Weiwei is in the father and son narrative module. Still, because Weiwei is a metaphor for childhood Chen, the narrative module is connected from father and son to mother and son. The topic seemed to return to Chen again. At this time, in the module of mother and son, the pain of the old doctor's loss of his son, and the pain of Monk in the module of father and son made the spectator have a *déjà vu*. The film has a structural metaphor because the characters constantly reflect on each other in this rhythm. The spectator is caught in the constant pursuit and exploration of metaphors.

Cultural Metaphors for Dreams

Dream—Alternants for Metaphor and Metonymy

In T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the scene described at the end of the last poem, "Little Gidding," is a metonymy for the rose garden, which appears at the beginning of the first poem, "Burnt Norton." Thus, a relationship is formed—the first poem and the last poem form a new structure in which "what appears to be the end—it may be a climactic effort, it may be the end to a poem—becomes...a new beginning" (Gordon 1999, 341).

This approach also appears in *Kaili Blues*. The film's second part mainly describes Chen's dream with a long shot of more than forty minutes. Some of its characters correspond to several real characters in the first part.

The relationship between multiple similarities is metaphorical in the first part, and the difference is that the characters appear in the second part. Although there are similarities to the first part, the association is metonymic. The relationship between dreams and reality determines this. Mark J. Blechner, who studied this relationship, believes that the elements in the dreamer's dream correspond to his real life, such as "one person or object is substituted for another" (2018, 117), thus reflecting the meaning of metonymy—" [It] is the substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant (the fundament)" (111).

However, the figurative relation of dreams to reality is more than metonymy. Edgar A. Levenson believes that "dreams may be interpreted along the two basic linguistic axes—that is, metaphorically and metonymically" (Levenson 2000, 120). To a certain extent, the object in the dream is metaphorical or metonymic, depending on whether its link to reality is direct or indirect. According to Levenson, metaphor is "the story line of the dream, accessible to any listener's interpretation" (120). The metonymy of reality by the dream image requires the interpreter to understand the dreamer's associations: "It is the reservoir of the idiosyncratic experience of both participants. It is nonlinear and doesn't tell a story, as does the metaphoric line" (120). For example, a canary in a purple weskit has no meaning unless it relies on association.

However, the barriers between metaphor and metonymy in a narrative are often not clear-cut. In this regard, Roman Jakobson's point is that "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination" (1971, 704). Here, the selection means metaphor, and combination means metonymy: "separated in their foundation, metaphor and metonymy are joined at the level of function" (Ropare-Wuilleumier 1978, 11). Jakobson illustrates this point with examples from different literary schools and suggests that the two elements (metaphor and metonymy) interact in literature, poetry, painting, and film. Within the works of these other art categories, there are "various motives which determine the choice between these alternants" (Jakobson 1971, 255). Christian Metz further believes that the distinction between the two should not be based solely on film elements but should also consider the configuration of similarity and continuity inside and outside the narrative. Therefore, metaphor and metonymy do not appear singly in most cases but appear in the form of interaction or mutual suggestion (Metz 1982).

To sum up, it can be seen that the projection of dream images to reality is difficult to summarize with pure metonymy or metaphor. They often work together. In the film, it starts from the moment Chen enters the dream. Bi Gan uses hallucinatory images to imply that this is a dream. The specific operations are as follows: two scenes with a shared hallucination are set in the film. In the first scene, Crazy Face’s home, a clock drawn by Weiwei is running on one wall, and a moving train image is shown upside-down on the other. Another scene at the film’s end depicts Chen sitting on a train with a running clock outside the window drawn by another Weiwei in his dream.

Because of the fit of the hallucinations in these two scenes, the entire second part is a metaphor for dreams. At the same time, the fantasy characters in this dream are metaphors or metonymies of reality.

As to whether fantasies in dreams are metaphors or metonymies, this lies in “while metaphor establishes connections between different domains of experiences, metonymy operates within the same experiential domain” (Müller and Kappelhoff 2018, 110; compare Barcelona 2009; Croft 1993; Gibbs 1999; Mittelberg and Waugh 2009; Radden 2000). For example, the fantasy character Weiwei can be understood as a metaphor for the real Weiwei. At the same time, his girlfriend Yangyang is a metonymy for the old doctor in reality. Furthermore, Yangyang functions as both metonymy and metaphor because the doctor’s other meaning is a metaphor for Chen’s mother.

Table 4: The Projected Relationship between the Characters in the Second Part of *Kaili Blues*

<i>Dreams</i>	<i>Reality</i>
<i>Characters</i>	
Teenage Weiwei	Weiwei, Chen
Yangyang (Teenage Weiwei’s girlfriend)	Old doctor, Mother
Hairdresser	Chen’s late wife
<i>Events</i>	
Chen put on the shirt that the old doctor wanted to give to her old lover and gave the tape that the lover gave her to the hairdresser.	The old doctor asked Chen to help her send her old lover a shirt and a tape that her lover once gave her.
Yangyang is about to leave the town where she and Weiwei live.	Mother had left town; The old doctor also left the town.

Table 4 shows that the fantasy characters project the real, forming a more complex connection with the metaphorical relationship between the characters in the first part. Likewise, events in dreams have similarities to reality because the spectator’s associations are also required, so this relationship is also metonymic.

The time forking in the first part is continued here, and the fantasy characters here correspond one-to-one with reality, so the metaphor in the first part still exists here. It is as if the fantasy character hairdresser directly is a metonymy of Chen’s wife. Because of the metaphor of continuation, when Chen handed the tape (clue) to the hairdresser, she was the wife and the old doctor at the same time (tape as a clue to the old doctor).

Cultural Metaphors of Dreams

According to Hong Kong scholar Mei Gao's research, some plots in *Kaili Blues* are metaphors for "giving dreams" (*tuomeng*) in traditional Chinese folklore (Gao 2020, 51). It refers to several scenes in the film's first act (in the first part of the film) in which the deceased deliver messages to the living through dreams. The second part of the film, which is also a metaphor for dreams, is not mentioned by Gao. However, the point of this metaphor (in the second part) is not "giving dreams" but rather an allusion to the effect of dreams on a person's spiritual enhancement or self-liberation in traditional Chinese religion.

Discussing this undervalued profound dream metaphor must return to the subject of metaphor research. There are currently two opposing positions: the cognitively informed conceptual metaphor theory of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson and the philosophical metaphorology of Hans Blumenberg (Greifenstein et al. 2018). As for how metaphorical meaning is constructed, the former believes that meaning is contingent upon universal cognition, whereas the latter believes that it must be rooted in historical culture (Greifenstein et al. 2018). Current researchers (or institutions) in film metaphor, such as the Center for Advanced Film Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, advocate combining the two theories. Their research takes an eclectic approach between two prominent metaphor theories, which are not only based on a universal cognitive schemata of neurocognitive approach but also "necessarily entails taking the historicity of metaphorical meaning-making into consideration" (Greifenstein et al. 2018, 3). The dream metaphor in *Kaili Blues* necessitates such analyses.

On the one hand, "dream" stands for "giving dreams," while on the other hand, "giving dreams" has a solid folkloric background in China. If the audience consists only of native Chinese speakers, the combination of the dead-dream-living can easily lead to people's associations with "giving dreams." Because it is part of the Chinese-language circle's everyday cognition (folk belief), it can be seen from this that, while native Chinese speakers may not be able to point out specific prototypes for more profound dream metaphors directly, they can have appropriate interpretations of such metaphors.

The methodology utilized by Fan and Mei is consistent with these "appropriate interpretations." The former compared *Kaili Blues*' dream plots to Jia Zhangke's films, while the latter compared it to *The Widowed Witch* (2017). These reflect the cultural association audiences native to the Chinese language would make regarding dream-related scenes. In Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013), Xiaoyu enters a van filled with snakes while evading pursuit. In *The Widowed Witch* by Cai Chengjie, Erhao can suddenly predict the future one day accurately. These plots resemble the mystical scene in the second installment of *Kaili Blues*, in which Chen Sheng meets the avatars of several significant people in his life in a fictitious town.

The metonymy of dreams causes the second part of *Kaili Blues* to have a structural reaction to the first part. The metaphorical cluster previously formed in the first part is readjusted, the theme is changed from regret to nothingness, and a new group is created. This comes down to

the meaning of the concept of a dream in a particular culture. The passage from the *Diamond Sutra* that appeared in the opening of the first part is echoed here¹⁰:

The Buddha said the living beings in all these world systems have many different minds, which are all known to the Tathagata. Why? Because the minds the Tathagata speaks of are not minds but are (expediently) called minds. And why? Because, Subhuti, neither the past, the present, nor the future mind can be found. (Excerpt from Chapter 18, the *Diamond Sutra*. Refer to the English subtitles of *Kaili Blues*)

The implication of this verse for the entire film is highlighted in the dream part. The mirror relationship between reality and fiction makes the narrative frame asymmetrical style. In reality image, a character becomes a metaphor for the past, present, or future of another character (just as Weiwei means Chen's childhood), and the fantasies set in the dream are also metonyms for the corresponding characters (the hairdresser looks like Chen's ex-wife), which transforms the entire narrative into an aesthetic of nothingness. This corresponds to another famous sentence in the *Diamond Sutra*,

All conditioned dharmas
Are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, or shadows;
Like drops of dew, or like flashes of lightning:
Thusly should they be contemplated.
(Excerpt from Chapter 32, the *Diamond Sutra*. Refer to the translation on lapislazulitexts.com)

The dreams in the film are metaphors for the underlying cultural meanings and acquire deeper meanings. There is a solid metaphorical relationship here with the allusions to dreams in Buddhism and Taoism. Comanducci said, "metaphors have consistent meaning only within a given culture" (2011, 25). Some of the plots in *Kaili Blues* have a solid metaphorical connection to the references to dreams in traditional Chinese culture.

There are often reflections on the connection between dreams and reality in Chinese literary works. For example, in the famous paradox of Zhuang Zhou's Butterfly Dream, it is impossible to determine who the noumenon is between the dream of the self and the butterfly's dream (Zhuangzi 2013). Or, in the allusion to Golden Millet Dream, a person completed his life in a short dream, so he gave up the pursuit of worldly success after waking up (Fuller and Lin 2010). Alternatively, in *Dream of the Red Chamber (Hongloumeng)*, the protagonist enters a dream and reads a collection of prophetic poems that herald the ultimate fate of every female character in reality (Ferrara 2009). In addition, this metaphor for the cultural meaning of dreams makes this part a metaphorical cluster with the first part, and every event in the first part produces a metaphor for dreams with religious connotations.

¹⁰ Kraicer views this Buddhist scripture as the key to deciphering the *Kaili Blues*' narrative.

In the film's ending, after the day in the dream is over, Chen finally finds Weiwei in Zhenyuan, the town where his mother abandoned him. Weiwei has begun to integrate into his new life with the elderly Monk. This ending makes it impossible to know whether it is a dream or reality, and it is the effect of the metaphorical structure—the metaphor of dreams continues off-screen. From another perspective, this situation also means the end of the metaphor—Weiwei, who symbolizes Chen in his childhood, and Monk, who embodies old Chen, finally live together, which ends all the time-forking games. The metaphorical meaning of dreams in Buddhism and Taoism is highlighted at this time—the beginning and the end of life are superimposed, and it is unclear which the before and the after are. As T. S. Eliot describes in the last part of the final poem of the four quartets:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
(1963, 207)

Conclusion

When we create a puzzle with a clear solution, there is a robust causal relationship between each step of the puzzle-solving process. In contrast, a puzzle without a solution is analogous to a tarot card game in which each stage is replete with metaphors and transcendently connected to the player's history and future.

The metaphor condensation and displacement employed by *Kaili Blues*, as well as the time forking effect and the mapping of dreams to reality, are techniques that were once prevalent in complicated film tales. In this film, unlike others, Bi Gan successfully mixes all three elements. Bi Gan eliminates the causal relationship between the plots by utilizing the essence of the impossible puzzle, the infinite game. As a result, metaphor replaces cause and effect as the reference object for assigning logic to the plot.

This technique has been utilized in Kieślowski's *Three Colors: Red* (1994) and Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), but it has not been applied to the entirety of a film due to the films' obvious storylines. The contribution of Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* is that he eschewed solvable puzzles in favor of impossible ones as narrative criteria. One episode no longer determines the next in this scenario. In contrast, the metaphor substitutes the deterministic relationship between the plots and becomes the narrative's driving force, compelling the spectator to make continual attributions via association, creating a unique poetic effect.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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