

Temporal narrative and visual symbols in *The Three-Body Problem*: an aesthetic interpretation from science fiction to images

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Abstract: As a milestone work of Chinese science fiction literature, the application of temporal narrative and visual symbols in the novel *The Three-Body Problem* has become the key to the adaptation from literary text to image. This paper intends to discuss the inheritance and innovation of the aesthetic style of *The Three-Body Problem* from the perspectives of the non-linear structure of temporal narrative and the metaphor of visual symbols. Through the comparative analysis of the narrative mode, temporal and spatial background and key image symbols of novels and film & television works, we can not only see the reproduction of the hard core of science fiction in the film & television adaptations, but also explore the aesthetic tension between the two. Through the time clues, the combing of *The Three-Body Problem*, the juxtaposition of historical mirror images and the shaping of visual images, this paper not only reproduces the grand imagination of "cosmic sociology", but also forms more correlation with the current context, and opens up new possibilities for the imaging of science fiction IP.

Key words: "*The Three-Body Problem*"; temporal narrative; visual symbol; aesthetic analysis

1 Nonlinear structure of the temporal narratives

1.1 The space and time in the novel

The Three-Body Problem adopts a non-linear temporal narrative structure, and constructs a grand and complex narrative system through the interleaving and span of multiple time and space. The novel begins with the event of "Guzheng string", which pulls the time clue back to the Cultural Revolution. Through the experience of the protagonist Ye Wenjie's father, it reveals the historical scars of that special era, laying the motivation for Ye Wenjie to contact with the three-body civilization in the future. Ye Wenjie's life has become the main thread throughout the whole novel. Her experience in the Red Bank Base, her battle with Evans, and her choice to become the leader of the "Advent School" have crossed more than half a century, witnessed the great changes of human society, and also reflected the cycle of the history of the universe. As the core concept of cosmic sociology, the law of "dark forest" originates from the mysterious dialogue between the character Luoji and others, but it can be traced back to the evolutionary history of human civilization, linking the three-body invasion with the expedition of ancient nomads, forming a historical mapping and metaphor [1].

In the novel, the narrative mode of multiple temporal cross-spanning breaks the linear flow of time and creates a three-dimensional and profound reading experience. On different time lines, the story echoes and sets off each other, not

only showing the color of fascinating suspense, but also containing profound historical philosophical enlightenment. Through the free switching and reorganization of time, the author Liu Cixin integrates the rational speculation of hard science fiction with the humanistic care, showing the unique charm of Chinese science fiction. The non-linear time narrative of the novel *The Three-Body Problem* not only opens up the expression form of science fiction literature, but also provides a new aesthetic idea for the adaptation of film and television works.

1.2 The comparison of temporal narrative structure: from linear to reconstructed

Novel narrative depends on the time node, while the film and television works focus more on the spatial narratives, which leads to the adaptation of film and television works facing a unique challenge of temporal and spatial transformation, especially the adaptation of science fiction novels. For example, the *Wandering Earth* takes a different approach from the original work, breaking the linear timeline of the novel, recombining the originally scattered events, and presenting them in a way more in line with the rhythm and tension of the film. This strategy of time reconstruction gives the film stronger dramatic conflict and emotional tension, making it more expressive of the big screen. In contrast, *The Three-Body Problem* TV series is closer to the original in its temporal narrative. The reason is that the TV series has more space and media characteristics are more suitable for continuous narrative, which can make the time clues of the original story unfold, presenting the complexity and heaviness of the novel. The differences in the temporal narrative structure of the two works not only reflect the artistic pursuit of the creative team under different adaptation strategies, but also reflect the different requirements for narrative time and space in movies and TV dramas. The time reconstruction strategy of the *Wandering Earth* is to cater to the immediacy and focus of the cinema. The relatively linear time strategy of the TV series *The Three-Body Problem* is more in line with the continuity of TV media. Two kinds of time-based narrative structure are compared to each other to provide the audience with the opportunity to experience the diversity of science fiction narratives, and also provide valuable experience for science fiction film and television adaptation [2].

2 A metaphorical symbol of the visual symbols

In order to make the audience better understand the world under Liu Cixin's works, the film has conducted a lot of textual research in terms of costume modeling, spatial environment and other aspects, faithfully restoring the historical background of the novel, thus enhancing the audience's sense of substitution. For example, the shot of Ye Wenjie operating the computer and taking out the perforated paper tape faithfully reproduces the scene when the Red Bank Base received the trimaran message in 1979. This detail is in line with the storage medium of the computer at that time, and is full of the characteristics of the times. In the image system, the spatial scene is the place where all the stories takes place, and also the carrier of the existence and development of the characters. "The spatial scene is the only matrix on which characters, plot, and narrative in film and television works rely for their residence, interpretation, extension, and sublimation." "Film and television works can use different temporal and spatial relationships to directly or indirectly reveal the fate of the characters, and use the modeling means in time and space to directly reveal the characters' psychology and emotions. The so-called space mostly refers to the environment and background of the characters' activities, which is the general framework of the plot and the characters' actions of the film." Therefore, the spatial scene plays a key role in setting the tone of the image, promoting the development of the plot, rendering the atmosphere, and reflecting the psychological state of the characters. For example, the selection of Yang Dong's experimental space scene is not only in line with the character setting, but also has a sense of thickness, a sense of history, also greatly improving the overall temperament of the series [3]. In the shooting process, the cooperation with relevant scientific experts ensures the accuracy of scientific details, makes those abstract physical concepts be reflected through images, deepening the audience's understanding of scientific content, lowering the threshold of the audience's understanding, and making the plot more friendly and easy.

In terms of special effects and art design, the crew also used techniques such as live motion capture, facial scanning and pure CG animation to present a 123-minute game period. These technologies not only enhance the visual effect of the game, but also utilize lighting to create a unique game atmosphere, which make the three-body visually futuristic and retain a touch of the retro texture of the 2007 game. In terms of visual design, the series adds moderate secondary creation on the basis of being loyal to the original work. For example, when the fictional character Wang Miao reveals the mystery of the three-body to the Pope in the three-body game, the scene combines style symbols such as Yayoi Kusama and Dadada. These visual symbols symbolize the chaos of the three-body world and the collision of civilization [4].

Through this visual use of symbols, the series presents the absurdity and disorder of the three-body world, strengthening the audience's understanding of the theme of the story, making this story not only impactful, but also deeply symbolic. The series also cleverly recreates some of the classic scenes in the original work. For example, the scene of dehydration and soaking enhances the visual impact by accelerating the process, and the picture of the Tri-Dimaran absorbing water strengthens the visual shock of the human body accumulation, leaving a deep impression on the audience. These designs all reflect the visual presentation of the crew's clever thinking and pursuit. In terms of animation style, the series chooses the LowPoly style to express the fables such as "Farmer and Turkey". The exaggerated lines and warm colors not only have the fable sense of the story, but also help the audience quickly understand the complex concept [5]. The low-polygon style makes these stories present a unique effect between 3D and 2D with a sense of nostalgia and abstraction, which not only fits the allegory content, but also enables the audience to quickly grasp its core ideas when watching. The use of such stylized visual symbols not only enriches the level of image presentation, but also enhances the artistic appeal of the series, making it more visually innovative and expressive while remaining faithful to the original.

3 Inheritance and innovation of the spirit of "hard science fiction" in the image adaptation

3.1 The reproduction of scientific ideas and technical details

As a masterpiece of hard science fiction, *The Three-Body Problem* has won the favor of many readers with its rigorous scientific core and rigorous logical deduction. In the process of film and television adaptation, the crew always adheres to the respect and inheritance of the scientific spirit of the original work, and strives to faithfully reproduce the rational core of the original work in the image language. First of all, in the stage of script writing, the scriptwriter team extensively referred to the cutting-edge theories in physics, astronomy, computer science and other fields, and carefully selected and artistically translated the scientific concepts and technical settings in the original work, so as to ensure that the scientific connotation of film and television works would not be diluted or distorted in the adaptation.

In the visual effect production process, the special effects team worked closely with the scientific consultants to make a detailed visual presentation of the cosmic wonders, extraterrestrial civilization, future technology and other elements in the original work. From the trajectory of the tri-body galaxy to the planetary layout of the solar system, from the microstructure of Mico to the working principle of the spacecraft, every scientific detail has been repeatedly demonstrated and carefully designed, striving to reproduce the science fiction images of the original work with the greatest sense of realism and credibility. Even for some of the original "unshot" core elements, such as two-way foil, four-dimensional space, etc., the crew also tried to visualize, not only retaining its scientific connotation, but also giving artistic expression, which can be described as unique originality. It is worth mentioning that the inheritance of the scientific spirit in the filmization of the *Three-Body Problem* is not a simple list of concepts and scenes, but an effort to internalize it into an organic composition of character shaping and theme expression. The characters in the play are immersed in the choice of major scientific propositions, and their thoughts and feelings, as well as their choices all show the dialectical unity of scientific rationality and humanistic care. On the one hand, the movie praises the persistent character of scientists such as Ye Wenjie

and Wang Miao to explore the truth without distractions. On the other hand, it also reveals that science is "not omnipotent", and any application of technology that breaks the bottom line of ethics has the potential to have unintended and disastrous consequences. The movie puts science under the scrutiny of human nature, which triggers the audience to think deeply about the proposition that "science shows man, rather than dominating people" [6].

The Three-Body Problem fully demonstrates the rational core and scientific connotation of the original work with its exquisite video language, which can be called a comprehensive presentation of the spirit of "hard science fiction" in the field of film and television. While faithfully writing the science fiction imagination, the crew also writes the "Chinese expression" of the deep integration of science and humanities with realism. This kind of imaging attempt integrating ideological, artistic and ornamental nature is not only the inheritance and development of the spirit of the original work, but also an important symbol of the maturity of Chinese science fiction film and television, and an infinite imagination space for Chinese science fiction movie and television.

3.2 The positive impact of *The Three-Body Problem* on China's science fiction industry

The positive impact of *The Three-Body Problem* on China's science fiction industry is comprehensive. The success of the drama version of *The Three-Body Problem* has injected fresh vitality into the creation of Chinese science fiction film and television, and enhanced the recognition and attention of China's science fiction industry at home and abroad. Driven by the national strategy, film and television companies and platforms have increased their science fiction projects, enriching the types of domestic science fiction themes. With its excellent production and excellent cast, *The Three-Body Problem* has attracted a large number of audiences, changing the stereotype of science fiction works and opening up a broader market for science fiction films and television. Various science fiction film and television works combine science fiction with suspense, romance, action and other elements, and develop a variety of genres to meet the needs of different audience groups. At the same time, the drama version of *The Three-Body Problem* has a significant impact on the international arena, introducing Chinese science fiction works onto the international stage, making the international audience have a deeper understanding of Chinese science fiction culture, and laying a foundation for the international development of China's science fiction film and television industry. It has broken the Western monopoly on the science fiction genre, demonstrated the imagination and creative level of Chinese science fiction, promoted the promotion of Chinese culture and science fiction creation overseas, provided new ideas and direction for Chinese film and television works to expand the international market, and facilitated cross-cultural exchanges.

4 Conclusion

With its magnificent visual wonders, exquisite narrative strategies and profound and intelligent philosophical connotations, *The Three-Body Problem* has reached an unprecedented height of artistic expression and ideological depth, and is regarded as a masterpiece of Chinese science fiction film and television. In the future, science fiction, a cultural form with both imagination and philosophy, will surely usher in a more bright development prospect. Science fiction film and television should also be based on the soil of reality, and reveal the complexity of human nature, the diversity of society, and the fragility of civilization with keen insight. An excellent science fiction work should become a spiritual light to enlighten the mind and illuminate life, indicating that in this era full of uncertainty, everyone should uphold the rational light of science and adhere to the heart of humanistic care. The film and television process of *The Three-Body Problem* is not only a magnificent turn of Chinese science fiction TV series, but also a symbol of the steps of human civilization towards the stars and the sea in the dialogue between science and humanity.

Conflicts of interest

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

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