

Spatial Reconstruction and Aesthetic Expression of Feminist Narratives

-- Take Yang Lina's movie *Song of Spring* as An Example

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Abstract. The movie *Song of Spring* with beautiful images tells the story of a middle-aged and elderly mother and daughter after encountering sudden changes in their lives. They heal each other in their plight and redeemed each other. Director Yang Li Na uses a new female perspective to look at society, dissolving the male gaze through the female point of view and voice. She uses a beautiful mirror narrative to show the growth and image of women, revealing the historical complexes and cultural psychology of contemporary elderly women and reflecting the richness of the female world; through a dreamlike polyphony narrative, she reconstructs the narrative time and space, with real life time and space interspersed with the ever-present illusory memories, highlighting the plight of women behind the warmth; through the beautiful narrative of "prose poetry" and the poetic metaphors of beautiful romance, a gentle and serene feminist expression is presented. Based on feminist narratology, this research uses documentary and qualitative research methods to analyze the film *Song of Spring* reconstruction of feminist-themed films by surreal expression techniques and poetic metaphors spanning time and space, exploring the "other" perspective and gender aesthetics of feminist narratives in the film *Song of Spring* and the reflections on the meaning and value of women's lives behind it.

Keywords: feminist narrative; time and space construction; aesthetic expression; the movie *Song of Spring*.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese films have been paying more and more attention to female themes, showing deep concern for their plight and struggle in the midst of real-life conflicts. As a female director, Yang Lina has portrayed a series of female images on the movie screen, showing a strong female consciousness, and deeply analyzed the problems faced by women in the real society. Movie *Song of Spring* is the last part of Yang Lina's women's trilogy (*Spring Dream*, *Spring Tide*, *Spring Song*), which continues the keen touch of the previous two, focusing on a mother and daughter. The 85-year-old mother and her 65-year-old daughter, who are both senior intellectuals, live together in a villa. Due to historical reasons, the daughter is burdened with guilt towards her father, remains unmarried for life and redeems herself by volunteering. As Alzheimer's disease gradually makes her lose her memory, the elderly mother reassumes the burden of caring for her daughter. The film observes society from the perspective of women, looking at the living reality of contemporary Chinese women, expressing female emotions and feelings, and showing a distinctly feminine consciousness.

As an interdisciplinary theory, feminist narratology integrates the theories and methods of narratology into gender, and regards female narrative experience as the foundation of narrative text analysis. By analyzing the influence of gender on narrative, it examines the impact of assumptions about gender in specific cultural and historical contexts on narrative forms. American scholar Susan S. Lancer, a pioneer of feminist narratology, first combined narratology with feminism in 1981 in her book *Narrative Behavior: Perspectives in Fiction*. Brewer's *Opening the Talk: From Narrative Economy to Women's Writing*(1984), Warhol's *Constructing a Theory of the Attractive Narrator*(1986), Warhol's *Gendered Intervention*(1989) and Susan S. Lancer's *Fictional*

Authority(1992), etc., respectively introduced the characteristics and research methods of feminist narratology, and more specific critical practices appeared.

2. The perspective of the "other": the world of women reflected by mirror images

Traditional aesthetics are dominated by men. Many films stand in the position of men, "gazing" at the world from a male perspective, and women are in a position of being "gazing" or ignored. "It presupposes the antagonistic relationship between the subject and the object, and the attitude of the subject in the gaze towards the object" [1]. "Feminist film narratives, by choosing their own image concepts and value positions, reflect the consciousness of women who are not accommodated by the male world" [2]. *Song of Spring* observes society from a new female perspective, reflecting the rich world of women with an aesthetic mirror narrative.

2.1 Dissolution of the male gaze

In the creation of feminist films, dispelling the male gaze in films has become an important way to express female consciousness. In Yang Lina's series of female films, real and distinct female images are used to show the real life of women and reflect the living conditions of women. *Song of Spring* starts by paying attention to the situation of women in family and love, which itself has a distinctly female narrative perspective. By narrating the ordinary life of a mother and daughter, the film conveys the intricate life experience of contemporary women and triggers people's thinking about women's issues. Through images, Yang Lina objectively presents the real living conditions of elderly women in contemporary cities and expresses women's unique life experiences.

In feminist critical theory, the female other is in a subordinate position, unable to escape the male gaze. In *Song of Spring*, two heroines are high-level intellectuals. They have superior living conditions and elegant lifestyles. The film uses a large number of long shots to show the daily life of the two women in dining, cooking and reading. Zhou Xia's appearance brings out the plot of daughter Feng Jizhen's reflection on the past and the redemption of the soul, bringing a short-lived family happiness to this dull and depressed family. These scenes are full of feminine tenderness. Besides, the whole film looks at the world through the eyes of women, blurring the image of man. The father is clear but hazy in his daughter's memory. The loving father who made her repent and attached exists in the words and hallucinations of the characters, becoming a character of "absent presence", and even a symbol that reflects history. With its ambiguous "blank", the absent father alludes to that unforgettable history. For the daughter, the image of her father is sometimes blurred and sometimes clear, which has become a pain in her life forever. She never married in her entire life, and she often volunteers to get rid of her father's influence. Most of the filming scenes are arranged in the heroine's interior and courtyard. The male character of the father in the play has always been hidden in his daughter's dreams or hallucinations, while the male doctor role played by Zhu Shimao has only a few shots. Through these forms, the film allows the male gaze to be dissolved, women become the protagonists, and the theme of feminism is highlighted.

2.2 Female voices and perspectives

In the book *Fictional Authority: Female Writers and Narrative Voices*, Lancer once re-divided the narrative voice. She summarized three narrative voice modes according to the different narrative modes, namely authorial, personal and collective voice. The author's narrative voice refers to the traditional third-person narrative, while the personal narrative voice refers to the narratives in which the narrator and the protagonist of the story are the same person. Lancer believes that the authorial narrative voice refers to a "different-story, collective, and potentially self-referential narrative state"[3]. "Women's films should be 'women writing, writing about women', that is, created by women's teams, taking women as the protagonists and interpreting films about women's themes from a woman's point of view" [4]. The comparison film *Song of Spring*, it is not difficult to see that Yang

Lina did not use a single narrative voice, but alternately used an author-type narrative voice and personal narrative voice, using an omniscient perspective to narrate the life of the mother and daughter, bringing out the father's story through Feng Jizhen's dreams and visions, triggering thinking about women's issues. Through this narrative voice mode, the viewer's perception and understanding of the film no longer rest on the story itself, but is associated with history, reality and the future, especially showing the plight of women in the social and historical-cultural context.

Song of Spring is undoubtedly a real women's film. It was under Chinese translated title "Mama!". The film's main creative team is all women, with women as the protagonists, interpreting the theme of women from the perspective of women, and even the name of the film - "Mama!", also with distinctly feminine features. Director and screenwriter Zhang Ji praised the film as "an unprecedented female story that shows the responsibility of Chinese cinema". Yang Lina is a director of a documentary film. Her work never pursues grand narratives, but rather reveals warm and heavy social realities in the midst of the ordinary, the mundane and the commonplace. The hallucinations and dream images of many of the daughters in the film are subconscious expressions, and as the sound is emitted, the viewpoint changes accordingly. The change of perspective reveals the painful and lonely inner world of daughter Feng Jizhen: the unbearable past, the guilt that cannot be redeemed, and the desire for a happy and beautiful family life. Looking back on that dusty history with Feng Jizhen's seemingly insane voice and perspective, she was able to face the traumatic past, release the suppressed pain and desire, complete self-redemption and reconciliation with the world, and bring the audience a stronger aesthetic experience.

3. Interlacing time and space: the predicament of women behind the warmth

With her keen observation and rich emotions, Yang Lina turned her attention to the lives of contemporary elderly women and explored the ethical dilemmas faced by women. Real life time and space are intertwined with the constantly emerging illusory memories. "The element of space has an important narrative function. Therefore, novelists not only regard space as the place where the story takes place and the scene that is essential to the narrative but also use space to express time, use space to arrange the structure of the novel, and even use space to advance the entire narrative process" [5].

3.1 Memories trapped in time

The daughter was born into an intellectual family, her father was a professor of archaeology and her mother was a professor of liberal arts. In those extraordinary times, the daughter, who was a little more troubled, misunderstood her father, and the father was under pressure from the outside world and family, and finally died, resulting in a tragedy and becoming a pain that the daughter could not get out of her whole life. After being ill, the daughter's memory is trapped in time, but she can still remember the good times she had with her father, and still remember to publish an archaeological diary for her father to remember him.

The recurring illusory scenes in the film arouse people's reflection on the past and sympathy for the lonely fate of the characters in the film. Daughter Feng Jizhen's unreal memories are told in dreamy pictures. She atoned for her sins by doing volunteer work. She never married because of her guilt. She tolerated the thieves who framed her.

Sudden bad luck broke the tranquility and balance of life, disease disintegrated ordinary life, and opened the texture of memory. The father in memory, the unsolved mystery of the father's death, are mentioned implicitly and restrainedly through the images, full of illusion and self-subversion, triggering the audience's multi-level thinking. When the memory is erased little by little with the time, the pictures left in the daughter's mind continue to appear in the form of hallucinations or dreams, arousing people's reflections on history and inquiries about reality. Ignorance creates tragedy, as life and death, love and hate, distance and nearness, and existence and destruction place one in misery. The daughter who was trapped in time kept recalling and fighting, but she could not break free from the big net of time and the shackles of her soul.

3.2 Dreamy polyphonic narrative

"Narrative is a cultural phenomenon that participates in the cultural process"[6]. Polyphonic narration refers to the way of narration in which two or more voices run side by side in the same narration. In the movie *Song of Spring*, the director adapts the method of continuous cross-narrative of memory and reality, combining real life with hallucinations and dreams, and presenting the daughter's mental journey in the interlaced change of dual time and space, thus realizing the diversity of narrative. The audience hears the voice of the female narrative.

"The film uses a polyphonic narrative to state the redemption of a daughter's guilt for her father's early death"[7]. It uses dreams and hallucinations as the main narrative links, transforming physical time and space into psychological time and space. The polyphonic color of the film is not only realistic about real life at the narrative level, but also full of illusion and self-subversion. Behind this is the rebellion and deconstruction of the film itself, history and reality. Many illusions and fantasies make the film look illusory and absurd, and the truth is lost in it.

The director uses space to develop a synchronic narrative, and arranges a "father" who travels through different spaces to link up an invisible linear time narrative, thereby promoting the rhythm of the narrative. The real space of the story and the illusionary space-time have their own ethical contexts. Through the transformation of the characters' perspectives, the combination of real or illusory time and space, and the interspersed narrative methods such as the characters' memories and dreams, show the life situation of the mother and daughter and the ethical dilemmas they face. The repeated hallucinations in the film present the daughter's struggle and hesitation when she is in an ethical dilemma. The film uses the narrative method of interlaced time and space, showing the pursuit of spatial effect. At the same time, the film implicitly mentions that the death of the father may be related to the daughter, who has been tormented by a sense of guilt. The daughter insists on "doing volunteer work", "being misunderstood as a thief without excuse", "helping to frame her own thief", "planning to publish her father's archaeological diary", etc., all of which have answered some unsolved mysteries in the redemption of love.

4. Poetic Expression: Implicit and Romantic Feminine Aesthetics

Art is a road to all realms that are not governed by time and space. The film *Song of Spring* presents the poetic expression of "the combination of virtual and real", which not only depicts the trivial details of ordinary and peaceful daily life, but also has a profound freehand brushwork of the mutual redemption of mother and daughter in the face of sudden changes. The poetic narrative of *Song of Spring* is the director's exploration of the artistic expression of the life plight of the characters in the play, a breakthrough and innovation in the creative techniques of realism-themed female films.

4.1 A beautiful narrative in the style of "prose poetry"

Prose poetry has both the romantic imagination of poetry and the free and lively characteristics of prose. The French poet Baudelaire believes that prose poetry can "adapt to the turbulence of the soul, the fluctuation of dreams and the jump of consciousness"[8]. In movies, it is often expressed as "emphasizing the expression of personal emotions and meaning in life, gradually forming a kind of prose and poetic image narrative style" [9]. As a documentary director, in recent years, Yang Lina has a special pursuit of her own film aesthetic ideals. Many of her films have a prose-poetic aesthetic. The main narrative perspective of the film is the relationship between the daughter who suffers from Alzheimer's disease and gradually loses her memory and the elderly mother, and expresses the truth of life through the quiet and tranquil film language. The film selects the main space scene in an urban courtyard with a sense of age: red walls and green windows, vibrant green plants in the courtyard, warm and elegant interior layout, exquisite three meals a day, two intellectual and elegant elderly women in their twilight years, the sun is shining warmly or the drizzle is falling, everything is like a gurgling stream flowing through the years, quiet and peaceful, full of poetry. There are flowers and grass, trees and cats here, full of the joys and sorrows of the past, and full of the atmosphere of old

times. The narrow courtyard space is filled with all the consciences of human nature and friendly interpersonal relationships, and the daily inadvertent beauty that the audience is particularly familiar with has been re-amplified and externalized, causing deep resonance.

The soothing narrative rhythm and the real details of life leave the audience with infinite space for aftertaste. The aesthetic expression of "prose poetry" makes the audience feel sympathy for the suffering of the characters, and at the same time generate a warm emotion, feeling the beauty and clarity of life in the experience of truth and beauty. The film's leisurely and tranquil narrative brings people not condescending cheap sympathy, but intertwined with broken poetry and romantic pain.

4.2 Dreamy polyphonic narrative

Metaphor is a rhetorical device commonly used in poetry. By depicting vivid images, it creates a beautiful artistic conception and brings poetic feelings to people. F. Jameson pointed out: "The so-called metaphor is that the superficial story always contains another hidden meaning, and its real meaning is not what it appears on the surface, and needs to be explained"[10]. *Song of Spring* cleverly uses various metaphors to concretize the living conditions of women. The director uses audio-visual means to accumulate and express them as aesthetic illusions, forming a poetic image discourse system. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard believes that "one of the water images is motherhood"[11]. Water has become the exclusive symbol of femininity, and the bond between women's generations, witnessing the reconciliation after half-life alienation.

Water is the source of life and the ultimate destination. Throughout the film, water from the lake, the river, the rain, the sea and the bathroom appears. Water alludes to the place where the father disappeared, and water alludes to the undercurrents and ripples beneath the calm surface. The director created an eerie and illusory atmosphere through reflections and mirrors in the water. This atmosphere can be interpreted as the auditory hallucinations of Alzheimer's patients, and also symbolizes the historical post-traumatic sequelae of the extraordinary period. The film presents the audience with an open-ended ending, which sodium Yang Li believes is allegorical: "The surging sea is like the tide of life; the deep affection and tolerance of the sea are like the power of mother's love. There is something in the lines echoing, 'Mum is the sea, I am a drop of water, Dad is a whale that can't swim', to a certain extent, that is also their spiritual home, so the sea also embraces all the living creatures of nature with its bosom"(opinions from the author). At the end of the film, the mother and daughter embracing each other on a beach lapped by waves, the dance of life was like a tidal wave of love, the sky and the earth were empty and clear.

5. Conclusion

Song of Spring continues the sharp perspective of the first two books in Yang Li's Women's Trilogy, and takes a deeper look at the bond between mother and daughter. The relationship between mother and daughter once estranged, and the lingering regret brought by the death of her father, is reconciled and redeemed by love in the face of life's impermanence. The film, *Song of Spring* tells women's stories in a delicate cinematic language, exploring the space for women's survival and growth. Using a feminist narrative to write about the hardships and resignations of women's destinies, it has a strong gender consciousness and a strong humanistic concern that has always radiated a feminine light in her work. The film illustrates women's issues, highlighting the warmth of mother-daughter human relationships, but also confronting the reality and revealing social issues, presenting the difficulties faced and endured by women in contemporary society. The open-ended ending reflects the complexity of women's issues in China today and brings profound reflections. The film's mirroring of individual mothers and daughters to a group of Alzheimer's patients brings a more profound path of reflection to women's cinema from a feminist perspective. They are not only the objects of the film but also a typical profile or microcosm of the social reality and the signs of the times.

Based on the complex reality context, Yang Lina records the trivial and ordinary daily life through vivid video narrative, showing the special female experience and female relationship, inquiring about

the ultimate meaning of life, revealing the historical complex and the relationship between contemporary elderly women, placing deep concern on women's difficulties and struggles in realistic conflicts, and building a feminist discourse system. In addition, the film's poetic narrative is an exploration of the director's artistic expression of life's dilemmas, and a breakthrough in the creation of realistic women's films. The rich metaphorical images and the surreal expression techniques spanning time and space reveal the growth and behavior mode of women's character in detail, highlight the female dilemma behind the warmth, and show a distinct female consciousness, reflecting more profoundly the theme of feminist cinema and the romantic aesthetics of women. Therefore, both in terms of ideological connotation and expression skills, *Song of Spring* reflects the aesthetic characteristics of feminist narratives.

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