

Dislocation Reference Gaze: The Cinematic Language Enigma and Ontological Philosophy of *Resurrection*

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Abstract: In an era marked by the upheaval of digital media and the persistent discourse of the “end of cinema,” Bi Gan’s new work, *Resurrection*, responds to the concerns of the times through a meta-cinematic, self-reflexive perspective, using its imagery to pose a profound inquiry into the very essence of cinema. The film relies on a mechanism of encoding and decoding structured like “enigma/solution,” weaving a system of cinematic language puzzles that combines narrative tension with philosophical depth through three dimensions: the suturing of memory via historical dislocation, the aesthetic reference of cinematic language signs, and the bidirectional construction of identity through the gaze. By intertwining and dialectically engaging narrative, symbolic, and ontological puzzles, the film transforms enigma into cinema’s very mode of existence, offering a poetic response to the question of cinema’s survival in the digital age. In the active decoding by the audience and the mutual verification of sensory subjectivity, the film reconstructs the power dynamics of looking, simultaneously rewriting film ontology for the contemporary era and reaffirming human life’s subjectivity through the interrogation and return of the gaze.

Keywords: *Resurrection*; Meta-cinema; Film Ontology; Puzzle Narrative; Bi Gan

1. Introduction

Amidst the ongoing iteration of digital media and the relentless impact of AI technology on the traditional industrial foundations and ontological boundaries of cinema, the refrain “cinema is dead” resonates repeatedly within the digital deluge. Confronted with this epochal challenge to cinema, director Bi Gan, grounded in a cultural self-awareness among filmmakers, once again rehearses the poetics of dreams and memory within the “screen-mirror.” Through *Resurrection*, he responds to these contemporary

concerns, presenting the audience with an interplay of “cinophilia” and “enigma.” The film outlines a “wild age” where humanity achieves immortality, yet the cost of this immortality is the loss of the ability to dream, and those who secretly dream are branded “Soul-Enchanters.” Dramatically and philosophically, the director personifies “cinema” itself as the protagonist Soul-Enchanter (*Mihunzhe*). Therefore, against the overarching backdrop of the film’s mission-like artistic response to the mummy complex, “the fluidity of dreams set against immortality as its opposing petrified order” [1], and the guidance and shift of the “Other” perspective between seeing and being seen, the personified protagonist Cinema embarks on an allegorical inquiry and philosophical contemplation of the ontological fate of cinema through its own existence and demise. The director’s fluid and imaginative arrangement of “cinema’s” identity forms narrative puzzles that constantly rewrite history, memory, and subjectivity. The authorial and self-reflexive design of cinematic language creates symbolic puzzles through aesthetic references and encoding. And the philosophical contemplation of cinema’s subjectivity and its relationship with the audience, through the gaze of “the big Other” and the self-deconstruction of the screen’s boundary, interrogates cinema’s ontological puzzle. *Resurrection* transforms enigma into cinema’s mode of being. Through its “enigma/solution” encoding/decoding mechanism, it guides the audience to actively seek meaning amidst the cinematic language puzzles of dislocation, reference, and gaze, thereby achieving a re-cognition of film ontology and even human subjectivity through the process of solving the enigma.

2. Historical Dislocation: The Narrative Puzzle of Memory Suturing

Resurrection envisions an age of immortality vying with time, interweaving future fantasies with historical retrospection, memory projection

with detailed perception, and the quest for immortality with the descent into death. It sutures the multi-faceted refraction of individual memory onto film history into the film's narrative fabric, weaving a narrative puzzle intertwined with cinematic history, memory, and identity subjectivity. The film opens with a textual description defining the reality of the "wild age," using the spiritual origin of cinema's birth to imagine humanity's potential for immortality. However, it anchors its narrative on the representative Soul-Enchanter—cinema itself—whose unknown form hides in ancient history, "causing reality pain, history chaos, and time convulsions," secretly dreaming and forsaking immortality. Through the setting of "the big Other," capable of piercing illusions, the narrative traverses the history where "cinema" hides and the dreams it dreams, thus telling the story of the "wild age." Consequently, the film's depiction of the future "wild age" is largely accomplished through a retrospection of film history. The vision of the "wild age" and the retrospective of film history constitute the primary spatio-temporal dislocation in the film's narrative.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari noted in *What is Philosophy?*: "Without a feeling for a certain consistency with the past, our bodily organs cannot perceive the present." [2] Although the dislocation between future and history in *Resurrection* forms the first layer of narrative enigma, it also provides the audience a pathway to perceive the consistency between past and present through the retrospection and suturing of film history. It offers a handle for the audience to follow "the big Other" in solving the story's riddle, establishing the underlying logic for the film's artistic expression and visual puzzle to be felt and perceived. Subsequently, the director further amplifies the "sensory perception" of the cinematic body. Through compartmentalized "six-sense narratives", he disrupts historical continuity and subverts established traditional narrative norms. Across the six sensory domains of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, he endows the personified figure of "cinema" with distinct identities and subjectivities, and stitches the refraction of individual memory through world film history and modern Chinese history into each segment of the sensory narrative. By filling in the historical details that "cinema" has concealed, this textual strategy constructs an unprecedented mode of "experiential viewing"

[3]. Furthermore, the "interruption" of history, the projection of memory, and the traction of perception together constitute the second layer of structural dislocation within the film's narration, further encoding the film's narrative enigma.

Based on the sensory framework of the "six sense bases and six consciousnesses" in Zen Buddhism, the film is divided into six chapters, each corresponding to a sensory dimension, locating a historical dreamscape where the Soul-Enchanter hides, and telling a sensory story through images. Thus, drawing on individual perceptions of history, the director selects historical slices from modern Chinese history—the late Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China period, the 1960s-70s, the Reform and Opening-up era, and the millennium—and creates a "birthplace" of the "Mind" resembling a film set. This provides a spatio-temporal anchor for the multi-faceted story of the Soul-Enchanter, enriching the layers of the visual puzzle through the recombination of different historical slices. Simultaneously, by superimposing these historical slices onto world film history, the director weaves film historical memory back into the light and shadow of digital celluloid, enchanting the sensory narratives and visual "puzzles" of each chapter while leaving traceable paths for the audience. From evoking the illusion of the phenakistoscope, to paying homage to *The Sprinkler Sprinkled*, to recreating Chinese fantasy genres, *Resurrection* merges a "cinephilic spirit" in its creation, while also using itself as a medium to carry and transmit film historical memory, honoring and continuing world and Chinese film history on the occasions of their 130th and 120th anniversaries. As the Italian scholar Benedetto Croce stated: "All history is contemporary history." [4]

With the narrative framework established and historical spatio-temporal slices selected, the core question becomes how the film's storytelling mechanism concretely expresses the "six senses," forming the third layer of encoding for the film's narrative puzzle. Following the narrative logic established by the opening dislocation between immortality and death, the sensory narratives in each chapter are often accompanied by dialectical expressions and contemplations of dislocation. "The invocation of the six consciousnesses from Buddhism is not intended to activate certain senses, but rather to

deactivate them one by one" [5]. Thus, the construction of sensory synesthesia often implies the deconstruction and stripping away of the senses. Rather than simply using established conventions, direct audio-visual presentation, or psychological Gestalt projection to achieve "synaesthesia," the director cleverly integrates historical context to encode the "six senses" into the core vehicles of each chapter. He imbues them with emotional-philosophical contemplations of seeking and losing, beauty and ugliness, sweetness and bitterness, elevating sensory narrative into an embodied practice of philosophical speculation. This guides the audience to grasp the plot's "enigma," to experience the disruption of the senses and the life perception of "being-toward-death," thereby completing the third layer of perceptual dislocation in the storytelling. For instance, in the taste chapter, the director uses the Chinese fantasy genre, rooted in collective film and television memory, to suture narrative gaps specific to a particular period of new China, anchoring the search for "the bitterest thing" as the characters' spiritual symptom. Here, the Soul-Enchanter takes the form of a young monk who, having returned to secular life, re-enters a temple seeking the bitterest piece among the shattered fragments of a Buddha statue to knock out a painful bad tooth. The "bitter demon" residing in the tooth materializes as the young monk's father, seeking to understand "what the bitterest thing is." Amidst the Zen dialectics of "form" and "formlessness," sweetness and bitterness, they reflect on an era and life's circumstances. The pain of the "bad tooth" serves both as a sensory projection of individual generational memory and a metaphor for the pain and bitterness bitten into individual lives by a historical era. The act of knocking out the tooth, an act of destruction and stripping away, becomes a violent ritual toward enlightenment and release, initiating a journey into the "maze of taste." The young monk believes the bitterest stone is actually tainted with urine, losing its purity; the bitter demon's quest for "the bitterest thing" lies not in the taste of bitterness itself, but in the complexity and multi-flavored nature deep within the human heart.

In *Resurrection*, the director places the Soul-Enchanter "cinema" within a narrative puzzle marked by multiple structural dislocations. He continuously weaves the dialectical relationships of history, memory, and

sensation, constantly having it play, construct, and reshape itself. This gives "cinema" a fluid, imaginative, or malleable identity form. Within the cycle of "puzzle" and "solution," through the refraction of the director's personal memory onto film historical memory, the film triggers the audience's repeated questioning of individual life experience and collective historical memory. Through the repeated experience of cinema's identity form, it amplifies sensory perception, enlightening a re-cognition of human life's subjectivity, while also hinting at new possibilities for the visible and invisible, for looking and being looked at, in both images and the real world.

3. Cinematic Language Reference: The Symbolic Puzzle of Aesthetic Integration

Resurrection encodes the aesthetic symbols crystallized from the interweaving of film theory and practice into the signifieds and signifiers of its cinematic language. Through the reference of its audio-visual language, it integrates aesthetic nuances, composing poetic imagery and constructing a visual puzzle concerning the visible and invisible. At the same time, the integration and display of aesthetic depth, through cultural resonance and intertextuality of visual symbols, provides the audience with clues for solving the riddle, becoming vivid footnotes to the cinematic language puzzle. From referencing traditions of cinematic art, to translating Chinese aesthetics vividly, to self-reference within the director's oeuvre, each chapter employs different spatio-temporal settings to fuse different aesthetic symbols into sensory codes, outlining distinct aesthetic landscapes. In the film's visual chapter, the aesthetics of German Expressionist cinema, beginning with *What is Philosophy*, are integrated into the lighting and mise-en-scène. The scene opens with the big Other in an attic space, where tilted architectural designs and hand-painted backdrop patterns are subtly introduced into this representation of the Republic of China era. Subsequently, distorted spatial compositions and abnormal lighting in the "opium den" scenes amplify the Expressionist style. Particularly in the sequence where the big Other secretly follows a servant girl into a dark room, the unnaturally arranged stone wall backdrop segments the staircase, and the servant girl's shadow gradually obscures the light, turning the big Other's path into darkness.

These design elements heighten visual psychological tension and add mystery to the visual narrative. The aesthetic depth inherent in Expressionism, which inspires exploration of the subconscious and the spiritual world, also constructs the deep pathway for the film to delve into dreams and pursue the Soul-Enchanter. The visual symbols and cultural depth of Chinese aesthetics further encode cinematic art through reference, elevating the imagistic conception and integrating the unique aesthetic style of *Resurrection*. The director either embeds traditional cultural symbols into the visuals or integrates Chinese aesthetic creative methods into audio-visual expression, cleverly placing cultural codes within each chapter and leaving intriguing clues for “solving” the cinematic language puzzle. Inside the “opium den” of the visual chapter, traditional Chinese architectural elements are intertwined with Expressionist compositions. The abnormal lighting within various background frames creates a visual effect reminiscent of scattered perspective, while the existing depth of field reminds of the focal point. When the gaze focuses on the revolving lantern at the top center of the frame, the entire scene, woven with aesthetic symbols, seems like a flat silhouette cutout from inside the lantern, with each framed image in the background like rotating phantom slices, reflecting the fleeting joys and sorrows of life in Republican-era mist and smoke. Also in the visual chapter, the fusion of Chinese aesthetics and cinematic art appears in the sequence where the big Other enters the Soul-Enchanter’s visual illusion. Here, the imagery is crafted with a return to theatrical tradition. An oval stage adorned with Chinese-style scenery and foreground window frame masks forms different combinations as it rotates. As the big Other moves through this mise-en-scène, it creates the aesthetic effect of “changing scenery with each step,” offering the viewer a Chinese painting-like aesthetic experience of “wandering,” and “recreating for the audience the unique ‘shadow-play feel’ of early cinema” [6]. Additionally, in the taste chapter, the characters’ wuxia-inspired costumes (bamboo hats, raincoats), the Chinese temple setting with blue bricks, black tiles, and drifting snow, along with deep-focus compositions and low-angle camera movements, all draw upon traditional Chinese aesthetics, injecting profound aesthetic momentum into the alignment with the historical slice and the creation of Zen

contemplation.

Self-reference is a common method in Bi Gan’s cinematic creation, a hallmark of his authorial signature, and forms a silent dialogue between director and audience through cinematic language symbols. In *Resurrection*, Bi Gan’s self-reference includes both the reappearance and variation of motifs from his previous works and the continuation and breakthrough of his own creative methods. In terms of “object” symbols, Bi Gan repositions his signature “apple-biting” motif, present throughout his career, into the film’s “touch” chapter. As the act of biting an apple transitions from shadow projection to real scene, and then to Apollo (the incarnation of the Soul-Enchanter), the emotional arc and authorial expression spanning three works are subtly intertextualized and re-expressed through the transition of light and shadow. Furthermore, “Dangmai,” the spiritual “Peach Blossom Spring” of Bi Gan’s cinematic universe, undergoes symbolic translation again, appearing as the matchbox in the taste chapter and the “Dangmai Request Line” in the touch chapter. These form expressions of “spirituality” (the unlit match after desecrating the Buddha statue) and time references (reminders for the approaching dawn), respectively. The double reference to unseen places and spoken places once again forms a poetic signifier for that space where dreams and reality intertwine. In terms of creative method, whether it’s the wandering of Chen Sheng’s dream in *What is Philosophy* or Luo Hongwu’s cinema reverie in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, the blurry presentation of dreams and images in Bi Gan’s films is consistently intertwined with the immersive realism of long-take choreography. The “reverse application of a technique originally used to construct spatio-temporal integrity” [6] to achieve the disorienting superimposition of dream and reality is a hallmark of his unique visual grammar. This “reversed” long take reappears as an authorial signature in the “touch” chapter of *Resurrection*. In a thirty-minute long take, neon lights flicker, point-of-view cognition shifts, and frame symbols, time-lapse photography, and references to film history intertwine. Through the segregation of the frame, the open-air screening of *The Sprinkler Sprinkled* in the background creates a spatio-temporal suspension of the foreground story. After the screening ends, one film gives way to another, the camera passes through the

frame, the previously shot Apollo in the foreground revives, and he runs with Tai Zhaomei toward the dawn of the new century. Reality and illusion, death and rebirth, continuity and interruption are densely interwoven in this long take, forming the enigmatic expression of the cinematic language symbols.

4. Identity Gaze: The Ontological Philosophy of the Other's Returned Gaze

"What is cinema?" is a question that film creation and scholarship have persistently pursued and re-affirmed for over a century. From the establishment of cinema as art in the *Manifesto of the Seven Arts*, to the commercial elements propelled by nickelodeons; from André Bazin's exploration of the ontology of the photographic image, to Christian Metz's 'imaginary signifier' as a semiotic intervention; from Gilles Deleuze's film-philosophy inquiries, to Béla Balázs's aesthetic construction of film culture (as seen in *Visible Man* and *The Spirit of Film*)—the philosophy of film ontology continuously extends within the inherent tensions between cinematic artistic expression, technological evolution, and aesthetic self-awareness. As a renewed attempt and exploration in art cinema, *Resurrection* re-examines the identity of cinema through meta-cinematic media self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, forming a re-reflection and re-thinking of the image's ontology via the Other. The film embodies cinema as the protagonist Soul-Enchanter, and constructs this gazing and reflection upon film ontology through two methods: narrative narration by "the big Other" and self-gaze. The concept of "the Big Other" [7] drawn from Lacanian psychoanalysis—with its connotations of order and authority—is imbued in this character, providing the audience with a reliable point of entry and narrative anchor. Thus, "the big Other" becomes akin to André Gaudreault's "the Grand Image-Maker" [8] leading the audience's gaze toward the "cinematic Soul-Enchanter." In the film, cinema is the monstrous machine of its early perception, the most beautiful voice after the "great mute learned to speak," a vessel for emotional wounds and historical-cultural reflection, and a dream enigma where magical imagination collides with montage. When the big Other clears the poppy flowers from the monstrous machine to install light and film, it constitutes a hailing of cinema by order and rules. As the film turns and light

flickers, cinema's near-death life is prolonged, cinema's body through the roles played within the story becomes concrete and clear, and cinema, through the extension of its sensory media, gradually becomes a whole in flux, in self-renewal, and in high interaction with society.

Self-gaze is the second mode of ontological philosophical reflection in the film. Lacan noted in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*: "In the field of the visual, the gaze is exterior. I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture" [9], referring to the reversibility of the gaze. The subjectivity of cinema's ontology in the film is likewise constructed through this reversibility of the gaze. It is not a simple relationship of seeing/being seen, but a mutual attestation of subjectivity between the spectator and cinema, one that breaks through the screen's boundary. In film theory research, whether the classical metaphors of "screen as frame" or "screen as window," or contemporary theoretical interpretations like "screen as dream" and "screen as mirror," the screen, by virtue of its unique media attributes, remains a liminal interface central to discussions of the subject-object relationship in film viewing. In *Resurrection*, a fire burning from the center of the screen outward immediately breaks this liminal boundary at the film's start. The people sitting in the cinema watching the projected world within the image look back directly at the "fourth wall" burned away by the fire, creating a direct eye contact with the real-world audience. When the embodied cinema and the viewer gaze upon each other, the subjectivity of the "I," produced through this detour of the Other's gaze, is constructed. The philosophy of this "I"—that of the Soul-Enchanter—is simultaneously the philosophy of cinema's ontology. Subsequently, the big Other moves a camera directly into the frame, pointing it at the audience. As the flash goes off, the boundaries of seeing/being seen, photographing/being photographed, are further dissolved; the barrier between subject and object is further broken. This active breaching of the boundary between cinema and reality in *Resurrection* again triggers reflection on the relationship between cinema and reality. Perhaps the audience's very act of watching is itself a cinema being gazed upon and watched. The questioning of cinema's ontology thus circles back to the Platonic "Allegory of the Cave," the philosophical origin of cinema. Re-thinking film

ontology aims to better answer the “cinema is dead” query in the current tide of change. Confronting the ghostly persistence of this cinematic end-times discourse, the director, through the story of the cinematic Soul-Enchanter’s gradual demise in *Resurrection*, guides the audience to engage in a collective contemplation of film ontology from a subjective perspective. In the film’s finale, through the intertwined interplay of audience, theatre, and cinema, he leaves a glimpse of cinema’s life pulse and the hope of *Resurrection* through death, as suggested by the film’s English title, *Resurrection*.

Resurrection does not define cinema through traditional ontological answers like “recording tool,” “narrative vehicle,” or “art form.” Instead, through its meta-setting where the Soul-Enchanter is cinema itself, it shifts the inquiry of film ontology from “what it is” to “how it exists” within an allegorical cinematic extension. In the film’s allegorical framework, cinema’s embodied form is the Soul-Enchanter; the Soul-Enchanter’s core attribute is dreaming; and the existential form of dreams is inherently that of a riddle awaiting solution. Thus, “enigmaticity” constitutes cinema’s mode of existence. This “enigmaticity” differs from traditional puzzle films, where complex mysteries serve a coherent narrative logic aimed at a predetermined, unique solution. Instead, it constructs its narrative structure and mode of meaning generation entirely as a puzzle-like existence; the puzzle itself is the entirety of the content. In Bi Gan’s view, cinema should not be a passively received information product, but a sensory dialogue that requires the active investment of the audience’s attention [10]. Accordingly, the audience’s viewing process is no longer a passive wait for answers to unfold; rather, it constitutes a practice of active decoding and meaning-making through gazing. The audience shifts from passive spectators into subjects of puzzle-solving, participating in the very construction of the filmic object. The relational structure of “creating dream riddles, awaiting decoding by the Other” thus becomes a new annotation for film ontology. Concurrently, the film’s premise—“humanity achieves immortality but loses the ability to dream”—serves as a precise metaphor for the predicament of cinema in the digital age. Technological iteration grants images near-immortal capabilities of replication and

preservation, yet continually erodes cinema’s soulful “dream” essence. The Soul-Enchanter’s choice to forsake immortality and enter dreams signifies cinema’s active departure from “technological immortality.” The life of the image no longer depends on the permanent preservation of digital carriers; it persists in the form of a riddle, manifesting itself in each instance of audience decoding and gazing, ultimately achieving rebirth at the ontological level.

5. Conclusion

Resurrection is not merely a stylistic experiment, but Bi Gan’s poetic response to the question “What is cinema to do?” within the context of digital media transformation. Confronting the epochal challenge of the “end of cinema,” Bi Gan does not defend cinema’s boundaries on a technological level. Instead, he establishes enigmaticity as cinema’s contemporary mode of existence, one that persists in the active decoding and sensory mutual verification by each spectator. Within a dramatic framework of multiple historical dislocations, the film interweaves and sutures the refraction of individual memory onto film historical memory, continuously rewriting cinema’s identity form and constructing narrative puzzles. Through the awakening and mutual verification of sensory subjectivity, it explores the interweaving of history, memory, and dreams in the “wild age.” Through the multi-dimensional reference of signs in cinematic language design, it integrates aesthetic depth and philosophical threads, constructing symbolic puzzles. Via the vivid footnotes of cultural connotation and cinephilic rapport, it decodes the visible and invisible within the “wild age.” Through the creative contemplation of multiple cinematic identities, it breaks the shackles of the screen’s boundary and the liminal space between “cinema and reality,” re-addressing the ontological puzzle. Through the bidirectional gaze between cinema and audience, constructed via the Other, it unravels the thought on cinema’s ontology in the “wild age.” By weaving its puzzle narrative, *Resurrection* leads the audience to pull film ontology from theoretical discourse back to the site of sensory experience; through cinema’s embodied existence, it re-examines the origins of film philosophy and envisions the possibilities of cinematic life; through humanity’s existential instinct to contend with time, it philosophizes

about human existential predicaments and spiritual belonging amidst the tide of media change. *Resurrection's* pioneering aesthetic exploration returns to the origin of film ontology. Through the return of the gaze and the unveiling of the "Allegory of the Cave," it realizes a re-engagement of Chinese art cinema with global film philosophy, and accomplishes an imagistic meditation that questions the very essence of human existence.

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