

The Construction of the Female Image and Social-Cultural Metaphor in Tuya's Marriage from the Perspective of Space Narration

Wenjing Yang^{1,a,*}

¹Guizhou University of Finance and Economics, Huaxi Street, Guiyang City, Guizhou Province, China

a. yangwj@mail.gufe.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: The rural film *Tuya's Marriage*, directed by Wang Quan'an, constructs profound and rich spatial metaphors, promotes the development of film narrative, shapes the character characteristics of female characters and completes the unique expression of the female experience. Based on the theory of space narration, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of three narrative Spaces, which are enclosed space, social space and imagination space. It reveals the internal relationship between spatial metaphor and the image-building of female characters in movies as well as the profound cultural connotation. The film focuses on the living conditions, the expression of true emotions and the construction of female individual subjectivity of women in marginal areas, which further promotes the writing of female images in films.

Keywords: space narration, *Tuya's Marriage*, female image

1. Introduction

In recent decades, both directors and academic circles have paid more and more attention to the study of film spatial dimension, and the emphasis on space has greatly promoted the development of film creation. However, as a matter of fact, time and space are the two basic dimensions of narratology research, and the research on space dimension has been lagging behind or even absent for a long time. Long has pointed out that both classical narratology and post-classical narratology lay particular emphasis on the time dimension and ignore the research on the space dimension intentionally or unintentionally [1]. This situation continued almost until the second half of the twentieth century, when an innovative paradigm of the "spatial turn" emerged in Western humanities and social sciences theory, raising the dimension of spatiality to an unprecedented level. This influence gradually spread from disciplines such as architecture, geography, philosophy, phenomenology and culture to the study of literature and film theory. The emphasis on the concept of space has undoubtedly contributed greatly to the study of film creation and film culture and theory. The dimension of space plays a crucial role in the narrative of the film. American scholars David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson argue for the importance of space in the narrative as a formal system, noting that some media narratives focus only on cause and effect and temporal relationships, and many events do not emphasize the place where the action takes place [2]. Some

Chinese scholars have also pointed out that space provides fuller information for film narratives, thus enabling them to move into a deeper and more realistic realm [3].

In recent years, the issue of marginalized women has also received attention in terms of women's survival, consciousness and autonomous action. Some directors have taken advantage of this change to create films that reflect the evolution of the image of women, which to a certain extent, reflect the reality of women's situation and the transformation of the image of women. At the same time, the stereotyped and crystallized image of women and the surreal consciousness and actions reflected in the films act on society today, in turn suppressing or promoting the awakening of women's consciousness. In short, the trend is in the right direction. Zhang and Liao have examined the evolution of the image of rural women in Chinese rural films over time, from the submissive image of "no-self" in the 1980s, to the struggling image of "know-self" in the 1990s, to the independent image of "self" in the 21st century. It would be argued that whether it is the traditional women who are deeply oppressed, the marginalized women in the sandwich, or the newly independent modern women, the overall image tends to be positive and reflects the development and progress of the times [4].

The film *Tuya's Marriage*, directed by Wang Quan'an, won Golden Bear Award at the 57th Berlin International Film Festival. Set in the harsh grasslands of Inner Mongolia, the film tells the story of Tuya and her husband, who agree to divorce in the hope of finding a husband who will be prepared to look after both of them and their children, in a gritty documentary style. In the context of the conservative, traditional countryside in China, the character of Tuya conveys the perseverance of women and the awakening of consciousness against tradition, but at the same time, bears the imprint of the tragedy of women of the old era. The film has also attracted the attention of experts and scholars who studied the film on the realistic style, national audiovisual style, character shaping, feminist perspective, cross-cultural communication significance and other aspects of the film, but few scholars analyzed the film from the perspective of space narration. Space is often used as "the specific place for character generation and the best representation of its character image", which can help to explore the character characteristics and gain insight into the inner world of the character to understand further the cultural expression and social metaphor of the film [5]. *Tuya's Marriage* has a unique set of space scenes with profound and rich space metaphors, and the construction of narrative space in the film skillfully promote the process of film narrative and form space symbolic metaphors to deepen the cultural meaning of the film. Therefore, this study explores the intrinsic relationship between the images of female characters in the film and the specific space in which they are located from the perspective of "space" and reveals the social and cultural phenomena that the film wants to express in terms of the image characteristics of its space.

2. Enclosed Space: The Imbalance of Daily Order and the Struggling Women

If a character feels surrounded by walls, the character is claustrophobic in a small space. The interior space can be felt as enclosed [6]. The film depicts internal places such as residences and wards, which are intertwined with the inner emotions of the characters in the film, forming an enclosed space in a certain sense. Further, the cause of this space characteristic is not only due to the physical place surrounded by walls but also the metaphor of the character's psychology, so that such a space has the features of "closedness" and "isolation" in the dual sense of physical and psychological. In particular, the "yoke" of the family house is always associated with some specific events - it is these events that make the family house lose its normality and become a "yoke" [5]. In the film, Bartel, who is Tuya's husband, has a leg disability caused by digging a well and sits in a dark corner of the house all day long, which makes him unable to share the burden of the family and even cut off from the outside world. Therefore, he has become a person who has lost the right to "speak" in his family and society, and he is a person who is isolated from the outside world not only

in physical space but also in his own psychological space. This state of affairs caused a serious imbalance in the internal order of the family, and the pressure of the external environment forced Tuya to urgently seek a way to break the old order and reconstruct the order of their daily life. The depiction of Tuya's family's residence in the film is always dim, depressing, and cramped. It shows Tuya's exhausted state every time she rides out to herd sheep and carries water back home, a metaphor for Tuya's difficult living situation and inner struggle. According to Spatial Narratology, space is also inextricably linked to shaping the human 'self' or 'subjectivity'." [5] In such a confined space, Tuya is placed in a dilemma, carrying out a difficult female self-exploration and constantly shaping her own consciousness of the subject. In residence, Tuya's body is in a state of "confinement", and she has to take on the heavy work of shepherding sheep and carrying water outside and still have to do daily household chores such as caring for her husband and children at home. On the contrary, Tuya began to psychologically redeem herself, especially from the conversation with her husband about the difficulty of using water in their residence, and Tuya's heart has begun to seek ways to break the current predicament and the old, repressed order of daily life. The response from Tuya's husband, "find a man to help you carry water", also became the beginning of Tuya's divorce and the narrative of finding a husband to raise her ex-husband and children.

The dilapidated ward in the film serves as another important place in the enclosed space, accompanied by a repressive, pathetic, and resistant tone. In this atmosphere, another female image in the film, Bartel's sister, is hard-working, tenacious and simple, appears. She is portrayed as a rural woman imprisoned by traditional ideas, not only becoming a "tool for childbearing" but also consciously moving towards the traditional gender norms under the traditional Chinese family patriarchy in the face of difficulties. After her husband's death, she remained faithful to her duties as wife and mother, choosing one person to take on the burden of raising six children. Bartel's sister seems to be numb and sluggish, but she shows the tenacious and kind side of a woman. After Tuya fell ill and could not bear the heavy work, Bartel's sister felt deep sympathy, so she persuaded Tuya to divorce her brother, and she will take care of Bartel. In the old ward, Tuya lies on the hospital bed with a bottle in her hand while Bartel's sister sits sideways and smokes a cigarette. The space is set up with a touch of mutual compassion between the women, but also a metaphor for the choice and struggle of consciousness between the two women in the desperate situation of survival, which eventually leads Tuya to take the road of "remarry a man to take care of her ex-husband and children". The setting of the enclosed space that appears at the end of the film is also meaningful, Bartel who is Tuya's ex-husband and Senge, who is Tuya's current husband, have an argument; at the same time, her son Zaya fights with someone who teases him about having two fathers. Faced with this situation, Tuya sadly and helplessly entered an enclosed space with tears streaming down her face. Tuya is again trapped and confused in such a dim and small confined space, metaphorically expressing another new dilemma and ethical pressure Tuya will face - how to struggle with ethics and morality in the general sense of society.

3. Social Space: Women's Survival Dilemma and Self-Redemption

Film space is not only a material existence but also reflects the social relations between characters. The status, occupation, social class, and power position people have in work, family, and marriage relations belong to the scope of social space [7]. Social space mostly refers to a comprehensive image of social relations between people, showing the complex social relations and emotional connections between people. As the environmental background of the overall narrative in the film, the prairie nurtures various human relations and cultural spirits in the life of the prairie. The film sets its narrative space in the vast grasslands of Inner Mongolia, while the symbols of grassland and nomadic herding often appear in our cultural system as an unrestrained, free and exotic image due

to historical and cultural deposits. In a sense, they are the other shore, carrying the imagination of the vast, free and running within a specific culture under the suppression of the closed and regular order [8]. However, the vast grassland scene that appears many times in the film breaks the conventional impression of the grassland image, presenting a dull yellow, desolate, and poor ecological state. The whole space is full of oppression, seriousness, rather than freedom, and a freewheeling state, which not only reflects the imbalance of the grassland ecology but also refers to the difficult living conditions of the local nomadic people. In the film, there are many times Tuya is in the barren grassland full of yellow sand. Most of the images in the film are of vast landscapes, and Tuya is often insignificant in this harsh and empty natural environment, allowing the audience to deeply feel the depression and loneliness of her being wrapped up in a huge spatial environment. This expression further reinforces Tuya's survival pressure and life's plight, showing Tuya's powerful sense of life. In such a living space, Tuya's subjective consciousness continues to awaken, and she struggles violently with her emotions inside, finally choosing the seemingly best of both worlds to redeem herself by marrying a man to raise her ex-husband and children. More specifically, on the one hand, Tuya's severe living conditions coupled with a back injury made her on the verge of desperation; On the other hand, Tuya is a kind and simple person full of love and responsibility, and she cannot give up her family and responsibilities despite the desperate situation. Hence, it seems that only the model of "remarrying to raise her ex-husband and children" can achieve the double redemption of Tuya's own body and mind. This is a great way for her to both get rid of the physical fatigue and reach self-reconciliation inside. This approach reflects Tuya's inner awakening of self-consciousness in the process of self-exploration and self-decision-making and the compromise of her inner world and reality.

In the process of Tuya's "remarriage", she had to face a "female-commodity" exchange model, which was also the inevitable result of the above approach. "remarrying to raise her ex-husband" has a certain degree of rebellion against patriarchy. However, it also seems to make Tuya, as a woman, become a commodity for exchange, depriving her of the right to choose love, treating the female body as a commodity that she chooses to "sell" to anyone who is willing to support her ex-husband. This model undoubtedly equates her body with a commodity, attributed to Tuya's saying, "As long as someone is willing to support her ex-husband, she will marry this person". Tuya seems to have "sold" herself as a commodity to a man willing to raise her ex-husband, and such a model has undoubtedly equated her body with a commodity. However, the film's elaborate marriage proposal plot dissolves this metaphor to a large extent. As line after line of marriage proposals, from horse-drawn carriages to motorcycles to cars, travel across the vast grasslands, it seems that Tuya is not entirely at the mercy of fate in this transaction. She has the right to choose in the limited conditions and at the same time among those who propose to Tuya because of the value of Tuya's character, which in a sense, dissipates the meaning of this "female-commodity" type of exchange. The appearance of Senge, who digs a well in front of Tuya's residence, impresses Tuya with his purity and persistence. In the face of a life-and-death situation, Tuya realized Senge's true feelings and took the initiative to accept Senge. Only then did this seemingly commodity exchange mode of matchmaking farce come to an end. As an important spatial imagery, the well runs throughout the film's narrative and has multiple social implications. The well not only implies the trauma suffered by the nomadic people of the grasslands in the process of modernization and industrialization but also relates to the survival of the local inhabitants. At the same time, the well plays an important role in the film, closely related to Tuya's choices. Specifically, Senge's act of drilling the well ignites Tuya's hope for survival and the realization of her own love for Senge. In short, this unconventional grassland social space dilutes the discourse of male power, and Tuya's request to remarry a man to raise her ex-husband also carries a certain implication of rebellion against the traditional patriarchal discourse.

4. Imaginative Space: Absent Women Who Exist in Dialogue

There is also a type of female figure in the film that exists in the dialogue but is not present - Sareena, Senge's ex-wife. Her image exists only in people's conversations, and there is no concrete image of her, but this absent woman leaves infinite space for the audience's imagination. The interpretation of Sareena's character has also become a major controversy in the film. Sareena, as depicted in the film's dialogue with people, seems to be an objectified, vain, profit-oriented, selfish, and low-morality woman who ends up running off with another man and cheats Senge out of the big truck he bought. She runs away again and again in pursuit of a better life, and such an "objectified" female character obviously forms a considerable contrast with Tuya and Bartel's sister in the same living space. Why is the image of this female character not directly given, and why is Sarina mentioned in the film many times? What deep cultural implications does the absence of this female character imply? Which is worth further thinking about and excavating? These are all worth pondering further.

Instead of directly presenting Sareena as a woman, it gives the audience a huge space for imagination and interpretation of this character. Sareena's escape from this hard living space again and again brings deeper thinking to the audience. Why does Sarina still have to escape this space environment after Senge meets her to buy a big truck? This may seem like a dissatisfied desire for money, but it may actually be its survival instinct. It is a concrete embodiment of Sarina's pursuit of modernization. The reward of modernization is considered the continuous improvement of the material condition of mankind [9]. Sareena is not willing to live in the nomadic region, which is almost abandoned by modern civilization, where there is a lack of water and deplorable living conditions, and faces the same living environment and conditions as Tuya. She also chooses the process of self-awareness and subjectivity construction in the survival dilemma. Compared with the other two female figures, she tries to break through the "tragic" color of the imprint of this living space on women; she is free-spirited, bold and fearless, breaking through the traditional moral constraints, although she has made a violates of social morality and ethics. She is imagined as a type of woman who takes the initiative to break through the limitations of the space environment and "chase modernization" in the survival dilemma. Sarina's final fate is unknown, but it can be seen that her escape from this living space is still full of frustration and abandonment. As Wang pointed out, Sareena could not withstand the temptation of modern material life and ran away with rich men again and again, which also meant that she fell down and was abandoned again and again on the road of chasing modern civilization [10].

5. Conclusions

This paper analyzes the intrinsic relationship between specific spaces in the film, including the vast and barren grassland, the hospital, the residence, and the shape of the female characters. *Tuya's Marriage* uses the metaphorical expression of spatial discourse, leaving the audience to imagine infinitely and provoking them to think deeply about the grand themes behind the metaphor, such as the collective survival of marginalized groups in the process of modernization, especially the moral dilemma of women's survival and emotional life. The film does not directly write about such grand issues as the ecology of the grassland and the fate of the herders but focuses on a woman living in the nomadic region of Inner Mongolia, giving her real feelings and state of existence and externalizing the inner activities of women through spatial expression. By depicting the daily life scenes of women in the nomadic area, the film gives the characters the power and vitality of the original ecology, making these female figures gain realistic meaning.

The order of closed space and social space should have been relatively stable. In the vast grasslands of Inner Mongolia, there is a stable family structure, a stable means of transportation and

grazing as a source of livelihood, which is the daily order of life for local herders, but the balance of order in the daily space of the Tuya family is disrupted by the drastic changes in external conditions and the internal change of Tuya's family. In the end, Tuya has to choose "remarrying a man to take care of her ex-husband and children", which is not only a rebellion against the traditionally male discourse under the patriarchal system but also a challenge to the traditional order of family structure. However, in this series of actions, Tuya not only shows her simple and kind qualities and forbearance and indomitable spirit but also reflects Tuya's strong vitality as a woman in the difficult process of exploring self-awareness and the difficult situation of survival. The other female character in the film, Bartel's sister, is a kind and simple person like Tuya, but under the oppression of the living environment and the burden of family responsibilities, she lacks the sense of autonomy of fate and accepts the tragic fate of life with a numb spirit. On the contrary, the writing of Sareena, a woman who is not present, leaves the audience with infinite room for reverie. She is a materialized woman but also a rebel against the times and the fate of existence. The film places the image of women and their survival situation at the core of the expression rather than at the periphery, showing the real emotions of women struggling and suffering in the difficult self-exploration and the contradiction between ethics in the general sense of society and the needs of individuals. This triggers the audience to think more about the survival situation of women, the psychological struggle and the construction of female subjectivity conveyed in the film. Furthermore, it brings realistic enlightenment to today's films about women and makes the audience focus on the living conditions of marginal female groups in various countries and regions.

References

- [1] Long Diyong. (2008). *Spatial Narratology: A new field of narratology*. *Journal of Tianjin Normal University (Social Sciences)*(06), 54-60.
- [2] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson. (2015). *Film Art: An Introduction* (Zhen Weizhen Trans.). Beijing United Publishing Co., Ltd. 102.
- [3] Jiao Yongqin. (2009). *The spatial narrative of the film*. *Contemporary Cinema* (01),113-115.
- [4] Zhang Lihua & Liao Bingling. (2022). *The Evolution of Rural female images in Chinese rural films*. *Masterpieces Review*(20),19-21.
- [5] Li Diyong. (2015). *Spatial Narratology*. Beijing: Life, Reading, New Knowledge Sanlian Bookstore, 260-268.
- [6] Mieke Bal. (2015), *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Tan Junqiang, Trans). Beijing Normal University Publishing Group, 128-129.
- [7] Zhang Man. (2020). *Metaphor Analysis of Narrative Space in Marriage Story*. *Movie Literature* (09),128-130.
- [8] Feng Xin. (2007). *Tuya's Marriage: The vanishing shore*. *Film Art*(03),16-18.
- [9] Richard Falk, Emilio Ambasz & William O. Beeman. (2018). *Post-Modernism: The Social Aspect*. *Performing Arts Journal* (3).
- [10] Wang Yumei. (2012). *The survival choice of rural women in Central and Western China viewed from Tuya's Marriage*. *Movie Literature* (05),94-95.