# An Analysis of the Narrative Expression Methods of the Film Man Jiang Hong

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Abstract. In today's rapid media development, audience feedback has long been one of the criteria for judging the success of commercial films. Audience feedback on the "bottomup" experience of a film can lead to a deeper understanding and ultimately to a revision of the theories, concepts and history of cinema and film history. The film "Full River Red" takes the Southern Song Dynasty as the story background, fictionalising a story of a group of folk volunteers plotting to assassinate Qin Hui. It is an innovative film that combines costume, suspense and comedy, and is highly acclaimed for its interlocking and progressive suspenseful plots and heartwarming and inspiring theme of the family and the country. This paper explores and analyses the narrative techniques of the film from three perspectives: plot, theme and music. In terms of plot and theme, Man Jiang Hong combines the real historical background to arouse the audience's patriotic passion with strong national colours. This paper analyses the dualistic theme of the film by combining the semiotic Greimas' "Semiotic Rectangle" model, and explores the kernel of the theme of the family and the country in the film. In terms of film music, the film pioneeringly adapts the Yu Opera as film music, which cleverly forms an intertext with the film plot and enriches the narrative dimension of the film. The author hopes that by exploring the narrative expression in the film "Man Jiang Hong", discovering the aesthetic value of the film as well as the national sentiment behind the commercial value, and the author can provide theoretical explorations and references for the film and new media industry.

keywords: The film "Man Jiang Hong"; narrative technique; musical narrative

#### 1 Introduction

The film "Man Jiang Hong," directed by Zhang Yimou, was released during the 2023 Chinese New Year holiday season as a suspenseful comedy. Prior to its official release, the film had already garnered over 2 billion yuan in pre-sale ticket revenue. As of March 10, 2023, the film's total box office earnings have surpassed 4.5 billion yuan, securing its position as the sixth highest-grossing film in the history of Chinese cinema. Additionally, the film has received high acclaim, with a 9.5 rating on Maoyan and a 7.2 rating on Douban. In today's fast-developing media, audience feedback has long been one of the criteria for judging the success of commercial films. Starting from the viewer's 'bottom-up' experience of the film allows for a deeper understanding and, ultimately, a revision of the theories, concepts and histories of cinema and film history. Man Jiang Hong" is based on the real historical events involving Yue Fei and Qin Hui but fictionalizes a story of an ambitious individual who, by deciphering a secret message, plots to assassinate Prime Minister Qin Hui. During the Southern Song Dynasty in the

Shaoxing era, four years after the death of Yue Fei, Qin Hui initiated negotiations with the Jin dynasty. On the eve of these negotiations, an assassination attempt occurred at the prime minister's residence, resulting in the disappearance of the vital secret message. Qin Hui urgently dispatched personnel to search for the culprits throughout his household. A group of individuals who harbored deep resentment towards Qin Hui seized this opportunity to infiltrate his residence and spontaneously organized a plan to assassinate him, seeking to avenge Yue Fei. In this paper, we will attempt to analyze the film's narrative techniques from three perspectives: the plot, themes of patriotism, and the use of music in storytelling.

## 2 Storyline (dramatic structure)

The Full Monty is quite distinctive in its narrative strategy, and it is an excellent suspenseful film with interlocking suspense, layer upon layer of clues to promote the extension of the plot, and moment by moment heart-stopping. The following will analyse the storyline of the film from the perspective of dramatic structure.

#### 2.1 Classical Unities

The "Classical Unities" is a 17<sup>th</sup>-century theatre structure proposed by the French classical theatre theorist Boileau, who summed it up as "a story to be told in one place, in one day, and to maintain the stage full from the beginning to the end." Its function can make the plot more concentrated and compact. The story of the film Man Jiang Hong is constructed as the completion of the designated action of searching for the secret letter in a designated city in one hour, which can be regarded as the typical narrative mode of "Three Uniforms". The embodiment of the "Three Elements" mode in suspense films often adopts the narrative strategies of "limited time" and "limited space". The limitation of time can create tension and suspense, the limitation of space can create dramatic conflict, and the protagonist is forced to take action under the double pressure of the two-dimensional limitation of time and space to stimulate his self-potential and influence the direction of the event and the final ending.<sup>[3]</sup>

In Man Jiang Hong, the limited time and space of the "Three Uniforms" limit the story to the prime minister's quarters and one hour, and the audience will be unconsciously drawn into the situation during the film, believing that it is impossible to complete the task within the limited hour, creating the same anxiety and tension as the protagonist. Often in a limited, small environment, it is easier to produce a cramped, confined sense of unease, and closed space so that there is no place to escape, in such an environment conflicts can not be reconciled, can not be avoided, and finally ushered in the outbreak of conflict under high pressure. In the face of the emergence and interruption of clues, Zhang Da becomes more and more anxious and eager to find the clues, and in such a situation, the audience will also be tense.

In addition, the narrative strategy of coupling is also used in this film. Qin Hui ordered Zhang Da to find the secret letter within one hour, 120 minutes. From this point until Qin Hui sees the contents of the secret letter on the prison wall, it was exactly 120 minutes. This narrative strategy of coupling the narrative time of the film with the projection time has been preceded in the American western High Noon. This technique will make the audience produce the illusion of confusing the film story time with the real time, and produce an immersive sense of being there, following the rhythm of the film, substituting themselves into the perspective of the protagonist,

breathing with him and sharing his fate, and at the same time strengthening the sense of urgency of the film's plot itself.

#### 2.2 linear narration

The concept of "linear narrative" originated in Aristotle's Poetics. The concept of "linear narrative" originated from Aristotle's Poetics, in which issues such as the similarities and differences between tragedy and epic, the relationship between human nature and art, and the functionality and completeness of the narrative on the overall plot were discussed. After that, Robert McKee provided theoretical support for the concept of "linear narrative", and J. Hillis Miller proposed the concepts of "narrative line" and "line imagery", which expanded the concept of "linear narrative". J. Hillis Miller also put forward the concepts of "narrative line" and "line imagery", expanding the academic connotation of "linear narrative". As a result, the concept of linear narrative has become clear in film storytelling. So far, most of the films on the market nowadays take the conventional linear narrative as their narrative structure, i.e. including the four parts of "beginning – development – climax – ending". Climax – Ending". The film "Man Jiang Hong" uses the conventional linear narrative as the main narrative structure of the film, which makes the logic of the story more rigorous and the development of the plot more in line with the cause and effect relationship.

The film opens with the assassinat" on o' the resident envoy of the Jin Dynasty, and the purpose of finding the murderer and the lost secret letter lays down an underlying logic for the whole film, and also lays down the biggest "cause" for the subsequent development of the storyline. The protagonist Zhang Da eats the token and travels around the whole house, searching for the truth while constantly bringing out new relationships between the characters. Although these characters have different identities, they are all tied up by a secret letter, and the purpose of their actions is to use the information difference of the secret letter to protect themselves, which is the "fruit" that leads to the characters' constant backlash and wavering camps in the film. As the plot deepens, more characters' relationships are revealed, and their respective missions and bonds become the "cause" of their actions, while these seemingly minor actions either push or change the direction of the plot, generating new "fruits". For example, the songstress Yao Qin, who was originally a marginal character, swallowed the secret letter in order to protect herself, making herself the focus of the incident and changing the work of everyone from searching for the secret letter to fighting for Yao Qin. Later on, it is revealed that she is actually married to Zhang Da, and that she is willing to sacrifice her life for the chance to assassinate Qin Hui, which explains her previous behaviour and makes the character's personality and line of action full and logical.

#### 2.3 MacGuffin

"MacGuffin" is a concept introduced by Hitchcock in his films, which refers to a non-existent thing or phenomenon that the characters are attracted to. "MacGuffin" refers to important clues in the film, which dominate the motivation and purpose of the characters' actions, play an important role in driving the storyline and support the development of the film's plot, and are often used by Hitchcock to set up suspense in suspenseful films. The word "MacGuffin" comes from a story: a man travelling by train to Scotland saw the passenger next door had a strangely shaped suitcase and asked what was in it, to which the passenger replied, "MacGuffin." He asked, "What is a MacGuffin?" "For catching lions in the Scottish Highlands." In fact, there are

no lions in the Scottish Highlands, and the so-called "MacGuffin" does not exist. In this dialogue, the MacGuffin is not something that actually exists, but it is the core and theme of the whole dialogue, and the content of the conversation unfolds and develops around the MacGuffin.

In Man Jiang Hong, MacGuffin is undoubtedly the secret letter that proves Chancellor Qin Hui's collusion with the Jin Dynasty, and the mastery of the secret letter is the mastery of the initiative, so the characters in the play have been around under the search for the secret letter and to start the action. In an interview, screenwriter Chen Yu mentioned that in addition to the progression in storytelling, there is also the elevation from the metaphysical story to the metaphysical theme, which undergoes many dimensions in the process. The upgrading of the story is not a "flapjack" type of transformation, such as "It was you who killed, it wasn't you who killed, and yet it was you who killed.....", which is only limited to the same dimension of the reversal, while "Man Jiang Hong" has several reversals. Man Jiang Hong" in several reversals is vertical across the dimensions.<sup>[4]</sup> The purpose of the action of all the people from looking for who killed the gold envoys, changed to why kill the gold envoys, leading to who in the end to kill Qin Hui, and finally changed to the purpose of killing Qin Hui, just for "a breath of air", and this series of changes, are relying on the clues of the secret letter to lead to one by one.

# 3 Family and National Themes

As a melodrama film promoting patriotism and family and national sentiments, "Man Jiang Hong", with the great hero Yue Fei as the backdrop of the story, is very easy to arouse people's sense of family and national sentiments. Yue Fei is a household name, loved by the people as a national hero, and before his death, he wrote "Man Jiang Hong – Write Wistful Memories", which has been known by the people for thousands of years, inspiring people to be positive, united and loving. At the same time, the related allusions to "Mother Yue stabbing words" and "Serving the country with loyalty" are also used in the film to render the atmosphere of the film and bring the plot to a climax, which becomes the key pivot to guide the destiny of the characters in the film. The story of Yue Fei has become a cultural consensus and cultural gene of the Chinese nation, and director Zhang Yimou has cleverly used this cultural IP in the theme setting, making it easier to ignite the enthusiasm of the film, resonate with the audience's mind, and stir up the audience's sense of national mission and national identity in their bones, together with the grand scene of the whole army reciting the same words, to form the patriotism spirit of "passing on to others". The film is a patriotic spiritual inheritance of "human-to-human transmission".

This chapter tries to start from the perspective of the film's theme, extracting "semantic elements" from both sides of the dramatic conflict and grouping them into Greimas' "Semiotic Rectangle", which is conducive to analysing the relationship between the characters in the story, and discovering the profound kernel of the family and nation theme by analysing the film's dualistic theme.

#### 3.1 Greimas-type Themes

A.J. Greimas is known as the founder of French semiotics, and the "Paris School" headed by him is known as the four major schools of semiotics together with Saussure of Switzerland, Eco of Italy and Pierce of the United States. He developed the concept of dichotomy on the basis of Saussure and Jacobson, and put forward the theory of "the basic structure of symbolic knowledge", and the "Greimas-type theme", i.e., the dualistic theme.

From this theory, a model matrix is constructed, which deepens the structure of symbolic analysis, and is known as the famous Greimas' semiotic rectangle. The theoretical formulation is shown in Figure 1.

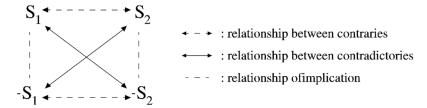


Figure 1. The semiotic rectangle. Self-drawn by the author.

These four terms have the following three kinds of relationships:

S1 and S2: Contrast between opposite terms

S1 and -S2, S2 and -S1: The contradictory relationship between contradictory terms

S1 and -S1, S2 and -S2: Linkage (or complementary relationship)

In the film "Man Jiang Hong", the underlying purpose of the main character's camp is to find a way to assassinate Qin Hui in order to avenge Yue Fei's death, so we take "kill Qin Hui" as the basic symbolic term in the matrix, S1, and the power of Qin Hui's camp as the opposing term, S2. By applying the "Semiotic Rectangle" to the analysis, we get the "meaning matrix" is shown in Figure 2.

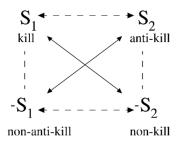


Figure 2. The symbolic term relationships. Self-drawn by the author.

In the plot setting, in order to avenge Yue Fei, Qin Hui must be killed, but the director chose to let the treacherous minister in the city tower of the impassioned "recite the poem" of this plot, so that Qin Hui to bear the curse of the ages. The plan to assassinate Qin Hui fails, but the protagonist's camp still wins, satisfying the audience's psychological expectations. By making Qin Hui lose face and making his life more embarrassing and painful than being assassinated, this is, firstly, closer to the historical facts, and secondly, expresses the potential meaning of this melodramatic film, i.e., evil does not overpower good. This potential significance is precisely accomplished by having the villain, Qin Hui, recite the poem on the city tower.

The film shares the same "assassination" theme as Zhang Yimou's other costume film "Hero", which was made twenty years ago. In Hero, the protagonist Nameless went to assassinate the King of Qin to settle a personal grudge, but at the last moment he was caught up in the choice between his personal desire and the peace of the world, and finally listened to another assassin, Broken Sword's advice: "Seven countries have been at war for years, and the people are suffering, and only the King of Qin can stop the wars and unite the world; the pain of a person is no longer a pain when compared with that of all the people in the world; the hatred of the State of Zhao and the State of Qin is no longer a hatred when put in the context of the world. The hatred between Zhao and Qin is no longer hatred when placed in the whole world." In Hero, Nameless decided to give up the assassination and sacrificed his life for the sake of morality in the world. In Man Jiang Hong, Sun Jun, inspired by Zhang Da and others, finally approached Oin Hui, but in the end, he also gave up assassinating him and asked him to recite a poem in public. As Sun Jun scolded Qin Hui, "It is cheaper to kill you than to kill you, they want to keep you as a traitor in the world to bear the scorn of the world. Some things are more important than life and death. That's why they went ahead and sacrificed their lives for the sake of this song 'Man Jiang Hong'." In both films, the ending is "no killing", which sublimates the theme of the film, overriding the physical suppression to achieve spiritual victory, in order to achieve a kind of expression of the theme of sacrificing one's life for the sake of justice, which is a consistent aesthetic idea of Zhang Yimou's films.

#### 3.2 Contrasts Highlight Dramatic Tension

In the film "Man Jiang Hong", the director is good at using the art of contrast to create dramatic tension, and has used contrast many times in character setting and plot treatment, which enriches the film's expressive power, and gives a more dramatic expression and stronger artistic shock to the excavation of human nature and the interpretation of the theme.

Firstly, in terms of character setting, the main character Zhang Da is a small utility soldier, while his enemy Qin Hui is the prime minister of the Song Dynasty, Qin Hui. The two camps are extremely different in terms of social class and power, so from the very beginning, the hero's assassination plan is accompanied by great difficulties. Right at the beginning of the film, Zhang Da is dispatched by the Chancellor to carry out a time-limited mission, and if he fails to complete the mission, he will be brought to death. This sets a tense pace at the beginning of the film, suggesting that Zhang Da's fate is in the hands of the Chancellor and his situation is precarious. With such a strong contrast between the two, the audience's heartstrings are closely tied to the protagonist, constantly worrying about his fate.

It is also interesting to see the dual role of Qin Hui's two mute girls, Green Pearl and Blue Jade, who are both maids and bodyguards. In the camera language throughout the first half of the film, the two maids have been shown as docile and weak clerical figures, and it is only in the last scene that the two are revealed to be bodyguards with extraordinary skills. The identity of the two mute women with disabilities so that people preconceived them as vulnerable groups, and the director also took advantage of this, to the audience to perform the "blindfolded", to the end of the truth, which gave the audience a surprise at the same time, but also become the main character assassination action in an accident, swinging the direction of the plot, increasing the flexibility of the plot. The reason for this treatment, the author believes that the director should want to lay out the treacherous minister Qin Hui's cunning and deep character, so that the use of a double at the end of the plot can be self-explanatory.

Secondly, in the ending of the plot setting, the impassioned recitation of "Full River Red" is not someone else, it is Yue Fei's greatest enemy Qin Hui, this treatment will play the artistic contrast to the extreme, with the whole army reciting the formation, greatly increasing the drama. Director Zhang Yimou used the usual tactics of the sea of people in the previous films, so that "the word presses the two Song dynasties" "Man Jiang Hong" can be recited in a burst of sound waves to create a vast momentum of transmission of the sense of the sky, resulting in a powerful artistic infectivity, but also touching the audience's heartstrings.

#### **4 Narrative Music**

Film music has an indispensable role in film. Since the development of sound film, film music has been an indispensable part of audiovisual art, playing an important role in audiovisual effect, artistic expression and supporting narrative. [5] The music in the film "Man Jiang Hong" is composed by singer Han Hong, and the most distinctive feature is the adaptation of Yu opera stanzas, which is combined with electronic music elements to create a brand-new style, which is deeply loved by the young audience. In addition to this, the film also uses elements of opera percussion many times to enrich the audiovisual. In this chapter, we will analyse the textual intertextual role of Yu opera chanting as film music and the empathetic role of "Cherry Song" as theme music from the perspective of film music.

#### 4.1 Intertextuality in Yu Opera Chanting

The script of the film "Full River Red" is based on the story of the hero Yue Fei, who was born in Tangyin County, Xiangzhou (present-day Tangyin County, Anyang, Henan Province), and therefore the soundtrack is in line with the hero's life. At the same time, Yu Opera has the characteristics of majestic, passionate and powerful singing, which is suitable for praising Yue Fei, the hero of the anti-Golden Jin Dynasty, and Yue Fei's "Man Jiang Hong", with its flowing clouds and rivers and swallowing mountains, is also in line with Yu Opera's bold and hearty singing.

The Yu Opera excerpts In the film "re a apted from "Bao Gong Resignation", " Exploring Yin Mountain", "Bao Longtu Sitting in Prison", "Fighting Luanghao", "Five Ships Inviting Troops", "Guillotine Cases", "Wang Qiang Pointing Troops", "Mu Guiying Hanging Up Marshalship", and most of them come from Bao Gong's plays of the Yu Opera. "Bao Gong" that is, Bao Zheng, his iron face, honesty and justice, dare to redress the grievances of the people, so there is "Bao Qingtian", "Bao Gong" name. He was also known as "Bao Longtu" because he served as a straight bachelor in Longtu Ge, so he was also known as "Bao Longtu". In the film "Man Jiang Hong", Bao Gong opera singing is interspersed with the main character's search for clues in the process of rushing. For example, when Zhang Dasunjun suspected that the dancer was a suspect and went to interrogate her, the soundtrack was adapted from "Fighting Wang Qiang" in "Bao Gong's Resignation from the Dynasty". The section of the lyrics wrote: "Wang Qiang thief little a Sima, deceiving the emperor to the loyal and good pressure, said the annoyed with anger, bursts of anger upward hair ..... Today we beat the old thief, killed the old thief with the Bao family, look at the over the Chao Wa Wat I will be the thief to beat." Between the lines bursting with Bao Gong in addition to the violence of justice and righteousness of the anger, revealing that the victory is in the bag, immediately ready to invite the reward of the excitement. This kind of excitement is also shown by Zhang Da Sun Jun in the play. In the token under the auspices of Zhang Da has the power to walk around the whole hospital to investigate at will, and in their reasoning, the most suspected is the dancing girl who has direct contact with the gold man, so in their view, the speed of solving the case is extremely fast, it seems that the truth is already on the verge of coming out, and the victory is assured. Another example is Zhang Da and Sun Jun who, after finding out from the night watchman, prepare to go to the back kitchen to search. The lyrics of the soundtrack here are adapted from "Exploring Yin Mountain". The story of " Exploring Yin Mountain " is about Pao Gong's rescue of Liu Jinchan in the netherworld, "What Liu Jinchan's soul flies away, I don't believe you make up lies, in the world of the living, I am loyal and selfless with an iron face, but in the netherworld, why is it difficult to do all kinds of things?..... If I can't find out Liu Jinchan, I will not go back to the world of the living. The courage and determination of Bao Gong to go to the netherworld to redress the injustice for the people's daughter despite the danger and obstacles, also implies that Zhang Da and Sun Jun searching for clues in the process of mystery, but the heavy responsibility had to go to investigate. The lives of the people are at stake, but one is for the redemption of others, and the other is for the preservation of oneself.

In these footages of rushing, there are no character lines, nor too many performance actions, but the rhythm of the narrative is not interrupted, relying on the narrative role of the Yu opera lyrics themselves, and the film plot to reach a clever intertext. The plot of the film itself alternates with the soundtrack, which is like a duet, omitting and complementing each other, suggesting the direction and development of the plot and enriching the narrative level of the film.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### 4.2 Repeated melody empathy

One of the major roles of film music is to set the mood and render the atmosphere, enhance the audiovisual effect, and also enhance the empathy effect. The so-called empathy is an emotional response that is more in tune with the situation of others. The so-called empathy is an emotional response that is more in tune with the situation of others, i.e., "putting oneself in the shoes of others". Empathy in film generally means that the audience empathises with the characters or the plot, becomes more immersed in it, and feels the same as the playwright.

Repetition of melody is a common technique in music writing. In musical theatre, repeating a section many times can serve to emphasise the theme, and this section is usually the thematic core of the whole play. The repetition of the piece deepens the audience's impression and enables them to remember the theme, so that they can instantly recognise it when it appears again later on. In film music, the same melody is repeated over and over again, which also serves to emphasise the theme in the narrative.

In the film "Man Jiang Hong", the dancer Yao Qin and Zhang Da are husband and wife. It is not easy for them to have a chance to be alone in the woodshed, but it is also their last chance, when Yao Qin sings her favourite song "Cherry Song" as a farewell for them. Cherry Song" is a song written for the film by Han Hong with lyrics from Song Dynasty poet Jiang Jie's "One Cut of Plum - Boat Past Wujiang River". The melody is a structured counterpoint four-bar phrase that uses a major pentatonic scale with a mostly eighth-note rhythm. In terms of rhythm, the whole piece of music has the unique Chinese rhythmic beauty of "one note at a time"; in terms of melody, the major pentatonic scale, i.e. "Gong Shang, Angle, Levy, and Feather", is a unique tuning in ancient China, and due to the lack of semitones and triple tones, the melody has the

beauty of a bright and cheerful harmony; In terms of mood, the lyrics tell of the loneliness of wandering in a foreign land, and express the sighing of the passing of time in homesickness, with a faint melancholy beauty in emotion. Yao Qin's parents died, and she once drifted away from home to work as a songstress on the streets. Therefore, no matter in the choice of lyrics or melodic arrangement, the song "Cherry Song" is very suitable for Yao Qin's character.

The song "Cherry Song" appeared five times in the film. The first time was when Yao Qin received the cherries from Zhang Da in the firewood room, she sang it casually; the second time was when she said goodbye and hugged him in the firewood room; the third time was when Yao Qin swallowed the cherries and prepared to carry out the assassination plan; The fourth was the dialogue before Yao Qin was to "kill" Zhang Da when they were captured. The fifth time was when Yao Qin and He Li died together, and Zhang Da collapsed and sang "Cherry Song". Every time the "Cherry Song" was played, The beautiful and pure love story of the two is just like appearing in front of the audience's eyes, but it was constantly pulled by the cruel and turbulent reality. A pair of bitter lovebirds were forced to self-sacrifice in front of the family and the country's major events, whether to protect the ego or to take care of the overall situation, which was a direct reflection of the inner torment of the two people. It was interesting to note that the first time Yao Qin sang the "Cherry Song", Zhang Da was silent; in the end, when Yao Qin died, Zhang Da sang for her. This echoes the first time and creates a strong dramatic tension that the audience can't help but be moved by.

#### **5 Conclusions**

The film "Man Jiang Hong" pioneered the theme of "costume + comedy + suspense", which set a record in domestic genre films, and won a "full house" at the box office in the Spring Festival. In terms of storyline, the secret letter is used as a "McGuffin" to sublimate the main story line many times, which constantly leads to new contradictions and character motivations. Between the interlocking clues, the truth will be peeled off from the cocoon. In terms of thematic expression, with the theme of family and country as the main selling point, the film uses dramatic tension to show the dichotomy of loyalty and treachery, patriotism and betrayal of the country, and then sublimates the theme of the film with the reversal of the ending. In terms of the film's music, the innovative use of Yu Opera singing as the film's music. Yu opera lyrics alternate with the audiovisual language to achieve a clever textual intertext, which enriches the film's audiovisual content and enhances the narrative dimension of the film. Director Zhang Yimou uses his usual "momentum building" technique to help the film climax with grandiose scenes, igniting the patriotic gene in the audience's blood. From this point of view, Man Jiang Hong is an excellent work.

The film industry has long been the mainstay of the consumer market, and film has become an indispensable part of the public's spiritual life. And nowadays, with the continuous and rapid development of new media, VR and AR are becoming more and more popular, and the combination of film and new media is a general trend. New media technology and its narrative research will be the focus of the next research.

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