

# The Symbiosis of Reality and Illusion in Cinematic Storytelling: An Aesthetic Deconstruction of the Stage Imagery in the Dance Performance “Smoke”

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**Abstract:** The presentation of a stage can be expressed through the body or through the camera, and there is an inherent aesthetic connection between the two. Camera direction, shot composition, and framing can highlight the textured interplay of illusion and reality on stage, bringing a new aesthetic dimension to dance. Taking the dance work “Smoke” as an example, this article explores, from the perspective of the camera, how stage shots can create an aesthetic space of “illusion” and “reality” through filming techniques, choice of shot sizes, and composition. At the same time, using “Smoke” to analyze the aesthetic logic of the combination of illusion and reality in dance under camera narration, it discusses its role in enhancing the emotional impact of dance and expanding the boundaries of dance aesthetics, thereby providing some theoretical reference for the integration of stage design and camera language in dance.

**Keywords:** Dance “Smoke”; Cinematic storytelling; Coexistence of reality and illusion; Stage aesthetics

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## 1. Defining the aesthetic connotations of “emptiness” and “substance” in the dance “Smoke”

In the development of contemporary dance art, the integration of stage and camera is becoming increasingly common. The stage serves as the fundamental space for dance performance, where tangible elements such as specific movements and set pieces can be presented; while the camera, as a form of information transmission, can create a hazy, abstract “intangible” aesthetic by selecting angles and framing shots. This combination breaks down the barrier between traditional stage performances and the audience, allowing viewers to appreciate the aesthetic essence of dance from a more detailed and nuanced perspective.

The work “Smoke” centers on the imagery that embodies both the tangible and intangible—“Smoke”—

creating an intertwined aesthetic atmosphere in the stage scene. Whether it is simple props like tables, chairs, steps, and walls, abstract body movements, or exaggerated emotional expressions such as “smoke rising from the head”, all provide rich material for camera representation. Therefore, this article uses the language of the camera to analyze how the dance “Smoke” reflects the aesthetics of tangibility and intangibility within the stage scene and explores how the camera participates in the construction of dance aesthetics, aiming to enrich perspectives in the study of dance aesthetics.

Methodologically, this study employs text analysis and case study, focusing primarily on the stage footage of “Smoke” and combining it with camera language theory to summarize specific techniques used in constructing aesthetic spaces of tangibility and intangibility. Meanwhile, with reference to research in dance aesthetics and visual communication, it explores the aesthetic value of the symbiosis between the tangible and intangible under camera narration, seeking to integrate theoretical analysis with real-case examples.

## **2. Theoretical connection between cinematic narrative and the aesthetics of real and virtual in dance**

### **2.1. The visual constructive function of cinematic narrative**

Cinematic storytelling refers to the process of transforming the dynamic performances on stage into visually narrative images through the camera’s selection of shots, adjustment of angles, and changes in framing. Unlike audiences watching an entire stage in a theater, the camera has a strong subjective guiding influence. It can use movements such as push, pull, pan, and dolly to direct the audience’s attention to specific stage details; it can also adjust the framing to enlarge or compress the stage space, thereby controlling the narrative rhythm of the dance. From the perspective of visual construction, the essence of the camera is “selective presentation.” It can omit secondary elements on stage and highlight the core aesthetic subjects; it can also create virtual spaces that cannot be directly presented on stage through the editing and combination of shots <sup>[1]</sup>. It is precisely this characteristic of “selective presentation” that endows the camera with the innate ability to construct spaces of real and virtual aesthetics, thereby providing technical support for the expression of real and virtual aesthetics in dance.

### **2.2. The cinematic expression dimensions of real and imaginary aesthetics in dance drama**

In traditional dance forms, the aesthetics of reality and illusion are mainly constructed through the elements of the stage itself. For example, body movements can be realistic or expressive, stage scenery can be concrete or abstract, and narrative plots can be realistic or symbolic. The introduction of camera work further expands the expressive dimensions of this aesthetic.

In the presentation by the camera, the “real” in dance is primarily reflected in the precise capture of concrete stage elements. For instance, cameras can accurately record the dancers’ detailed movements, the textures of props, and the reproduction of lighting colors. These magnified images become tangible visual information that the audience can directly perceive. On the other hand, the “illusory” aspect of dance is often achieved through subjective treatment by the camera. For example, slow motion can extend the trajectory of movements, close-ups can emphasize performers’ facial expressions, and shots of empty space can help to enhance the stage atmosphere. These cinematographic techniques can transform abstract emotions and artistic conception in dance into visual images that viewers can see, with a sense of a blurred or ethereal quality. The combination of camera storytelling and the aesthetic of reality and illusion in dance can turn “stage space” into “camera space”, making the interweaving of reality and illusion in dance more delicate and diverse.

### **3. The visual construction of “reality” in the cinematic narrative of the dance “Smoke”**

#### **3.1. The visual constructive function of cinematic narrative**

Panoramic shots can fully present the overall space of the stage in a dance performance, restoring the complete view of the stage and constructing a realistic, tangible space. In the conflict scene of the dance “Smoke”, the panoramic shots reveal the stage’s single, stark props and scenery—the dim lighting, the gray-toned walls... These elements together create a dull and depressing space, surrounded by a monotonous, faded atmosphere, where even the faintly drifting “smoke” seems suppressed, letting no trace of vitality through, making the audience feel as if they are truly there. Additionally, panoramic shots can also show the spatial arrangement and physical coordination between the performers. To depict the intertwined emotions of a duo, the work frequently uses montage editing techniques. In the “Smoke Filling the Air” scene, the panoramic shots capture the irregular dance paths of the male and female leads; their free and minimally adorned movements, amplified by the montage technique, appear chaotic yet possess a subtle, harmonious connection. This comprehensive presentation of the stage space enriches the dance’s sense of realism and provides a stable visual foundation for the narrative conveyed through the camera<sup>[2]</sup>.

#### **3.2. Close-up: The texture and detail of the body**

Close-up shots are an important filming technique for emphasizing the sense of tangibility in dance. They allow the audience to see the actors’ subtle movements, enhancing the expressiveness and texture of body language. In the dance piece “Smoke”, close-ups repeatedly focus on the movements of the male and female leads’ hands and feet. For example, the probing finger joints as they rest on a table or stage column, the fingertips quickly retracting after touching a solid object, the tension-stiffened palms in moments of stress, the fingers slowly stretching when relaxed, and the staged movements of the male lead “falling” down the stairs. The camera does not focus on the lower body as conventional storytelling would, but rather on the actors’ heads, where the audience can only see hair gradually becoming disheveled from constant bouncing, leaving one to wonder whether the character’s state is the result of rolling from a fall or a hurried chase<sup>[3]</sup>. These details concretely present the characters’ inner struggles and conflicts, allowing the audience to directly feel the emotional tension of the characters.

Additionally, close-ups highlight the texture and details of stage props. For instance, in the opening scene of “Smoke wafting from the chimney”, the camera closely frames the upper bodies of the male and female leads. As the female lead lifts the male lead’s hat, a wisp of smoke slowly rises from his dry hair, as though the character’s inner anxiety can no longer be contained and erupts from the body. Prior to this, several flashback shots display the lonely “sloped table” on stage, the smoke rings exhaled by the female lead, and even the folds in the costumes formed by movement—these meticulous depictions of movements and props enhance the tangible feel of the stage image and lay the groundwork for creating a sense of ethereality later on.

#### **3.3. Fixed shot: A realistic freeze of the narrative scene**

A fixed shot refers to a camera remaining stationary during filming, presenting the stage scene in a set format. This type of cinematographic language can enhance the realism of the stage scene, directing the audience’s focus to the narrative function of the scene itself. In the dance piece “Smoke”, the fixed shot frames a table in the center of the stage, then suddenly shifts to the male protagonist in motion, with several massive stage pillars beside him. His body continuously interacts with the pillars. In one cut, the shot reveals that the pillars are actually the legs of the table; in the next cut, it returns to the stationary table, but in the following moment, the female lead walks over and kicks it away. The so-called “normal table” is merely an illusion created by the fixed shot, and the alternation

of the images allows the table to “change size” according to the needs of the dance. A fixed shot can also capture an actor’s emotional moment. In a duet scene, the fixed shot captures the male and female leads standing face-to-face; however, the “standing” in this context is not shown through their entire bodies but only through their feet, which step over one another without moving forward, conveying their complex emotions in place of eye contact. This structured presentation makes the characters’ emotional states more real and tangible, enhancing the realism of the shot’s narrative and further highlighting the aesthetic characteristic of the stage image’s “realness.”

## **4. The creation of the ethereal ambiance in the cinematic narrative of the dance “Smoke”**

### **4.1. Flash lens: Expressive extension of physical emotions**

Flash shots are a type of cinematic language used to create a “virtual” state aesthetic in dance. They stretch the dimension of time, elevating the performers’ physical emotions from a realistic level to an expressive, impressionistic one. In the duet scene of the dance “Smoke”, the screen continuously flashes scenes of the male and female leads touching and quarreling, then suddenly freezes on a particular movement before slowly resuming action. Additionally, when the male lead climbs onto the tabletop following a “magnified” perspective and accidentally bumps into the female lead, whose head is poking out, the scene of him panicking and sliding down the table leg is repeated through flash shots. The dance uses these flashes to repeatedly depict the falling process, maximizing the presentation of the male lead’s “shock” on screen. This expressive extension of bodily emotions allows the stage visuals to transcend the limitations of real time, constructing a “virtual” aesthetic dimension filled with imaginative space.

### **4.2. Camera panning: Poetic rendering of spatial atmosphere**

A panning shot refers to a filming technique where the camera slowly moves around the subject. It can expand the sense of space on stage and create an atmosphere that is poetic and blends reality with illusion. In the dance piece “Smoke”, the male lead’s shots shift continuously with changes in the center of his movements: when standing, the shot captures the entire limbs; when sitting, it focuses on the legs; when adjusting his clothes, it frames the upper body; when lifting his hat, it zooms in on the head. The female lead’s shots quickly pan from her body to her face, showing expressions of surprise or stiffness.

Panning shots can also achieve a transition between real space and psychological space. In the duet scenes where the male and female leads display inner conflict, the camera moves from the real stage scene—zooming in on a wall—to the male lead lying on the ground performing a side leg kick using the wall as leverage. This spatial transition blurs the boundary between reality and illusion, intensifying the ethereal quality of the stage visuals and guiding the audience into the characters’ inner worlds.

### **4.3. Empty shots: The abstract sublimation of symbolic imagery**

An empty shot refers to a shot in which no characters appear. It can achieve an abstract elevation of symbolic imagery through the presentation of stage environment, props, and other elements. In the dance piece “Smoke”, empty shots repeatedly focus on the smoke rising faintly above the main character’s head and around them, the scattered light, and the lonely table. These elements, detached from specific narrative scenes, become symbolic “void” imagery.

For example, in the scene where the male lead goes upstairs to find the female lead, a deliberately empty shot

of the corner steps is included. The male lead's movement upstairs does not become awkward due to the limitations of real props; instead, it cleverly mitigates the cumbersome effect of large props. In the scene approaching the end of the play, an empty shot captures the background wall after the smoke gradually dissipates. The ethereal and fleeting nature of the smoke symbolizes the transience and impermanence of things, while also subtly implying the emotional space within the protagonist's heart. This abstract elevation of symbolic imagery enhances the aesthetic level of "emptiness" on stage to a philosophical height and imparts a deeper spiritual connotation to the dance.

## **5. The aesthetic logic and value of the coexistence of reality and illusion in the choreography "Smoke" through cinematic narration**

### **5.1. The narrative logic of shots interweaving reality and illusion**

The cinematographic narrative of the dance "Smoke" aesthetically follows the logic of "interweaving reality and illusion", meaning that the visual "reality" and the poetic "illusion" in the artistic conception are not separate, but rather rely on each other and transform into one another. For example, the close-up shots capturing the details of the body are "real", but when the slow motion extends the duration, these details can transform into a poetic "illusion." The wide shots showing the stage space are "real", yet through camera panning, this space can also give rise to a poetically "illusory" atmosphere.

In cinematographic storytelling, "reality" is the starting point of aesthetic perception, providing the audience with direct visual content; "illusion" is the elevation of aesthetic experience, guiding the audience to use their imagination to fill in the meaning beyond the frame, thereby attaining spiritual aesthetic pleasure. It is precisely this interweaving of the real and the illusory that presents the stage imagery of the dance "Smoke" with rich aesthetic layers, possessing both a tangible form and conveying a spiritual, poetic essence.

### **5.2. The aesthetic value of the coexistence of reality and illusion**

The effect of combining reality and illusion in camera storytelling brings multifaceted aesthetic value to the dance piece "Smoke." Specifically, it is reflected in the following aspects:

It enhances the artistic appeal of the dance. Through the "real" images, the audience can gain a deeper understanding of the characters' emotions and the plot development, thereby generating emotional resonance. At the same time, by creating the artistic conception of the "illusory", the audience can experience an aesthetic enjoyment that transcends reality, further enriching the spiritual connotation of the dance. It expands the aesthetic boundaries of the dance. The viewing space of traditional dance is usually limited to the physical stage of the theatre, but camera storytelling, through the combination of reality and illusion, creates an aesthetic space that spans both reality and imagination, making the aesthetic expression of the dance no longer restricted by the physical stage. Thirdly, it provides feasible ideas for contemporary dance creation. The integration of camera storytelling with the aesthetics of reality and illusion demonstrates that dance art can achieve innovation through the incorporation of modern media. This offers a referable example for stage design and narrative methods in dance.

### **5.3. Reflections on the limitations of cinematic narrative intervention in dance drama creation**

Although cinematographic narration brings more possibilities for the interplay of reality and illusion in the dance piece "Smoke", it also has its own limitations. Firstly, the subjective choices of the camera may weaken the core

of the dance itself. If there is an overreliance on camera movement and close-ups, the audience may focus solely on what is shown through the lens while neglecting the artistic value of the performers' movements; secondly, the camera needs to exercise restraint when creating a sense of "illusion." If the imagery is handled in an overly abstract or obscure way, it may confuse the audience and hinder their understanding of the dance's theme.

Therefore, this offers two insights for contemporary dance creators: when using the camera, the dance itself should always remain the main focus, maintaining a balance between cinematic language and bodily expression; at the same time, creators must consider the audience's reception, preserving enough realistic cues when constructing virtual atmospheres so that the fusion of reality and illusion is more easily understood and appreciated by viewers.

## 6. Conclusion

Cinematic storytelling provides new perspectives and methods for expressing the interplay of reality and illusion in the dance piece "Smoke." For example, using close-ups, wide shots, and other camera techniques can highlight specific elements on stage, constructing the "real" aspects; meanwhile, techniques like flash cuts or panning shots can help create atmosphere and imagery, evoking the "illusory" aspects. This combination of reality and illusion not only enriches the visual layers of "Smoke" but also enhances the artistic expressiveness of the work, expanding the aesthetic space of the dance.

In contemporary dance creation, the integration of camera work and stage performance has become a trend. Dance creators should further explore the aesthetic possibilities of cinematic storytelling, grasp the creative logic of the interplay between reality and illusion, and achieve a fusion of cinematic language and stage art while maintaining the essence of dance itself. Only in this way can more profound and moving dance works be created, promoting the continuous development of contemporary Chinese dance.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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