

The Establishment of Spatial Concepts in Mamoru Oshii's Early Animations

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ABSTRACT

Japanese director Mamoru Oshii is known for his discussions of reality and virtual space in his works. However, before achieving fame, he had already been exploring the possibilities of space in his animated films. Later, these methods were also used in other works to form his spatial style. Therefore, this article focuses on the spatial details in Oshii's early animations and attempts to analyze the construction and expression of these spaces from the perspective of cultural geography. In the context of his concept of national space, I pay special attention to the re-creation of the two adapted works *Urusei Yatsura* and *Patlabor*. Hope to trace the path of his spatial concepts.

KEYWORDS

Mamoru Oshii; Japanese Animation; Film; Space; *Urusei Yatsura*; *Patlabor*; Science Fiction Animation

Nick Jones (2016) once cut into the *Resident Evil* films from the perspective of spatial production. Those cinematic Spaces that serve as imagining geographies are connected to reality but are also full of new possibilities (Aitken & Dixon, 2006). What I want to talk about is these imaginary spaces, not just "through a shot sequence or a montage suture" within the "given narrative" (Aroztegui Massera, 2010), but also from the design. In Japanese director Mamoru Oshii's animations, we can feel space as a unique element. There are some internal relations between space and reality in his works (Moon & Park, 2012).

Almost the world's widespread interest in Mamoru Oshii began with *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), but his early animated films are also noteworthy, and we'll be talking about his cinematic space.

His early animation work includes:

*Urusei Yatsura*1: *Only You* (1993), Director

*Urusei Yatsura*2: *Beautiful Dreamer* Director

Angel's Egg (1985), Director

*Patlabor*1: *The Movie* (1989), Director

*Patlabor*2: *The Movie* (1993), Director

Even before he became a representative of science fiction animation, Mamoru Oshii paid close attention to the element of "space" in his works. He tried hard to design some space, and gradually formed his concepts of space.

1 Planning and Zoning: Establishing Spatial Concepts

After graduating from Tokyo University of the Arts, Mamoru Oshii entered the animation industry. Because of the art he studied as part of the Pedagogy, Oshii did not have the same high drawing

skills as a cartoonist. But as a big fan of Miyazaki Hayao animation, he watched a large number of animations in the market and learned a lot of skills from it. Before officially becoming a film director, Oshii had already had sufficient training in television animation.

Urusei Yatsura is a long-running manga series by Rumiko Takahashi that tells the stories of teenagers with different personalities who attend Tomobiki High School. The plot of this comic is unrestrained and has a crazy humor style. The series was adapted into a 218-episode TV anime series that aired on Fuji TV between 1981 and 1986, with Mamoru Oshii animating the first 129 episodes. The manga was announced to be animated again in 2022. After the TV version was broadcast, due to the high popularity of fans, *Urusei Yatsura* has been produced six consecutive theater versions. Oshii participated in the production of the first two films, serving as director, writer, character set, storyboard designer, and other positions, and received wide acclaim. Known as “the pulverizer of the original work”, he has greatly changed the animation narrative style of the original manga and the TV version. In the theater version, he uses delicate light and dark contrast, unique storyboard design, and calm narration to describe Takahashi's female unique feelings of happiness and pain of love (Chen, 2006, p.40). The atmosphere of the space in animation is handled just right.

In the recreation of *Urusei Yatsura1*, Oshii tapped into the allegorical role of space. The opening credits of the film are a scene of a boy and a girl chasing each other around a park in a fiery sunset. The simple figures are in black and white, while the park scenes are abstract and linear. The whole picture uses the retro sense of red as the background, black and white figures shuttle through it, and bright yellow color blocks as shadows. This is stepping on the shadow game. The boy is a little Ataru Moroboshi, the girl is Princess Elu from the alien, and the story starts with Moroboshi stepping on the shadow of Princess Elu—According to the custom of the Elu star, Moroboshi should make a marriage contract with the Princess Elu after 11 years. A vague memory from many years ago is placed by Oshii in the form of abstract light and shadow at the beginning, and then the story begins 11 years later.

Similarly, near the end of the film, the guys encounter Space Jump while trying to save Moroboshi who returned to Elu star, and suddenly they enter a white space of consciousness. At this time, memories of the same chase became clear, and the truth was about to be revealed. In the changing light and shadow of the sunset, the characters become realistic, and the clock in the corner of the park reflects the sky and clouds to signify the rapid passage of time. The figures of the two children are concentrated on the rotating iron sphere climbing frame: Princess Elu climbs on the iron sphere and continues to rotate, while Moroboshi runs on the ground to chase the shadows, indicating that the two people will eventually be in different worlds.

2 Transfer of Japanese Space

The interior space of Japanese architecture is progressive, usually through doors, corridors, porticoes, and other elements to divide the building into several independent and related spaces such as the vestibule, atrium, and inner courtyard, to highlight the overall hierarchical sense of space. Japanese artworks often use the technique of separating characters into internal and external spaces to create interaction, using spatial distance to increase visual effects, and rendering a specific atmosphere for a dramatic plot. Therefore, Oshii also extensively uses the connection function of space to reflect various kinds of relationships. On the one hand, Open Spaces such as cities and apartments are mainly used to render the atmosphere and account for the environment and adopt a slow-paced narrative. On the other hand, the main character's interaction is focused on the Confined Space and the internal and external interaction is carried out through the action of gradually breaking the space limitation.

For example, in the film, Lum's partner takes Moroboshi's earthly friends and relatives through space to hold a wedding, but they are ambushed by the Elu. The two sides fought a spaceship battle in space. Inside the ship is a Japanese-style living space where friends and family stay. A window is set on one side of the space, through which they can watch the interstellar war-like fighting scenes in space. We can feel that there is "an immediate relationship" between the body of a character and "its space", "between the body's deployment in space and its occupation of space" (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974], p. 170). Those in favor of the engagement capered and talked by the window, while the opposition squatted on the tatami mat made of grass and wood. So that the psychological state and emotional relationship between multiple characters are clear at a glance. Such relational zoning allows the space inside the picture to be fully brought to "a human scale"—dividing or reducing "the immense spaces" into "small spaces" and filling the space with a more human touch (Ashihara, 1983[1979], p.122).

The technique of enlarging the screen space can be seen in almost all of Oshii's works. In the early days of his creation, the most common way to increase the space capacity was to use mirrors, such as the use of glass, building walls, water reflection, and so on. These are also common in Japanese animation. Otherwise, Oshii is also good at using editing, such as using cross-editing to intersperse the wedding inside the building with the rescue battle outside, and finally achieve the rescue result by breaking the connection point of the two spaces—the window. The most personal characteristic of Oshii is the depiction of multiple perspectives. In the films, when the role as an object enters the venue, the lengthy questions and discussions of many minor characters around introduce the one's personality and the story background, which appear in both *Urusei Yatsura*. Currently, the picture is mostly close-up, focusing on the faces of each character. The design of the storyboard is very clever, and the fast switching still picture, from the point to the ground, makes the object (the character) be depicted from the perspective of others in a three-dimensional presentation.

Summarily, in his early animation creation, Oshii has consciously and gradually explored the appropriate ways to better plan the space, including reconstructing the space form, increasing the space capacity, expanding the content of other dimensions of space, etc. The ultimate goal is to achieve the ideal state of representation for the sake of engraving a deeper level of information in it.

3 The Rhetoric of Space

In 1988, Mamoru Oshii and Naoyuki Yoshinaga co-created the *Mobile Police Patlabor* anime series OVA, which was released in 1988–1989 and consisted of seven episodes. Among them, the first six episodes were directed by Oshii. This production brings together music supervisor Kenji Kawai and art supervisor Hiromasa Ogura, who played crucial roles in the subsequent anime films by Oshii on the theatrical version, and later, they collaborated with him on the Theater Edition. The manga series *Mobile Police Patlabor* (HEADGEAR, 1988–1994), originally written by Masami Yuki, has a solid fan base and has been adapted into a well-received TV series.

The setting of the story revolves around a Japanese police force equipped with battle robots, the Special Vehicles2 (SV2). Mamoru Oshii also continued the style of the TV anime in *Patlabor1: The Movie*, choosing a more conventional story dealing with robot crimes. However, *Patlabor2: The Movie* is complete "Mamoru Oshii". He takes the two captains of the SV2—Kiichi Goto, who is thoughtful and decadent in appearance, and Shinobu Nagumo, a cold female police officer with a strong fighting force—as the main object of description, that they are the middle managers who have certain command rights but cannot have absolute control. Combined with the social problems of the time, some theorists have focused on the translation of the real-world in *Patlabor2*, which is

implicated in “the theatricality of such attempts to both challenge and unify the space of Japanese national and personal identity, strategic theaters of conflict, and national law and order” (Anderson, 2009).

All in all, Oshii has been constantly exploring the way of space rhetoric in his creation, trying to attach more inside information to space. In the Theater Edition of *Mobile Police Patlabor*, he makes a more skillful and mature use of spatial metaphor. We can interpret the opening of the two animations as his use of static and dynamic image schema metaphors respectively. For one thing, *Patlabor1* opens with a mutilated apocalyptic scene and a deliberately enlarged silhouette of a man preparing to kill himself, followed by images of the film's robot-warriors, Labor (large robots used in construction) working alongside ordinary humans. The former depicts a murderer who uses computer viruses to commit crimes, while the latter explains that the main battle in the film is between humans and robots. Both of them contain reflections on humanity and technology. For another, *Patlabor2* used a robot war from Southeast Asia three years ago as an introduction. The advance team was the first to find the enemy aircraft, but as the captain, Yukihiro Tsuge received an order from the superior to prohibit the attack, resulting in the destruction of the entire team. After a heavy rain, the surviving Tsuge escaped from the mecha. Faced with the huge statue of a god which was damaged in the rain forest, his heart had a fission violently. Oshii uses this flashback of the war as a memory to express the target field of abstract concepts outside of space—a reflection on justice.

4 Construction and Expression of Space

The construction and expression of spatial structure have always been a highlight of Oshii Animation, and it is mainly reflected in the architectural structure. In *Patlabor1*, there is a police officer Matsui from the Special Search Department. he leads his men through an old wooden traditional Japanese building that is about to be demolished, in search of criminal evidence of a programmer who committed suicide. The picture makes full use of the progressive characteristics of Japanese living space, showing a confusing visual effect. It is always in abandoned buildings that surround the edge of the city that the place of abode is chosen by the programmer who triggered the robot crime. Particularly, Oshii took a subjective long shot to follow the actions of the two police officers. The narrow Japanese roof-style building was used as the perpetrator's living space. The simple and old wooden decoration, scattered furniture, dim indoor light, and the color unified into the natural wood, clearly conveyed the perpetrators' stubborn and egoistic character and anti-social crime motive.

As a passive space, in addition to objective existence, space is also constructed and shaped by social, political, and economic forces. After the search, there are many storyboard designs comparing the city with the old house, reflecting that Tokyo at this time “has been and continues to be spatially unjust” (Soja, 2010, p.48). Normally, there is something causing people's thinking to change. *Patlabor 2* also chooses dark industrial buildings as the foreground of the city, with the character monologue thinking about the profound issue of “what is it that we are guarding?” Oshii is used to seeing movies as reality. He was born in the harbor area of Tokyo. That is to say, the old rivers and factories are memories of his growing up. The Tokyo in animation is also the Tokyo in history. Animation Spaces are used by Oshii to subtly express specific rights disputes and social orders in both virtual and real life. It's just like Eduardo said that “macrospatial organization” occupy real space for various purposes, and those “exogenously generated geographies”, especially “the dense web of state-created political and administrative districts and boundaries” have a constant impact on “practically every daily activity wherever one is located” (Soja, 2010, pp. 32-33). The

geographies from reality influence Oshii's thinking, and in his animation, which belongs to his imagination space, we can capture the obvious traces.

The rapid movement of light in the space and the movement of the background is also used to show the complex relationship between the characters, such as the scene where Shinobu Nagumo and the villain Yukihiro Tsuge rush under the bridge at night. The rippling surface of the water is used to reflect light, and the lights of the vehicles on the bridge and the distant fishing boat flicker slowly to indicate the myriad thoughts of the two people—a man and a woman—Nagumo was an excellent student at Tsuge's school and a good friend of him. She even had a secret love affair with Tsuge, who had a wife and child; Tsuge has been missing for three years after committing a crime, and now returns with a threat to destroy the city of Tokyo, while Nagumo has her justice as a police captain. During this period, other animation productions had already begun using the technique of making parts of the interior space move, such as the “moving background” in Hayao Miyazaki's animation, which was borrowed extensively during Mamoru Oshii's filming of *Patlabor 2*. The scenes such as flashing red channel lights on city buildings, the violent movement of air caused by the rotor of a helicopter as it takes off, and slow-moving clouds in an aerial chase reinforce his cold shooting style. He pursues the balance of the graphics in the picture, creating the space effect of undercurrent, to increase the information in the limited picture space as much as possible. In addition to the conventional background, the picture information corresponding to the subject can also be counted in it.

5 Conclusion

Most of these spaces can also be realized in real life, like a movie rather than an animation. Those stories are not merely “a show about giant robots, but serve as a basis from which to explore history, politics, and culture” (Ruh, 2013[2004], p. 77). By making full use of the elements in the space through special shooting angles and methods, Oshii paid extra attention to the use of lenses, to make reality full of other meanings. The *Patlabor* series was also a “turning point” in Oshii's creative career, and clearly, he was aware of it. It can be concluded that, unlike the previous fantasy stories, now he has entered the world of cyberpunk, which has also brought him to the attention of Westerners (Ruh, 2013[2004], p.81).

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