Research on Character Development Strategies Based on Spatial Narratives

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Abstract: Space serves as the anchoring point for a filmmaker's narrative, not merely as the setting for actions and storylines but also as a vital element intertwined with the era, society, and characters' psychological states. This paper analyzes the relationship between space and characters from two perspectives: the selection of space in character development and the role of individuals in space-driven narratives. Through spatial representation, this study organizes the issues of space and character construction by examining "domestic spaces" and "poetic spaces," analyzing the connection between characters' states and their environments. It explores how the production of space influences characters' personalities and how characters' creation of space reflects their inner world. Additionally, the paper extends spatial representation to public spaces, examining the potential of "heterotopia" in character development. The study discusses the position and universal characteristics of characters within space-dominated narratives.

Keywords: character development; space; film narrative

1. Spatial Narratives in Film

As an audiovisual art form, film utilizes space as a visual representation, providing a direct means to convey narratives. Since the Soviet montage school, filmmakers have explored spatial narratives, exemplified by the "creative geography" experiment and the "Odessa Steps" sequence, both of which investigate the narrative potential of filmic space. Italian Neorealism integrated space into film, as seen in Bicycle Thieves, where the post-war Roman setting not only serves as the story's backdrop but also constitutes the narrative environment, consciously presented by the director. In the French New Wave film Contempt by Jean-Luc Godard, space is integral to the narrative structure, with the story divided into three segments corresponding to three distinct locations — "Cinecittà", a "Roman apartment", and "Capri Island" — each contributing to the film's layered expression. Moreover, the exploration of cinematic space resonates with André Bazin's reflections on the essence of cinema.

With the evolution of cinematic art and the rise of digital media, human perception of space has become more sensitive, diverse, and complex. Cyberspace has begun to challenge physical space, prompting Gilles Deleuze to propose the concepts of "smooth space" and "striated space." The former is decentered, lacking hierarchical organization, characterized by constant flux, boundlessness, and unrestrained extension. In contrast, the latter is enclosed, defined by class, culture, and other factors. Although opposites, these two types of spaces coexist in a dynamic balance. Deleuze's ideas bridged digital media and poetic space, further advancing the study of spatial theory.

The integration of space and narratology, however, has been relatively uneven. Although Joseph Frank's 1945 essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" explored the relationship between space and narrative, and works like Spatial Form and Plot have since emerged, a systematic framework has yet to be established. Nonetheless, film practice shows that space is becoming increasingly significant in narrative construction, with more scholars adopting spatial narrative perspectives in film criticism.

From a certain perspective, the history of film narrative development is closely linked with the construction of spatial theory. The Lumière brothers' early films, such as their recording at the train station, essentially represent the discovery and documentation of space. Film has shortened the distance between humans and space, heightening spatial awareness. Bazin referred to film as "the myth of reconstituting the world in its original form," indicating that space is an essential consideration in narrative studies. As one scholar noted, "The image characteristics of cinematic signifiers can endow space with a form that is 'superior to time'".

In modernist cinema, public space often serves as a symbol of the protagonist's inner emotions. For example, in Michelangelo Antonioni's L'Eclisse, La Notte, and L'Avventura, architecture creates a grand yet alienating labyrinth where characters gradually lose themselves and drift apart. In L'Avventura, walls become the visual focal point, replacing charac-

ters, while the vast walls and bleak distant landscapes reflect the characters' sense of loss and confusion. In La Notte, the interaction between characters and space is more pronounced, with characters "dodging" within the space, highlighting their disconnection and delineating the alienation between individuals.

2. Spatial Representation and Cinematic Narrative

In narratology, the study of narrative initially derived from structuralism, leading to a focus on structure and form within works, with less emphasis on characters. Scholar Hu Yamin once said, "Character is the most mature field in realist literary theory, but it has not been sufficiently studied in narratology"[1]. This holds true in cinematic narrative as well. Professor Tan Peisheng devoted an entire chapter in Film Aesthetics to discussing "anthropology" in cinema, affirming the importance of "people" in films from various perspectives. However, in narratology, whether Russian formalism or French structuralism, characters are often considered subsidiary to actions, with human essence defined as "participation" rather than "personality," serving only as functional elements within the structure.

Similarly, in dramaturgy, there have long been debates between "character theory" and "plot theory." This is because dramaturgy often limits character development to the construction of situations and the setting up of conflicts, placing characters in dilemmas and revealing their motivations and personalities through their choices and actions. This intertwines plot with character, making discussions challenging. Indeed, placing characters within specific plots and using the progression of "situation-motivation-action-character" to develop characters can deeply explore their personalities, but it is not the only method. In On Theatricality, Professor Tan Peisheng, drawing on Hegel and Diderot's discussions on "situation," suggests that "the setting of character actions" is also an important part of the situation and "has a certain influence on character activities"[2], acknowledging the role of space and setting in character development.

In literary creation, authors often use symbolism, implication, and allegory to create characters. For example, in Dream of the Red Chamber, the author employs names like "Jia-False" and "Yuan, Ying, Tan, Xi-Original to be Sighed" to suggest character traits and fates through their cultural context, leaving readers with a subconscious initial impression of the characters. Moreover, scholar Long Diyong proposed the "spatial representation method," linking specific spaces with character traits. In Dream of the Red Chamber, the settings of "Yihong Court," "Xiaoxiang Pavilion," and "Hengwu Garden" serve as living spaces for the protagonists, where "the layout of the courtyards, the flowers, and even the interior furnishings all complement the personalities of the main characters"[3]. In the opening of South African writer Nadine Gordimer's The Guest, the character's residence is described in detail: "The house was warm in the center, with an oil burner, and light streaming through red curtains. Everything was in warm, soft tones..."[4]. In postmodern novelist Haruki Murakami's Kino, a particular space is linked to a character, allowing readers to form an initial impression of the character: "The man always sat in the same seat, which was inconspicuous and not particularly comfortable. The ceiling sloped down there, so he had to be careful not to bump his head when standing up"[5]. In William Faulkner's A Rose for Emily, the spatial description creates a rich visual connotation, using space to shape the character:

"It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps — an eyesore among eyesores"[6].

This set of spatial imagery, on the level of logical reality, accurately reflects Miss Emily's past, her reclusive personality, and her state of being stuck in a bygone era through the depiction of a once-elegant but now dilapidated and outdated house. Symbolically, this "stubborn and coquettish" house also serves as a metaphor for Miss Emily herself, who, like her house, is out of place and anachronistic in the eyes of the town's residents.

In cinematic narrative, the causal relationship and symbolic conveyance between people and space can directly appeal to visual imagery. By linking characters to specific spaces, the audience can enter the character through spatial representation. In Citizen Kane, the director first uses a series of shots that gradually draw closer to depict Kane's residence, a luxurious yet gloomy castle, allowing the audience to grasp Kane's personality traits through this "spatial imagery."

In Jia Zhangke's 24 City, spatial representation plays a crucial role in character development. As a film shot in a documentary style, the characters are detached from traditional narrative plots, and space becomes the primary element in shaping them. Characters like He Xikun in the abandoned factory, Secretary Guan in the theater, and Su Na in the old classroom are each observed in almost static shots, where they gaze at the space while the space also gazes back at them. Their past lives, experiences, and personalities are revived through the spatial details, allowing the audience to trace the history embedded within the imagery and connect with the characters, each standing still in a specific era.

This method of spatial representation also appears in Andrei Tarkovsky's films. In the opening of Stalker, the camera,

accompanied by the sound of water and machinery, moves through a dilapidated double door and slowly enters a bedroom. A family of three lies in bed, with water and medicine on the bedside table, and the external environment vibrates, making everything on the table shake. The camera, in a calm and scrutinizing manner, sweeps over the three faces and then slowly moves back. At this moment, the father and mother open their eyes, gazing into the void. Here, the rich perceptual elements support the space, with ubiquitous details narrating everything within it. Faces also become part of the perceptual elements of space. By giving the space a continuous characteristic through such shots, the audience is brought into the space, perceiving its rich details and heavy atmosphere from the character's perspective, and, unknowingly, they have already empathized with the characters.

Compared to the "situation-character" approach that requires logical reasoning and abstract understanding, the "spatial imagery-character" method provides the audience with a direct, concrete, and tangible visual reference, allowing them to quickly form a relatively stable initial impression of the character, supported by visual imagery. Meanwhile, this way of conveying character through spatial representation also resonates with Bazin's discussion on the ontology of cinema to some extent.

3. Rebellion and Discipline in Private Spaces

Martin Heidegger believed that space is the external manifestation of human essential forces. Space is not something external to humans but is directly connected to them; people exist through their dwelling spaces, and thinking of people simultaneously invokes the thought of their dwelling spaces. Ecologist Lawrence Buell also stated, "Place is part of the source of our rational abilities"[7]. In Ritchie Robertson's Who is Kafka?, the author explicitly links Kafka's "cubbyhole" living space with his character and the style of his works. The relationship between people and space can be analyzed from the perspectives of action and reaction. A person's subjective will acts upon the space in which they live and operate, while that space, in turn, influences them.

Liu Zaifu, in his work On the Combination of Characters, defines round characters as those with "dual or multiple combination characteristics," where traits such as good and evil, joy and sorrow, strength and softness, coarseness and subtlety coexist within the same character, forming a unified but opposing whole. "The dual combination of characteristics represents the dialectical unity of the positive and negative aspects within the realm of personality"[8]. The complexity of such characters is evidently difficult to fully capture through simple spatial representation unless the space itself possesses diverse characteristics that can resonate with the multiplicity of the character.

Gaston Bachelard's concept of poetic space, based on phenomenology, offers a solution that aligns with the needs of round characters. In Bachelard's spatial poetics, space serves as the dwelling place for imagination, dreams, and memories. Bachelard uses material archetypes such as the house, the bird's nest, and the shell to imbue real living spaces with poetry and imagination. These spaces are not only physical shelters but also sanctuaries for the soul, carrying dual responsibilities of protection and comfort.

In modern urban spaces, buildings are primarily designed with functionality in mind, often at the expense of artistic and meaningful considerations. "The principle of designing according to function is the universal principle of the modern language of architecture"[9]. The uniformity of building styles makes it difficult to analyze a character's personality through external spaces, as one might do with Citizen Kane. The overall architectural style of an apartment building does not provide an accurate portrayal of a single resident. Moreover, urban dwellers rarely consider the external aesthetic style of buildings as the primary factor in choosing their residence. Thus, in cinematic depictions of space, modern residential environments cannot convey character traits through the external appearance of homes as traditional "mansions" once did. The environment of modern communities can only serve as a rough indicator of the protagonist's social status. Consequently, the interior spatial environment has become the focus of contemporary urban cinematic representation. The first space depicted in a film often places the protagonist in a well-decorated apartment, where the minimalist Chinese-style decor conveys the owner's social status (middle class) and taste. Meanwhile, the dust-covered dining table and the unused furniture hint at the owner's state of mind.

Cabinets, boxes, and drawers, as storage spaces, delve deeper into the inner exploration of space within space, concealing more of the character's secrets. Numerous films have set up plot points around these storage spaces. In Alfred Hitchcock's Rope, the "secrets in the chest" drive the main plot. In Chungking Express, Faye sneaks into cop 633's home and tidies up his cabinets. In the film, 633's "home" takes on a dominant role, becoming an extension of his essence. By exploring 633's room, Faye gets to know him, confirming 633's character by opening each cabinet, and in this process, she enters his inner world (symbolically completed when Faye hides in 633's cabinet).

4. Heterotopia in Public Spaces

Unlike the relative stability of domestic spaces, public spaces bring forth various emotions and states in characters, which are often manifested more directly. Characters exhibit different states—comfort, ease, tension, or restraint—when placed in different public spaces, reflecting their personalities, values, and even their sense of belonging. In the film The Crossing, the young girl Peipei traverses various public spaces, wearing headphones in public transportation to counter the noise of the external world with detachment, filling the space with her melancholy and solitude. In the electronics market, she tries to appear calm but cannot fully conceal the deep-seated fear and anxiety within her, allowing the audience to understand her character.

If, in personal spaces, characters construct their spatial representation by modifying the space itself, in public spaces, they must choose where to position themselves. Foucault, in Of Other Spaces, defines heterotopias as real places that exist in society but are opposed to it, "where one can see oneself in a place where one is absent"[10]. Heterotopias are "other spaces" that exist on the periphery of mainstream culture. Entering a heterotopia also means relinquishing the possibility of gaining convenience and recognition within "normal" spaces. Adolescents, who are often caught between these two spaces, waver between the desire for "self-understanding" and the fear of breaking away from the big Other, leading to a sense of angst (in Heidegger's terms) in public spaces, which signifies "a deep structural relationship between man and the world"[11].

The primary characteristic of space-dominated narrative is the abandonment of character-driven motives as the main narrative force. Narrative depth is no longer central; instead, the characters' flat states and the randomness of events take precedence. This trait is more pronounced in public spaces.

In Italian neorealist films, directors brought real, war-torn spaces into the frame by "carrying the camera out onto the streets," making these spaces an integral part of the narrative. Characters wander through public spaces, with the audience understanding them through these environments. The spaces also determine the characters' fates. In Rome 11:00, unemployed women are forced to beg in the streets, becoming dependent on the space. Similarly, the father and son in Bicycle Thieves struggle on the streets. The use of long takes and deep-focus shots preserves the integrity of space, tightly binding characters to their environments, as seen in Rossellini's Stromboli. In one scene, the protagonist gets lost in the village, and the entire sequence is captured in a single overhead long take, compressing the character within the public space, with the space dominating the narrative.

Japanese director Akira Kurosawa used space similarly in his films of the same period. In Stray Dog, out of the 165 scenes, those confirmed as shot on location include scenes 1–3, 5–9, 17–27, 45, 52–89, and 146–164[12]. Among these, scenes 5–9 and 17–27 depict a chase through the city. The characters enter the post-war streets of Tokyo, with Kurosawa using subjective shots to capture the cityscape, thereby closely linking the space with the characters' emotions. This space-dominated narrative approach greatly enriches the text's polysemy.

5. Conclusion

The construction of cinematic space has become a prominent subject of study in recent years, indicating a vast potential for further exploration in the field of spatial narrative in film. In traditional dramaturgy, character traits and states are often revealed by placing characters in dilemmas, using their choices to communicate their values and personalities to the audience. However, when portraying characters through visual imagery, this connection must be made through space. Constructing characters through space offers a richer array of interpretations. The selection and combination of spaces such as residential areas, schools, dormitories, and entertainment venues, along with the intellectual elements and details crafted within these spaces, contribute to the development of the protagonist's character.

For instance, in The Crossing, the rebellious girl Peipei, who longs for paternal love and a sense of identity, is shaped by her movement between the alleys, electronic markets, and teahouses of the two cities. In The Boys from Fengkuei, the confused adolescents wandering between the shores of Fengkuei and the bustling streets of Kaohsiung are defined by their surroundings. Similarly, in A Brighter Summer Day, the oppressive atmosphere of the military dependents' village, school, and home contributes to the transformation of a young boy into a murderer. Everything Everywhere All at Once explores the inner world of its characters through multiple spatial dimensions. The "original universe" to which the characters return aligns with Deleuze's description of smooth space: "Deleuze, from the perspective of nomadic aesthetics, emphasizes that smooth space can disrupt the striated territories of traditional spaces"[13]. In the film, the "original universe" disrupts the "realistic space," forming connections and opening a new living space between mother and daughter.

Space serves as the attachment point for both characters and narrative. Exploring narrative space in film may lead to even more exciting possibilities for cinematic storytelling.

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