

## The Art of Poetry in Narratology of Contemporary Hollywood Movies

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### Abstract

*The Art of Poetry*, a master piece written by the ancient Greek literary theorist Aristotle, has been exerted a profound influence on modern narratology and has made a valuable reference for later film narratology. This paper mainly analyzes the influences of the tragedy theory from Aristotle's *The Art of Poetry* on plot integrity and reversal in film narratology. The paper also illustrates the arrangement and function of the turning point in classical three-act structure movies in order to discuss the general rules pursued in film narratology. In addition, through analysis on the classical Hollywood movies, it is believed that the reasonable narration in a movie should be of important meaning for conveying aesthetics concepts to its audience.

**Key words:** *The Art of Poetry*; Narratology; Film narration; Integrity; Reversal

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### INTRODUCTION

The film directly presents the ultimately beautiful voices, lights, and shadows to audiences, while the audience can feel and review the happiness, anger, sadness, gloom and other aspects of life through the stories in the film.

Among many elements of film arts, narration should be the essential part for us to thoroughly perceive the world of the film.

### 1. THE ART OF POETRY AND FILMS

Modern narratology was cultivated in the literary researches, and thus the film narratology came into being. In films, narration generally means the method of telling stories, and especially means how the events are organized in certain time and space. More specifically, it requires the scriptwriter and the director present the core of a story in the most attractive and interesting way (Lynn, 2005, p.300). In fact, researches in film narratology generally adopt the abundant theoretical resources in literary narratology. In the *Dictionary of Film Art* (Xu, Fu, & Cui, 2005) published in 2005, film narratology is defined as a theory based on literary narratology or semiology to study the narrative elements and structure in films. Therefore, film narration and literary narration share some common characteristics in a certain scope, and the two can be both considered as one kind of language narrations. Meanwhile, as two "divisions" of narration, film narration and literary narration both reveal the basic narrative rules of the "general narratology". For example, the principles of "narration with content" and "narration with order" in Chinese classical literature has been fully applied in Chinese modern film art. Film narration and literary narration have similarities in both thinking patterns and language models, and many concepts and paradigms in literary narratology can be spontaneously introduced in films. As the the ground breaking work in narratology, *The Art of Poetry* and its author Aristotle need to be investigated deeply and repeatedly.

Aristotle takes the view of realism to analyze the classical works of literature popular among the upper class in ancient Greece. He explores the historic evolution and composing principles of the tragedy art and finally

has extracted the aesthetics concepts in art creation so that the popular literature and art can possess the connotation of philosophy. It is said that the original title of *The Art of Poetry* is *On the Techniques of Poetry*, and in ancient Greek, the word poetry has the meaning of “creation”. Discussing the creation of “poetry” means to appreciate and review all kinds of art works. The poets like to use splendid words to record the bizarre art images in their minds, just the same as the scriptwriters describe their gripping stories and imaginative scenes in the film to some extent. Many viewpoints of Aristotle in his *The Art of Poetry* still guide the principles and creation theories of film narration and have an inspiration meaning to scriptwriters and directors in modern times. His illustration on plot integrity and plot reversal also constitutes two indispensable parts of modern film narratology.

## 2. PLOT INTEGRITY

In analyzing the narrative structure of films, plot could be the most familiar term for us. Foreign scholars once defined plot as “all the time clues directly presented to the audience in the film, including the causal relationship, time order, lasting period, frequency and locations”. Aristotle believes that plot is the arrangement of the story and a description for a certain act with integrity and special significance. A plot with reasonable structure should not be started or ended arbitrarily and have to be in accordance with a model featuring the beginning, middle part and ending (Aristotle, 2009, p.21). It is crucial to turn the messy storyboards into logical and tidy plots rather than highlight the novelty and distinctiveness of a story. A story, in some cases, no matter how inconceivable it is, can be very persuasive as long as it is arranged in an appropriate manner. As a result, films, only with storylines but lacking fascinating plots, can not move the increasingly persnickety audience. The great master of script in Hollywood, Robert McKee, has made the best summary of the “Classical Hollywood Narrative Structure (CHNS)”<sup>1</sup>. He holds the idea that a story is the one “where the protagonist struggles to achieve his or her ambition through fighting against the major external opposite strength in a consistent period and a virtual world with coordinated logic and causal relationship, and finally obtained an absolute result which can not be changed (Lynn, 2005, p.313).” It is undoubted that the connotation

<sup>1</sup> Classic Hollywood Narration Model is a general-used narration model which came into being during 1920s and 1940s and has been dominating film production in the Hollywood. The core content of this model includes the normalization of dream production, typification of characters shaping, dramatization of plots and stylization of the perfect ending. Kang, E. (2013). Study on Variation and Progress of Classical Hollywood Film Narration--Take *Argo* as Example. *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute (Music & Performance)*, 138(4):157.

of Aristotle’s *The Art of Poetry* has been greatly enriched in modern film narratology. Aristotle points out that several segments make a whole, in which each segment have to be arranged with some certain rules, and he believes aesthetics is closely related to the well regulated arrangement of segments in the whole. Emphasis on “narrative logic” and “consistent causal relationship” also reveals the concern of “well-regulated plots”. Moreover, “narration with order” will shorten the time for audience to appreciate the “plots of defamiliarization” so that they can pay more attention to the narrated “content” of the film.

McKee’s narrative method has been prevailing among the Hollywood movies because the method conforms to the arrangement of “our own illusion and anticipation” of our brain in some degree. Such method is also appropriate to our aesthetic views on rules arrangement, which reflects some certain characteristics when people ponder over the interior time, spatial and causal relations of an object. As a result, if the rules are disrupted, the disorganized narration can rarely be accepted by the brain. Take for example *A Beautiful Mind*, a movie winning the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2002. The movie is adapted from the biography of the Noble Economics Prize laureate, **John Forbes Nash**. The protagonist is endowed with great talent in the game theory and differential geometry but tortured by schizophrenia from an early age. Narration of the movie is conducted in chronological order, telling the story of Nash from his study on mathematics in Princeton, then being a lecturer and researcher in MIT, struggling against schizophrenia in later life to finally being awarded the Nobel Prize. Centering closely on the main character, the movie describes Nash’s academic pursuit, career, marriage, child rearing and elderly life step by step. With clear time lines and space axis, the movie does not attempt to pose any obstacle to audience. Aristotle has proposed that a work should describe only one object, and this principle is also applied in describing the plots of a film. The plots should be presented with integrity and each event needs to be organized coherently and consistently. If any segment is omitted or moved, the integrity will be destroyed (Aristotle, 2009, p.24).

Narration of biographies usually follows regular principles and sometimes may thus get criticism due to these stereotypical rules. It is a fact that a lot of great films produced in Hollywood have made innovations in the narrative structure, but the producers always face extremely high risks when the integrated narrative model is broken. The science fiction, *Cloud Atlas* (released in 2013), is divided into six parts according to different periods, which respectively take place in 1850, 1936, 1975, 2012, 2144 and the future after human extinction. Narration in the six parts are highly independent in styles and the six stories are very little correlation to each other. In addition, each part is disrupted or hindered half way and then followed by plots with inverted time order so

the strange and loose narrative pattern of this film looks like such a recursive sequence as “1-2-3-4-5-6-5-4-3-2-1”. Obviously, the producers are not good at grasping such pace and order, and almost all the audiences feel the movie quite dull and obscure due to the disorganized plots and even give up watching before the first quarter of the movie.

Plot integrity doesn't mean division of plots is forbade in all cases, but these plots should remain connectivity and consistency in time and space, which should ensure the connected plots intelligible to the audience at some point in time or give necessary hints through certain film shooting skills. Audiences' involvement, subtexts, progress and pace have to be devised in an appropriate manner, otherwise, “restructuring” will only lead to confusion of the audience.

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### 3. PLOT REVERSAL

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Aristotle has particularly mentioned “reversal” in *The Art of Poetry*, and he believes that reversal is a result when the event turns into an opposite status from its original state. Reversal is in line with the law of possibility and inevitability. He takes the examples in *Oedipus* and *Lynceus*, thinking that the messenger's action to console Oedipus, relieves him from the horror of marrying his mother and tells him his real identity which can be regarded as a reversal; that there is also a reversal that Lynceus is saved while Danaus (who is supposed to kill Lynceus) gets killed (Aristotle, 2009, p.30). Since the concept of reversal was applied in the modern film narratology, its connotation and denotation have been greatly extended and become the rudiment of the “turning point” in the film of the three-act structure.

Throughout movie development in the past ten decades, most Hollywood movies are willing to employ the classic three-act structure or other variations of it. Sid Field took the lead to systematize this structure, and on the basis of this, more commentators and scriptwriters made further interpretation and enrichment later. Hollywood scriptwriters mostly have a good command of such straight and distinct structure. They are also trying to make more efforts in the coherence of each act so as to make the narration smoother.

The three-act structure can be divided into paving, development (conflicts and struggling), and ending. The turning point is the most important part in first and second act. The first act is the base of a film with a core of depicting the protagonist and providing enough background information to the audience. Turning point in the first act is to afflict certain crisis on the protagonist's normal life so that the plots can not move forward normally and a new chapter should be unfolded. The first turning point is associated with the protagonist's certain decisive actions and since then, the protagonist will get

more involved and the characters' fate will develop into more dangerous situation. Turning point in the second act is also named as “the truth moment”. It will create a crisis for the protagonist and decide the new development direction of the film. However, in the second turning point, the protagonist usually realizes that the responsive actions he has taken are of little use and can not reverse the crisis he is confronting. After this process, the protagonist often obtains some inspiration and encouragement which help him correct his former mistakes and make more advisable and tactical decisions.

In the magical fantasy film *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*, which is adapted from Tolkien's novel, Prince Thorin Oakenshield of the Dwarf in Erebor leads his fellows and they retake their kingdom and treasure once occupied by the evil dragon. At the beginning of the film, Thorin is depicted as a selfish, greedy man, while he also boasts some certain arrogance and hostility as a descendent of the throne. After they seize back the treasure, there comes an important reversal in the film that Thorin refuses to share the treasure with his allies from afar who have given him great support. He would rather build fortifications to fight against them. When the film comes to the second turning point, Thorin finally realizes that the treasure has corrupted his mind and manages to beat his evil thoughts. The film reaches the climax when he takes up arms to fight together with the allies and then confronts with the greatest challenge since the beginning of the story. At this moment, the various emotions of the protagonist are greatly exaggerated.

The two significant reversals foster many exciting moments in the film and meanwhile, ensure the consistency and narrative rhythm of the plots. The reversals designed for the protagonist are believed appropriate because they don't weaken the character's positive image and the image of the character even becomes more vivid through the depiction of his evilness, which can better raise resonance of the audience.

Actually, narrative reading can be regarded as a multi-level mental operation, which involves the specific activities influenced by readers' knowledge, emotion, ideology and ethics in a specific narration, so as to reveal how narration realizes communicative behaviors and how narration is applicable to a wider range of communication in a general sense. According to this, film narratology is similar to literary narration. In addition to making emotional experiences such as surprise and suspense, the plot reversal also has a deeper thematic function (Cai & Fang, 2019, p.85). Arrangement of reversals in the film usually promotes dramatic conflicts which help to trigger off diversified perception of audiences. At the same time, the audience's aesthetic and ethical judgments are constantly revised during the process of film narration, which finally leads the audience to think deeply about the film ethics.

With the increasing complexity of film narration, proper arrangement of the turning points is a decisive part for the success of a film. An appropriate reversal will take the film to its climax and lay a foreshadowing to the perfect ending. On the contrary, if the reversal arrangement strays from the narrative rules or breaks the character consistency of the protagonist, the narration of the film will be greatly influenced. Unnecessary and excessive reversals inserted into the film just like a sick tree being transplanted into a healthy and green forest.

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## CONCLUSION

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Film is always making narration and presented by narration at the same time. It is a recurrence of a meaningful motion. The narrative principles for general literature evolved from *The Art of Poetry* are also believed effective in film producing (Wu, 2007, p.30). Looking back on Chinese contemporary films, feature films usually get criticized. To draw people's attention, film creations always mix various kinds of popular elements so that the script becomes a hodgepodge. The result of such mixture is that incidentals are put before the fundamentals though they had hoped to reach the aim of every aspect being considered. Some films may unconsciously let people forget the original intention of film narration: "To tell a story integrally and properly." In particular, some commercial blockbusters only focus on the box office brought by fans. Even though some have gotten extremely high box office, their public praise hit rock bottom because the inconsistent clues, disorderly plots and illogical imagination of these movies make the audience run out of patience. Thousands of years ago, Aristotle has paid attention to the methods of storytelling in his *The Art of Poetry*. He analyzes the artistic characteristics and the components of tragedies, displaying his own aesthetic

views and values. He also innovatively discusses the skills for script creation and elaborates on what kind of aesthetic thoughts should be delivered by art works. In the post-structuralist era, the study of narratology has promoted the cultural and historical context to a very important position. It means narratology has changed from traditional poetics research to interdisciplinary research combined with politics, culture, folklore, convention and so on. And based on the thoughts of Aristotle, modern film workers are suggested to consider putting more efforts in the film narration, which is the most initial part of a film. Then they can take into account the depth and complexity proposed by modern narratology while pursuing understandability and comfort for audience (Li, 1992, p.35). Instead of making lucrative popcorn movies to tell some illogical or even stupid stories, I believe taking film as a manifestation pattern to tell an attractive and soul-stirring story would be more praised and encouraged.

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