



Scan to know paper details and
author's profile

Behind the Suspense: “Knowledge” as “Prey” in the Film Possession

Shuyi Liu

University of Science and Technology Beijing

ABSTRACT

The film *Possession* employs detective narrative techniques to build a suspenseful, symbol-rich structure, intertwining the plot with the pursuit of “knowledge” and transforming the viewing experience into a metaphor for the quest for understanding. This paper analyzes the construction of suspense and the deeper implications of “knowledge” as “prey” in *Possession* from three perspectives. First, it analyzes the film’s detective techniques and their role in uncovering truth. Second, it explores how unsent letters ignite the audience’s interpretive desire. Lastly, it examines unresolved mysteries, emphasizing philosophical reflections on “knowledge” and theory. These three dimensions are interrelated, collectively emphasizing the pivotal role of “knowledge” exploration in promoting female empowerment and fostering deeper theoretical reflections.

Keywords: knowledge; suspense; detective techniques; reading desire; theoretical reflection.

Classification: LCC Code: PN1995.9.S87

Language: English

Doi: 10.34257/LJRHSSVOL25IS17PG29



Great Britain
Journals Press

LJP Copyright ID: 573362

Print ISSN: 2515-5784

Online ISSN: 2515-5792

London Journal of Research in Humanities & Social Science

Volume 25 | Issue 17 | Compilation 1.0



Behind the Suspense: “Knowledge” as “Prey” in the Film *Possession*

Shuyi Liu

ABSTRACT

The film Possession employs detective narrative techniques to build a suspenseful, symbol-rich structure, intertwining the plot with the pursuit of “knowledge” and transforming the viewing experience into a metaphor for the quest for understanding. This paper analyzes the construction of suspense and the deeper implications of “knowledge” as “prey” in Possession from three perspectives. First, it analyzes the film’s detective techniques and their role in uncovering truth. Second, it explores how unsent letters ignite the audience’s interpretive desire. Lastly, it examines unresolved mysteries, emphasizing philosophical reflections on “knowledge” and theory. These three dimensions are interrelated, collectively emphasizing the pivotal role of “knowledge” exploration in promoting female empowerment and fostering deeper theoretical reflections.

Keywords: knowledge; suspense; detective techniques; reading desire; theoretical reflection.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 19th-century Britain, advancements in science, culture, and industry fostered a knowledge-driven society (Allitt 2002), shaping future generations’ reverence for intellectual growth. This focus on “knowledge” is evident in the literature and art of the time, underscoring its enduring cultural and intellectual legacy. After World War II, the pursuit of “knowledge” emerged as a central theme in various novels and their film adaptations, including *Howards End* (1992), *An Education* (2009), and *The Imitation Game* (2014). These works explore the profound impact of “knowledge” on both individuals and society, using diverse settings and characters to illustrate its far-reaching influence. Among them, *Possession* (2002), directed by Neil LaBute,

stands out for its portrayal of “knowledge” as a central theme, depicted as “prey” to reflect society’s insatiable thirst for it. Adapted from A.S. Byatt’s Booker Prize-winning novel, the film not only captures the suspenseful plot and the intense atmosphere of 19th-century Victorian society’s pursuit of “knowledge”, but also integrates reflections from 20th-century intellectuals on the subject. It follows Roland Michell, a research assistant who uncovers intimate letters written by Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash, sparking his pursuit of “knowledge” and revealing its transformative impact on both personal lives and history. In doing so, *Possession* highlights the power of “knowledge”, continuing the spirit of 19th-century Britain’s scientific, cultural, and industrial revolutions, which laid the foundations for modern progress.

This study examines how *Possession* creates suspense through its detective techniques and plot structure, using “knowledge” as a metaphor for “prey”. Suspense is a critical element in cinema, as it piques the audience’s curiosity and intensifies their engagement with both the unfolding plot and the fates of the characters (Bordwell et al. 57,71). Building on this, the study further investigates how *Possession* portrays “knowledge” as “prey” in three interconnected aspects: the detective techniques employed, the unsent letters and the desire to read, and the unresolved mysteries that prompt theoretical reflections. These interconnected elements not only sustain the narrative’s suspense but also deepen the film’s broader exploration of “knowledge”, truth, and the intellectual pursuit that drives both the plot and character development.

II. DETECTIVE TECHNIQUES AND THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH

Though titled *Possession: A Romance*, the film delves into the theme of “knowledge” through

detective narrative techniques, portraying academic research as an investigative process. This fusion of “knowledge” and detective fiction adds a layer of complexity, with the search for truth driving the plot forward and each revelation further expanding the “knowledge” framework. At the core of *Possession* lies the pursuit of truth, which is revealed through a carefully crafted blend of historical and contemporary storytelling. This combination of academic inquiry and detective work not only highlights the continuity across eras but also facilitates a dialogue between the past and the present, offering the audience a unique experience in the quest for truth (Todorov 55-65). Tzvetan Todorov, in his analysis, observes that detective stories typically consist of two narrative levels: the crime story and the detective’s story (55-65). Similarly, *Possession* features two intricately woven narrative layers, united through the framework of academic research. This dual-layered structure spans the 19th and 20th centuries, blending historical inquiry with present-day investigation and thereby merging history with reality. In *Possession*, modern scholars Roland and Maud explore Victorian letters to uncover the hidden love story between Ash and LaMotte. The film also shows their emotional bond from the 19th-century perspective. As Roland unravels the mystery, the narrative shifts between timelines, blending Victorian history with 20th-century interpretations. This non-linear structure adds complexity and enriches the viewer’s experience.

In the narrative maze of the film *Possession*, Roland and Maud are not merely academic detectives but also serve as guides for the audience in their exploration of historical truths. As the plot gradually unfolds, the audience is drawn into the detective’s journey, navigating a labyrinth of unknowns and uncovering the complex truths hidden behind the case. Through their emotional connection with the detectives, the audience gains a deeper understanding of the story’s themes and motivations. Roland and Maud, like detectives, piece together Ash and LaMotte’s relationship from the clues in their letters. The letters in the library spark Roland’s curiosity, claiming they will “completely alter the

historical view of Ash as a good husband,” offering new perspectives in Ash’s study. Roland and Maud retrace Ash and LaMotte’s steps to find real-world evidence of their love story.

As their research deepens, Roland and Maud uncover more valuable clues, including letters Ash wrote to his wife, Ellen Ash. Among these clues, Maud finds inspiration in LaMotte’s line “The doll keeps the secret,” leading her to unexpectedly discover all of Ash and LaMotte’s correspondence hidden in a doll, providing crucial evidence for Roland’s study. The collaboration between Maud’s scholarly expertise and Roland’s analytical insight proves instrumental in piecing together the intimate relationship between Ash and LaMotte, highlighting the interplay between intellectual inquiry and intuitive discovery. Together, Maud’s expertise and Roland’s insight complement each other, revealing the intimate relationship between the two 19th-century poets. Through their discoveries, the film gradually uncovers the truth, providing the audience with an experience of cognitive and emotional transformation.

III. THE UNSENT LETTER AND THE DRIVE FOR “READING” DESIRE

In film, suspense is often created by withholding key narrative elements. In *Possession*, the three unsent letters create informational gaps, building suspense and stimulating the audience’s curiosity and “reading” desire.

As critics note, *Possession* is a game of desire between the text and the reader (Shinn 164-183; Bronfen 117-134). It metaphorically explores the self-repression and desires of postwar British female intellectuals, with readers and viewers developing a sensory attachment to the expressions of these desires (Barthes 1975). The first unsent letter is Ash’s secret letter found in the library. Roland discovers these unfinished letters at the start and their gaps spark the audience’s curiosity to fill them in. This interaction deepens audience engagement and mirrors literary critic Wolfgang Iser’s idea that a text’s incompleteness invites the reader’s imagination and interpretation (195). Roland uses the letter to uncover Ash’s secret, symbolizing the

search for meaning. Its unfinished nature encourages multiple interpretations, reflecting postmodern views of texts as dynamic.

The second undelivered letter is one that Alan failed to give to Ash. The camera shows Alan standing before Ash's body, holding a letter meant for him a month earlier. A flashback shows Lamott apologizing to Alan and asking her to deliver a letter to Ash, hinting at secrets and adding suspense. However, Alan did not fulfill Lamott's request and never gave the letter to Ash before his death, eventually placing it in his grave. This intensifies the drama and keeps the audience emotionally engaged. It raises questions about loyalty, secrets and loss, while challenging expectations. The film creates an emotional loop, connecting the audience's curiosity with the characters' motivations and deeper meanings. Catherine Belsey argued that unfulfilled desires in romantic stories maintain their appeal (683). By not revealing the ending, the film creates a space of uncertainty, where viewers are eager to learn more but don't want the story to end, as it would end their desire to engage. In short, the story's conclusion ends their longing (Blanchot 51). Lamott and Ash's relationship highlights the challenges women face in pursuing desires and independence.

The third unsent letter is Ash's verbal instruction. At the film's end, the omniscient narrator takes the audience back to 1865, where Ash meets his daughter and asks her to deliver a message to Lamott. However, she forgets the task while playing with her brother. This plot device cleverly taps into the audience's expectations, driving the narrative forward with a dual effect. First, it heightens the dramatic tension, as the audience wonders about the unspoken message's effect on the plot. Second, it keeps the audience emotionally engaged, evoking sympathy for the unfinished connection between Ash and Lamott. This tension deepens emotional resonance and offers insight into the characters' motivations. The scene also highlights the narrative's clever structure, using flashbacks and suspense to build to a climax. The girl's forgetfulness adds a tragic note and serves as a metaphor for fate's unpredictability and fragile communication. This

suspense enhances the emotional depth and makes the film's conclusion more impactful. The 19th-century story of Lamott and Ash lacks a clear resolution, and this open-ended narrative not only provides an emotional context for the 20th-century relationship between Roland and Maud but also stimulates the reader's ongoing desire for the text, creating a continuous dialogue of mutual engagement between the film and the audience (Mitchell 106). Audience find certainty in the known modern love story, leaving curiosity and uncertainty about the past in suspense. As scholar Maurice Blanchot pointed out, even in "silence," language still "insists" on existing (51). The film intertwines 19th- and 20th-century love stories as a metaphor for textual desire, engaging the audience's senses and emotions. Possession becomes a dialogue between text and history, inviting viewers to navigate the known and unknown while experiencing both "knowledge" and emotion.

IV. UNSOLVED MYSTERIES AND THEORETICAL REFLECTION

The film *Possession* cleverly constructs an ideal academic system, but leaves it as an intriguing mystery. This mystery explores themes like academic possessiveness, research methods, and feminist theory. Novelist Byatt uses irony to reflect on 19th-century views of "knowledge", critiquing the current academic system, with this reflection artfully presented in the film. As Brooks and Kelly note, "reproductive of the past yet accessible to the interventions of the present" (234), clarifying its knowledge mode (95).

The film portrays the debate between American and British scholars over Ash's research, reflecting the academic critique and reflection on possessiveness. For instance, the "Ash Factory" is led by British scholar James Blackadder and American scholar Mortimer Cropper, but their rivalry over Ash's letters leads to a breakdown in their relationship, leaving the future of the Ash Factory uncertain. Through this ironic approach, the film exposes the possessiveness inherent in the Anglo-American academic world of the 1980s. Furthermore, it illustrates the rise of individualism in academic research and how such

a trend obstructs the pursuit of objective truth and “knowledge” sharing. For example, the difficult collaboration between scholars suggests that personal interests often override the collective goal of advancing “knowledge” exploration. In addition, the commercialization of academia is an implicit theme in the novel; scholars’ research can be swayed by external factors like funding, which in turn undermines the purity and objectivity of their work. However, beyond the influence of external pressures, the personal ambitions and pursuit of fame by these two scholars reveal a deeper issue: that is, how individual achievements frequently take precedence over collective interests within the academic world.

The film critiques the Ash Factory’s post-structuralist methods without defining an ideal approach, inviting reflection on academic methodologies. It advocates a blended strategy of traditional and modern methods for nuanced analysis, rather than endorsing a single solution. Roland and Maud embody ideal scholars who challenge 20th-century critical methods, illustrating the film’s implicit support for a balanced academic framework. After discovering Ash’s secret letters, Roland joins Maud, a Lamott specialist, to delve into Ash’s work. Roland, previously aligned with the fragmented post-structuralist methods of the Ash Factory and Maud, employing psychoanalytic criticism, had both prioritized theory over direct textual engagement. This time, they break traditional academic boundaries by integrating their research with the natural environment. Roland reexamines Ash’s poetry, focusing on its linguistic beauty rather than solely seeking references or biographical clues. This shift transforms him into an ideal reader, emphasizing the film’s advocacy for an immersive and integrative approach to literary texts.

In *Possession*, Lamott and Maud represent the emotional journeys of 19th- and 20th-century female intellectuals, respectively. Influenced by feminism, Byatt contrasts Lamott’s independence with Maud’s emotional uncertainty. Specifically, Lamott initially avoids male possessiveness through a same-sex relationship but ultimately

chooses a path of independence. Conversely, Maud, while researching Ash and Lamott’s affair alongside Roland, develops feelings for him yet struggles with her emotions. Moreover, Maud’s pinned-up hair symbolizes her inner uncertainty; as her connection with Roland deepens, she releases her hair, symbolizing her newfound emotional freedom and willingness to embrace an equal, open relationship. Thus, this transformation reflects Byatt’s ideal gender equality.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper examines *Possession* to highlight how suspense is used in the narrative and explores “knowledge” as “prey”. Suspense symbolizes academic inquiry, critiquing contemporary theory’s detachment from reality through Roland and Maud’s investigation of Ash and LaMotte, engaging the audience’s quest for knowledge. This enhances the story’s appeal and deepens the audience’s understanding and respect for the academic research process. Furthermore, The film contrasts 19th- and 20th-century academic environments, revealing the evolving manifestations of the drive for “knowledge” within cultural and social contexts. Consequently, *Possession* offers a unique narrative approach and an artistic representation of knowledge, love, and historical truth. In this way, it provides valuable insights for both the academic world and a wider audience.

WORKS CITED

1. Allitt, Patrick N. *Victorian Britain*. The Great Courses, 2002.
2. Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Hill and Wang, 1975.
3. Belsey, Catherine. “Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire.” *New Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1994, pp. 683 - 705. doi: 10.2307/469473
4. Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Translated by Ann Smock. University of Nebraska Press, 1982.
5. Bordwell, David, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 11th ed., McGraw-Hill Education, 2017.

6. Bronfen, Elisabeth. "Romancing Difference, Courting Coherence: A. S. Byatt's *Possession* as Postmodern Moral Fiction." *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature*, Yale University Press, 2004. pp. 117–34.
7. Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Harvard University Press, 1992.
8. Byatt, A. S. *Possession: A Romance*. Vintage, 1991.
9. Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.
10. Kelly, Kathleen Coyne. *A. S. Byatt*. Twayne Publishers, 1996.
11. Kimber, Gerry. "A Cycle of Dislocation: Katherine Mansfield, Modernism and Proto-Postcolonialism." *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*, edited by Patrick Gill and Florian Kläger, Routledge, 2018, pp. 104–24.
12. Mitchell, Kate. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*. Springer Nature, 2010.
13. Shinn, Thelma J. "What's in a Word? Possessing A. S. Byatt's Metonymic Novel." *Papers on Language and Literature*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1995, pp. 164–83.
14. Todorov, Tzvetan. "Typologie du roman policier." *Poétique de la prose*, 1971, pp. 55–65.