

Using Reality to Build a Distinctive Sound Style of Western Movies: On the Sound Design of True Grit

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Abstract: As the essence of American films, western movies have complete and classical sound design schemes. Some routines are formed inevitably. The film *True Grit* was directed by Coen Brothers in 2010. It contradicts the conventional design of Western movies in many ways, showing distinct features from the character design, plot development to the arrangement of ending. In terms of sound design, the film is based on reality and constructs a distinctive style of sound in Western movies.

1. Introduction

The 2010 film *True Grit* is adapted from a novel of the same name written by Charles Portis. The story was set in the western United States in the 1870s. In the book, a 14-year-old girl, Mattie, came to a foreign town and hired the bailiff Rooster Cogburn to help her hunt down the murderer who killed her father and fled to the territory of unfriendly Indians. In 1969, John Wayne, the most influential western cowboy star of the twentieth century, produced a film based on this book and won the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for his performance in it. Though shared the same title, the movie directed by Coen brothers is not a remake of John Wayne's film. It is a creative adaptation based on directors' aesthetic understanding and their loyalty to the spirit embodied in the original work.

Traditional American western movies have typical routines. Typical visual symbols include sunset, yellow sand and cowboy sharpshooters. In violent conflicts, directors often use a deified way to show cowboys' heroism and law enforcement officers' courage in getting rid of the cruel and pacifying the good people. They move cameras to show the motion effects brought by galloping horses, and create the atmosphere of cowboy movies through the sound of whistles, guitars, pianos, fierce fighting and gunshots. Such audio-visual effects make audiences feel delighted while watching movies, and meet their needs of releasing emotions in movies. The formation of this audio-visual style is closely related to the trend of deification in western movies. These deified western movies are not true portrayals of history, but ideal moral codes reflecting the national character and spiritual inclination of Americans. In this film directed by Coen Brothers, however, the Western world is not manifested in a deified way. Almost no classical elements in the audio-visual language of American western movies appear in this film. The movie does not deliberately exaggerate the atmosphere, but uses plain language to show the most real human power. In addition, the role settings in this film are also "anti-western". Handsome cowboys and beautiful women in traditional western movies are replaced by a one-eyed drunkard in 50s and a strong girl who was only 14 years old. In this seemingly insipid narration, the audience can gradually find the firmness and justice in human nature, understand characters' fearlessness out of their strong belief, and appreciate the warmth of mutual trust between people. The film presents a rare reality and delicacy in Western movies, which make it worth pondering. The so-called true grit refers to the heroine Mattie. This 14-year-old girl has the calmness and courage over her peers. The formation of her character is actually related to the American spirit once real. As David Herbert Lawrence described, "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer".

This film unfolds the whole story with Mattie's memorial monologue. Seemingly concise and plain, Mattie's narration is actually firm and decisive, thus laying the keynote of the whole story.

Guided by this keynote, the film follows the principle of plainness in many aspects including lens using, film editing and sound design. No sound in this film is treated exaggeratedly. The language, sound and music are in line with the simple and unadorned style. Under that situation, audiences can pay more attention to characters. The reality and credibility build a distinctive sound style in Western movies. This is a quiet western movie, which is more complex and more challenging in production. Traditional Western movies have modeled sound effects; a special sound library was even built for these films. This paper discusses sound design in *True Grit* in detail, and analyzes the innovation of this sound style in western movies from three aspects: voice, sound and music.

The sound designer of this film is Skip Lievsay who has worked with Coen brothers for many years. Their first cooperation was *Blood Simple* in 1984. When he created sound for this movie, Lievsay did not refer to the 1969 film, but first read the original novel to determine the sound style of this film. He also said that John Wayne's version was actually different from the original work.

2. Voice Design

The voice design is a main way to portray characters in movies. All sounds emitted by actors through their throats belong to the category of human voices. In films, characters' voices can appear in dialogue, narration and monologue. Meanwhile, the tone and intonation of speech, as well as the sound of breathing, can also convey information on characters' moods and states. The timbre, pitch, rhythm and intensity of human voice are conducive to shaping characters and forming sound images. The combination of sound images and visual images can build round characters effectively.

Mattie, the heroine of this film, is different from ordinary girls for her fortitude and courage. Therefore, directors made a lot of efforts in designing her voice. Firstly, the pronunciation of Mattie is designed as short and powerful, which reflects Mattie's firm belief. From the angle of casting, directors' requirement for the actress is "simple but tough, as tough as nails." The Coen brothers set up a website in December 2009 in Texas to search for the actress playing Mattie. From the establishing of the website to the beginning of filming, they received 15,000 audition applications. In the end they picked Hailee Steinfeld to play the part of Mattie. Coen brothers are confident about this new actress who has little acting experience. Ethan Coen said, "I'm very satisfied with Hailee Steinfeld. She makes me feel good. Her temperament and appearance fit well with our expectation and imagination of Mattie Ross. And she's very good at reading lines. The historical background of this novel is far away from us; there are many words and expressions that modern people may not be able to read out fluently. However, it is not difficult for Steinfeld to say them aloud. She has this ability of speaking lines and performing."^[1] The film directed by Coen Brothers is more faithful to the original work; many lines are directly derived from the novel. From interviews with Hailee Steinfeld, we can see that the actress is an independent and decisive girl who tends to speak fast, which is in line with the character in this play. But in the performance, Hailee's tone becomes shorter and stronger to match Mattie's tough and courageous personality.

Secondly, Mattie is designed to have fast speed of speaking. Her language is concise and direct with clear logic, showing her agility of thinking and decisiveness of action.

Thirdly, Mattie's intonation also expresses her personality. Although Mattie is in danger for many times, her voice remains in consistent tone and volume, showing the calmness and courage beyond her age. Mattie's concise, fast and plain way of speaking runs through the story from a 14-year-old girl in memory to the middle-aged and old aged character. The design of this intonation plays an important role in characterization and embodies Mattie's values. As Mattie said in her monologue at the beginning of the film, "There is nothing free". Twenty-five years later, Mattie, an old one-armed woman, remains as calm and peaceful as she was when she was 14. She killed the murderer, and paid the high price for her life. Mattie's voice is quite different from the voices of heroes and women in classic western movies.

3. Sound Effect Design

The most noteworthy aspect of sound effect design in this film is the design of background

sound. Most scenes in this film are composed of barbaric Indian Territory in gloomy tones. The scenes are comparatively similar. The author believes that directors deliberately weaken the environmental elements in pictures, thus focusing audiences' attention on characters' lines and actions. This requires the sound team to carefully weigh and consider diversified environmental sounds, in order to create different spatial information and better express the harsh environment. In this film, various sounds of wind, snow, rivers, insects, birds and beasts are employed. Characters are put into these dramatic sound fields, which highlight the harsh environment and rough tasks shouldered by the roles. Their fearless spirit is vividly reflected under that situation. Coen brothers attach great importance to environmental sound. As Lievsay said, "Joel and Ethan also like to have backgrounds, so he will make appropriate backgrounds for all the scenes in the movie."^[1] The Sound designer and FX re-recording mixer Berkey says that the backgrounds were a particularly challenging component of the overall sound design, as so much of the film takes place outdoors; the film was shot mostly in the high country of New Mexico and in Texas. "Joel and Ethan love a full ambient track, which is nice," he says. "They want you to be immersed in the atmosphere of wherever you are."^[2]

Among these environmental sounds, the author holds that the most expressive element is the sound of wind which shows the bad natural environment. As a special sound effect, it is used for many times in this film. The sound of wind is linked with plights faced by main characters. It lays the keystone of the whole film combined with music and pictures.

Firstly, the whole story begins and ends in the sound of wind. In the beginning of the movie, directors use the sound of wind to replace the opening music for films produced by their company. The sound of fierce winds, as a single sound element, impresses audiences at the opening of this film. Audiences are drawn into the specific environment of the movie; the basic scene of a Western movie is established. Subsequently, when displaying opening credits, the sound pattern is composed of the sound of wind, background music and the voice-over narration of Mattie. The end of the film is the same as the beginning. The narration of the heroin's voiceover brings the whole story to an end. In the last scene of this film, Mattie worshipped Rooster and left. Directors deliberately arrange the sound of wind to accompany the theme song played by piano. The film ends, echoing its titles. Working primarily from his own extensive library of winds, Berkey "spent a lot of time going through and making sure that they're all interesting winds and fit together from scene to scene. In some cases, you want to have a progression of different types of winds that go from a warm, blustery thing to a very different kind of environment-in this case, [the main characters] are heading up into the mountains and it becomes colder and colder, so you want to be able to communicate that somewhat through the winds."^[2]

Secondly, directors deliberately arrange the sound of wind in many key plots, and endow the element with meanings. When Mattie tells the story of his father's death, the scene is accompanied by the sound of snow and wind. This combination creates the miserable atmosphere: a man died in a strange land on a winter night. Then the girl is forced to share the bed with an old woman, who has the same landlord with Mattie's father. The woman grabbed the quilt at night; Mattie has to endure the severe cold and her thunderous snores. The quilt is also taken away by the old woman. In this scenario, the sound of wind appears again. On one hand, the harsh wind shows that the girl has to endure the cold because she can't cover the quilt. On the other hand, it creates the first trouble that the girl faces when she stays alone in a foreign place to deal with matters after her father's death. In the scene which the little girl spends the first night in the field with two bailiffs, a lot of sound of winds dubs in, foreshadowing the beginning of a hard journey. Many of the key parts of the story, such as the scare of seeing a dead body on the road, the encounter with an Indian dentist dressed as a black bear to buy dead bodies, the encounter with a fugitive gang led by Ned, and the eventual killing of members of the Ned gang, are all accompanied by the sound of wind, highlighting the dangerous environment and difficult situation. The sound of wind alludes to all kinds of dangers and troubles around Mattie, such as vicious thugs, dead bodies, gunfights and the cold environment. But Mattie, the girl with courage and determination, is not frustrated by them. In the scene where Mattie falls into the cave after killing the murderer, the sound of wind appears again. Audiences can

realize that danger will come again from the meaning of that sound. Sure enough, there is a viper in the cave, and Mattie cannot escape from danger this time. She is bitten by the snake. In the series of scenes in which Rooster and Mattie ride horses to seek medical treatment, the sound designer Berkey adds a series of sounds of wind, indicating the difficulty and distance of the journey. Thus it can be seen, the sound of wind runs throughout the film like the theme music, and appears repeatedly in key scenes. The wind sometimes exists as an objective sound, sometimes appears in advance when the protagonist is about to be in danger, and sometimes runs through the whole paragraph to create the atmosphere. In the film, the sound of wind occurs multiple times (as high as thirteen times) and creates the basic tone of sound, showing the harsh environment and outlining every trouble Mattie met. The sound of wind contrasts the extraordinary heroism showed by a 14-year-old girl, which is also the spirit of the American nation. By the time the sound of wind appears again at the end of the film, audiences' understanding of the sound is no longer limited to wind in the natural environment. They can understand its implication as well as the connection between wind and the fate of the protagonist. The wind runs through the whole film and conveys unique meaning. It influences the sound style of this movie and help audiences to immerse themselves in the story. Working primarily from his own extensive library of winds, Berkey "spent a lot of time going through and making sure that they're all interesting winds and fit together from scene to scene. In some cases, you want to have a progression of different types of winds that go from a warm, blustery thing to a very different kind of environment-in this case, [the main characters] are heading up into the mountains and it becomes colder and colder, so you want to be able to communicate that somewhat through the winds."^[2]

4. Music Design

In classic western films, the purposes of music are quite clear. The music can arouse audiences' enthusiasm, create the solemn atmosphere, and build the powerful and legendary image of heroes. However, the music in this film abandons these traditions and does not deliberately exaggerate the heroic spirit. Instead, it objectively and flatly shows Mattie's perseverance. Meanwhile, directors also use music to soothe her. The composer of this movie is Carter Burwell, who has worked with the Coen brothers in several films. When the Coen brothers communicated with Carter about the idea of using the church music of the 19th century, Carter understood their intention. "Something that was severe (sounding). It couldn't be soothing or uplifting, and at the same time it couldn't be outwardly depressing. I spent the summer going through hymn books," Burwell said.^[3] He described the music creation process as follows. "The 1888 hymn *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms* is used as Mattie Ross's theme, and about a quarter of the score is based on it."^[3] He developed the hymn melody into the theme music. The song is especially in line with the musical image of Mattie: tough, firm and brave. The theme melody is presented in a simple and plain way. The repetitive music in the middle part conforms to Mattie's firm and earnest image; the piano performance accords with her plain appearance. At first, audiences may feel that the music is too plain and meaningless, but the repetition of the music helps them to appreciate the power of human nature and the charm of characters in real simplicity. This is quite different from many films in which the theme music is rendered with orchestral music, which helps audiences step into the context quickly. When talking about the idea of creation, Carter said, "In a moment where in many other films, perhaps, you would want music that suggested urgency or suggested action. We go exactly the opposite direction and play that solo piano, *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*. ... We want you to pause and think about where she is and the experience she's having."^[4] Therefore, the music refuses to guide audiences, but offers them the space for pondering. When the story moves forward, the image of Mattie is gradually established. The simple theme music appears in key plots for many times, which helps audiences to connect the auditory image with the protagonist. Finally audiences can integrate the musical image, the visual image and the personality traits of the protagonist as a whole, and ponder over the story.

The theme song of this film, *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*, is a hymn written in 1888. Anthony J. Showalter, the composer and lyricist of this movie, gains inspiration from a sentence in

Chapter 33 of the Old Testament: “the eternal God is the thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27).^[5] Mattie chooses to revenge and pay the price for losing one arm. At the end of the film, accompanied by the picture of Mattie’s back with only one arm, the hymn is sung by Iris Dement with her high-pitched voice and touches audiences deeply. Mattie endures all her life for this choice. In the end, she clings to the God’s eternal arms for the rest of her life and finds the peace and comfort for her soul. This echoes her voice-over at the beginning of the film: “there is nothing free, except the Grace of God.”

In traditional western movies, the evil must be eliminated, and the people must be protected; a good man is doomed to be a hero. This film shows a trace of warmth of human nature in its calmness. The imperfect ending is also anti-routine. Everything comes to an end quietly in regret. The film begins with snowstorms and ends with them; it calmly tells a legendary story in the past according to the reality.

5. Conclusion

The charm of films comes from real affections. Only true feelings can root deeply in people’s hearts. In this Western movie, Coen brothers deviated from the traditional routine and strove to be true. The principle of showing reality runs through the whole film in terms of pictures, languages, sound effects and the accompaniment of music. The American spirit embodied in Western movies becomes real in this movie. For justice, freedom and faith, the main characters go forward fearlessly, regardless of high prices they need to pay. It is worth mentioning that at the end of the film, Rooster Cogburn in the old version bid farewell to Mattie like a hero, while Coen brothers deliberately arranged the unsuccessful reunion of Mattie and Rooster. The regretful ending makes the film even more meaningful and thought-provoking. The warmth of mutual dependence among people can thus linger on audiences’ mind for a long time.

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