

The Spatial Text Narrative Strategy of Chinese Animated Films From the Perspective of "Mythological Space"

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ABSTRACT

The adaptation and deconstruction of Chinese mythological stories have been gradually established through narrative texts in the context of modern culture, and the intertextuality and expected vision formed between them and the audience have also become the prerequisites for the adaptation of mythological stories. The contemporary animated adaptation of Chinese myths is essentially a process of modern translation of cultural symbols. It is based on the narrative text of classic myths and integrates a strong contemporary social and cultural context to complete the adaptation and innovation of the original mythological themes. Based on the theoretical framework of "mythological space", this article examines how animated films can achieve the contemporary transformation of mythological texts through triple spatial reconstruction.

KEYWORDS

Mythological space; Character codes; Textual narrative; Spatial narrative; Worldly sentiment

1 Introduction

Myth, as a literary form, reflects a common perception of the objective world by primitive people and is a form of idea that reflects reality. In ancient times, humans were filled with awe, bewilderment and panic at the occurrence of various natural phenomena, and thus there was totem worship, imagination of all things in the world, and deification of all things in nature. On this basis, Chinese mythological stories have become increasingly rich and are scattered in ancient books such as notes and encyclopedias throughout the ages. Among them, the earliest and most widely preserved myths are the well-known Shan Hai Jing. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, there were relatively systematic mythological series such as Fengshen Yanyi and Journey to the West, which formed a relatively complete Eastern mythological worldview.

With the passage of time, the innovation of technology and the transformation of social and cultural contexts, people often reconstruct the original mythological stories to fit the changes and evolution of people's living conditions and values in the current cultural context. Especially under the premise of the integration of global cultural capital, cultural forms and contents determined by technology and media have led to fast-paced consumption habits and viewing demands. On this basis, the adaptation of classic story texts that are well-known to the public has become a universal creative strategy that can guarantee the return on corresponding capital investment and effective dissemination. "The Monkey King Returns" (2015), "Nezha: The Demon Child Reborn" (2019), "The Origin of the White Snake" (2019), "New Gods List: Nezha Reborn" (2012), "New Gods List: Yang Jian" (2022), Nezha: The Demon Child's Uproar in the Sea (2025), etc., based on the original mythological narrative text, have been rewritten in a bold way, reconstructed the Journey to the West series, the White Snake series, and the Investiture of the Gods series while retaining the original symbolic codes, and completed the deconstruction and reconstruction of the unique characters. The traditional codes from the original myths have become elements of directional identities and have become new signified symbols in the new worldview framework.

2 Narrative evolution in mythological space narrative texts

The adaptation of mythological stories is essentially a cultural practice of creative transformation of collective memory. This process is deeply related to the "expectation vision" theory in the receptive aesthetic perspective and the intertextual mechanism at the semiotic level, reconstructing mythological animated films while retaining the original spiritual core and special codes. Since the release of "The Monkey King Returns" in 2015, the adaptation of mythological animated films in China has gradually shown a diversified trend, featuring a variety of character images, breaking away from the stereotypical character positioning, being more in line with the changes of the present era, integrating the new social and cultural context from the perspective of the Internet, and incorporating more imaginative aesthetics.

2.1 The deconstruction of character codes

Today, many animated films have ingeniously modernized mythological figures, creating unforgettable images. The change and subversion of character designs are bound to draw attention from the audience. Looking at the excellent works in recent years, Nezha has become the mythological figure with the most adaptations in recent years, which has led to the establishment of the deification system with Nezha as the narrative subject. French film theorist Jean Mitri says: "To a certain extent, the film is like a new form of ideographic language... the conventional and fixed symbols of ideographic language are replaced by ever-changing symbolic meanings, which mainly depend on the visual context in which it is located, and less on the object or event being represented. This background gives these objects or events a temporary ideographic function through the relationship or meaning determined by it." ^①Therefore, in literary models and early images, the image of Nezha is relatively fixed and does not deviate from the original character design. The silk of the heavens, the firetip spear, the Wheel of Wind and Fire, and the Circle of Heaven and Earth that he possesses have all become indicative symbols of Nezha, as a referential identity object, representing a unique character image and continuing in many works to this day.

However, the character of Nezha began a new deconstruction and reconstruction in the current perspective of the "mythical space". Nezha is often depicted as a woman in a pink lotus dress, but in the history of Chinese literature, the lotus is often used as a metaphor for women. Therefore, Nezha's feminine design precisely conforms to the "tame" of power in the patriarchal society of the feudal era, and Nezha's resistance against patriarchy is actually a struggle against fate in the context of a specific era. It also reflects the repressed rebellious mentality of the people in the late Ming Dynasty.

But the feminized Nezha has changed in the current aesthetic perspective. New Gods List 2021: "Nezha Reborn", the creator focuses on a "new", aiming to create a new universe of deification, reconstructing character images and values, creating "marginalized" common heroes to interpret the current value system and worldview, evolving from femininity to masculinity, and discarding the previous "tame" and indulgent Nezha image. It presents a Nezha with a strong masculine desire and a flamboyant personality. The director deliberately kept the eye design of Nezha from the 1979 film "Nezha's Rebellion in the Sea" produced by Shanghai Film Studio. The traditional Chinese opera style of eyebrows and eyes not only carried the classical shaping and continuation of the character of Nezha, but also aimed to break the gender consciousness that was originally built on the feminine Nezha.

The reconstructed story of Nezha has changed the traditional intertextual style, but after the original story is constructed, the character positioning has changed. Besides the change in the meaning of the costume, a signatory code, the reshaping of the character personality and circumstances of the new opposite sex brings a new visual experience to the audience. Under the new narrative system, the divinity of Nezha gradually fades away. As an ordinary person, he has experienced many setbacks and injustices, and many modern elements have been added to him, giving him a modern touch. The external image of a motorcycle and leather jacket replaces the previous signifying codes, subverting the audience's original "intertextual memory" and "expected vision". At the same time, he represents a group of "symbolic expressions of power" ^②young people, and thus, with the help of others, achieves self-revival and return to divinity, thereby evoking a strong "expectation of vision" in the audience and fulfilling the referential satisfaction from the perspective of the common people. This character's subversion fundamentally breaks through the audience's original expectations. Through the fusion of narrative themes and social themes, it enables the film to reach an understanding with the audience in the depth mode and reconstructs the traditional narrative with a brand-new "spectacle" of imaginative texts, satisfying the audience's novelty and demand for imaginative consumption, and bringing the audience a unique aesthetic experience.

2.2 Reconstruction of the narrative of classic texts

From the perspective of the narrative theme, the motif of "patricide" is often carried in three forms in the work, and this is closely related to the context of the entire era. The symbol of "father" no longer merely refers to the individual father in the physiological sense, but rather the image of father in the sociological sense, tending towards spiritual leaders and power holders. "The father has always been an important indicator of a family, state, society and cultural imagination in the film, and the positioning and evaluation of the father role is an important indicator of cultural identity and recognition in each era. The change in this image reflects the basic direction and important transformation of cultural values in each era of China." ^③Therefore, the essence of patriarchy lies in the spiritual guidance it brings. In narrative works dominated by the Nezha series, the "patricidal" motif is a rebellion against patriarchy. Li Jing, as the biological father, has a controlling

role in the family, but his master, Taiyi Zhenren, and the Heavenly Court are the true power holders in the Deification worldview. When Nezha encounters dissatisfaction and expresses resentment towards his father, Taiyi Zhenren will continue to be the spiritual father of "Nezha". This completes the "patricide" orientation towards Li Jing, the symbol of his father.

The questioning of the Primordial Heavenly Lord in "Jiang Ziya" (2020) breaks away from the traditional narrative direction of submission and subordination, and instead gives way to the weaknesses of human nature. Therefore, Jiang Ziya's awakening is actually a process of resistance against "imperial power" and a return to human nature. In "The White Snake 2: The Rise of the Green Snake" (2021), Xiaoqing's challenge to Fahai and her stubbornness and awakening in the Shura field are more of a process of self-identity confirmation for women in the present era, in opposition to the "patriarchal" ideology that exists in the current social and cultural context; "New Gods: Yang Jian" (2021) continues the theme of the previous "Investiture of the Gods" series, from trust in the master to questioning and confrontation, and even achieves a double negation of "patriarchy" and "monarchy". It can be said that in the social and cultural context of the new century, the adaptation of mythological animated films has taken a new direction, gradually shifting from the early struggle against patriarchy and theocracy to the individual resistance against fate and the confirmation and identification of self-identity.

3 Spatial narratives in the consumption of imagination

"The essence of art lies in the defamiliarization of form, making things that people are accustomed to but fail to notice novel and charming, thereby evoking people's acute perception of things." ^[1]Therefore, an excellent film work is the expression of "defamiliarization" and the creation of "imagination" based on the reconstruction of the text, through the setting of signified symbols and the implications of the text, combined with the themes of society and The Times.

"Defamiliarization" is actually a process of transformation of things in the present. When the space in the original intertextual memory is modified and improved, it will appear in a more visualized, image-based plot, thus bringing a certain strangeness to the audience, but a sense of the original closeness and anticipation can be felt from it. This approach is quite different from the spatial Settings of traditional animated films in the past, but it is characteristic of the present era. In "The Legend of the White Snake 2: The Rise of the Green Snake" (2021), "The New Gods: Nezha Reborn" (2021), and "The New Gods: Yang Jian" (2022), the director reconstructs mythological stories with clear social Spaces and imagined urban Spaces, allowing the audience to search for a sense of familiarity in the original intertextual memory.

3.1 The social space under the mythological perspective

In terms of genre elements, mythological stories contain a clear hierarchy of "gods, men, and demons", satisfying people's imagination beyond the real world, which is a mirror reflection of people in the real world, constructed on social classes, ethics, and value systems in the real environment. Therefore, in mythological stories, the hierarchy and identity of the characters are the main components of the social relations in mythological narratives. The simple and clear binary opposition is the main narrative mode in mythological animated films, with the game between good and evil and the opposition between humans and gods being the main narrative direction. Therefore, in many adaptations of mythological animated films, creators extend the social space while retaining the original mythological core, so as to make it relevant to the themes of The Times.

The narrative space of "White Snake 2: The Rise of the Green Snake" has shifted from the human world to the Asura City filled with all kinds of gods, humans and demons. Xiaoqing's rescue of her sister has become the narrative focus of the film, while Xiaoqing's awakening of self-awareness as a woman in the current social context has become the core of the work. The New Gods series sets its era background in the cultural space of modern society and reinterprets the struggle between humans and gods in the original work. As a result, the original mythological relationships are integrated into and form a new social and cultural picture, and the spectacular setting of scenes and the regions in the original story form a linkage mechanism, satisfying the audience's secondary imagination of the mythological story.

3.2 The "defamiliarization" of the geographical space

The nationalized style and the localized narrative strategy in the image need to be implemented at the narrative level of subject matter, characters, contradictions, etc. The expression of these contents can better present the spatial symbols of the film. "The film presents space through audio-visual language, and the concrete information contained in the film

space is perceived by the audience in a visible and perceptible way. The audience organizes spatial information and establishes spatial relationships to form the story space of their own imagination. The audience participates in the building of the story space and feels the characters' circumstances and their inner journey, and understands the cultural significance of the narrative theme in the dramatic conflict of the story plot." "Therefore, from the perspective of spatial narrative, the regional spatial environment in the image carries the richness and depth of the image space, thereby enhancing the diversity and symbolism of the image text.

Based on the social spatial relations in the modern mythological perspective mentioned above, the direction of mythological narrative gradually shifts to the regional space where reality and science fiction blend. "Rebirth" is based on the Shanghai Bund and Manhattan of the 1930s and incorporates art deco design to create an imaginative Eastern steampunk city. The neon texture of cyberpunk and the heavy metal steampunk industrial style blend well with the local landscape, giving it both a realistic texture and a futuristic visual effect, while also incorporating many Oriental aesthetic elements. Under the fusion of multiple elements, the national style is well presented in the film. In this complete urban picture, civilization and barbarism are contained, the struggle and competition of the original animal nature are included, and the symbiosis of order and chaos formed by the convergence of man and god creates the necessary conditions for the contradictions and conflicts of the original mythological story. "Yang Jian" reinforces the stylized expression of this mythological spatial perspective, integrates traditional Chinese culture and social background, combines cyberpunk with typical Eastern implications, reshapes the appearance of the divine realm, and establishes a complete visual system.

The asura field of "The Green Snake" eliminates the boundaries between the past and the present, and builds an "otherworld" by integrating various elements of different eras, and in the expression of the "otherworld", it allows the audience to feel the life in the real world, that is, to establish the inevitable internal connection between the "otherworld" and the present society, and to reflect the present society and life through absurd and fictional stories. This makes the Asura field not merely exist as a unique regional space, but as an artistic code with rich implications and expressive functions.

4 The westernized rewriting of mythological text narratives

Martial arts and supernatural films are unique film genres in China and still hold a place in the hearts of the Chinese people. Classical literature such as *Journey to the West* and the *Investiture of the Gods* has become the most popular big IP for adaptation. In the process of adaptation, although the classic texts of these classical literature are still followed, in the second creation, the classic text stories will be remade on the original basis.

In the creation of genre films in China, the ethical concepts of religion are often combined with the narrative context of the film, and ethics and morality provide a rationalized moral basis for the justice mentioned in the film and highlight the "otherworldly" spirit inherent in Chinese religion through the narrative text, which is quite different from the "worldly" sentiment in the Western world.

Looking at the storylines of traditional Chinese martial arts films, after swordsmen slay their enemies or uphold justice, they often choose to retire from the martial arts world. According to the simple narrative logic that good and evil are rewarded, these swordsmen have fulfilled their narrative function of punishing evil and promoting good, and thus should enter an idealized world to escape from the originally impetuous and full of variables in the real society. In this way, the final image of the hero is established. Here, the hero's retreat complex is not only an elevation of the character's image, but also a Buddhist ethical "otherworldly" tendency, and it is to perfect the protagonist's moral concept and become the ultimate direction of the film's narrative plot. The emergence of justice is supported by religious ethics, and the retreat of the chivalrous is also a manifestation of people's "conversion" to religious spirit. The world of martial arts is romantic and idealized, so this religious spiritual projection precisely reflects the double negation of secular power and violence in Chinese martial arts films.

However, in the Western world, religious culture leans more towards a "worldly" complex. Whether it is their landmark buildings or the duties of the priests, they are connected to secular society, that is, daily life. They represent the will of God to listen to the confessions of the people and to guide the common folk. Religion is involved in reality and governs the secular world, and thus for the doctrines of Western religions it is an ideal secularization expression of religion.

In light of the narrative tendencies of animated films in recent years, whether it's "The Child of the Demon" (2019) or "Yang Jian" (2022), in terms of narrative systems, the endings of the films have gradually moved closer to Western cinema, relying on the production of sequels to create their own "such and such universe" series in the local context. On this basis, the protagonist will no longer retreat from the world but return to the world as a justice advocate to seek self-awareness

and complete self-awakening, thereby strengthening his "worldly" sentiment and discarding the "otherworldly" concept of traditional martial arts films.

5 Conclusion

In a time when various mythic-themed animated films are all the norm, narrative innovation lies in its heterogeneous creation, using traditional signified codes to reshape new discourse mechanisms, films based on the origin and transformation of classic mythological texts, completing the transition from traditional narrative concepts to modern cultural contexts, and promoting the integration of mythological stories with the context of The Times. While maintaining the original narrative concept, it rewrites the spiritual core of the mythological story and intersects with traditional Chinese genre elements to create a unique and distinctive spectacle.

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