

Narrative Construction Path of Film Character Relationships from the Perspective of Aesthetic Expression

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Abstract: The connections among the characters provide the foundation for the story of a film and are also used to present beauty. This paper takes the subject of character relationships in films from the perspective of aesthetic expression and explores how to construct a narrative of character relationships in films. Four analytical paths are proposed along with their justifications: The structuring path uses the Greimasian Actantial Model as a tool to abstract character relationships into deep grammar and addresses how these relationships are understood; the visualised path employs spatial composition and close-ups to give the relationships a visible form in the frame and responds to how these relationships are seen; the auditory path uses sound design, silence handling and layers of environmental sound to allow the relationships to be experienced sensually and responds to how these relationships are heard; finally, the naturalisation path builds relationships gradually through life-flow narration and emotional details in the daily texture, addressing how these relationships are felt. The four paths have both tension and complementarity, and the choice and balance of these paths are an expression of the director's artistic personality as well as an operational analytical framework for understanding the aesthetic mechanism of film narrative.

Keywords: Film aesthetics, character relationships, narrative construction, actantial model, visual grammar, sound design.

1. Introduction

Relationships among characters are also methods of film narration. Both are structural prerequisites for the development of the plot; without the desires, conflicts and compromises among characters, the story cannot proceed, and they are also important carriers of film aesthetics expression—the emotional memory of the audience for a film often does not depend on the complexity of the plot but rather on the intangible tensions and warmth between characters. However, as a "relational existence", character relationships are abstract and cannot be directly experienced. The film needs to employ certain narrative devices to present them in an accessible way [1]. The change process that this paper will study is "narrative construction".

Many results have been achieved by scholars in recent years. Among them, the effect of structuralist narratology is relatively substantial. Greimas's Actantial Model and the Symbol Matrix have been widely applied to analyze the character relationship structures in films such as *Wrath of Silence*, *Youth*, *Mountains May Depart*, and *B for Busy*. Researchers are trying to find the functions and deep meanings of all the characters in the complex character map. Although the above studies have offered effective analytical tools, the structuralist narrative system itself tends to over-rationalise character relationships and pays too little attention to the particular aesthetic qualities of film as an audio-visual art.

First, this paper will introduce the idea of aesthetic expression and then examine how the narrative of character relationships is built through several coexisting paths. What is meant by "aesthetic expression" here is the way in which film gives character relationships an aesthetic form that can be perceived through formal elements (structure, composition, sound, rhythm, texture, etc.). Based on the above analysis, this paper puts forward four construction paths: the

Structuring Path, the Visualised Path, the Auditory Path and the Naturalisation Path. These four paths are not mutually exclusive; rather, they have different focuses and are often combined in various films and sections.

2. Structuring Path: Actantial Model and the Grammatical Abstraction of Character Relationships

A first-order theoretical tool for exploring the connections among characters in films is the Greimasian actantial model. The six types of functions for characters in the narrative are classified as six actants: the subject and the object, the sender and the receiver, the helper and the opponent. Opposition and Combination of the two form the deep grammar of the narrative. The model can organise the complex relationships among characters into a reasonable logical system and reveal the reasons behind the events in the film.

Some film studies have explored the analytical prospects of this. Renshun Wang used Greimas' narrative semiotics theory to study Xin Yukun's *Wrath of Silence*. Through surface and deep narrative analysis, he showed that economic disparity and class imbalance were the root causes of violence among the characters, and thus the director exposed how the monopoly of power and interests held by the upper class led to retaliatory resistance [2]. Zhang Baomin, Chang Wannian and Xu Wenjie are the three characters in the film with structural conflicts. Zhang Baomin is the subject who seeks his missing son Chang Wannian, represents the violent order, and assumes the function position of the opponent; Xu Wenjie is in a state of conflict between lawyer identity and moral choice, and thus has an unstable function position. This functional uncertainty is a high-aesthetic design choice in the film that does not lead to a fixed judgment by the audience on the morality of the characters.

The Application of the Actantial Model is not restricted to

a single film. Analysis of actants in *B for Busy* also shows the explanatory power of the structuring path. The subjects and objects in the film have non-typified life texture features, and the helpers and opponents have interchangeable attributes. With the expansion of the boundaries of actants and the division of functions in contemporary society, the relationships among characters in modern novels are no longer simple oppositions but rather a kind of ambiguity. The instability of this structure is also an artistic choice; therefore, the audience does not need to determine whether characters are good or bad in their perception but can feel the deep meaning of life through their relationships. Some studies have repeatedly verified the explanatory power of the structuring path, but the actantial model itself also has theoretical problems. Some studies have found that the surface actantial model fails to explain the basic fact of at least three symbiotic actants in a story [3]. The first reason for the structure of this paper is that it will not only present the events of the incident but also explore how the relationships among the people involved in the incident have been formed. How are the organised relationships presented in visuals after being organised for analysis? The displayed path is based on the above question.

3. Visualized Path: Presentation of Spatial Composition and Character Relationships

The camera shows the two people. Who is standing and who is sitting, who is in the bright light and who is in the dark, who occupies most of the frame and who is pushed to the edge-before the audience can hear a single line of dialogue, their eyes have already read the temperature of this relationship. This is exactly why film and literature present the relationships among characters differently. Novels can show the subtle tension between two people through extended sections of psychological description, but films cannot. Films should show the connection between things in an accessible way for the public. Stillness and motion, as well as the proximity and distance of characters in a picture, are all basic ways to show relationships. A character in motion and a quiet, seated character placed together in a single frame often lack a certain sense of momentum; whether the characters share the same frame itself already conveys a sense of closeness or distance.

Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog* can almost be read as a textbook of visualised path. Cooper's research notes that this film is rich in worthwhile details of careful arrangement of visual symbols, and the complexity and tension of the characters' relationships are revealed layer by layer through the frame rather than through dialogue [4]. Phil and Peter are always in a visually lower position to each other. Phil is in an open outdoor space, and in a panoramic shot, he appears as a silhouette; this posture itself is a statement, as if the air of this land belongs to him. Peter appears repeatedly in indoor enclosed spaces and close-up shots; the camera is very close, so we can see all the small changes in his face clearly. Cooper believes that the film shows the flow of power relations through visual entanglements between people and objects, and the paper flowers made by Peter are not merely decorative props but are closely linked to the construction of masculinity and gender order. This behaviour shows his weakness and is also indicative of being an outsider. Given the change in circumstances towards the end of the movie, many of these

scenes will now seem meaningful to the audience.

The aesthetic value of the visualised path is that the relationships among characters are now "felt" rather than "told". The audience does not need a narrator to tell them how the two people are related; the work itself will show. Hou Hsiao-hsien's way in *City of Sadness* is not the same. The whole film has 221 shots, only 17 medium shots and 4 close-ups. Long depth-of-field shots include all the characters in the same frame without cutting or emphasis, and their relationship develops, collides and dissolves within the frame, refusing to be simplified like life itself [5].

4. Auditory Path: Sound Design and Sensory Construction of Character Relationships

Although films are often called audio-visual arts, for a long time, the function of sound in showing the connections among characters has been ignored. Speech speed, the use of silence and other sounds in the environment can all help to create a sense of place. Michel Chion uses the metaphor of "hide-and-seek" to explain the connection between sound and image, and sound is not added to the picture; instead, it has an independent expressive power. Auditory features of objects that cannot be observed visually are also available for analysis.

Dialogue is a relatively high-level form. Who is speaking, who is listening, who is interrupting, who is silent? These are all forms of showing the changes in relationships. But what is more interesting is frequently silence. Most of the emotional information in *In the Mood for Love* between Zhou Muye and Su Lizhen is not expressed through words. The overlapping footsteps in the corridor and the continuously ringing phone are more prominent than the lines. Some studies have pointed out that in the film, "baseline sounds and background sounds complement each other; signal sounds are repeatedly used, and background sounds appear occasionally", thus achieving emotional closure through blank space [6]. Sound is no longer the way of communication; now it is the absence of connection between us. What the audience feels is not only what happened between the two, but also those things that have never happened but always exist.

Music and the sounds of nature are also included. Recurring musical themes can evoke emotions in the audience about characters even when those characters are not on screen. *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* has a special kind of sound processing for daily life. Clinking of bowls and chopsticks, soft talk among family members, and occasional silence-all these sounds together constitute the sound environment of family life. Some studies have examined the "sound perspective" of the film in terms of regional features, motion and space, etc., and pointed out that sound serves to tell stories, connect scenes and create images [7]. Sound Director Li Danfeng said that the sound design of the film aims to start from the concept of "roving observation" and create a constantly changing scroll-like sense with sound.

From *In the Mood for Love* to *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, the ways sound is used to build relationships are different, but they all lead to the same end. A separate sound path can be added to extend the scope of character connection beyond sight. Sound processing is more indirect than visualised paths; it does not explicitly present the relationship between things but creates a mood and allows us to feel the texture of that relationship through hearing.

5. Naturalization Path: The Texture Generation of Character Relationships through Narrative Flow

If the auditory path focuses on how relationships are perceived through sound, then there is another more subtle way of construction that can be referred to as the "naturalisation path". It does not have a structural opposition or composition, and it is not strongly associated with sound; rather, it has gradually emerged from daily life. Hirokazu Kore-eda's works are typical examples of this kind of creative works.

Hirokazu Kore-eda once said that his way of creation was "sketching", and he would deliberately add many small details when writing a script. My observations and descriptions of people start with details... I pay more attention to the emotions of the actors in the camera and make the shots 'get closer' to the people. This reveals the aesthetic logic of the naturalisation path: the authenticity of character relationships comes from the density and texture of details, rather than the ingenious arrangement of the narrative structure [8].

Father, Son and Daughter is an example. The main plot of the film "Misplacing the Child" has good dramatic potential, but the director has chosen to focus the narrative on the daily life of the two families: the father's rediscovery of the child's image through the camera, playful scenes, and silence during family meals. A father-son relationship does not need many scenes of conflict; it can be shown gradually through small, daily life. The reason why the reconciliation between Ryota and Keita is moving at the end of the film is that the audience has already felt a "quantitative change" in their relationship through the daily narrative. Some studies have pointed out that Hirokazu Kore-eda's films externalise the inner psychological state of characters through environmental sounds, anti-climax narratives and externalised spaces, "creating an absent film that speaks through daily life" by avoiding a climax and drawing attention to silence [9].

This "de-dramatisation" does not disregard the construction of character relationships; instead, it opts for a way closer to real-life experience: relationships are not "created", but "nurtured". Chinese director Sonthar Gyal's *The Watcher* has also used this way to explore Chinese father-son relationships by focusing on the small details of family life rather than external events. The film "focuses on shooting the details of daily life scenes and objects, such as the renovated old house, the old wooden table for meals, the locked old room, etc., to build a sense of reality" and offers new possibilities for the aesthetic expression of father-son relationships.

6. Path Intersections and the Integration of Aesthetic Expression

The four paths rarely work independently in the practice of film production. More often than not, they are interwoven to form the normal construction of character relationship narratives: at the structural level, they provide a logical system for the relationship; at the visual level, they offer a perceptible image of the system; at the auditory level, they create an atmosphere; and at the level of naturalisation, they add real texture. Together, the four elements can be used to create a work of art.

Kong and Jigme are self-consciously integrating this. Xie

Jianhua believed that "character relationships are the glue of the story", so the film simplifies the grand heroic narrative into an allegory of character relationships and shifts its narrative focus from problem-solving to ideological enlightenment [10]. For the Structure of Paths, the two main characters are dynamic double protagonists. Jigme begins as the identity of a translator and guide in the story, and gradually gains an independent space for action and values. In the naturalisation path, the two main characters engage in extensive conversations about geography, language and customs, etc., which form the core of the story and also allow for an in-depth exploration of the characters. The four paths converge at the same aesthetic goal here: to enable the audience to understand the relationship between *Lao Kong and Jigme* through an orderly arrangement of the story, visual signals in pictures, and a slow buildup of trust through daily talk.

The two are in harmony and meet the basic requirements for a relationship as an object of beauty. The connection is loose and many-faceted; a single way cannot cover all of it. The construction of the relationship in the film is, in fact, an ongoing negotiation between "showing the relationship" and "keeping the mystery of the relationship". Negotiation can be viewed at the boundaries of the four paths: the structural path is intelligible in terms of relations, but its richness may be reduced; the visualised path makes the relationships perceptible, but certainty reduces ambiguity; the auditory path makes the relationships audible, but subtlety may be lost; and the naturalisation path makes the relationships recognizable, but openness can cause some viewers to lose the narrative focus. The four paths are in opposition and, at the same time, also beautiful in the film. The director's selection and distribution of this tension are precisely the expressions of his artistic temperament [11].

7. Conclusion

The four ways address different levels of the problem: the structural path shows the connection in an easy-to-understand manner; the visualised path presents the connection visually; the auditory path expresses the connection audibly; and the naturalisation path makes the connection perceptible. They each have their own division of labour at the analysis stage, but in actual creation, they are not easily separated. *Kong and Jigme*, for example, use handheld and out-of-focus shots, and also interweave Tibetan and Chinese elements; thus, they have already achieved a single aesthetic effect. The two paths are intertwined to some extent, so they cannot be treated as independent entities when building a model of this relationship.

Therefore, the two are not in opposition and will not be used alternatively. Films with distinct authorial styles often simultaneously employ multiple means. The director's choices at the structural level will affect the presentation methods of vision and hearing, and the accumulated detail texture of the naturalisation path will, in turn, provide an empirical basis for structured understanding. The two are mutually restraining and supporting, and this is how the narrative construction of their relationship is shown in films.

The discussion in this paper still focuses mainly on text analysis, and the degree of acceptance by the audience has not been investigated. The applicability of the four paths in different kinds of films also needs to be verified. For example, in strong plot type films, is the weight of the structural path necessarily higher than that of the naturalisation path? At

present, there are not enough samples to provide support for the judgment. Digital technology has also changed how characters are presented in the picture; virtual shooting and post-production synthesis have made characters no longer share the same physical space but still form a close relationship, and the viewing rhythm of streaming platforms has also altered the audience's sense of the "speed of development" for this relationship. The above modifications suggest that research on the narrative construction of relationships should be conducted using an extended media-aesthetic approach rather than an internal-text method.

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