

# Spatial Narrative of the Film *My People, My Country*

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The film *My People, My Country* tells seven stories of great historical significance that have occurred since New China's founding 70 years ago. The film takes time as a clue and narrates the transformation of space. Based on the understanding of spatial narrative, this paper explores the spatial narration in the film from the perspectives of narrative space formation, narrative means, and spatial expression of emotion.

*Keywords:* film, spatial narrative, narrative space, emotional expression

## Introduction

Long Diyong (2008) pointed out that narratology is not only in the time dimension but also involves the space dimension. However, in traditional narratology research, researchers have not paid enough attention to the space in the narrative and conducted in-depth research. He thinks that narratology should begin to pay attention to the study of spatial dimension, and thus puts forward the spatial turn of narratology. A movie is a complex of time and space. Apart from the clue of time, the construction of space in movies is also very important, and its importance is self-evident for the study of spatial narrative in movies. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the film's narrative space from the spatial narrative perspective.

## Overview of the Film

To pay tribute to the motherland, the film *My People, My Country* was released in Chinese mainland on September 30, 2019. The film was directed by Chen Kaige, and seven directors including Guan Hu, Zhang Yibai, Xu Zheng, Xue Xiaolu, Ning Hao, Chen Kaige and Wen Muye each shot one of the stories. These seven stories are *The Eve*, *Passing By*, *The Champion*, *Going Home*, *Hello Beijing*, *The Guiding Star*, and *One for All*. The time background is: from the eve of the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, to the successful explosion of the first atomic bomb on October 16, 1964, the Chinese women's volleyball team won three consecutive championships on August 8, 1984, the return of Hong Kong on July 1, 1997, the opening of the Beijing Olympic Games on August 8, 2008, the successful landing of the Shenzhou-11 spacecraft return capsule on November 18, 2016, and finally to the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Anti-Japanese War on September 3, 2015. The seven stories in the film take place in different times and spaces. The director takes time as a clue through the narrative of "third person", and connects each space in series.

These time nodes are wonderful historical moments since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Based on the timeline, the film narrates in a constantly changing space, presenting an audio-visual feast to the

audience. Although these seven stories have their own merits, they have made big events appear in small ways. Audience who are used to grand narratives begin to see how ordinary people participate in each big event and make their own unique contributions. While the audience watches movies, with the change of space and the development of the plot, the audience has emotional resonance, and people's memories of the past are aroused. Every ordinary day we spent also witnessed the development and prosperity of a country. "people" and "country" have never been separated. How an ordinary person loves his country lies in his personal existence and witness. Rivers converge with streams, and the grandeur of history is born in ordinary life.

### The Formation of Narrative Space

The spatial narrative of films mainly studies the selection of lens space and scene space, scenery feature, narrative function, structural form, arrangement and combination, etc. Generally speaking, the whole narrative space of a film is the narrative space of the film, which is composed of one or more narrative spaces of stories, while the narrative space of a certain story is composed of one or more scene spaces, and the scene space is of course composed of a secondary level of lens space through montage (Huang, 2005).

The scene is the basic unit of space, and the choice of the scene is an extremely important part of film creation, which will affect the choice and construction of narrative space in films. Therefore, it is very important for a good film to choose an appropriate scene for the narrative. This paper extracts several main elements of narrative space for analysis, and lists the social attributes, main scene space, and scenery feature of each story in the film as follows:

Table 1  
*Social Attribute, Main Scene and Scenery Feature of the Film*

Name of the Story	Social attribute	Main scene	Scenery feature
The Eve	Urban	Tian'anmen Square	Artificial scene
Passing By	Urban	Scientific research station	Real scene
The Champion	Urban	Shanghai alley	Real scene
Going Home	Urban	A watch repair shop/negotiating table	Real scene
Hello Beijing	Urban	Taxi	Artificial scene
The Guiding Star	Wilderness	Landing site	Real scene
One for All	Army	Warship	Real scene

We can see that most of the social attributes are urban attributes because the attributes of films are mainly memorabilia since the founding of New China, which restricts the choice of social attributes of stories and these events cannot happen in deserted places. There are many restrictive factors for the attribute of scenery feature, which I think is to correspond to the theme. The theme of the film emphasizes how the little people participate in the memorabilia of the country, which naturally does not require large-scale artificial scene-making. After all, what is emphasized in this film is "people" and the resonance of characters' emotions, the scene needs to be used as "green leaves" to set off emotions. For example, in *The Guiding Star*, the sense of reality set off by the real scene of the wilderness can emphasize the monotonous life of the two "cowherd boys". However, in the face of the important historical moment of the successful landing of Shenzhou-11, that is, "the guiding star" in grassland language, there will be a strong sense of national pride and mission in the heart. For the audience, the grassland

scenery is also necessary. The sensory impact of the deserted prairie and the Shenzhou spacecraft that represents the highest technology is so strong that it resonates with the audience.

The choice of scene space in the story is the most important and is mainly influenced by three factors as follows. First, narrative needs, which is the most important point. The most essential thing in movies is to tell a story well. It is always the story that chooses the scene, not the scene that chooses the story. *The Eve* tells the story of the behind-the-scenes personnel who want to ensure the flag-raising, and the scene must take place near Tian'anmen Square in the Forbidden City. *Hello Beijing* is the story of taxi drivers who are moved and take the initiative to send out Olympic tickets, and the scene is chosen in the surrounding environment with taxis as the main body. The scene must match the narrative, and can also set off the narrative atmosphere. *Going Home* tells the historical event of Hong Kong's return. The director set the scene on the flag-raising platform in Hong Kong, and the solemn atmosphere of the return was created at once. The scene serves for narrative and vice versa can promote the development of narrative. Second, scene scheduling needs. The change of scenes is never arbitrary. The basis of scene scheduling is mainly the content provided by the script, the characters and their psychological activities described by the author, the contradictions and entanglements among characters, and the relationship between characters and the environment. The scheduling of the scene can be reflected in the change of the lens. In *Going Home*, the lens is aimed at the narrative of the characters at first. To focus the audience's attention on the efforts made by people, the director intentionally aims at the national flag, which set off the solemn atmosphere of the scene and make the audience understand that these efforts are of great significance. Third, visual appreciation needs. Visual appreciation is an aesthetic category. Movies not only tell stories but also bring people a good visual experience so that the audience can see what they can't see at ordinary times. A typical example of this part is *The Guiding Star*. The blue sky and white clouds, the barren ground, and the impact of Shenzhou spaceship are all very aesthetic and ornamental. Good visual experience can quickly stimulate the audience's sense of experience and make the audience immerse themselves in the film world quickly.

### Space and Narrative

The space in *My People, My Country* bears a strong narrative function, and the space to which the seven stories belong participates in the narrative of the film to varying degrees and promotes the development of the plot. The film creator takes time as the node, connects space in series, and promotes the transformation of space with time and space. The series of space not only shows space but also bears the narrative role of time. The transformation of space is used as a way to measure time, which in turn constructs time and promotes the development of the storyline.

From the single story in the film, the space is constantly changing. For example, in *Passing By*, Gao Yuan was hospitalized due to radiation, and the story space was changed from the laboratory to the hospital. He went to the street to look outside, and the story space changed to the street again. Due to the need for plot development, space continues to change. Another example is *Hello Beijing*, in order to tell a series of funny stories caused by an Olympic ticket, the space is in a taxi for a while, and then it is transferred indoors. The promotion of the plot requires the transformation of space, and the constantly changing space makes the plot more colorful. Space and narration depend on each other. Narration promotes the transformation of space, and the transformation of space reacts to narration (Wang, 2020).

From the whole film, from the founding ceremony on October 1, 1949 to the successful landing of the return capsule of Shenzhou-11 spacecraft on November 18, 2016, the numbers about time became the clues of the film's progress, accompanied by the change of narrative space. Similarly, the change of narrative space is an important driving factor for plot development. These seven stories are relatively independent, but some of them are intrinsically related, which is realized by the partial coincidence of space. At the end of *Passing By*, Fang Min saw the news of Gao Yuan's sacrifice on TV, turned her perspective out of the window, and saw people marching in the street to celebrate the women's volleyball team winning the championship. This is Gao Min's "passing by" 17 years later, and also the inheritance of the two stories of *Passing By* and *The Championship*. The transformation of these two spaces naturally shifts the narrative time from 1964 to 1984, and also connects the end of the previous story with the opening of the latter story.

### **Spatial Expression of Emotion**

As a tribute film, *My People, My Country* adheres to the creative idea of "historical moment, the memory of the whole people, head-on collision", which should establish a good empathy relationship with viewers. However, the construction of space in the film and its sense of substitution for the audience all affect the audience's emotions.

In the film structure, "my people" and "my country" show that the "space" of little people refers to the "whole space" of the country. A movie audience's identity is essentially a kind of self-identity, so the civilian historical perspective can establish an in-depth emotional connection with the audience. Multiple superimposed micro-narratives are extremely authentic. Without simple audio-visual shock of macro scenes, it can also arouse strong resonance in the audience, thus achieving the effect of lifting weights lightly. The construction of those micro spaces also falls into specific stories, which avoids the vagueness of grand narrative, and makes the audience have a sense of substitution and a deeper sense of emotion.

Taking *The Eve* as an example, as the main space of this story, Tian'anmen Square is endowed with cultural connotation, and the audience tends to associate Tian'anmen Square with the symbol of the country. At this time, space no longer simply expresses geographical location, but becomes an important carrier of emotional expression in narrative. The day before the founding ceremony, Lin Zhiyuan went to Tian'anmen Square to replace the blocking device, but he was hindered by various obstacles and intercepted by soldiers. Together with his fear when climbing the flagpole and the time being short, those plots were combined with scenes to push the audience's emotions to a climax. The efforts made by the eve for a founding ceremony in Tian'anmen Square are naturally full of deep emotions.

### **Conclusion**

Film narration is to arrange the position of a series of events in film space and the order in film time. As for how to do it, it depends on the filmmaker's concept of film time and space and his understanding and skills in dealing with the relationship between space and narrative. Here, arranging the position of a series of events in the movie space is to construct a series of single scene spaces, that is, to form the narrative space of a movie, which is itself a kind of spatial narrative behavior (Huang, 2005). From the discussion of the spatial narrative in the film *My People, My Country*, we can see that space plays an irreplaceable role in film art. The spatial narrative has the

functions of promoting plot development, arousing emotions and the audience's emotional resonance. Most of the existing narratology theories pay attention to the study of time, emphasizing the construction of narrative structure in time series, while ignoring the role of space in narrative (Cui, 2009). In future narrative research, we should also pay attention to the study of spatial narrative.

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