



# A Study on the Narrative Methods of *Time Still Turns the Pages* (2023) from the Perspective of Trauma Theory

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**Abstract:** *Time Still Turns the Pages* (2023) is a feature film directed by Hong Kong director Zhuo Yiqian and produced by Er Dongsheng. The film received five nominations at the 60th Golden Horse Awards and was shortlisted for the World Focus Unit at the 36th Tokyo International Film Festival. The story begins with an unclaimed anonymous suicide note, triggering middle school teacher Zheng Sir's search for the story behind the suicide note. This search process evoked the painful memory of his brother's suicide when he was young, allowing him to re-face the trauma deep in his heart. Through this story, the film reveals the family, campus and social issues behind the phenomenon of teenage suicide. On a deeper level, it explores the short life span of a damaged soul and how the living carry trauma and heal themselves. The film explores how people face, understand and deal with trauma, and raises the possibility of rebuilding the ruins of the soul through love and telling.

**Keywords:** trauma theory; *Time Still Turns the Pages*; narrative methods; reconstructing the mind

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## 1. Introduction

*Time Still Turns the Pages* explores trauma through familial pressures, societal expectations, and the psychological burden on teenagers. Using a dual narrative structure, it captures the temporal nature of trauma. While examining personal and intergenerational struggles, the film highlights trauma's irreversibility while affirming love, courage, and forgiveness as paths to healing.

## 2. The background and manifestations of traumatic psychology

*Time Still Turns the Pages* depicts adolescent trauma through the stories of Youjun and Youjie. The Zheng family, seemingly perfect, hides many struggles. Though charismatic in public, the father is tyrannical at home. Fearing his violence, the mother redirects her frustrations onto Youjie, whose poor academic performance leads to further mistreatment. This one-sided power dynamic fosters alienation and a vicious cycle of emotional neglect.<sup>[1]</sup>

The film reflects that excessive pursuit of social success causes the harm of youth education. Parents think that success in school can raise social status, and therefore children are under tremendous academic pressure. The utilitarian education overlooks individual health and all-around development and aggravates the anxiety and stress of teenagers.

The other layer of trauma originates from the analysis of depression in the realm of psychology. Depressed people are unwilling to accept loss and have a negative attitude towards themselves, leading to low self-esteem and self-denial. The film shows the psychological mechanism of traumatic experiences through multi-line narratives, such as Youjie's self-blame caused by his idealization of his family, and the blow his death had on Youjun and his family alienation<sup>[2]</sup>.

In addition, trauma in adolescence can easily lead to anxiety, fear, depression and other problems. The film shows different ways of coping with trauma through the two characters of Monitor and Vincent. The monitor chose to suppress and numb to avoid trauma, while Vincent's problematic behavior stemmed from self-protection from bullying. Violence and discrimination in schools are also presented as the result of structural trauma on individuals.

These traumas present the challenges adolescents face as they grow, impacting their psychology and behavior and requiring deeper understanding and support.

### **3. The continuity of trauma and its temporality**

*Time Still Turns the Pages* uses a dual-line structure and a displaced perspective to present the temporality of trauma. The narrative is divided into past and present tenses, using diaries as the central medium to show emotions and memories across time and space. The dual tenses in the film reflect both the traumatic death encounter and the experience of survival. Trauma narratives oscillate between the event itself and the story of survival, using dislocated narratives to reveal the complexity of trauma. Through vivid images, the film shows the cycle of trauma in time, revealing its lag and invisibility [3].

Cathy Caruth defined traumatic psychology as an overwhelming encounter with a sudden or catastrophic event. Typically, the reaction to such events is delayed and often manifests through intrusive phenomena like hallucinations. Recurrent uncontrollable behavior. “Trauma breaks down a person’s defense mechanisms and prevents them from responding effectively, which means that the trauma does not take effect immediately but manifests itself over time with a lag”.<sup>[4]</sup>

Inter-generational trauma profoundly affects the self-perception and identity construction of the next generation, presenting a cycle in which trauma evolves into emotional connections. The English title of the film *Time Still Turns the Pages* implies the linearity of time and the cycle of psychological time, and the stagnant moments in life become the key to the traumatic narrative. In these moments, the audience perceives the stagnation of time and the overflow of emotions, showing the irreversible and cyclical dialectical relationship between life and trauma.

### **4. Restoring the subject in memory and narrative**

Historian Dominick Lacapra linked traumatic memory to the unconscious, proposed the concepts of “historical trauma” and “structural trauma”, and introduced “loss” and “absence” explain them respectively [5]. The former refers to the trauma of historical events caused by a specific time, and the latter is a trans-historical inner state that makes people anxious about “integrity”. *Time Still Turns the Pages* adopts a linear overall logic, but multiple clues run in parallel, including the task of finding the owner of the suicide note, Youjun’s recollection of the growth stages and the reconstruction of the contents of the diary. Trauma is both absence and presence, with individuals shaping their actual actions based on the experience while simultaneously re-understanding the past as a result of the encounter. These three clues are intertwined and advanced in a montage style, complementing each other, depicting the formation process of Youjun’s historical trauma, and showing his struggle and self-rescue from structural trauma. The narrative of Youjun’s adult stage is the main line, while memories and past plots explain and promote the changes in the character’s behavior, providing completeness and clarity to the main line logic.

*Time Still Turns the Pages* uses a dual-line structure and a displaced perspective to present the temporality of trauma. The film is constructed through a dual narrative time, which not only shows the past where the trauma occurred, but also reveals the recurrence of the trauma in the present. Diaries are the core medium, carrying emotions and memories, and becoming a place for dialogue between the deceased and survivors. The film devises narrative tricks through confusion, cross-montage and other techniques, and finally reveals in the “Funeral” episode that the diary reporter is the survivor Youjun, and the diary author is the late Youjie.

The double tense corresponds to the two tellings of the trauma narrative: the encounter with death and the experience of survival. Trauma narratives oscillate between the events themselves and stories of survival. The delay and repetition of traumatic psychology results in the subject being unable to respond effectively. The traumatic memory will not appear immediately, but will appear with a lag over time. In the film, Youjun’s trauma does not cause intense grief, and the family forcibly maintains order and covers up the tragedy. Youjun hid his diary after encountering a drastic change. When he grew up, he found temporary salvation in love. Intergenerational trauma is an insidious and profound form of trauma that is perpetuated through “intergenerational ghosts”. Youjun suffers from the influence of his parents’ emotional instability. His father’s critical illness and Youjun’s indifference are manifestations of a state of dissociation. The delay and repetition of trauma make the subject encounter trauma again and again, destroying interpersonal relationships and subjectivity.

The English title of the film *Time Still Turns the Pages* implies the cycle of time, the traumatic narrative reciprocating in psychological time. The wheel of life cannot be turned back, but psychological time is entangled with the past. Trauma narratives express chaos, dissociation, meditation and other emotions through moments of stasis, embedded in action

images, forming a “Crystal of time”. In these moments, present and past, phenomenon and potential, memory and fantasy meet. Trauma narratives often use techniques such as scenery, silence, and time cracks to break linear time sequences.

“Unreliable narrative” comes from *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and describes a narrator who is inconsistent with the norm. In film, the implied author is the authoritative coder, and film contains a tripartite narrative agent. The unreliable narrative in *Time Still Turns the Pages* is reflected in Youjun’s limitations in observing his brother and his imagination of the unknown contents of the diary. After encountering a trauma, the victim experiences repetitive dreams and behavioral impulses, which Freud called “repetition compulsion”. The vortex of traumatic memory needs to go through the process of trauma narration to turn it into a narrative memory. Witness is an important part of the trauma narrative. The diaries, comics, and suicide notes in the film are the second space of the traumatized people.

Director Zhuo Yiqian created *Time Still Turns the Pages* to commemorate his deceased friends. There are autobiographical elements in the film. The audience and the protagonist experience trauma together, achieving narrative creation in both personal and public senses.

## 7. Conclusion

*Time Still Turns the Pages* offers a candid reflection on teenage growth and the structural trauma behind suicide. The film delicately portrays trauma, making “depression” a visible and relatable experience. While it analyzes psychological dilemmas and cultural roots, it misses deeper discussions on patriarchy and women’s roles, leaving some characters underdeveloped. Notably, the film avoids a didactic tone, instead fostering empathy by respecting life’s imperfections. There is no perfect ending—the mother never returns, the father dies in regret, the marriage fails, and the owner of the suicide note remains unknown. While trauma cannot be fully repaired, the film conveys hope through love, courage, and forgiveness.

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