

***Red Sorghum*: Image as Narrative Mediator Between Humans and Nature**

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ABSTRACT

In Chang I-mou's *Red Sorghum*, the image of sorghum often initiates narrative through the intertwining of humans and nature. Sorghum in this sense sometimes personified, sometimes witnessing history and becoming history, takes on the primary focus of filmic narration. With detailed discussion of chosen scenes, this paper tries to expound upon its "role" in the film, to reveal the intricate relationship between image and narrative, to examine how it enhances narrative through the aesthetic aspect of metonymy. The paper will also discuss how the film displays double visions of postmodernism tinged with sorghum as an image of contextualized backdrop.

Key words: mediator, cinematography, mise-en-scene, carnival, contiguity, metonymy, scene, stretch.

Titled as *Red Sorghum*, the film already suggests the interrelations between humans and nature. Chang I-mou structures the narrative of this film with the image of sorghum, and through its relation with humans, sorghum plays an important role in the world of human beings. The world interwoven by people and sorghum changes corresponding to the change of time and space. Images in this film reveal diverse characters of sorghum in the narrative. Regarding the image in the frame of a film, V. F. Perkins (1986) in *Film as Film* has this to say:

The subtlety, complexity or intelligence of a picture is not to be found in its given meanings. These qualities may be seen in its organization; they should not be claimed for (nor should naivety, crudity or triviality be charged against) isolated units (p. 118).

Art mediates nature and reality. The mediation bestows people with perceptions to probe beyond the boundary of human knowledge. Although the perception ascertained in a work of art is not the very truth itself, it already opens a possibility of existence and points to a realistic or truthful aspect of life. In *Red Sorghum*, aspects of life are not isolated units; rather, they are often linked to the whole of a dualistic nature and humans. This paper will examine some scenes in details to discuss how sorghum as the emblem of nature helps shape narrative, how humans bear a dialectic relationship with nature, and, above all, how, in a tragic historical event, the common destiny of humans and nature is subtly depicted through images in the frame. Discussion sometimes will dwell upon the mise-en-scene because, as Ma Sen (1989) says, the success of *Red Sorghum* is the success of its filmic language.

The scene of carrying the bride in the sedan in the beginning of the film already hints at the fate of people, closely related with the first appearance of

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sorghum in the film. Through this first encounter between people and sorghum, due to the interruption of the kidnapper, the seeming burlesque of psychological turn from hope to disillusionment shapes and reshapes the fate of people. The procedure, seemingly a comic melodrama, already foreshadows a forthcoming tragedy. Susanne K. Langer (1953) in her *Feeling and Form* points out:

It is commonly assumed that comedy and tragedy have the same fundamental form, but differ in point of view—in the attitude the poet and his interpreters take, and the spectators are invited to take, toward the action.... Drama abstracts from reality the fundamental forms of consciousness: the first reflection of natural activity in sensation, awareness, and expectation, which belongs to all higher creatures and might be called, therefore, the pure sense of life (p. 327).

The combination of comedy and tragedy might probe possibly “the sense of life” because probably both of them are just two sides of the same coin. Very often do the smiles and laughter of *Red Sorghum* mask the sighs and sadness of “everydayness¹” of life.

In the above-mentioned scene, the prank-playing sedan-carriers are silenced when they enter the sorghum field at Ch'ing-sa-k'o. Does the threatening mystery of the sorghum field emit the phantom of legendary story to test human minds? The sound “Freeze!” from the sorghum field seems to substantiate the mystery of the legend, it interrupts the procession of the sedan-carrying, and the bride in the sedan accordingly harbors a fanciful thought for her future. Chiu-erh, the bride, exchanged for a donkey and doomed to be married to a leper, suddenly seems to see the spark of future. The sound, “Freeze,” seems to sound out the turn of fate. The unveiling (by the kidnapper) of her face and her daring look serve as an ironical contrast to the face of the kidnapper, who has to hide behind a mask and the only exposed parts through the three holes of the mask are ridiculously and comically presented in front of the eyes of Chiu-erh. Stepping outside the sedan and giving the sedan-carriers a long look, she demonstrates a more autonomous self. The kidnapper has to conceal his identity, and the sedan-carriers have to be on their knees, while she with determined steps walks into her future. The unhappy interruption of the kidnapper turns out to be a seeming comedy-to-come. But Chiu-erh's fancy is, ironically, short-lived. The kidnapper's attempt is suppressed, and she has to walk back to the inside of the sedan to follow the predestined track of her fate.

In this brief event, the cameras catch the ineluctable mix-up of laughter and sigh in the ironical world of *Red Sorghum*. The men who earlier made fun of the bride with their fancy sedan-carrying style is later made fun of by the look of the bride. The look seems to mock their useless muscular bodies, humiliated to obey the order of the kidnapper. The look also seems to activate their fighting will, but the sudden end of this fighting especially surprises the bride, somehow against her

¹ The conception of “everydayness” is derived from Heidegger's (1962) aesthetically philosophical view of reality. Everydayness surrounds humans as an inevitable context of their existence. Humans are expected to live with it and to interact with it.

own will. The victory of the fight does not bring real joy to the men; in the remainder of the sedan-carrying procession, the men are “frozen” in stark silence. The silence probably suggests their apocalyptic view of their weaker inner self camouflaged under the ostentatious muscularity of their bodies.

In the beginning of the movie, the wild sorghum encounters the characters with the kidnapper lurking inside it and the bride’s mind is fancifully titillated during the process of kidnapping. Her sobs sneaking from the sedan are her helpless lament on her own destiny. Ironically, owing to the kidnapping, she is given the opportunity of freeing herself from the destiny; however, after the episode of the kidnapping, her destiny becomes even more intolerable. Before stepping into the sorghum field, the characters are unable to recognize their own weakness submerged in consciousness. But the sorghum exposes their weakness; it uncovers the characters’ superficiality and incites their undercurrent passion.

The audience and Chiu-erh’s second encounter with the sorghum also culminates in an irony and a mixed-up tragicomedy. On the way, back from her father’s home three days after marriage, with her father’s tender voice calling her name in the distance, a man in a mask again emerges from the sorghum field and takes her away. But this time the kidnapper is the leader of the sedan-carriers the day before. They yield to each other both body and soul. The tall sorghum becomes a barrier barricading the intrusion of others into their private world of passion. The conventionally-conceived illegitimate love seems to be legitimized in the sorghum field, where the libido unrestrainedly finds its full expression. For many critics, the sex act in the sorghum field symbolizes a turning page of Chinese filmic history; the libido supersedes the political ideology to become the focus of filmic interests (Chang, 1989, p. 118; Ma, 1991, p. 125; Hao, 2004, p. 64). The waving gesture of sorghum seems to fan up their passion like the dancing flame of a fire. Chiu-erh’s silent exchange of gazes with the leader of the sedan-carriers and her protruding embroidered shoe outside the sedan the day before become proleptic signs of the present explosion of passion. The fire of passion surges and expands, the sorghum all turns red-tinged yellow, and the bodies bury each other in corporeal consummation.

As Balazs (1970) says, “Our anthropomorphous world-vision makes us see a human physiognomy in every phenomenon” (p. 92), in the above-mentioned scenes, the sorghum reveals various appearances and emanates different connotative meanings. First, it is embroiled with the legend and is inhabited with ghosts and outlaws. The sorghum in this physiognomy accompanies the incident of the kidnapper. The sound “Freeze” for a while is interpreted (by the characters) as a mysterious and terrifying echo from the Unknown. Then, the kidnapper being suppressed and the sedan-carriers leaving, the sorghum dismantles the color of mystery. Its waving gesture in the wind seems to mock the human affairs jestingly. Finally when Chiu-erh and the sedan-carrier make love in the sorghum field, the coupling of sound and image forms a protective wall against the possible intrusion from the outside. The cinematography of a long-shot pictures the sorghum in vast plain, waving sonorously in the gusts; the spot where they make love is flat and round, suggestive of a sacred lot for the sexual act. The sonority exteriorizes the

interior passion of the characters. The sorghum in the wind seems to sing with a primitive yet immaculate rhythm paralleling the overflow of their emotion.

But the sorghum is only a natural object; its human physiognomy actually results from the projection of human consciousness that underlies interpretation. After Chiu-erh emerges from the sorghum field again, her father asks of her whereabouts. At this moment, a song from the sorghum field floats in the air: "Sister! Bravely walk ahead! Walk ahead! Thousands of ways to the heaven..." While her father comments on the absurdity of the song, Chiu-erh turns her head toward the direction of the song, understandingly observing the waving sorghum in the wind. The image—the stalks of waving sorghum, for her, probably like the arms of the lover—is overlapped with the song, and all together refresh the previous moment of ecstasy. Susanne K. Langer (1953) in her discussion of paradox quotes a passage from "Kunst und Gefühl": "The landscape does not express the mood, but the mood surrounds, fills and permeates it, like the light that illumines it, or the odor it exhales; the mood belongs to our total impression of the landscape" (p. 19). To perceive nature as a projected consciousness is to humanize nature. One of the most important characteristics of *Red Sorghum* is the humanization of natural phenomenon.

With its multiple appearances, the sorghum intrudes into the human affairs. The murder of Big Head Li is only briefly mentioned in narrative, and it seems that no one will take the trouble to trace the real cause. For the audience, the leader of sedan-carrier is mostly susceptible, yet the characters in the film seem never to foster any suspicion. The secret seems to be concealed in the sorghum, not to be formulated by such a rough human law that allows one to trade a woman for a donkey. The sorghum grows in the wild, covering up an illegitimate sexual love and implicitly tolerating the murder of Big Head Li by the leader of the Sedan-carriers.

Esther C. M. Yau (1987-88), while discussing the case of the murder in this film, asserts that man's disregard of this case is "a metaphorical display of a folk way of life that enables (ethically-defined) contradictory roles to coexist non-problematically in a vital male body (of the grandfather), as a murderer, lover, entrepreneur, patriot and patriarch" (p. 19). The director, through the sorghum, provides a metaphorically apolitical space where nature's power to regulate people is stronger than a literally inhumane law. The love between youths concords with the "naturalness" of law; therefore, it is protected by nature. Moreover, nature seems to disapprove the "purchase" of a wife by Big Head Li, the leprous owner of the winery. The folkway of life thus is a living gesture harmonized with nature and opposed to a dubious political institution.

But the love authorized in the sorghum field is thwarted when the lovers leave the realm of its protective power. The leader of the sedan-carriers is rejected by Chiu-erh after she takes charge of the winery. The success of his second visit winning himself the position as Chiu-erh's husband is effected partly because of his brave deed to save Chiu-erh from the bandits, and partly because of his urination in the wine. The urination in the wine symbolically establishes a linkage between the present complicated situation and the past factual love-act. Wine is fermented from

the sorghum that once witnessed their secret love. The urination implicitly suggests the transformed ejaculation. The ripple in the wine made by urination probably refreshes the memory in the sorghum field where the ejaculation fulfills the love-act. For the sedan-carrier, to urinate is to give vent to his anger, yet for Chiu-erh, to give vent to anger in urination is metaphorically to give vent to passion in ejaculation. The sorghum is fermented to become wine just as Chiu-erh's memory of the love act procreates love offspring as the sedan-carrier's urination imprints itself in her consciousness.

The death of Big Head Li leads to seven days' sequential clean-up. Big new calligraphic writing, "Good Luck," is pasted on windows. The sorghum wine is used to disinfect the neighborhood; in spraying the sorghum wine, people are immersed in jubilation, dispelling the phantom of the last owner of the winery. Krystyna Pomorska (1984) in the Forward of Bakhtin's (1984) *Rabelais and His World* mentions Bakhtin's conception of carnival: "The carnival. . . the new mode of man's relation to man is elaborated." Pomorska continues to say that "one of the essential aspects of this relation is the 'unmasking' and disclosing of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks" (p. X). Similarly, Chang Hsiao-hung in her discussing *Red Sorghum* observes, also referring to Bakhtin's conception of carnival, that the laughter in folk culture is a means to subvert the social hierarchy in the period of Renaissance. The jubilation in this film upturns a closed world restrained by the traditional logic-oriented system, and opens up a new world where death and life are involved in a reversal (p. 123). The jubilant transformation as an aftermath of a murder again reflects the medley of tragedy and comedy in the living reality of *Red Sorghum*.

Thus the people in a similar atmosphere of carnival bid farewell to the spirit of Big Head Li. Taking charge of the winery, Chiu-erh would like to be addressed as her name, rather than as "boss." The sorghum in this carnival-like festivity disengages the invisible human shackle. Equality replaces the ever-present class difference. Under the supervision of nature, human relation is consolidated just as the sorghum is fermented in the process. The sorghum and people are metaphorically interwoven in the jubilation that ironically commemorates the death of Big Head Li.

The interrelation between people and the sorghum can be further discussed. The spraying of the sorghum wine dispels the disinfected, both humane and physical. The fermentation of the sorghum wine is made possible only by the intrusion of people, yet what people have done is just catalytic. The oozing of wine from its container is not a tribute to human achievement, but rather to the god of wine. Wine is produced through the rhythm that harmonizes people to concord to nature. The sorghum is transformed into wine through people; however, in a sense, it is produced to outlast the catalyst. The wine produced by a leper is not contaminated by leprosy; moreover, it is used to disinfect what might have been contaminated by the leprosy. The mutual independence between people and the sorghum (or nature) gradually becomes the subject of the narrative.

Nature being the context of living, people follow its rhythm to have wine fermented. People's occasional violation of regularity does not necessarily confront

nature and therefore is tolerated. The off-screen narrator's grandfather is the leader of the sedan-carriers. The surprisingly excellent wine resulting from his urination seems to suggest nature as embodied in the wine a carefree human nature. Just as animals often urinate to demarcate their boundary of authority, the sedan-carrier's urination unexpectedly successfully wins him a bride, Chiu-erh, the grandmother of the off-screen narrator. In a sense, nature seems to collaborate with people in their wild carefreeness; the illicit love in the sorghum field and the urination to the fermented sorghum wine are separate episodes and yet are combined to create an artifice co-authored by people and nature. In fact, the phrase "human nature" already connotes a collaboration of humans and nature.

Roman Jakobson (1973) in his discussion of metaphor and metonymy as two poles of language mentions a well-known psychological test. The responses to the word "hut" from children vary from case to case. In one of the responses, Jakobson points out, "metonymical responses to the same stimulus, such as thatch, litter, or poverty, combine and contrast the positional similarity with semantic contiguity" (p. 123). In *Red Sorghum*, people and the sorghum grow in the same space where the expansion of the word "space" implies the shared common fate. In the film, the death of Luo-han is preceded by the description of what has happened to others in the space. The off-screen narrative voice, "The Japanese come as soon as they say they want to come," is dubbed upon a scene where vast field of the sorghum is cut down and uprooted. Another shot of the camera shows someone is flaying a dog. These two scenes are intercut, suggesting that the sorghum and the dog are juxtaposed to face the similar fate in the same space. But the audience does not fully comprehend the real meaning of these intercut scenes in contiguity until the appearance of Luo-han. The flaying of Luo-han and his tortured delayed death are semantically derived from the two preceding scenes in positional similarity in space and in time (sequence) to effect semantic contiguity.

This point can be further elaborated. Cutting crops in harvesting and killing animals are common phenomena on the farm. But the off-screen narrative voices about the Japanese arrival and the stark silence in the space envelopes the scenes with an unsettling aura. In this scene, the sorghum literally serves as the frontier to counter the invasion of Japanese; therefore its "death" foreshadowing the death of people and the skinning of the dog preceding the tortured frayed death of Luo-han. Thus when destroying the sorghum, people actually turn to wound themselves because both the sorghum and people share the similar destiny in this particular time and space. As opposed to the original adopted novel, the actual fraying of Luo-han is not shown on the screen, but the cruel details can be filled in with the transference of the skinned body of the dog in the audience's imagination. The only difference is that while the dog is skinned after death, Luo-han is skinned alive. The uprooted sorghum, the skinned dog, and Luo-han are contiguous both in space and time sequence which thread together their similar destiny. Their positional similarity in space thus touches off their semantic contiguity—all are subject to death. Their death also predicts the possibly forthcoming death of the people in the same space.

The invasion of the Japanese again involves the sorghum in the form of wine in human affairs. People worship Luo-han's spirit with sorghum wine, drinking the wine and singing a song of homage to the god of wine. Yingjin Zhang regards the wine as the unifying force in this film. He also perspicaciously refers the god of wine to Nietzsche's (1971) Dionysus. He quotes Nietzsche as follows:

not only does the bond between man and man come to be forged once more by magic of the Dionysian rite, but nature itself, long alienated or subjugated, rises again to celebrate the reconciliation with her prodigal son, man. (p. 637)

The song to honor the god of wine appears twice in this film. The first time is the success of their new wine, and at that time it was Luo-han who discovered that the wine mixed with the sedan-carrier's urine became a happy surprise. The successful wine epitomizes the combined effort of human spirit; the uniform action of singing and drinking bespeaks the collective force, all the people in the winery being in one. The death of Luo-han is an amputation of the whole, and the homage to the god of wine is not only a dedication to appease his spirit but also a remembrance of the past when he discovered the secret formula of the famous sorghum wine.

Despite the rough and shallow content of the singing², the song unifies joint strength. The red wine flowing from the container embodies humans' consciousness and the reincarnation of Luo-han's living force. The camera-shooting delineates people's perseverance against the darkness of the night; and with flames surging, what men gulp down is the same human spirit which both the living and the dead share.

The depiction of this scene deserves scrutiny. The inflamed faces enhance the resounding song, implying their high spirits to face a determined future they have to confront. But the director ends this scene with an extremely long shot in which the flames of fire and the features of people's faces are blurred and minimized, engulfed in the nearby darkness. The decreasing intensity of the song implies that an invisible worry has already sneaked into the surface perseverance, subjecting the future to uncertainty. The mise-en-scene of the silent yet overpowering darkness already foreshadows a difficult future. The camera shot seems to expose a leak, or a blank, or a disjuncture, which reveals a sub-narrative to upset the stream of major narrative. Chang I-mou in this way pictures his film with a tinge of postmodern self-conflicting duality, which for the critic Wang I-chuan (1994) bespeaks the acclaim his movies have received in the western world (p. 68). In this particular scene of *Red Sorghum* through the camera seems to suggest that the fire eventually will be extinguished just as the wine in the following action will burn out and the human affair will end in darkness. The camera fades out, and the consciousness of the audience will linger for a while in that insurmountable darkness.

² Zhang Jia-xuan (1989) in discussing *Red Sorghum*, points out that the rough and somewhat vulgar wording of the wine song expresses an immature idealism, handed from Chinese cultural convention. The death of the villagers under the gun-fire of modern weapons hints at the consequential corollary of this "ancient" culture. See his "Red Sorghum," p. 41.

Thus, the wine and people are entangled along the movement of narrative. The sorghum wine is projected with human spirit to join the action for revenge. The wine stimulates human spirit, and yet it is human spirit itself in this sense, not relegated to simply an offering for ritual rite.

The revenge for the tortured death of Luo-han culminates in this involvement of people and the sorghum wine, the transformed existence of nature. People's set-up of the battlefield in the sorghum field are intercut with Chiu-erh's preparation of dishes, implying an impending battle and a foreseeable eating rite after the battle. Like the singing and drinking scenes mentioned above, the action of revenge through the camera has already been cast under the shadow of failure. Men's high-sounding song ends with a still picture of bowls of dishes and wine. The counterpoise of sound and silence strikes out sparks of dramatic dynamism. Irony is that silence emits a cryptic message of uncertainty for the characters; while for the audience it already transmits a sign of doomed certainty, overshadowed by death, the death for both people and the sorghum.

The revenge action will be discussed in detail for further understanding of people and nature intertwined in narrative through the director's flair for camera shooting.

First, the wine leaves the set-table and actively participates in the revenge action. It is no more a still object; rather it becomes the focus of action and thus is one of the primary subjects during this process. The wine-containers are carried to the sorghum field for the set-up of the forthcoming battle, functioning as explosives to destroy the enemy. Thus wine usually as a consumed product for hilarity is changed to serve as a kind of dynamite. Change in both people and nature seems to pervade the film. The leader of the bandits changes to become an anti-Japanese hero and then is tortured to death together with Lou-han. The wild sorghum is humble and coarse-grained, yet now in the revenge action, it seems to proclaim its serenity. Moreover, wine usually leads people to a state of intoxication, with will and perseverance emptied, but now it turns to spur their will for action. Change is a corollary of dialectic.

Second, the battle with the Japanese army also substantiates the mysticism of nature. The battle is a ritual through which humans and nature come to mystic symbiosis, echoing the event when "my grandpa" asks Tou-kuan, the off-screen narrator's father, to urinate in the wine for a mystic blessing from the Unknown. Tou-kuan's urination of course also echoes his father's urination that mysteriously made excellent wine in consequence. To bury the urinated wine underground also seems to materialize the spell that the sedan-carrier earlier cast upon Chiu-erh and now is handed down to Tou-kuan. Urination as a primitive ritual seems to raise a call for the helping hand from the mystic power.

Third, for their single-minded motive for revenge, people's desire to battle with the Japanese is aroused simply because they intend to punish those who torture their winery partner, Lou-han. The people in the wilderness only stick to a very simple principle that human nature is not to be violated. The "army" they form does not carry any banner of patriotism or nationalism just as Yingjin Zhang (1990) says, "the depoliticized narration of *Red Sorghum* results in a complete absence of

class distinctions and political consciousness (for example, self-conscious patriotism) in the film” (p. 45). The “purity” of their revenge motive enables the film to walk out of the shadow of propaganda that often brands such type of film in both Chinas in the age of its production.

Fourth, above all, the battle scene is worth detailed discussion because it powerfully depicts aesthetics of tragedy and brings the entangled dialectic between nature and people to a culmination. Gerard Genette (1980) in his *Narrative Discourse* points out that there are four ways of presenting duration in narrative—pause, scene, summary and ellipsis. With regard to scene, he says, the “action is almost completely obliterated in favor of psychological and social characterization” (p. 111). The battle with the Japanese army at the end of the film is the climax narrated with scene. The director depicts the climax with little realistic detail, the sequence of the battle often detaches from the action as mainly the visions of psychological projections. Through double narratives, the narrative of the off-screen narrator and the visionary psychological narrative of Tou-kuan, the narrator’s father, the film consummates in the artistic interplay of images and reality.

The battle breaks out at the moment when Tou-kuan runs to the sorghum field calling, “Mother, mother.” Chiu-erh carries the wine and dishes to the field to meet the hunger of the men who have long stayed in the field ready for action. She answers Tou-kuan’s calling with a smile. Yet the calling of “mother” changes drastically from the childlike jovial tone to a tense nervous yell that simultaneously accompanies the shooting of the Japanese machine gun. In Tou-kuan’s consciousness, the bullets aim at his mother, rather than at the men in the sorghum field. The death of Tou-kuan’s mother occupies the focus of his consciousness and therefore becomes the locus of his visionary narrative.

The initial gun-shooting and the sequential falling of Tou-kuan’s mother echo Balazs’s “scene in ‘ritardando,’ shot in N accelerando.” Time in this scene is almost frozen, and the subsequent shots respectively reveal the consciousness of the narrator. Various spaces in the synchronic narrative, “by using the time-honored device of ritardando at the moment of the climax” (p. 130) are to be re-formed in accordance with the fluid consciousness. The double narrative strings the battle scenes, and the following camera shots are intercut: the running Tou-kuan, the men’s attack in the sorghum relentlessly impeded, the shrieking suo-na (嗩呐) in the wedding procession, the running Tou-kuan, Chiu-erh’s being gun-shot and her shouldering pole slipping, the widely splashed sorghum wine from the cracked containers, Chiu-erh’s falling down, the running Tou-kuan, the men rushing to the Japanese jeep with wine-made bombs, and a thundering boom of explosion to end the battle sequence.

The camera shooting of Tou-kuan’s running appears three times, weaving various actions in the battle. Except for the shot depicting the failure of the wine-made bomb, Tou-kuan’s running is presented in slow motion. Close to the almost frozen scene, these shots structure the spatiality of the scene; moreover, these shots also assert their being in the extension of time. The running Tou-kuan in slow motion actually reveals a consciousness that triggers the memory of the past.

Thus while Tou-kuan's running is presented as a present simultaneously coexistent with the battle, it is actually a past narrated in the off-screen's narrative. The camera shooting of the recurrent movement—Tou-kuan's running—implies a consciousness that cannot erase the image of his machine-gunned mother. The running is the linking axis from which the battle is evolved; the running itself is also a recurrent image, smacking of the nightmare of the battle. The recurrence of the image stamps a mark of the injured past in the memory.

In this last scene of the battle with the Japanese, Tou-kuan's mother's being gun-shot and falling down appear twice, taking the central position of his consciousness of narrative and memory. His mother is shot, and interlarded by other narratives in various spaces, bends her body, and with the splashed wine on the ground she falls backward. Seymour Chatman (1980), while discussing Genette's scene, adds a stretch to the camera narrative, emphasizing its longer narrative time than the story time. The reappearance of his mother's being gunshot expands the profile of time and implies that consciousness dominates narrative. The locus in consciousness is broadened in narrative and in turn enriches the narrative.

The expanded narrative time overpowers the real time, thus renders the latter to various ways of narrative. The accompanying music comes mainly from the shrieking tone of suo-na, whose first startling sound, correlated with a ball of red fire in the sorghum field, momentarily draws the audience into an illusion of hilarious ceremony. The leaping flame seems to suggest the virility of the sorghum; time slowly explicates the obscure pictures; the moving fire reveals the profile of people. People with the ignited wine-made dynamite fade out, the high-sounding music and rich color freezing the consciousness of the audience and thinning the trace of the battle. This is assuredly the perception of the narrator. The hazard moment of life is presented as a solemn and colorful ceremony through narrative. The expanded "step" of time bestows a certain dignity to the hastening movement. The death scene is defamiliarized as a scene of aesthetic beauty mixed with a tinge of sadness.

In this ritualized battle, the red color dominantly contextualizes the narrative. The sorghum wine is red. Because of its being identified with people through narrative, the splash of the wine strongly suggests the death of people. Similarly, its burning flame emits power, paralleling the power of people in desperate fighting. The burning results in the red flame of the sorghum wine. The sea of the red fire touched off by the wine-made bombs swallows the exploded Japanese jeep. Red is a color of virility, taking on life to the full before it fades out into darkness. Life, compared to flame, fulfills itself in burning consumption. The battle thus becomes a ritual through which people and sorghum merge into each other. The red color records the trace of life and then darkens in the tragic event prescribed in time. However, though the sound/color fades and blacks out in time, it endures in the mental time of human consciousness. Those who survive face the sorghum field in the wind, the sound reverberating in consciousness to recall faces. The song which long time ago allured Chiu-erh to walk ahead for her own destiny now drifts in the air and echoes in the same space--the sorghum field. But of course time changes and the sorghum field cannot remain completely the same. Time and space are

always interacting.

As stated above, the sorghum and people are finally entangled as one. The off-screen narrator, the grandson of the sedan-carrier and Chiu-erh, according to his narrative, returns to the old place, and he says, "The bridge at Ch'ing-sa-k'o is still there, but the sorghum is gone. . . To mention this, someone believes, but someone doesn't." The sorghum field vanishes after that battle. It is transformed into wine to spread the ground of battle, and it joins people to enter history. The sorghum, like the people killed in the battle, becomes part of the narrative. Its extinction actually bespeaks its marked existence. Likewise the life of the rough, rural people is sublimated through their death in the battle! Through this event, both sorghum and people are exempted from the torrent of time and become the main stream of people's narrative to become a legend that someone believes and someone else doesn't.

The color of legend characterizes the ending of film to the greatest degree when the sun eclipses. Through the eclipse, the demarcation line of life and death seems to be breached, and the alive come to sense the existence of the dead. The sun slowly disappears, leaving an eerie atmosphere behind on the living earth, and the air reverberates with Tou-kuan's calling "Mother." The sun appears as the center around which humans and nature revolve. Its sudden disappearance, the disorder of nature, reflects the state of human affairs. The disappearing sun with its bloody color on the earth nourishes a phenomenal context for Tou-kuan's memory of his mother.

Tou-kuan's words, "Mother, mother, southbound; the road is wide, the precious ship is lengthy. Mother, mother, southbound; the horse is shiny; the traveling money is in plenty"³ are dubbed on the red color of the earth and the sun. Death as the passage to a future life in heaven parallels a stepping into a new phase of life on earth. The sun merges into the Unknown, yet it seems to show its face to have a dialogue with Tou-kuan. For Tou-kuan, the tremendous change of natural phenomena is probably an inviting gesture to escort her mother's trip to heaven.

Actually, the sun eclipse fortuitously follows Tou-kuan's mother's death, and therefore Tou-kuan visualizes that the startling death of her mother causes tremendous change both in people and nature. Facing the sun in eclipse on the borderline between heaven and earth, in Tou-kuan's consciousness, he no more deems his mother as a frozen body on the ground. For him, his mother with plenty of money on a shiny horse is on her trip to heaven. The physical encounter between his mother and his father precedes Tou-kuan's birth and is probably unknown to him. Yet it captures the audience's consciousness since the start; thus Tou-kuan's calling words also recalls the audience's memory. A scene thus again weaves multiple consciousnesses and narrative. The overlapping of the past and the present intensifies the dramatic force and renders this particular moment into a sadness tinged with seemingly incongruous festivity. The sun and the earth and the lowering sorghum in the wind also seem to respond to Tou-kuan's calling. Nature again reveals its mystic attribute, and the death of Tou-kuan's mother seems to be

³ This is my tentative translation.

embodied in that mysticism.

Nature mercifully embraces people's unsettled consciousness, yet the off-screen narrator slowly reveals: "Since looking at the sun that day, my father [Tou-kuan] has had eye disease. Everything looks red to him." Experiences in reality are colored to become sedimented consciousness. The blood from Tou-kuan's mother has dyed the perceived objects and the whole earth. The sun eclipse effecting the change of the color of the living ground actually extends the projection of human consciousness. The coloration of perception is a durable extension of memory that underlies all human affairs thereafter.

The film also ends in the torrential wave of the red-colored sorghum with subsequent drumbeats to capture the audience, perhaps for a memory. Again this combination of sound and vision exudes Chang I-mou's salient verve as a director. With this drumbeat sound blended with the vision, the film sorts out an aesthetic "silence" with panache--a silence which keeps the audience at this moment to recall the preceding scenes synchronically, the harmony between people and nature, the invasion of the extraneous violence to upset that harmony, and the co-existence of people and the wildly waving sorghum in the wind to witness the dead and the future death of the alive. Moreover, after the movie, the audience will probably fall into a long duration of silence.

Christian Metz (1974) says, "Reality does not tell stories, but memory, because it is an account, is entirely imaginative"(p. 23). Reality is reconstructed by narrative. The characters in this film, the grandfather and the grandmother, Luo-han and the off-screen narrator, are spread in different spaces. They are strung together through Tou-kuan's memory of these events, with admitted omission of particular details because most of these events precede his days. Then Tou-kuan's memory is retold to the off-screen narrator, the story imaginatively buttressed, and the plot supplemented. The past history of the narrator's grandfather and grandmother has become hearsays, taking on certain legendary coloration. The passing of people and the extinction of the sorghum field preclude the possibility of "eye-witnesses." The validity of the story is grounded in narrative through a consciousness that strongly believes in its authenticity. Narrative thus wields a double-edged weapon; while it tries to convince the audience with certain validity, the narrator consciously realizes that the narrative is open for doubt and interpretation. Narrative is a projection of consciousness because, as Metz says, reality in memory "is entirely imaginative." Consciousness is the subject of narrative.

Consciousness interacts with nature through images. Images like sorghum and the color of the sky and the earth therefore become the subjects of narrative. Metz (1974) also says, "A narrative is not a sequence of closed events, but a closed sequence of events" (p. 24). The narrator personifies the natural objects and consequentially the objects seem to be bestowed with consciousness. The objectivity of events in sequence mediated through narrative is "framed," structured and subjectified. Thus in the interpretation of consciousness, the sky and the earth are replete with feeling, forming parts of the meaning of artistic creation. Jonas Mekas (1977) says, "The basis of all creation is the restructuring of reality. Restructured reality becomes different depending on which art you use . . .

Something can grab you even if you are not ready--certain colors, certain surface things that stand out" (p. 193). In the color and light of this film, nature and humans merge into images and are restructured in the narrative. What the audience or viewer sees is not an undisputedly "authentic" event; rather he is ensconced in the authenticity of narrative. However, the "authentic" narrative provides a simulacrum⁴ that fortunately brings the audience closer to the events and enhances his belief in their factuality. To be moved is to be grounded in the authentic narrative of the event, whether it's being imaginative or realistic. With Chang I-mou's convincing narrative through camera, the intersubjectivity of multiple consciousnesses, that is, the consciousness of characters, of nature, of the narrator, of the director and the audience is concretized. The audience's consciousness is riveted in the image of the waving red-colored sorghum at the end of the film. Through this image, the audience transcends the fixed space and time and merges into the consciousness of the characters and the narrator in silence.⁵

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⁴ To understand "simulacrum," see Roland Barthes's (1989) interpretation of "The Structuralist Activity." (p. 171).

⁵ For the concept of the aesthetics of silence, see Susan Sontag's "The Aesthetics of Silence," and Chien Cheng-chen's "Silence and Language" in his *Language and the Space of Literature*, Chapter II.

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