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The landscape narrative system of Yellow River–themed documentaries: a case study of *The River Flows Day and Night*

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Abstract: Taking the Yellow River–themed documentary *The River Flows Day and Night* as a case study, this article draws on the theoretical frameworks of the production of space and cultural memory to examine how documentary filmmaking employs landscape-based narration to transform the Yellow River from a natural geographical object into a mediated space that carries historical experience and local identity. Centered on the relocation of floodplain communities in Shandong Province (1996–2021), the film constructs a narrative chain of space, memory, and affect through the presentation of environmental risk in physical space, the visual reconstruction of cinematic space, and the encoding of meaning in symbolic space. In doing so, events such as flooding and resettlement are translated into shared collective memory, enabling the contemporary reconstruction of local identity within a context of modern governance. The study demonstrates that the Yellow River landscape functions not merely as a narrative backdrop, but as a key communicative mechanism that links macro-historical processes with everyday life and drives the reproduction of social memory.

Keywords: Yellow River-themed documentaries; landscape-based narration; production of space; cultural memory; local identity

1 Introduction

In recent years, Yellow River-themed documentaries have moved away from grand narratives toward representations of local experience and individual life histories, reconfiguring the Yellow River from a national symbol into a lived space shaped by memory and social relations. This article examines how such documentaries generate a sense of place through spatial representation and memory practices.

The River Flows Day and Night focuses on the resettlement of floodplain communities along the Shandong section of the Yellow River from 1996 to 2021. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, this study analyzes how the film reconstructs place-based identity through the organization of physical, mediated, and symbolic space. It argues that landscape narration does not simply reproduce pre-existing meanings; rather, a sense of place emerges from the interaction between spatial production and memory inscription, offering insight into spatial narration in contemporary Chinese documentary practice.

2 Material representations of Yellow River cinema from the perspective of spatial production

Space was once regarded as an "empty container" devoid of inherent content. Henri Lefebvre argues that under

capitalism, production has shifted from the production of things within space to the production of space itself, while simultaneously generating the social relations that sustain spatial products [1]. On this basis, he proposes a triadic framework composed of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces, corresponding respectively to the material, conceptual, and social-symbolic dimensions of space. This framework provides the methodological foundation for the present analysis of the spatial narration in *The River Flows Day and Night*.

2.1 Physical space: the foundational expression of natural landscape

Physical space refers to tangible geographical environments and natural landscapes and constitutes the foundational layer of spatial production in documentary filmmaking. In *The River Flows Day and Night*, the hydrological and ecological conditions of the Yellow River floodplain function as the material basis of the narrative. Through images of floods, sediment, and submerged villages, the natural landscape is encoded as a "visualized environment of risk". As shown in Figure 1, the inundation of villages foregrounds the structural constraints imposed by the natural environment on everyday life, while the trees that remain standing serve as visual symbols of resistance and continuity, pointing to the resilience cultivated by floodplain residents through repeated encounters with flooding. In this way, the floodplain landscape is no longer a neutral backdrop but is constructed as a spatial condition that shapes individual destinies and collective memory.

Figure 1. Floodwaters submerging a village

2.2 Mediated space: visual reconfiguration of the Yellow River through media

Mediated space refers to the organization and translation of physical space through documentary techniques such as cinematography, editing, and voiceover, whereby continuous geographic space is re-encoded into visual structures with narrative functions. Through the combined use of aerial shots, long takes, and detail shots, *The River Flows Day and Night* enhances a sense of "reality" in resettlement scenes by maintaining spatiotemporal continuity. At the same time, the film juxtaposes flood imagery with post-resettlement communities through contrasts in color and lighting, thereby assigning affective and value-laden meanings to different spatial phases.

More importantly, this construction does not constitute a mere "representation" of natural space. Rather, spatial meaning is reshaped through visual rhetoric and narrative arrangement. The aerial perspective and shifts in scale situate individual lived experience within a macroscopic spatial structure, transforming geographic space into a form of "visualized space" oriented toward governance. Specifically, flood sequences predominantly employ cool tones and low saturation to foreground instability and risk, whereas resettled communities are depicted through bright, balanced warm tones that signal restored order and residential stability. Here, color functions not as decoration but as a narrative device

embedded within the visual structure; in coordination with composition and lighting, it translates spatial transformation into images with clear value orientations.

2.3 Symbolic space: ideological encoding of Yellow River cultural signifiers

Symbolic space is not a simple extension of physical space. Rather, it condenses historical experience and cultural meaning through specific material objects and narrative structures, endowing space with symbolic significance beyond the immediately real. In the film, the presentation of the land ledger (dizhang) constitutes a crucial moment in this symbolic construction. Scenes of an elderly villager leafing through the ledger render the macro-historical process of river course shifts into perceptible personal memory. As a material text, the ledger not only records historical land ownership and serves as a form of legal evidence but also embeds land-rights disputes within the historical context of river diversion, allowing individual narration and collective experience to converge within the same visual space.

For floodplain residents, land is not merely a means of livelihood but a symbol of family history and local order. The spatial ruptures caused by river diversion transform the land ledger into a material medium that links past and present. Its significance lies not in the outcome of land claims but in its symbolic function as historical evidence and an affective carrier. The film thus translates land disputes into cultural metaphors of "roots" and "belonging": faded ink and precise land records testify to generations of cultivation while establishing land as an emotional anchor in the ongoing production of place-based identity. As Yi-Fu Tuan observes, a sense of place emerges from affective bonds formed through long-term interactions between humans and their environment [2]; the land-ledger scenes visualize precisely this bond. Through repeated presentation of this object, the film constructs a stable symbolic structure among object, space, and subject, enabling individual memory to undergo social translation and become incorporated into the collective narrative of Yellow River culture. In this process, geographic space is transformed through cinematic practice into symbolic space that carries cultural identity and historical memory.

3 Memory inscription and the temporal structuring of Yellow River memory

Memory inscription constitutes a key mechanism of landscape narration through its distinctive temporality. In *Cultural Memory: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Identity in Early High Cultures*, Jan Assmann systematizes theories of collective memory by distinguishing between communicative memory and cultural memory [3]. The former relies on everyday communication and intergenerational transmission and is closely tied to recent historical experience, whereas the latter is preserved and repeatedly activated through stable media such as texts, images, and rituals, exhibiting stronger institutionalization and continuity.

Building on this framework, this article identifies three analytically verifiable pathways through which *The River Flows Day and Night* organizes memory in temporal terms: first, chronologization/archivalization through the visualization of landforms and river courses (geological memory); second, oralization/eventization through the juxtaposition of oral testimony and historical footage (historical events and traumatic memory); and third, developmental narrativization through the audiovisual organization of resettlement narratives (contemporary reconstruction and identity).

3.1 Geological memory: the stratification of natural history

Geological memory refers to the stratified landforms produced through long-term natural evolution in the Yellow River basin—such as sediment deposition, floodplains, and river course shifts—which function as geographic texts that register the passage of time. In Yellow River documentaries, floodplains and river diversion do not merely serve as natural backdrops; through visual narration, they are transformed into temporally oriented historical markers. By depicting changes in the river's morphology, the documentary embeds geological processes within an explicit temporal framework.

Sedimentation and channel migration thus cease to be purely geological phenomena and are instead organized as perceptible historical processes, enabling natural change to mediate across different temporal layers.

Shots 200–207 employ a continuous montage of distant push–pull shots and fixed close-ups to translate the spatial sequence of "southward channel shift–land re-emergence–cross-bank separation" into traceable temporal indices, thereby motivating the narrative action of land reclamation. Shot 475 uses an archival dispositif of "photographs plus captions" to insert family life histories into a chronological chain (2003/2010/2013), granting personal experience a reusable temporal structure. Shot 590 combines fixed close-ups with oral testimony (e.g., "we were forced to move again and again by the river," "whenever the water rose, everything flooded") to bind geomorphological risk to lived experience, reinforcing the perceptible linkage between "natural processes" and "survival experience." Through these strategies, river course change is translated on screen from a natural phenomenon into a resource of cultural memory, forming the temporal dimension and semantic foundation of landscape narration [3].

3.2 Contemporary reconstruction: memory reproduction and identity

Contemporary reconstruction refers to the film's re-encoding of the Yellow River landscape through techniques such as editing, music, and voice-over, situating it within the modernist discourse of ecological protection and urban development. This process gives rise to a narrative mechanism of "memory reconstruction–spatial reconfiguration". Its core media logic is developmental narrativization: relocation functions as an interpretive framework through which the repair of trauma and the rebuilding of order are overlaid and rendered as an acceptable historical outcome.

By juxtaposing the life histories of four generations of floodplain residents (Liu Zhaoshan → Tiantian) with shifts in policy, the film constructs a cross-generational, family-chronicle–like narrative that renders individual experience transferable across time. This strategy resonates with the notion of the living transmission of sites of memory, which emphasizes the interaction between intergenerational oral narration and material remnants. At the audiovisual level, aerial shots of standardized residential communities are set against images of flood-submerged old houses: the former, with their geometric layouts and infrastructural networks, symbolize the technical rationality of governance, while the latter, marked by damaged roofs and leftover objects, point to the material residues of trauma. This spatial contrast may be understood as a form of "governance through spatial reorganization", aligning with Foucault's reflections on space and power [4]. Sonically, sustained tension emerges between dialect dialogue and the noise of construction: the former carries local knowledge and embodied memory, while the latter signifies modernity's substitution of traditional livelihood practices. When music accompanies the completion of the new community, sound operates as an affective regulator, guiding viewers to seamlessly align trauma repair with developmental logic.

Consequently, the new settlement assumes a dual symbolism. On the one hand, it fulfills the governance promise of a "better life"; on the other, its standardized housing risks erasing regional architectural forms and everyday differences, thereby triggering a process of de-localization in cultural memory. As villagers negotiate their daily lives at the intersection of physic space and memory space, identity is reproduced precisely through this ongoing adjustment.

4 Conclusion

An examination of *The Yellow River Flows Day and Night* demonstrates that Yellow River–themed documentaries integrate natural landscapes, historical events, and contemporary governance practices through spatial narrative, thereby continuously activating a sense of place in both audiovisual production and reception. Centered on the relocation of floodplain communities, the film situates geological memory, traumatic experience, and modern development discourse within a unified communicative structure, revealing how documentary landscape representation participates in the reproduction of cultural memory and the reconfiguration of local identity. The Yellow River is thus constructed as a

mediating space that links macro-historical processes with everyday lived experience, offering a compelling case for understanding the communicative role of contemporary documentaries in the construction of social memory.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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