

## Path: A Narrative of *Ju Dou* in an Architectural Medium

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### Abstract

*Drawing on my design study of the Chinese film Ju Dou by Zhang Yimou, this paper explores the ways in which film narrative may be used to construct narrative in the medium of architecture. After initially analyzing the use of space in the film, the paper considers the ways the film works as a vehicle for constructing architectural space. This paper concludes by raising questions about how the logic of film narrative may become transposed into the spatial logic of architecture.*

In the realm of architecture, the role of translation across symbolic forms, either in a strict sense of translation or in a less strict sense of exchanging ideas, is not only to get inspiration and to produce novel forms, but also to achieve a better understanding of how meaning is constructed in different media, especially through the construction of spatial relationships. Film is a formal construction that conveys meaning. In a film, meaning is assigned to space while the embodied experience of space is engaged and articulated, which is specifically relevant to architecture. Thus, it is important to read a film from the vantage point of spatial relationships as well as to execute a translation from a film to a design of space.

The Chinese film *Ju Dou* is chosen for this case study for its simplicity of the plot in contrast to the strong emotional impact on the audience. The story happens in a Chinese house, a basic architectural and social unit in Chinese villages. Since the director, Zhang Yimou, had a strong photography background the film is appreciable in the mere sense of the aesthetics of images. Moreover, the film is physically distanced from the contemporary western culture. It is less easy to be categorized as any -isms, which challenges the reader to look at the film outside stereotypical point of views.

### The story

*Ju Dou* is set in the Chinese countryside where a house also serves as a dyeing mill. The film is based on the novel, *Fuxi Fuxi* by Liu Heng, with significant changes of the plot [1]. The plot of the film is as follows. In a small Chinese village in 1920s, an old dyeing mill owner purchases a beautiful young wife, Ju Dou. Ju Dou is abused by her husband, which arouses the sympathy and affection of Tianqing, the adopted nephew, who lived in the same house. Ju Dou falls in love with Tianqing and soon has a son. After the lawful husband is paralyzed from an accident, Ju Dou and Tianqing have an open affair in the house but, at the same time, suffer from this affair because their relationship is not accepted either by the society or by their own son. The son accidentally drowns his acknowledged father, Ju Dou's lawful husband. He kills his biological father after years of deep resents to the love of his actual parents. In desperation, Ju Dou burns down the house and sends all the passion and violence in smoke.

### The spatial construction in the filmic medium

Zhang Yimou manipulates both the structure and the appearance of the space by deliberately posing characters, using specific angles of camera to shoot the space, as well as by establishing the links between color and events. The idea of boundary is repeated in a metaphorical manner throughout the story. Color-coding is used throughout the film.

### Boundary: a spatial symbolism

The film *Ju Dou* is staged in a house with the majority of episodes happening inside. The spatial confinement of the house works as a metaphor of the social confinement. The house defines a boundary of the family. It is a boundary within which certain things should be kept, such as killing, demonstrating love and abusing. Whereas looked from outside, the house presents itself as a peaceful courtyard.

The interior space of the house repeats the idea of boundary several times. The wooden stairs that connect the first floor (the public space) and the second floor (the master's bedroom) in fact separate the two spaces. Several scenes occur in the film. In this scene, the first eye contact between the nephew and Ju Dou is when the nephew climbs up the stairs while Ju Dou is looking down from the second floor. The stairs do not allow them to meet on the same floor. Instead, the nephew draws back and leaves Ju Dou on the second floor. In this scene, every time when the nephew desires to stop the husband's abusing Ju Dou, he stops at the stairs, which appears to be a boundary impossible to cross. In this scene, Ju Dou is trapped on the stairs when her husband sets a fire. In this scene, she cries out the fact that her lover is the real father of her son on the stairs when her son turning crazy on the second floor and her lover sitting in a mess of cloths on the ground. She, on the stairs, wants to connect the son and the father emotionally just as the stairs may connect the first floor and the second floor spatially. However, what the stairs actually do is to separate. At the end of the movie, Ju Dou is trapped again on the stairs when she, in pain and distress, climbs down but cannot stop the tragedy that her son is killing her lover.

In the film, the peephole indicates another boundary which at first only seeing and being seen can cross and later feelings can be communicated across. Owing to his instinctive feeling, the nephew looks at the bathing Ju Dou secretly through the peephole. At this time, the peephole sets up a boundary that separates the seeing from being seen and the intentional from the unnoticed. After discovering it, Ju Dou covers the peephole (to reinforce the boundary). However, after she gets desperate from the husband's abuse she uncovers the peephole and un-blocks the relationship between seeing and being seen. Ju Dou turns her front to the peephole which she knows the nephew is watching behind. The passive being seen turns to be an active being seen.

The peephole is then no longer a boundary to separate but a frame through which showing and watching communicate. Having decided to die together, Ju Dou and the nephew enter the cell underneath the house, which they literally say is a larger hole than the peephole. If we push this comparison further we may argue that the cell acts as a status of the peephole when the two people meet and when the spatial boundary between Ju Dou and her lover disappears.

**Color: the appearance of space**

The appearance of the space is rendered in color and light. Zhang did mention that he chose colors in his early films (including *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*) deliberately.[2] In the film, the action of dying accentuates the idea of assigning meaning since dying is a way of giving appearance to texture. The three primary colors, red, yellow and blue, are repeatedly called on to contribute to significant visuals as well as symbolic meanings. (Fig 1)

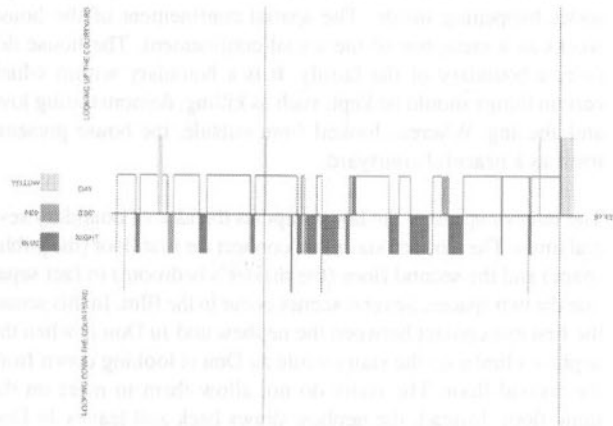


Fig.1. Color-coding of the film *Ju Dou*

Red appears as a background of passion and violence. The climaxes in the film always happen in the rendering of red. Ju Dou and the nephew fall in love in the midst of blood-red cloth falling uncontrollably. Suddenly, the falling cloth ends up with a pile of shapeless redness semi-floating on and semi-sinking into the red dying pond. The master and the nephew were killed in the turbid red pond with splashes of a mixture of dying pigments and, maybe, blood. When red, with yellow and orange, is hung peacefully in the courtyard it turns to be a silent demonstration of the ongoing tragedy. Yellow appears as the symbol of graceful and delightful fantasies, a light feeling that seems unreal in the heavy atmosphere. Yellow dominates the image as the sunshine coming down from the sky above the courtyard. Ju Dou's figure blurs in the yellow. The image is too bright to be stared at just as the fantasy in the nephew's heart is too beautiful to be allowed by an evil society. Blue acts as a veil. It renders night as a seemingly peaceful moment. Passion and violence are covered. Only the moaning of Ju Dou is heard. This emphasizes the idea of veiling since hearing her moaning suggests her existence while not seeing her demonstrates an incomplete presence. When the master tries to allude and drown the son of Ju Dou, the dying pond appears to be an extremely peaceful body of blue water. However, hidden dan-

ger is lying beneath. When the nephew bathes the master in a public water space, pretending to be nice to him, Ju Dou, in blue, is washing blue cloth. Blue hides the hatred.

Moreover, the appearance of the color emphasizes the idea of boundary. The courtyard is the only place where sunlight can be seen from the inside of the house and also where the inside of the house can be seen. In the same space with the same stripes of cloth, different appearances occur by simply looking up or looking down. When looked up in the courtyard, the color of the cloth blends with the light and appears vivid. When looked down from an aerial view, the color loses the vibration of light and turns to be extremely peaceful. The different appearances of color emphasize a claustrophobic feeling. Although things happen inside the house, they cannot be detected from the outside.

**Repeated spatial themes**

Repeated themes in the film are the moments when the creation of symbolic characters becomes the most explicit. There are two major repeated spatial themes: falling cloth and aerial view of the courtyard. The detailed scene of red cloth falling occurs when Ju Dou and Tianqing fall in love and when the son is killing Tianqing. These are the two climaxes of the film. Falling demonstrates an irreversible tendency, that of the forbidden love, its hidden tragedy or an ongoing violence that leads to death. Meanwhile, four still views of the courtyard are inserted in between episodes when the camera takes a deep breath before the story continues. Compared to the falling cloth theme, which is a depiction of a detail in the house, the courtyard theme shows what the house looks like from outside. The change of the courtyard, from an empty one to one with colorful cloth hanging around, indicates that something is going on inside the house.

**A narrative in an architectural medium**

My spatial analysis of the film provoked the generation of multiple drawings that served as exploratory vehicles for building architectural space.(Fig.2) These drawings express specific meanings that one can get from the film. However, in order to communicate these meanings, one needs to think in an architectural medium, the space.

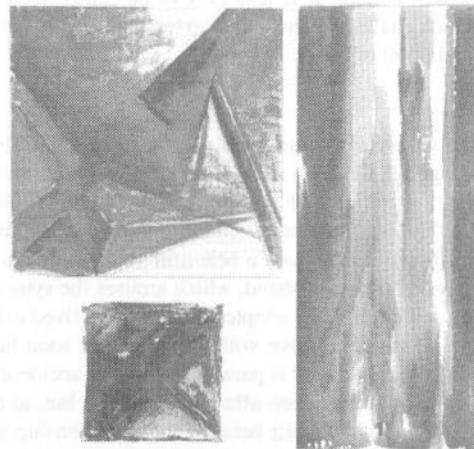


Fig.2. Experiments in 2D shapes and colors

**A notation of interwoven triangles**

There are only four named characters in the story. All of them contribute to the narrative. The nephew "steals" Ju Dou from her husband. The son kills, by accident, his namely father, Ju Dou's husband. In the end, the son kills his biological father, the nephew. Ju Dou burns the house. No wonder *Ju Dou* is argued as a Chinese vision of the Oedipalist narrative. Four triangular relationships can be found amongst the four people. The first triangle consists of the husband, Ju Dou and the nephew. It is a triangle of a lawful husband and a lover centered at Ju Dou. The second triangle consists of Ju Dou, the nephew and their son. It is a triangle of love and family. The third triangle consists of the lawful husband, Ju Dou and the son. It is a triangle of a lawful family. Having discovered the truth that he is not the father, the lawful husband manipulates the son and this triangle of an illusionary family in order to destroy the relationship between Ju Dou and her lover. The fourth triangle consists of the three males in the story. They are, in fact, the namely father, the real father and the son. But this triangle is always read by outsiders and is forced by the husband as a triangle of the master, the nephew and the son of the master (the brother of the nephew). We may notate this pattern of relationships in a graph with four vertices. Each of the vertices is connected with the other three. (Fig.3)

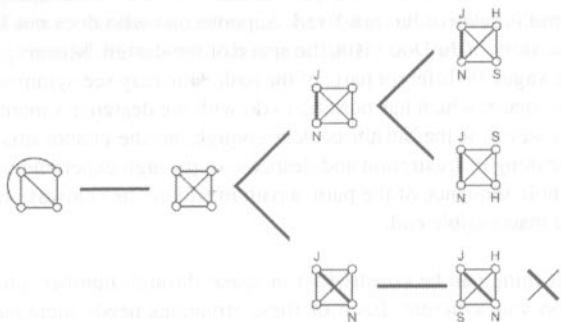


Fig.3. Relationships amongst the four characters

This graph remains isomorphic no matter which vertex is assigned which character. However, when one thinks of it as a two dimensional projection, the assignment matters. The difference is significant if we arrange Ju Dou and her lover on a diagonal or on an edge of a quadrilateral. In the former case, the relationship between the husband and the son interferes the relationship between Ju Dou and her lover. In the second case, they do not intersect. Since the former case better resonates what happens in the story, the diagonal arrangement is chosen for an unfolding of design.

**Path: a design**

In an architectural medium, the construction of a narrative in spatial language contributes to the structure of the medium. A transposition of the film narrative into architecture reveals the spatial logic of architecture. Since a narrative requires a reading, we intend to compel people to read the logic of the space as they travel in the space. The logic of the architectural medium is experienced through perspective and sequence. The former is about space and the latter is about time within space. This means we can either force people to look at the space from certain angles or force them to follow certain sequence to see the space. If we

choose the latter (since sequence involves time and hence reveals the relationship between scenes) we must ask how the architectural parallel of narrative sequence functions. Sequence can either mean the movement of objects (or events) in front of a static observer, or the movement of the observer when the objects are static, or maybe a combination of the two. In architecture, the movement of the observer seems to be more possible. But how does architecture direct people to follow a sequence? What architecture can do is to provide the walkable and non-walkable space. The walkable space composes a path. A design is constructed by unfolding a design of a path to comply with the nature of the narrative. Spatial metaphor is used to embed the meanings in the narrative in both spatial structures and visual shapes. When people move through the visual fields shaped by architecture, emotions are aroused and meanings retrieved.

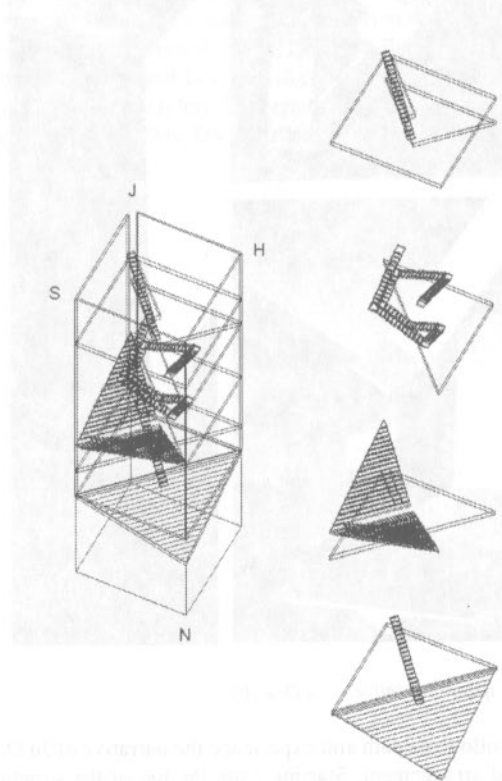


Fig.4. A spatial narrative of Ju Dou (a)

A design is constructed by tying the form of the path up to the sequence of the narrative. (Fig. 4) The whole structure is in the closure of a well like oblong, which may be an analogy of the shape of the courtyard, and literally carries the claustrophobic meaning. Light is used as a symbol of a tragic happiness and death at the very end of the path, a climax but a dead-end. The design adopts the square as a basic planar arrangement with four vertices being four characters. The path is designed to show the struggle of Ju Dou's moving towards her lover, which is always disturbed by either the master or her son. Thus, the vertices become the starting point of the path (that represents Ju Dou), the endpoint of the path (that represents her lover) or interruptions of the path (that represent the master and the son). The triangles are articulated as triangular plates that are statements of the dominant triangular relationships along the path. In other words, the



path is formulated to set the revealing of the triangle relationships along the time dimension. Metaphors are constructed in the design of the path. The path is in an up-side-down form to force people to go from the top to the bottom and to have no exit. This is a spatial metaphor of the feeling of being trapped and sucked by tragedy. In the design, path is not only taken as a sequence for experiencing the space, but also as segments that reinforce the inaccessibility of the endpoints. In this way, a feeling of frustration is suggested. More richness is added when the attributes of the path are defined, such as the shape of the stairs, the triangular slopes and the use of light. (Fig. 5)

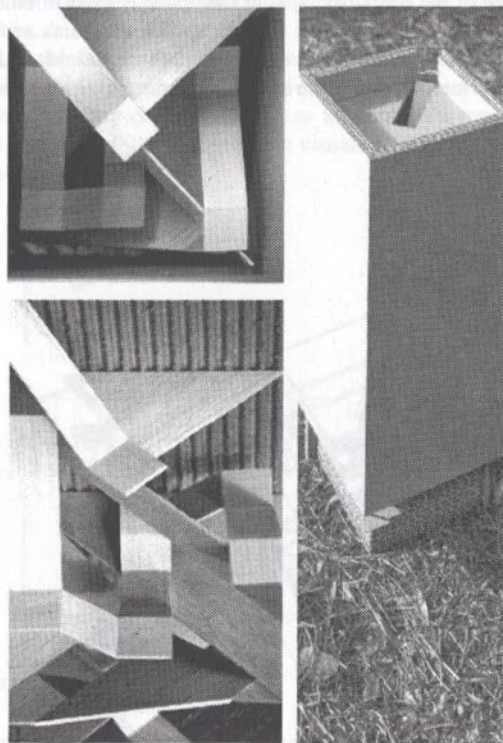


Fig.5. A spatial narrative of *Ju Dou* (b)

Let us follow the path and experience the narrative of *Ju Dou* as a spatial arrangement. Starting from the top of the structure, a stair leads one into the darkness, the starting point being one vertex of the square and the aim being its opposite vertex across the diagonal. This interprets the tragedy's beginning with *Ju Dou*'s Longing for her lover. However, the path, which originally starts from *Ju Dou* towards her lover, is interrupted by the appearance of the master that is represented as a vertex in between that of *Ju Dou* and that of her lover. The triangular relationship between the master, the lover and *Ju Dou* is represented as an accessible part that connects the master and *Ju Dou* and an inaccessible part that connects the lover. Then, two paths start from *Ju Dou* and her lover simultaneously aiming at reaching each other. After a spiral of both hesitating and getting closer, these two paths meet at the same point, which indicate the falling in love of the two in the narrative. Subsequently, the two paths run into another triangular relationship, the mother, the father and the son relationship. However, the son turns out to be another interruption between the lovers instead of a happy union. Two triangular slopes starting from the vertices of *Ju Dou* and her lover meet at a gap

centered at the vertex of the son, from where the path is led towards the vertex of the master and reaches the triangle of the master, *Ju Dou* and the son. The actual family relationship is turned into the namely family relationship. The final part of path starts again from the vertex of *Ju Dou* towards her lover. This path ends up with a big triangular slope towards the vertex of the lover. Light comes from a cut. One seems to be pushed or rush towards the vertex of the lover and light (happiness). But the path leads to a dead-end of the claustrophobic space. The sudden ending of light indicates a strong feeling of death.

## Conclusion

The aim of this case study is to explore how a spatial language constructs meaning. The design is a test only in a syntactical sense. Boundary, a spatial meaning expressed in the film, is articulated as inaccessibility in the design. The issue of color raised in the film is not touched in the design. Three questions are raised by looking retrospectively at the process of the translation from the film *Ju Dou* to a spatial design. Is meaning embedded in form? How is meaning constructed by the construction of space? If we agree that meaning and space have certain links, what strategies can architecture use to take advantage of them?

It would be plausible to argue that the link between meaning and form is relative but not fixed. Suppose one who does not know the story of *Ju Dou* visits the space of the design. Meaning may be vague in different parts of the path. One may see symmetry in the space, which has nothing to do with the designer's intention. However, if the design is clear enough, he/she cannot miss the meaning of frustration and desperation through experiencing the whole sequence of the path, a path in which one is always led to an inaccessible end.

Meaning can be constructed in space through number, proportion and structure. Each of these strategies needs metaphor to link to certain meaning. These ways of constructing meaning are based on an expectation that meaning will be read as a conception. In other words, one has to analyze and synthesize in order to know what the space means. However, if one takes into account of the embodied experience in the space, he/she might use movement as a mechanism to construct meaning. Accessibility, co-presence, co-visibility, moving direction and pace will be possible keys to define movement. An overall structure of the space will emerge as a pre-determined sequence that reveals meaning, if movement can be linked to meaning through spatial metaphor. For example, moving up is happy while moving down is sad. Inaccessibility is frustration. Systematical research is needed to pin the metaphors down to certain spatial ideas. If we suppose this work can be done, certain reading of the space can be ensured through designing movement within a space. Number, proportion and structure can also come into play.

This paper gives a hint of an architectural strategy by proposing designing through experience. Let embodied experience be the reading and the understanding of space. Form and meaning are defined at the same time when the embodied movement is defined. Although the design in this case study does not fully cover the idea of architecture, it is a first step to exemplify meaning by foregrounding a specific spatial arrangement of movement. That is, to use path as a vehicle to direct an experience and thus a reading of space.

