

# Visualizing the Pain of Female Existence: A Case Study of *Mama* (2022)

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Manuscript received July 22, 2025; accepted November 17, 2025; published December 25, 2025.

**Abstract**—The film *Mama* is another powerful feminist-themed masterpiece of director Lina Yang after her *Spring Tide*. The film downplays the promotion of language and plot, presenting a non-verbal expression path of female existential pain based on visualization. This article takes the visual expression of female existential pain as the core topic. Starting from the three dimensions of camera rhythm, spatial structure and body expression, it analyzes the emotional repression, physiological confusion and loss of consciousness of the mother and daughter in the film when they face the identity confusion caused by aging and illness, and the collapse of the mother-daughter relationship, exploring how the film uses a variety of imaging strategies to transform women's experiences into a penetrating emotional scene. The film's cinematic rhythm is built around the use of long shots, and the gaze created under the non-narrative structure thereby constructed; at the same time, a large amount of negative spaces and jump cuts are used in the editing process to construct a visual language that evades narrative; meanwhile, prolonged camera shots also generate intense pressure of the gaze. These shot rhythms further affect the configuration and feeling of space, constructing a spatial field of emotional expression through the repression of family space, the expression of spatial emotions, and the absence of external space. The closure of space ultimately presents various non-verbal reactions on the female body—the silence of the body, the visual presentation of physiological degeneration, and the rupture of the body and memory. In all, the film uses restrained, forbearing and penetrating images to construct a unique visual expression path of the pain of female existence.

**Keywords**—female existential pain, Lina Yang, spatial oppression, visual expression, women's film

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of contemporary Chinese women's film-making, the pain embedded in female experience emerges as a crucial emotional axis of cinematic expression [1]. In women's survival experience, pain is often not a sudden emotional outburst, but a physiological and psychological chain reaction caused by long-term repression and accumulation [2]. The mother in *Mama* [3] still has the identity of a mother and the core of the family, but the role she assumes has become ineffective, and her language, emotions and care abilities are all tending to collapse. This "idle" state of the role has accumulated continuous repressed emotions. When this repressed emotion cannot be released through language, it turns to the body to show irrational and uncontrollable reactions (such as fainting, crying, and stupor) [4]. When the body is also unable to complete this expression, the subject retreats to a deeper spiritual level, entering a deconstructive state of identity ambiguity, ethical disorder, and self-loss. This multi-level, progressive chain of pain gradually shifts the expression of pain from discourse construction to visual expression, thus forming an

unspeakable but continuously flowing female pain structure. The non-verbal perception and the visual structural strategy mentioned here are an interactive relationship between means and paths. The former refers to the audience's perception of women's experience during the film—not through dialogue and traditional plot narration, but relying on non-verbal elements such as silence, body, atmosphere, etc. to understand the character's state; the latter is the specific visual expression method adopted by the director to express this state, such as long shots, blank space, static space composition, etc. In other words, the film constructs a non-verbal viewing experience through visual structural strategies, allowing women's pain of survival to enter the audience's field of vision in an unspeakable but perceptible way.

This article will focus on analyzing the visual expression of female pain in *Mama* from three aspects: the rhythm of the shots in the audience's field of vision, the spatial perception constructed by this rhythm, and the body performance in the space.

## II. CINEMATIC RHYTHM: AFFECTIVE RUPTURE WITHIN TEMPORAL SUSPENSION

The film constructs the overall sense of time and rhythm of the film by controlling the shot duration/rhythm and editing pace. In individual shots, the gaze on the face or body of the characters is lingered to form viewing pressure and emotional traction, so that the audience can feel the psychological tension within the image and build an ethical relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Frequent switching and fast-paced shots force the audience into an accelerated psychological experience, and the audience is prone to feel a strong sense of conflict, thus generating tension and anxiety; while shots with long retention time and slow editing are easy to make the audience enter a slow, calm and even repressed perception rhythm. It is through this rhythm control that the film mobilizes the audience's physical perception and emotional resonance [5], so that they can not only see but also feel the flow of time and emotional deposition in the image during the viewing process.

### A. The Use of Long Takes—The Gaze within a Non-narrative Rhythm

The film employs a lot of fixed camera positions and long takes, some of which often last 40 seconds to 1 minute, and sometimes even up to 90 seconds. The use of such long takes makes temporal duration replace narrative advancement, forcing the audience to gaze under non-narrative rhythm. This gaze forces the audience to coexist with the characters in

a silent, slow and even meaningless real time, and to perceive the trapped state of women. Therefore, gaze becomes the core strategy of emotional arousal. A typical set of shots in *Mama*, a faint light is projected into the room through the gap of the curtains, and the mother sits motionless on the sofa, with a dull expression, wandering eyes, and never speaks. This set of shots of the mother neither zooms in nor cuts, but gazes slowly; the excessively long shot time makes the audience inevitably resonate with the mother's inner dullness and depression, and thus feel a strong psychological tension [6]. The mother in the film often sits in front of the window in silence, or stares into the distance on the sofa. The camera lengthens this extension of time. At the same time, faint but continuous natural sounds such as the ticking of clocks and the intermittent dripping of faucets continue to seep in. The audio-visual together constructs a depressing atmosphere where emotions cannot flow and life is condensed, as if everything is trapped in a silent space, silent but heavy.

### *B. Ellipsis and Rupture in Editing Pace: A Visual Language of Narrative Evasion*

In contrast to the use of long takes, *Mama* shows obvious ellipsis and rupture in the editing pace. Through this technical operation, a unique narrative and emotional expression strategy is constructed. The so-called ellipses or blank spaces refer to the fact that the film does not show a key action, dialogue or plot twist, but leaves a jump cut or time gap, which is manifested in the form of empty shots, scenes without dialogue or active evasion of key events. In the film, the mother seems to recall the death of her late husband, but the director does not enter any reality or memory shots, but directly cuts the shot to the empty kitchen: the kettle is boiling, steam rises, there is no dialogue, no music, only the sound of clocks and water, showing the blankness of the shot. The mother's body is not in the frame, but her emotions are full and strong in the space-sound formed by this blank shot. This jump cut, on the basis of avoiding traditional emotional expression, reveals the mother's inner emotional state [7]: trauma cannot be expressed or reproduced. This physical absence, on the contrary, constitutes a more tense emotional evocation mechanism. The audience can deeply experience the mother's unspoken but lingering pain in the empty shot.

At the same time, the film also presents a non-linear and jumping plot advancement through the broken takes that lack causal connection between multiple scenes. These broken jumps are not just about time in the traditional sense, but also about the interruption and disconnection of emotions, behaviors and spatial logic. In the film, the shot of the mother standing alone by the window on the balcony in a trance suddenly jumps to the back of her daughter writing at her desk. The two have no dialogue or interaction. The shot neither explains the spatial connection nor the causal relationship between the actions, but uses the discontinuity of the emotional state as the editing break-point. This non-narrative jump makes it impossible for the audience to place the mother's state and family relationship in a clear logic. The mother wanders in the corridor late at night, and the camera switches directly from her slow footsteps to the empty sofa. This switch completely cancels the continuity of the space, leaving an empty field where the behavior is interrupted. This empty field makes the relationship between

the body and space tend to be non-linear, showing that women gradually lose their logical position and existence certainty in the real space, and thus forms the audience's viewing anxiety.

Therefore, the blankness and the deep meaning of the rupture establish an anti-traditional viewing ethics: the audience is forced to be in the absent plot and sew the meaning in the blank. Emotional perception replaces narrative understanding to achieve empathy simulation of women's predicament. The film's camera switching is rare, and the overall editing rhythm is extremely slow. The de-dramatization treatment strengthens the emotional laziness and daily sense, reflecting the image ethics stance of rejecting performative drama.

### *C. Shots Duration: The Pressure and Ethics of the Gaze*

In the film, a striking example of prolonged camera fixation in the film is the one where the daughter suddenly loses her way by the lake at night and cannot find her way home. The camera adopts a long-range fixed shot, slowly panning horizontally, and lasts for dozens of seconds without any cuts. In the frame, the daughter stands alone on the desolate lake-shore, her figure appearing small and fragile. She is surrounded by emptiness—no other people, no dialogue—only the sound of water, distant traffic, and her repeated turning gestures as she looks around. Because of the long lingering of the camera, the audience is forced to stare at the space that she was familiar with but suddenly became unfamiliar, as well as her slow movement in this space, repeatedly searching, and her expression of surprise and panic. The camera is always far away, not approaching, not comforting, and not explaining. This kind of camera lingering not only breaks the traditional rhythm of narrative development, but also abandons narrative intervention [8]—the soundtrack and editing assistance that express emotions, making the loss itself a kind of visual time: the space becomes blurred, the plot is suspended, and the emotions have no outlet. More importantly, the lingering in this shot is not only a gaze at the space where the daughter's body is located, but also an amplification of her psychological state and the collapse of her family identity. When the daughter keeps looking around but can't find the direction, she finally stands still, squatting with her head in her hands, and the camera continues to watch in silence—this duration/continuation itself also builds the ethical pressure of the viewer: we can only watch her confused, helpless, and lost, but we can't intervene in her predicament. This precisely reflects the film's visual expression strategy of women's survival perception: no promotion, no intervention, no judgment, just watching how time slowly passes and entangles her, watching her sink in panic. This kind of stay is not only an aesthetic form, but also a structural viewing tension, showing a non-plot-based intensity of pain.

## III. SPATIAL CONFIGURATIONS: THE AFFECTIVE FIELD OF PAIN

The time density and viewing method created by the rhythm of the shots further affect the configuration of the space and the perception of the configuration. Space is not only the background of the characters' activities, but also a container for the generation, accumulation and release of pain

[9]. It records emotions, but also takes on silence and shows the spread of silence. Through rhythmic space and spatially structured emotions, the film makes the image scene of the home a repressive system where one is forced to stay, wait continuously and cannot escape. Therefore, the audience does not only experience the psychology of the characters in the plot, but is guided into a viewing ethics that bears the pressure of space together under the synergy of blank shots, rhythm hysteresis and spatial composition.

#### *A. The Oppressive Configuration of Family Space*

The film unfolds almost entirely within enclosed spaces such as courtyards, kitchens, bedrooms, and bathrooms. It uses a lot of corner camera positions, door frame obstructions, and long-range voyeuristic compositions, creating a recurring sense of spatial oppression. In the dining table scene, the mother and son have few conversations while eating, and the camera is mostly fixed on the dining table and the window. The audience sometimes only sees the two people at the table through a narrow passage in the middle, as if they were peeping. At the same time, there is no background music in the camera, only the sound of dishes and chopsticks touching and chewing. The isolation of the sound further amplifies the sense of closure in the space. These spatial arrangements and camera settings visually strengthen the subject's sense of helplessness.

Particularly noteworthy is the daughter's hallucination in the film—she sees her deceased father in the mirror, discussing with students in a friendly manner. The daughter stares into the mirror, and the space inside the mirror is misaligned with the real space—the daughter stands in the living room, but the father seems to exist in a room of another dimension. The mirror, as an extension of space, becomes a manifestation medium [10] for the subconscious echo in the family space. At this time, the space is no longer a physical entity, but a folded body of emotions, memories and hallucinations. The oppressive feeling of space makes the daughter's hallucination no longer seem abrupt, but appears as a self-compensation for the family order after the emotions have been suppressed for a long time. This ghost return in a closed space highlights the unbridgeable rift in the father-daughter relationship, and also pushes the psychological dimension of space to the level of traumatic memory.

#### *B. Alienated Expression of Spatial Emotions*

The film's treatment of space is not only reflected in the repressive arrangement of the family's internal structure, but also in some open natural spaces that present strong alienated emotional characteristics. The shot of the mother and daughter by the water in the early morning shows how the natural and open space can become a symbol of emotion and dilemma. The mother sits on a bench by the water, looking at her daughter sitting on the bridge across the river. The daughter dances her hands in the air, and the sound of water is sometimes heard and sometimes not. The background is the water surface between the mother and daughter and the green grass on the shore. There is almost no communication between the mother and daughter. The mother is silent and looks down, and the daughter is immersed in the empty happiness of the illusion, and the emotions condense in the air. The use of static medium-long shots captures the

psychological tension between characters who face each other yet fail to communicate. Although the subject is in a natural environment, the camera creates a sense of oppression that contradicts openness through water ripples, reflections, fallen leaves, and the silence of mother and daughter. Therefore, the alienation of space presents the emotional distress that cannot be escaped in the seemingly open natural scene.

The scene of the daughter boating on the lake in her hallucination is a highly concentrated and concrete expression of spatial alienation in the film. The camera uses a slow zooming technique from near to far, which creates a very poetic visual style with the softness of the night, the twinkling stars, and the open and clear space. The whole picture seems peaceful and romantic, but it reveals a strong sense of emotional isolation. The boat has no clear direction and drifts with the water. The lake has no boundaries. The camera not only does not allow the daughter who is alone to get spatial comfort, but also highlights her wandering and helplessness in her family identity and self-emotion. The shot is full of fantasy, and it also shows that the daughter can only rely on the fantasy space she has built to fight against the loss of control in reality. The boat disappears in the depths of the lake in the distance, and the audience can only watch it drift away without being able to follow it. This viewing structure is the ultimate presentation of the alienated emotion of space—beauty becomes a closed bait, and the audience and the characters enter an unreachable emotional vacuum together.

#### **IV. BODILY EXPRESSION: THE SILENT CONTAINER OF PAIN**

The closure and alienation of space ultimately manifests itself in various non-verbal reactions on the female body. The body is both a carrier of pain and an interface for emotional loss of control. Under the joint construction of the lens and space, it reveals multiple states of repression, physiological degradation, and identity dislocation [4].

The film's visual presentation of the female body strengthens the non-verbal expression of existential pain. As the mother gradually ages and becomes disabled, her body becomes a carrier of information: her movements become slower and her gait becomes unsteady, constituting her weakened existence in time and space. Through a series of key shots, the film transforms physiological degeneration into a trigger for psychological pain. The audience not only sees the changes in the body, but also feels the pain of the body in the breakdown of relationships and emotional distress.

The scene in which the mother begs her daughter not to chase the kitten away on a rainy day, with a pleading tone, a slightly angry voice, the sound of rain outside the door, blurred light, and a medium to long shot, not only shows the mother defending a cat, but also the mother's struggle for a weak sense of sympathy and control for herself. In a sense, this physical behavior is more like a projected expression of her own situation, and the cat becomes a substitute for emotional displacement. This calm but cracked dialogue in the film interprets the mother's physical degradation as a visual annotation of emotional oppression.

Another visually striking shot is when the mother climbs up the ladder to get a book while her daughter is out, and the

daughter is shocked and speechless when she finds out. The mother has always been an image of slow movement and needing care, but at this moment she suddenly crosses the line, which not only breaks the care order, but also makes the daughter face a huge imbalance between body and ethics. The camera uses an upward angle to capture the mother's shaking body, and then quickly switches to the daughter rushing into the picture with a terrified expression on her face. This shot not only shows the worry that she will fall, but also a metaphor that the boundaries of the body are disintegrating and the power structure is beginning to become chaotic. This brief retrograde in physiological degradation not only creates greater emotional uneasiness, but also is an important manifestation of the body [7] as the core of the turbulent family power perception structure.

## V. CONCLUSION

The use of shots, spatial construction and body presentation in the film *Mama* are important dimensions of expression. They do not exist in isolation, but are nested and interact with each other to form a unique emotional mechanism in the visual structure. The slow, lingering rhythm of the camera constructs an atmosphere of spatial oppression and enclosure; the spatial structure in turn defines and limits the presentation of the female body, making the body a perceptual interface that carries pain and emotions. The tired, still, and aphasic state of the female body in a confined space is the concrete embodiment of the pain of survival. The three together constitute a non-verbal perceptual path. Female experience no longer relies on language narration, but obtains emotional tension and narrative depth through image language.

*Mama* uses a restrained, forbearing but penetrating visual

structure to allow the narrative of women's suffering to be reproduced, giving way to the subjective viewing experience of how women feel pain. The silence of the body, the oppression of space and the slowness of the camera together constitute a visual grammar with high emotional intensity. In this sense, *Mama* can be called a visual archive that presents women's existential experience.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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