A Study of Spatial Narratives in Chinese Science Fiction Films in the Last Decade

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Abstract: Due to constraints such as cost and technology, domestically produced science fiction films have long experienced slow development and faced criticism. However, in recent years, several outstanding domestic science fiction films have garnered attention and support from numerous fans due to their rich imagination and profound thematic content, dispelling the public's "stereotypes." As an essential cinema genre, one of the critical components of the spectacular imagery in science fiction films is space, which influences a movie's reputation and box office performance. This article utilizes text analysis to examine domestic science fiction films released in the past decade, roughly categorizes several types of spatial settings in domestic science fiction films, and dissects the narrative strategies employed.

Keywords: Science Fiction Films, Spatial Narrative, Spatial Types

1. Introduction

Science fiction films encompass a broad concept, and various scholars, including Frank and Herman, have provided definitions for science fiction cinema. Presently, it is generally acknowledged that "science fiction films emerge when scientific ideas, artistic imagination, and cinematic techniques converge"[1].

During the decade from 2012 to 2022, with the advancement of technology and an influx of capital, the Chinese film industry began to experience new development opportunities. In this context, a wave of outstanding productions, epitomized by "The Wandering Earth," signaled to the industry that Chinese science fiction films were undergoing distinct changes in industry support, thematic selection, and cultural expression. Therefore, research on Chinese science fiction films should include more than just summarizing and reflecting on the exploratory period's rudimentary science fiction films. It should broaden its scope to study their spatial narrative strategies, providing meaningful and valuable support to the production practices of domestic science fiction films.

2. The Material Space in Chinese Science Fiction Films

In general, material space in a film refers to the physical environment directly presented to the audience, where the characters in the movie live and carry out their activities. This encompasses tangible geographical settings such as the universe, countries, cities, streets, and rooms. Material space is one of the most widely used spatial elements in film narratives. It provides a clear and intuitive depiction of the film's backdrop to the audience and facilitates the rapid unfolding of the narrative[2]. Between 2012 and 2022, Chinese science fiction films entered a period of diverse development. During this phase, there was a noticeable division and fragmentation of material space in domestic science fiction films. Typically, this division manifested as a disconnect between virtual, heterogeneous spaces and the "real" urban spaces. Film production teams utilized realistic techniques to depict the "real" urban spaces, often emphasizing the theme of narrative estrangement to enhance the emotional impact and authenticity of the storyline.

In contrast, in virtual, heterogeneous spaces, film production teams predominantly employed modernist approaches. These spaces ultimately carried a strong utopian narrative that tempered the adventurous and catastrophic aspects, expressing humanity's optimistic vision of a future society filled with the unknown.

2.1. Virtual Heterogeneous Spaces

In Chinese science fiction films, narratives often use virtual spaces to create a parallel "heterotopia" alongside the objectively real world, expressing certain postmodern aspirations. "Heterotopia," a concept introduced by Michel Foucault in the 1960s, is also referred to as "heterogeneous space." According to Foucault, heterotopia "discards the primacy of time over space and denies the priority of the future over the present[3]". It can be categorized as Edward Soja's "third space," signifying "an actual space where reality and imagination, the mental and the material, coexist[4]". Over the past decade, certain Chinese science fiction films have preferred two contrasting narrative approaches, echoing Foucault's concept of opposing forces within his idea of power. On one hand, they convey an awareness of the crisis in technology, prompting people to reflect on modernity. On the other hand, they depict utopian visions of a future society. In other words, during this diverse development phase in Chinese science fiction cinema, filmmakers typically construct heterogeneous spaces filled with disasters to contrast and metaphorically represent people's living spaces. This allows the audience to detach from the current world and contemplate the interplay between the virtual and the real within the heterotopia space, leading to reflections on technological alienation and personal worth. Often, these narratives culminate in protagonists "controlling" and "training" various disasters, ultimately leading to the dissolution of utopian ideals.

For instance, in "Unidentified," the character played by Chen Chutong, a "mad astronomer," spends years in the desolate Gobi Desert, far removed from everyday life, in search of an asteroid threatening Earth's existence. The film's story primarily unfolds within this heterogeneous space of the remote Gobi Desert. Similarly, in "Crazy Alien," the creators designed the "space" as a heterogeneous space, featuring satellites, space stations, and high-speed orbiting satellites, adding to the film's science fiction and spectacle features. These science fiction films merge seemingly unrelated spaces, locations, and places into a "real" domain, allowing viewers to accept and transcend reality through their cinematic experiences.

2.2. "Real" Urban Spaces

Film was born in the city, and it carries a unique "urban aura." In objective terms, many times, the on-screen space depicted in movies is, in fact, a representation of urban space. Therefore, film culture is an integral part of urban culture. However, cinema uses various media and techniques to reshape urban space within the screen frame, providing new interpretations. These interpretations not only reflect the individual intentions of the creators but also expand the urban image, making it a collective entity of imagination and emotion. For Chinese science fiction films, once they move away from the heterogeneous spaces laden with disaster and fear, the production teams employ a realistic approach to depict the familiar "real" urban spaces[5]. Some scholars argue that film often takes everyday elements we are accustomed to and gradually "estranges" them, creating a sense of wonder in the audience. Because urban space is not merely an architectural environment; it is a complex amalgamation of material and experience. The process of its production is dynamic, contradictory, and holds political, economic, cultural, and civilized significance beyond textual meanings[6]. Thus, the urban space constructed in Chinese science fiction films not only showcases a geographical space but also represents a cultural reimagination, sometimes even offering a third perspective on the concept of "home."

For instance, "Shanghai Fortress" primarily features locations in Shanghai. Different symbols, elements, landscapes, forms, and ambiances within the city carry rich inner meanings. Iconic symbols like the Oriental Pearl Tower and the Bund in Lujiazui are not only familiar landmarks in the audience's living and survival spaces but also symbols of the portrayal and aspiration toward modern urban life in Chinese science fiction cinema. In "The Wandering Earth," multiple Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou are depicted. While the underground city serves as a heterogeneous space, the city, as a spatial medium for storytelling in Chinese science fiction films, bears perceptual and experiential aspects of an actual city. This enables "The Wandering Earth" to achieve its narrative objectives through a dual-material space approach. The film uses the alienation technique to present a condensed, bustling version of Beijing with festivities, mahjong games, dumpling feasts, and visible propaganda slogans on Wangfujing Street. Moreover, the film features recognizable landmarks like the China Zun Tower in Beijing and the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai. These depictions of real urban spaces disengage the audience from the disillusionment of the heterogeneous space and, in conjunction with imagination and emotion, reshape their understanding of urban imagery, providing a greater sense of authenticity and depth to the spatial setting in Chinese science fiction films.

3. The Psychological Space in Chinese Science Fiction Films

In the narrative space of Chinese science fiction films, psychological space primarily serves the purpose of portraying the inner thoughts and emotions of characters. It typically represents the imagery of characters' emotional fluctuations or inner activities. In Chinese science fiction films, psychological space differs from the virtual and real aspects of physical space. It is constructed more within the combination of the characters' unconscious imagination, the spatial atmosphere, and prop settings. Psychological space transforms the perceptual and experiential physical space into an abstract and symbolic realm of imagination. The shaping of imaginative space is highly flexible, offering a divergent narrative space that can portray the mental states of characters, depict emotional relationships between characters, control the narrative pace, and drive the plot development by creating a particular spatial atmosphere. Moreover, in Chinese science fiction films, the semantic function embedded within psychological space serves not only to create intense and suspenseful atmospheres but also to present the characters' behavioral intentions and subconscious thoughts visually.

3.1. Adventurous Situations Under Sensory Stimulation

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said in "The Birth of Tragedy," "People long for pain, anger, hatred, excitement, unexpected shocks, and breathless tension. They summon the artist as the wizard of this spiritual hunt[7]". From its inception, cinema has been striving to create vivid and powerful sensory experiences to captivate the audience. In recent years, with technological advancements and policy support, China's output of science fiction films has steadily increased. To ensure a prosperous and stable market and cater to audience preferences, most Chinese science fiction films now incorporate elements of action, suspense, comedy, adventure, and various other genres. They continuously portray sensory stimulation and adventurous situations, enabling the audience to observe the characters' mental and psychological worlds concretely.

In "RESET," the film creatively constructs two impressive action sequences in relatively confined spatial settings. One takes place in a garbage processing plant, where Xia Tian, in a life-threatening situation, must slide down a steep ramp to retrieve a data module that has fallen near the shredder. The other sequence involves Xia Tian trying to escape her pursuers. She is initially trapped in her car, crushed by a shipping container, and narrowly avoids being crushed to death when the container falls. The film employs dynamic camera movements and various scene changes to create a suspenseful, heart-pounding sensory experience, showcasing the tension and anxiety faced by the characters when making life-or-death decisions.

Additionally, the movie contrasts the physical space's size and density to express the characters' emotional loneliness and solitude. In "The Lone Moonwalker," the film constructs a vast and spectacular lunar space. After the evacuation of the group, only Lone Moonwalker remains. Upon returning to the base, the previously bustling and somewhat crowded space has become eerily silent. This contrast reflects the loneliness experienced by Lone Moonwalker. As the story progresses, a character named "King Kong Mouse" accompanies him on a lunar rover journey. The director effectively contrasts the group of workers in the control center and the crowd in the underground shelter, making the audience keenly sense the psychological and situational dynamics of the characters in the film, ranging from loneliness to excitement and from solitude to liveliness.

3.2. The Heroic Quest with a Mission

Heroism, as a mainstream cultural and mythological theme, has always been favored by audiences. In Chinese science fiction films, the narrative of the protagonists' savior complex and willingness to sacrifice has become an indispensable element for shaping well-rounded characters. By integrating the heroic quest into the characters' psychological space, these films intricately depict their willingness to sacrifice for a more significant cause, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the characters. In recent years, Chinese science fiction films have predominantly focused on the individual as the starting point for constructing psychological spaces. Creators tend to mold the protagonists as ordinary individuals with an intense patriotism and a willingness to bear a mission. These characters typically awaken their heroic spirits when faced with adversity or crises, which often drives them to work together to resolve the narrative crisis, leading to character transformations.

In "RESET," the story involves parallel universes, time travel, and various science fiction elements. Scientist Xia Tian is forced to travel back and forth between three different timelines, risking her life in

battles of wits against her enemies to save her son. The film not only portrays the mother's solitary battle but also depicts characters like Director Su, Da Xiong, and Huang Chen, who are willing to take risks and make sacrifices. Their heroic quests are perfectly embodied through individual strength and collective effort. Similarly, in "The Lone Moonwalker," some scenes use space to depict characters' heroic quests. As the Earth faces an impending catastrophe, the tiny, blue planet symbolizes the impending doomsday crisis.

In contrast, the often overlooked repairman, Lone Moonwalker, sacrifices himself to protect Earth and its inhabitants, exemplifying the noble quality of selflessness. Although during this period, there were few Chinese science fiction films with themes of friendship, combating evil, and heroism, these films have been influenced by Hollywood. They exhibit mature imagination and scientific foundations while also integrating traditional Chinese thoughts and culture, aligning with the values and preferences of Chinese audiences.

4. The Cultural Space in Chinese Science Fiction Films

Culture plays a significant and profound role in shaping characters, settings, dialogues, actions, and plots in films. According to Bela Balazs, culture, as an essential component of cinema, is transitioning from abstract spirituality to tangible human experience. For cinema audiences, contemporary films are moving beyond traditional dialogue towards a complex presentation of cultural space, serving to influence and convey cultural values and diversity. Chinese science fiction films draw from various cultures and civilizations to form a multicultural representation of values and aesthetics in their narratives. Through visual and auditory presentations, these films communicate and express different cultural elements, adding a multi-faceted dimension to their storytelling. Chinese science fiction films aim to disseminate cultural customs and social ideologies to the public, serving the dual purpose of cultural education and entertainment. As an artistic medium, these films effectively convey cultural spaces, enabling audiences to experience and appreciate a variety of cultural backgrounds and worldviews.

4.1. Invocation and Rewriting of Indigenous Culture

In recent years, Chinese science fiction creators have incorporated a diverse range of traditional cultural symbols into their works, intending to achieve "Chinese nationalization of science fiction." As an ideology, indigenous culture necessarily relies on appropriate material carriers for its expression, and film, as the most prominent and popular mass medium today, is a crucial form for presenting indigenous cultural expressions.

Director Ning Hao once stated in an interview, "I want to make a film that can only be produced within the context of Chinese culture[8]". With this goal in mind, he created "Crazy Alien," a film enriched with various traditional cultural elements and value concepts. One of the significant narrative threads running throughout the film involves traditional monkey plays, which can be traced back to the Han Dynasty but gradually faded from the public's view with time. In "Crazy Alien," the protagonist, Geng Hao, identifies himself as the "Heir to the Monkey King of the Southwest." The film portrays him directing monkeys to perform traditional monkey play acts, such as the somersault over the Flaming Mountain and the iron rod inscribing the universe. It even humorously mistakes an extraterrestrial creature, Chaka, for a tamed monkey, leading to a series of comical adventures.

Furthermore, "The Wandering Earth" can be seen as a science fiction reinterpretation of the ancient Chinese myth of "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains" as the Earth embarks on a journey through space. Scenes of characters celebrating the Chinese New Year with traditions like eating dumplings, lion dances, and hanging paper-cut decorations in the underground cities create a sense of familiarity for the audience. The Chinese cultural features portrayed in these films collectively shape the cultural and aesthetic space of Chinese science fiction cinema, affirming that by integrating indigenous culture into scientific imagination, Chinese science fiction can genuinely exhibit its national identity.

4.2. The Collision and Interweaving of Multiple Cultures

Chinese science fiction cinema, as a cultural symbol of China, needs to effectively integrate with other cultures to better engage with the world. For instance, "Warriors of Future" is notably influenced by the Western science fiction theme of post-apocalyptic survival and seeking a way forward. "Crazy Alien" showcases the collision between space culture, Chinese traditional culture, and Western culture, intertwining the theme of "alien civilization" with China's traditional value of seeking harmony. "The

Wandering Earth" conveys the idea of a "community of human destiny" within a doomsday scenario. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas emphasized the interaction between cultures, suggesting that when two different cultures collide, they generate reconfigured meanings through dialogue. Chinese science fiction cinema, through its dialogue and interaction with other cultures, develops its own unique, complex, diverse, and ever-evolving set of values.

5. Conclusions

Space holds a dominant position in the narrative of science fiction films. In recent years, Chinese domestic science fiction films, in a period of diverse development, have undergone significant transformations in spatial production. They have demonstrated a convergence and interplay of various spaces, including physical space, psychological space, and cultural space. This approach not only allows creators to unleash their boundless imaginations but also expands the expressive forms of narrative space in Chinese science fiction films. For Chinese domestic science fiction cinema to make further strides and tap into broader markets, a deeper exploration and excavation of spatial narratives are essential. This will pave the way for creating new horizons in its development.

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