The Power Of "Silent" Expression: The Role of Plot and The Creation of Atmosphere in Film Music

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Abstract

In the context of the continuous integration of contemporary audiovisual media, film music, as an important part of film narrative and aesthetics, has demonstrated diverse functions. Using a combination of qualitative analysis and case studies, we analyze contemporary films from different regions of China and discuss in depth the artistic expression of film music in creating plot characters and atmosphere. It is found that film music effectively enhances the narrative effect and emotional expression through "silent" language, and shows a unique artistic influence in characterization and scene atmosphere creation. It is concluded that film music, as an indispensable part of the film language system, plays an important role in narrative and aesthetics through rhythm, melody and timbre, which not only promotes the development of the plot and deepens the emotions of the characters, but also expands its cultural influence in the era of streaming media, and becomes an important bridge that connects the creator and the audience with their emotions and understanding. At the same time, this study also provides references for films from other regions of China and foreign films that have not yet been covered, and helps to promote the continuous evolution of the communication path and audience acceptance mechanism of film music.

Keywords: film music; plot; film expression; atmosphere; emotion

Introduction

Film music has always played an important role in the history of film narrative, from the "silent" sound to the "sound" expression of the times, especially in the era of streaming media and the Internet, where the diversity of sound has been greatly enhanced. Some scholars suggest that although there are significant differences in audience aesthetics across different cultural backgrounds and among publics in different countries, the future development potential of film music remains great due to the influence of technology, as well as the creative concepts of directors and composers (Winter, 1941). At the same time,

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scholars have turned to more diversified research approaches, integrating insights from other disciplines to explore the role of film music in shaping "gender and racial identities" (Kirby, 2021) and "evoking audience empathy" (Hoeckner et al., 2011), thereby demonstrating its influence on the socio-cultural dimension. In addition, the mediated narrative of film music is highly relevant to the themes expressed in the film, and becomes a means of expressing the metaphor of the narrative plot. In fact, this multi-dimensional musical presentation reflects the richness of artistic expression and demonstrates the narrative value of film music. With the changes in media forms and communication platforms, the way of audience reception has also changed, enabling the audience to re-examine the function of film music in cross-media narratives while enhancing the aesthetic understanding of film narratives, which, in this way, may require a systematic discussion of film music.

Generally speaking, film music does not exist in isolation, but is closely connected to the creation of an emotional atmosphere in the narrative structure of the film, to shape the aesthetic and value expression of the film (Gorbman, 1980). Specifically, the mainstream viewpoint still emphasizes the idea that "silence is more powerful than sound." This makes film music not only echo the behavior and image of the characters but also enhance the expression of emotions in the development of the narrative, so that the audience can more intuitively feel the psychological changes of the characters and the direction of their destiny (Winters, 2010). Meanwhile, the rhythm and modality of the music can also serve as a metaphor for changes in the film's narrative, reinforcing the emotional atmosphere required by the storyline and enhancing its affective impact (Cohen, 1993). It is important to note that film music is not really "silent", but builds the audience's audio-visual experience subtly, making the narrative language more layered and expressive. This means that film music not only plays a crucial role in enhancing the atmosphere of the film and shaping character portrayals but also collaborates with various elements within the narrative system to construct the film's overall narrative logic. As a result, this multi-layered audiovisual experience of aesthetic reception by the audience enriches the narrative emotion of the film, which in turn promotes the expressive power of the art and the purpose of the narrative.

This study constructs a multidimensional sampling framework, encompassing major film genres such as drama, action, and science fiction, to comprehensively examine both the diversity and universality of film music. In terms of regional scope, it includes contemporary films from various parts of China, with selected case studies such as *"The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon"* (2023) directed by Wong Ching-Po, *"Full River Red"* (2023) directed by Zhang Yimou, and *"In the Mood for Love"* (2000) directed by Wong Kar-Wai. This dual-dimensional case selection strategy ensures a broad geographical perspective while enabling an in-depth exploration of the localized characteristics of Chinese film music. The

study aims to deepen understanding of the unique expressive power of film music and offer new perspectives and approaches for its research and creation.

Based on this, the primary objective of this study is to explore the artistic expressiveness of film music in Chinese cinema through a qualitative and case-based approach. Specifically, the research investigates two main analytical dimensions: narrative development and atmospheric construction. Drawing on film theories such as the concept of "using the relationship between sound and image" (Bordwell, 2020), the study incorporates a detailed analysis of musical elements, including lyrics, melody, and instrumental arrangements. Accordingly, this research not only examines how film music enhances narrative coherence, shapes character identity, and constructs cinematic atmosphere, but also considers its role in the aesthetic reception of audiences. Furthermore, it seeks to reveal how film music contributes to expanding the expressive potential of cinematic language, thereby eliciting broader emotional resonance among viewers.

Therefore, Kalinak (2023) argues that "music fulfills several important functions as an element in a film's narrative system"(p. 35). Based on this, the artistic style of film music in fusion is first explored, and the fluidity and tension of the film narrative are argued in an intertextual relationship. Then, the role of film music in characterization is further analyzed, so that the audience can form a stable recognition in the cognition and form a "silent" narrative language. Finally, the artistic language and expressive power of film music are discussed, and intertextuality is formed in the audience's aesthetic acceptance process. Therefore, through an in-depth analysis of music in film, this study systematically explores its artistic expressiveness to reveal the role of film music within cinematic works.

Promoting plot development and articulating visual narratives

Cinema is a form of reception that mobilizes the audience's audiovisual combination, which can intuitively reflect the audience's aesthetic experience and promote the development of the narrative plot in the construction of the screen. From this perspective, the relationship between film visuals and music can be classified into various types, the most common of which is sound-image synchronization. This "synchronization effect" enables the audience to establish an instinctive connection between the auditory and visual senses, so that the emotional color of the music and the picture are on the same frequency in the fused organic whole, thus guiding the audience into a specific emotional atmosphere (Chion, 2019). For example, in the film *"The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon"* (2023), the director combines the theme song "Brand New Me" (composed by Zheng Yinong) with the scene of the protagonist Chen Guilin joining the church for the first time, and makes use of its "harmless" ballad style and soothing melody to create a warm atmosphere, which creates a strong emotional

resonance for the viewers. Its "harmless" ballad style and soothing melody create a warm atmosphere, and its strong inclusiveness and affinity create a strong emotional resonance for the viewer, paving the way for the subsequent episode in which Chen Guilin discovers the hypocrisy of Lin Luhe. The film's sound and pictures have a strong emotional resonance with the viewers. It can be seen that the synchronization of sound and picture in the film not only creates a credible audio-visual world but also allows the audience to accept the aesthetic consciousness and express their emotions according to the narrative logic through the perfect match between sound and picture. However, the establishment of a sound-picture relationship does not always aim at the harmony of both sides, and the deliberate misalignment in the narrative can also break the audience's psychological aesthetic expectations, thus creating the tension of dramatic emotional expression and triggering the audience's deeper emotional resonance and reflection.

In contrast, the sound-picture retrograde creates the tension of emotional expression through the paradoxical design in the narrative, to subvert the audience's psychological expectations, and on this basis, expand the depth of the narrative, so that the plot performance and color symbols of the picture exceed the audience's visual perception, so that the audience in the visual aesthetic process to actively construct the association between music and picture, thus promoting the development of the narrative in a more complex direction (Mera & Stumpf, 2014). Similarly, this is also reflected many times in the film *"The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon"*(2023), whose typical climactic sequence brings great contrast to the audience's audio-visual experience, allowing them to purify their souls in emotional sublimation, while the picture is a bloody "killing game" that causes visual shock. This means that the music in the film narrative often plays a crucial role, and the incongruity between the music and the picture causes the "strangeness" effect in the visual aesthetics and produces a strong psychological impact. In fact, sound and picture reversal can not only enhance the dramatic tension of the film but also give the film a deeper expression, make the narrative more vivid and shocking, and push the film's plot to the climax. Therefore, as Dickinson (2003) puts it, "the particular kind of music used in dominant feature films has connotative values so strongly codified that it can bear a similar relation to the images as a caption to a news photograph " (p. 40).

Of course, when the soundtrack in a film clip carries cultural connotations or its lyrics provide plot clues, a symbolic metaphorical effect occurs (Chattah, 2006). Specifically, film music and video narratives constitute an intertextual relationship in which music lyrics are not only a tool for conveying information in terms of emotional semantics, but also carry deeper symbolic meanings. The drive of lyrics to the narrative theme of the film makes the storyline more layered and helps the audience to understand the message more deeply

(Ferguson, 2020). Especially in the film *"Full River Red"* (2023), the ten Yu opera songs with oriental flavor form a close intertextual relationship with the development of the plot, and their lyrics not only map the unfolding of the narrative plot but also hint at the upcoming plot twists to some extent. Making music an important part of the narrative rather than a mere accompaniment (Tang, 2019). In addition, some scholars have also shown that whether or not the lyrics in a film are "heard" by the characters, they should be regarded as an important and organic part of the narrative space, with the textual meaning of the lyrics forming a dynamic intertextual relationship with the visual narrative, characterization, and thematic expression, rather than just an independent "external exegesis" (Winters, 2010). This means that the role of film music lyrics depends on how they are used in specific narratives, and can serve as an important tool for enhancing narrative and thematic expression, as well as conveying deeper cultural values for cultural symbols, which breaks through the traditional meaning of the function of lyrics in the theory of "non-narrative music". Therefore, the audio and lyrics in a film can not only perfectly connect the plot before and after, help the audience to establish the aesthetic logic of the narrative, but also, to a certain extent, pave the way for and imply the subsequent plot, to enhance the overall expressive power of the film.

Taking this into consideration, we also need to discuss the artistic expression of music in film. In the organic fusion of plot and audio in film music, the soundtrack is used to create a unique artistic style, enabling the music to echo the theme of the film narrative in its emotional expression (Kassabian, 2002). Especially in recent years, Chinese directors like to blend traditional music elements with modern music styles to form a unique artistic style. Similarly, the films directed by Zhang Yimou bear witness to this, as they not only strengthen the image of the characters and the tension of the plot but also serve as cultural metaphors to sublimate the narrative theme of the family and the country, realizing the organic unity of commercial entertainment and artistic expression (He, 2024). In the long run, while preserving the traditional cultural genes and expanding the dimensions of artistic expression, music has become a cultural bridge connecting across time and space, promoting the globalization of Chinese film art (Hou, 2024). Alternatively，it builds an identity in a unique culture, realizing the organic unity of artistic inheritance and contemporary innovation (Zhou, 2020). In fact, by integrating elements of traditional Chinese music—such as opera, folk songs, and instrumental music—with modern genres like electronic, rock, and pop, film music has, to a certain extent, facilitated the organic unification of music and narrative within cinema. As a result, film music not only precisely intensifies dramatic conflict to drive plot development, but also employs modern reinterpretations of cultural symbols to deepen thematic meaning. This fusion revitalizes traditional art forms and imbues cinematic works with a distinctive cultural identity and contemporary emotional resonance.

In conclusion, film music plays a crucial role in film narrative, which is skillfully integrated into the narrative plot and visual images, not only promoting the development of the story but also realizing a smooth connection at the key turning point. It heightens the plot's tension, driving the narrative and thematic expression through the seamless interplay of sound and visuals, allowing the audience to more deeply understand and connect with the film's emotional undertones. In this process, the film music becomes the "invisible narrator", which not only deepens the theme but also guides the audience to generate psychological expectations, thus realizing the immersive narrative effect of sound-picture intertextuality and reality-immersion. Therefore, the organic combination of music and narrative not only gives play to the unique narrative advantages of music but also greatly enhances the artistic expression of the film, so that the film presents the best artistic effect, just as Kalinak (2023) pointed out: "Film music anchors the image in another way as well: it positions the audience to receive the narrative in the way intended by the filmmakers. Music resonates emotion between the audience and the screen" (p. 33).

Characterization and inner changes

The rhythmic style of film music is often closely connected to the visual scenes, providing a rich contextual framework for the characters' environments and the development of the plot, thereby shaping more three-dimensional and diverse "character images"(Avramidis et al., 2023). Specifically, the construction of these character images is tightly linked to the rhythmic style of the film music. On one hand, the tempo of the music is used to portray different character traits: fast-paced rhythms often accompany rapid editing and dynamic visuals, reflecting more energetic or intense characters, while softer music better expresses delicate emotions and tender character traits (Simonetta et al., 2019). Similarly, this variation is also reflected in the musical style, as filmmakers use modes and harmonic rhythms to evoke different character impressions (Xu et al., 2025). For example, lively and upbeat melodies often correspond with bright and rich visual styles, whereas steady and gentle melodies create soft lighting and color tones, more suited to introspective and profound character portrayals. In fact, film narratives frequently integrate timbre with character images and plot development, functioning metaphorically and enabling audiences to achieve a more diversified aesthetic understanding of the narrative, enriching its meaning and value. Moreover, appropriate musical scoring can foster immersive experiences, helping viewers resonate emotionally during the aesthetic process (Li et al., 2019). With the influence of modern technology and culture, film narratives increasingly pursue a "decentralized" storytelling approach, resulting in an aesthetic effect of "de-heroization." Therefore, film music is not only an audiovisual tool but also a vital narrative medium in constructing

character images, becoming an important symbol for audiences to engage in diverse aesthetic reception.

In addition, the timbre of musical instruments used in film music can also give the characters a distinctive image and form a clear recognition in the audience's cognition. Some scholars have pointed out that the timbre of certain instruments in films has formed fixed associations with specific characters (or concepts), enabling audiences to quickly recognize and understand the film's narrative roles (Oden, 2021). In this way, the timbral expression of musical instruments is also highly referential and becomes crucial to the audience's understanding of characterization in both mediated and symbolic representations. For example, in director Chen Kaige's film *"Farewell My Concubine"* (1993), composer Zhao Jiping uses the traditional Chinese bowed string instrument *"jinghu"* as a key element of the main theme. The instrument's blend of strength and delicacy accompanies the life journey of Cheng Dieyi throughout the film. Its piercing high register and warm, bright tonal color reflect his stubborn and lofty character, helping to shape the cultural symbol of "one cannot truly live without becoming the art itself." In general, the timbre of a musical instrument plays an important role in the sound of a film. Generally speaking, the timbre of instruments in film music can enhance the construction of character images by drawing on cultural archetypes and the audience's internalized stereotypes, thereby highlighting the distinct traits of the characters and making them more vivid and multifaceted (Groves et al., 2025). During viewing, lower and louder sounds are more likely to be associated with tall and imposing villainous characters, while higher pitches tend to be linked to young, positive heroic figures. This implies that the choice of instrumental timbre in film music plays an important role in characterization, and the timbre of a particular instrument can form a stable association with the character's personality and enhance the character's recognition and the audience's perception. To better portray the characters, film creators should consciously choose instrumental timbres that match the character's personality (or cultural background) to realize a more recognizable and expressive musical narrative.

Of course, accompanied by the above-mentioned film music in characterization, it enables the audience's aesthetic vision to focus more quickly on the main character of the film, thus obtaining a stronger visual shock. This helps guide the audience's attention to the characters in the film, enabling them to quickly form an initial understanding of the characters' image, thereby establishing a clear and shared public perception (Millet et al., 2021). Similarly, composers should accurately capture certain essences of human nature and trigger emotions similar to those experienced by the audience through music, so that the audience can more easily feel the emotions and inner world of the characters, thus deepening their understanding and identification with their images (Guymon & Packard, 2014).

Moreover, the values conveyed by film characters are also influenced by the audience's aesthetic perceptions. In fact, the narrative genres and character constructions in the film are often designed to resonate with real-life situations in order to fulfill the purpose of educating the public, thereby enhancing emotional understanding through empathetic engagement.

However, both the guidance of different types of film music to the audience's emotional inclination (Hoeckner et al., 2011) and the emotional tension created by film music by shifting within and outside of the plot (Stilwell, 2019) can allow the audience to have different expectations of the characters as a way to enhance their willingness to explore the characterization in depth, thus deepening the aesthetic expectations of the character image. Therefore, film music can stimulate the audience's subconscious emotional resonance and aesthetic expectations of the fate of the characters, making the character image more three-dimensional and vivid. In other words, within the relationship between the public and cinematic narrative media, film music serves as an auditory bridge connecting the audience with the characters. It plays an irreplaceable role in guiding the audience's understanding of character portrayal and deepening their aesthetic perception of the roles.

Based on this, film music can also, to a certain extent, reflect the emotional changes within a character. The atmosphere it creates often resonates with the character's psychological state, allowing the audience to gain a deeper insight into the character's inner transformation. For instance, in *"Let the Bullets Fly"* (2010), directed by Jiang Wen, the main character Zhang Muzhi makes his entrance accompanied by the music piece "The Sun Also Rises" composed by Joe Hisaishi. The prominent use of brass and percussion instruments at the beginning of the music creates a powerful and heroic image of Zhang Muzhi, highlighting his courageous and hopeful nature beneath a radiant exterior. As the plot develops, especially in the scene where the Sixth Brother is framed and killed by Huang Silang, the introduction of strings and piccolo renders the music sorrowful and subdued. The entire scene is enveloped in an atmosphere of despair and grief, subtly revealing the protagonist's tender and nuanced emotional side. In fact, the method of adjusting film music to reflect a character's psychological state and emotional changes (Green, 2010) essentially externalizes inner feelings into perceptible auditory signs through variations in instrumental timbre and musical structure. This allows the audience to intuitively sense the emotional fluctuations of the character as the plot unfolds (Fischer et al., 2021). It indicates that the use of music constructs a form of audio-visual narrative language, enabling the audience to subconsciously resonate with the character. This approach reveals more complex and nuanced psychological transitions and emotional atmospheres, not only enriching the depth of character portrayal but also deepening the emotional connection between the character and the audience. Thus, as Tan et al. (2007) argue, "the film score is such an important part of the film-viewing

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experience that even when attention was directed away from the music, participants reported that it served as an important signal for the film characters' internal states" (p. 147).

Therefore, music plays a crucial role in shaping the characters' images and expressing their psychological changes, which can not only present the characters' external characteristics and establish a clear recognition in the audience's cognition but also portray the characters' psychological activities in depth, which further stimulates the audience's aesthetic expectations for their images. In most cases, film music can be created around the character traits of the core characters, using specific music styles and rhythms to accurately convey the characters' external image and inner world, making the music narrative give the film a higher sense of reality and infectious force. For key characters, film music utilizes the timbre and sound effects of different instruments to allow the audience to perceive the character's unique personality on an auditory level, thereby enriching and diversifying the character's portrayal. In fact, music is no longer merely a component of the audiovisual language; instead, it participates in the film's narrative in a "silent" way, becoming a vital medium for shaping character images and revealing inner emotional changes. In this way, film music helps the audience to understand the inner world of the characters more deeply, leaving a deep impression on them unconsciously, and fulfilling the audience's aesthetic expectation of their horizons. As Ashley and Timmers (2017) argue, this is because "at an individual level, we may have certain expectatiAshley and Timmers (2017)ons concerning emotions evoked by music depending on the way we use and engage with music, but also depending on the way we normally express and experience emotions" (p. 632).

Creating Scene Atmosphere and Enhancing Aesthetic Narrative

In the art of cinema, the rise and fall of musical melodies and the variation in rhythm not only enhance emotional expression but also play an integral role in cinematic narration. Through this, music constructs an emotionally charged auditory language that contributes to both the artistic quality of the narrative and the expressiveness of character portrayal. Whether it is the sense of tension evoked by a rapidly accelerating tempo or the joyous tone created by a light and cheerful rhythm, film music consistently aligns its auditory cues with the plot, thereby forming a distinctive mode of musical expressivity (Wang, 2025). For example, the score of *"Not One Less"* (1999) adopts folk songs from northern Shaanxi as its musical foundation, incorporating traditional Chinese instruments such as the *"suona"* and *"erhu"*. This musical approach creates a score that is both humorous and gentle in its melody, reinforcing the film's narrative themes while also enhancing its emotional realism. It deepens the audience's understanding of the plot and emotional resonance with the characters. In this sense, music can follow the fluctuations of the narrative and variations in melody to elevate

the film's thematic expression, thereby guiding the audience's psychological response (Gorbman, 1980). In fact, the narrative function of film music is closely synchronized with plot shifts; within the deep coupling of narrative logic and visual tone, it forms a highly expressive sonic system—an indispensable component of the film's multidimensional narrative structure. Furthermore, the synergy between film music and visual imagery plays a crucial role in shaping the atmosphere of cinematic scenes.

In different narrative situations, the melody and rhythm of music are often adjusted according to the content of the picture, thus creating a specific atmosphere for the picture (Provenzano, 2008). On the one hand, film music can effectively render an emotional atmosphere, and its style usually matches the emotional tone conveyed by the picture, thus strengthening the atmosphere of the scene (Huili, 2014). As a kind of "silent" symbol, film music has the unique ability to convey emotions, which not only enhances the audience's emotional engagement with the plot but also stimulates their associations with the corresponding atmosphere of the scene, adding richer emotional layers to the visual images (Mariani, 2020). This means that for the public's visual aesthetics, the synchronized writing of picture and sound can provide a rich immersive experience for the audience, and in this way reinforce the emotional expression of the film's narrative. By doing so, cinema can serve the purpose of indoctrinating the values and emotions condensed in the narrative.

However, film music can also, on a macro level, enhance the expressive power of visual effects, thereby increasing the appeal and emotional impact of the imagery (Xu, 2022). It allows audiences to project related emotions and associations onto their understanding of film scenes, which in turn shapes their perception of the overall cinematic atmosphere (Herget, 2019). In fact, this synergy between music and visuals not only intensifies the emotional tone of individual scenes on a micro level but also constructs a panoramic audiovisual experience on a macro level. This deep integration of music and image generates a distinct narrative atmosphere, becoming one of the key elements through which audiences comprehend the story and form aesthetic identification.

By contrast, the synergy between film music and visual imagery not only helps to shape the atmosphere of narrative scenes but also provides audiences with an immersive audiovisual experience. Scholars have noted that when music and visuals are rhythmically and emotionally synchronized, they can guide audiences into a full-bodied engagement with the film's constructed world, thereby facilitating a sense of immersion (Di Stefano, 2023). In this context, viewers are more likely to be absorbed in the complex emotions portrayed by the characters and, in turn, to experience their inner emotional states more authentically. Moreover, the effect of audio-visual coordination plays a critical role in dynamic sequences. For instance, in *"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"* (2000), composer Tan Dun employs

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traditional Chinese instruments such as the *"xiao"* (bamboo flute) in scoring the bamboo forest fight scene. The natural setting of the bamboo forest is inherently poetic and ethereal, and the sound of the xiao harmonizes seamlessly with this environment. As the narrative unfolds, the music adapts to the changing emotional tone of the scene, allowing the audience to experience a mood that is both powerful and lyrical through the combined force of visual and auditory perception. This intensifies the immersive quality brought about by audio-visual integration. This suggests that the close coordination between music and visual imagery in film not only plays a vital role in enhancing the atmospheric qualities of scenes but also significantly deepens the audience's immersive audiovisual experience. The interaction between sound and image transforms cinema into a multisensory art form, capturing audience attention and encouraging a more focused engagement with the narrative, thus enriching their understanding of both story and character, and heightening the overall sense of immersion (Hammond et al., 2023).

Building on this, the variations in melody and rhythm in film music can resonate with the narrative structure, thereby reinforcing the uniqueness and appeal of the story and opening up greater possibilities for diversified aesthetic narration (Ji 2024). This is particularly evident in scenes where the visual presentation lacks clear emotional direction—what might be called emotionally neutral or ambiguous shots. In such moments, music serves as a powerful guide, enabling viewers to interpret the emotional states of characters more deeply. This illustrates the regulatory function of film music in the cognitive processing of visual scenes. Not only does it enrich the layers of cinematic storytelling, but it also encourages audiences to engage in multidimensional aesthetic interpretation based on their own life experiences ((Kuchinke et al., 2013). It is thus evident that the atmosphere created by film music is closely tied to the viewer's aesthetic experience, shaping how audiences understand and evaluate characters and plotlines (Plantinga, 2012). Accordingly, when a film scene lacks a clear emotional orientation, film music can utilize its rhythm and modality to metaphorically guide the development of the narrative, enabling the audience to form their psychological cues. This facilitates a more diverse aesthetic perception and experience. Not only does this enrich the film's narrative expression and endow it with deeper interpretive layers, but it also contributes to the film's commercial success.

In conclusion, film music is an important means used to create the scene atmosphere of the film, which forms different emotional tones through the changes in melodic rhythm, and creates a unique scene atmosphere through the synergy between it and the visual images. This not only deepens the audience's audio-visual experience and immerses them in the world constructed by the film, but also accentuates the diversified aesthetic narrative of the film, especially in specific narrative scenes. Music can regulate the audience's comprehensive

understanding of the character's emotions and emotional communion. Therefore, film music is no longer merely a background accompaniment to visuals, but rather a core component of cinematic narration, playing a vital role in constructing scene atmospheres and enhancing artistic expressiveness. This further affirms the indispensable role of music in the art of cinema, establishing it as a key element in advancing narrative development and emotional expression. The role of film music in atmosphere construction is a profound reflection of this point, as Chion (2019) asserts: "one consequence for cinema is that sound, much more than image, can become an insidious means of affective and semantic manipulation" (p. 39).

Expanding emotional expression and promoting interactive participation

Film music can convey narrative information and cultural connotations through the relationship between "energy" and "reference", thus enriching the artistic expression of the film as a whole. Historically, early film music was influenced by opera and concert music, which provided audiences with emotional guidance and narrative clues in silent films, reinforcing the narrative context through harmonic and instrumental melodic changes (Arroyo García Lascurain, 2016). Similarly, the deep integration of film music and imagery not only plays a crucial role in constructing cinematic narration but also shapes the audience's perception of time, space, and emotional atmosphere, thereby influencing their understanding of characters and plot (Ansani et al., 2022). In fact, as an important component of the overall semiotic system of film, film music expands the expressive dimensions of cinematic narration. In doing so, it provides audiences with a unique and essential pathway to enter the narrative world and cultural context of the film.

However, the cultural significance carried by film music is distinctive, as audiences interpret film music differently based on their cultural tastes and identity (Anderson, 2016). This phenomenon is also well reflected in the field of sociology and cultural studies, where different scholars, from the perspectives of gender, race, and culture, have found that there are significant differences in the way film music is utilized and understood by viewers in different cultural contexts (Stilwell, 2002). In other words, this cultural taste not only reflects the cultural capital and aesthetic preferences that individuals possess but also implies their perceptions of specific cultural images or social groups. As a result, there are differences in different audiences' preferences and evaluations of the same piece of film music, further reflecting the complex relationship between the audience's acceptance process of film music and its cultural connotations. It should be noted that film music is not only the background sound of the screen but also a narrative language that actively "speaks".

In contrast, film music possesses a strong ability to evoke emotions; its specific melodies, rhythms, and lyrics can effectively stimulate the audience's feelings, immersing

them in the atmosphere created by the film and eliciting resonance (Palencia-Lefler, 2020). This kind of emotional arousal constitutes an important part of the infectious force of film art, which not only expands the artistic expression path of the film but also enriches the expression level of film language. Further, the appropriateness between film music and images has a significant impact on the audience's viewing experience (Machulla et al., 2023). When audiences hear a soundtrack that closely matches the film's plot, they often unconsciously immerse themselves in the emotional atmosphere created by the film, thereby enhancing their emotional engagement and forming more positive and favorable emotional evaluations of the protagonist, resulting in a stronger sense of identification (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). The emotional tone of the music needs to be consistent with the overall emotional atmosphere of the film, so that the music not only strengthens the audience's emotional response but also effectively enhances their cognitive engagement with the film, allowing them to focus more on the plot (Costabile & Terman, 2013). This means that when film music successfully evokes emotional resonance in the audience, it often subconsciously guides them into a specific psychological state, thereby deepening their emotional engagement with the plot and strengthening the film's impact on both psychological and aesthetic levels. This shows that film music is not only an auxiliary audio-visual means but also an important medium for shaping the audience's viewing experience and promoting emotional resonance.

Based on this, the close connection between music and film provides a solid foundation for audiences to form an "aesthetic intertextuality" experience during the process of aesthetic reception. When viewers watch a film, the integration of music and imagery forms associative links in the brain, allowing them to attain a unified aesthetic experience. At the same time, certain pieces of music can evoke corresponding visual imagery in the viewer's mind, thus stimulating the desire to revisit the film (Kinder 1984). For instance, the ending song "A Lifetime of Love" (composed by Lowell Lo) in *"A Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella"* (1995) not only symbolizes the romantic entanglement between the protagonists but also conveys a profound reflection on fate's uncertainty and emotional misalignment—demonstrating the emotional resonance between film music and narrative. Similarly, such intertextuality is vividly expressed in *"Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix"* (2016), where the film uses traditional musical modes and expressive media to symbolize the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. Through the repetition of musical motifs and the deepening of emotional expression, the film affirms a dynamic structure of aesthetic intertextual reception. From this perspective, film music possesses a strong capacity to trigger memory and activate associative thinking, laying the foundation for new interpretations and experiences with each viewing. Therefore, when audiences hear music of a similar style in

other contexts, they may also associate it with their original viewing experience, thereby expanding the depth of their understanding and the breadth of their emotional engagement with the work, further demonstrating the ongoing intertextuality generated between the audience and the film (Annesley, 2013).

With the rapid development of the Internet and streaming media platforms, film music has begun to integrate deeply with online platforms, and social media and short video APPs have not only broadened the dissemination path of film music but also provided a brand-new space for interactions between the audience and the creators, which significantly enhances the sense of multi-party participation (Danielsen & Kjus, 2019). In particular, the algorithmic recommendation mechanism of streaming platforms exposes viewers to the content of film clips and soundtracks while also subconsciously shaping the scope of the film's dissemination and the emotional resonance it provokes (Villermet et al., 2021). For example, the film *"Full River Red"* (2023) features a soundtrack that blends Henan opera (Yu opera) with electronic music, which quickly went viral on short video platforms. Users edited the soundtrack in combination with stylized, exaggerated marching movements, transforming the film's original theme of loyalty and righteousness into satirical expressions of contemporary workplace stress or trending social issues. This kind of secondary creation not only extends the intertextuality of the original work but also endows the music with new social meaning, forming a participatory dynamic among "audience–music–streaming platforms." Moreover, such spontaneous user-generated content aligns closely with the promotional logic of online platforms. By using film music to produce short-form videos, audiences are gradually led to discover deeper layers of enjoyment within the film, thus encouraging them to "revisit" and redistribute the film's content in more active and creative ways (Berg, 2006). In this context, film music becomes one of the core elements that trigger audience discussion, imitation, and secondary creation, capable of evoking broader emotional resonance and identification across multiple platform contexts, thereby constructing a multi-party co-created "participatory" aesthetic space. Thus, music, as a medium, not only extends the boundaries of cinematic dissemination but also reshapes the relationship between audiences and film, transforming the soundtrack into a creatively generative force.

In conclusion, film music, through its dual function as both *"signifier"* and *"signified"*, enriches the artistic language of cinema, enhances the audience's emotional expressiveness, and fosters a sense of intertextuality within the process of aesthetic reception. The development of streaming media and virtual interactive platforms has also contributed to the formation of a wider emotional resonance of film music and enhanced the sense of participation of many parties in the "participatory" mode. In most cases, film music is no longer just an accessory element in the film narrative, but becomes a key medium to stimulate

the audience's continuous response and re-creation, guiding the audience to continuously cycle through the aesthetic experience and in-depth reflection, thus breaking the traditional unidirectional acceptance structure. Therefore, film music has become an important element in the construction of emotional resonance and "intertextuality", and an indispensable core component in the process of contemporary film dissemination and acceptance. This is so "this proves to be more of a positive than a negative aspect of music, since it allows viewers to take a more personal approach to films presenting even very foreign concepts" (Green, 2010, p. 91).

Conclusion

Although the use of music in films is not rigidly fixed in the film industry, a relatively mature set of guidelines has gradually formed, which may apply to any type of Chinese film produced after 2015. As many studies have hypothesized, film music plays an important role in plot character and atmosphere creation. It is not a background sound in the film, let alone existing as an adjunct to the picture, but an artistic element with a metaphorical expression function. Through changes in rhythm melody and instrumental timbre, music can effectively promote the evolution of the plot, suggest plot twists and turns at key points, and even foretell the direction of the plot. When the theme melody forms a fixed connection with a specific character scene, the audience will subconsciously complete the understanding of the character and synchronize the rhythm of the emotions. This synergy between sound and image is precisely the fundamental reason why film music demonstrates its unique expressive power in both narrative and aesthetic dimensions, making it an indispensable and important component of the cinematic language system.

Based on this, the results also show that film music, through its "silent" language expression, displays profound infectious power and artistic expression in films. Whether it is to promote the development of the plot or to shape the character image and psychological changes, film music can provide the audience with a more immersive aesthetic experience, thus opening up an independent and deeply integrated narrative channel outside the visual. Moreover, the rise of streaming platforms has provided a broader channel for the dissemination of film music. Audiences are no longer passive recipients of music but actively engage in the reception and creation of films, extending the influence of music beyond the film text itself. Therefore, film music is not only an important carrier of artistic expression, but also a bridge connecting emotion and understanding between creators and audiences, and its comprehensive function and cultural value are expanding.

In this study, contemporary films from different regions of China were selected as research samples to verify the expressive paths and unique functions of film music across

various genres and narrative structures. Although the scope of the research is somewhat limited, the generalizable conclusions drawn hold certain reference values for other unexplored Chinese regional films as well as foreign films. With ongoing technological innovation and changes in the streaming environment, the future interaction between audiences and film music is likely to undergo new transformations, thereby continuously driving profound changes in film dissemination channels and reception mechanisms.

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