The Influence Of Film Narrative On Chinese Sci-Fi Movies

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to study the narrative structure of Chinese science fiction films. As one of the most important genres in the film industry, sci-fi films from America occupy a huge market share, conversely, Chinese sci-fi films struggle to gain traction in mainstream media. This problem is addressed from the premise that Chinese science fiction films lack strong narratives. Accordingly, by examining world film narratology, the narrative structure and elements of Chinese science fiction films are examined using contemporary film narratology theory.

This research is built on three pillars, firstly the 'film narrative' looks at narratology study to build a relevant research framework for the examination of films. Secondly the genre of 'sci-fi' originates from literature and expands into the film genre. The specificity and development of this genre are identified in the context of the Chinese film industry. Lastly, the bringing together of these two frameworks to address the question of "What is the most suitable narrative module for Chinese Sci-fi movies?"

The specificity of this research is in the fact that it focuses on the narrative aspect of Chinese Sci-Fi film contributes towards the understanding of specificity in sci-fi film narrative in order to strengthen contemporary Chinese sci-fi films.

*Keywords: Chinese Sci-fi films, film narratology, Chinese culture, narrative*

Introduction

1.1 The current state of science fiction in China

In recent years, with the development of film technology, Science Fiction (SF) films become more and more popular in the film market. Especially after the 1990s, the output and influence of global science fiction films have shown an (a trend in accelerated growth).

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**North America Box Office History for Science Fiction
Ticket Sales and Market Share by Year**
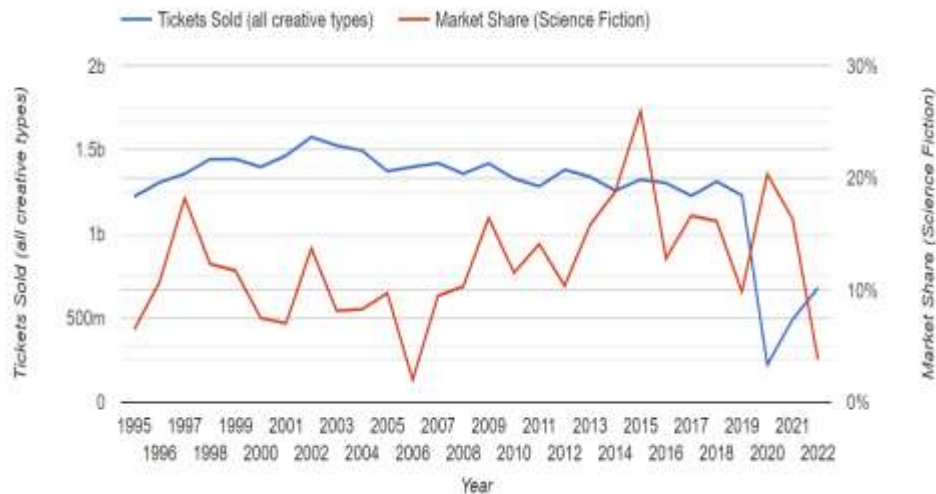
Note: Figures for 2022 are at an annualized rate.
Figure1

Figure 1, shows that both the box office and the market share of SF films stay at a relatively high level in the North American theatrical market. SF films have become very popular around the world since the 1990s. But compared to Hollywood, Chinese SF films are insufficient in quality and quantity (Appendix 1: Chinese Sci-fi Movies collection data 1958-2020). Since 1958, there have been only 27 SF films produced by China mainland, and the box office and awards are not good. So what is the reason makes Chinese sci-fi movies are in such an embarrassing situation?

In the Chinese film market, the 2014 annual box office champion was the sci-fi movie *Transformers 4*, which is the first film to exceed 2 billion (CNY) box office in the Chinese film market. And on the film review website, the ratings of science fiction films are among the highest. In douban.com which is the most popular film review website in China, *Interstellar 2014* has a high score of 9.4, *Avatar 2009* has a score of 8.8, and *The Wondering Earth 2019* has a score of 7.9. Also on rotten tomatoes, which is the popular film review website in America, the fresh point of Sci-fi films is high level. All this data shows that Science fiction movies are especially popular with audiences. Science fiction is gaining more and more attention from critics and academics. The Sci-fi genre is becoming one of the hot spots that need more research.

China is one of the countries with the largest number of film

productions, according to the statistics of Lighthouse Professional (App), from 2014 to 2021, the number of films released in China has grown from 400 a year to nearly 700. China has always been famous for martial arts films and ethics films, such as Jackie Chan and Jet Li's kung fu films, Zhang Yimou's Hero 2022, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon 2000, and so on. But when it comes to sci-fi movies, China is lagging far behind the West.

The History of Chinese Sci-fi Films

Movie Name	Year	Accumulation box office by China mainland (RMB)/100Million	Awards(International)	Awards(China)
Future X-Cops	2010	0.5899		The 2nd Golden Broomstick Award (2010)The most disappointing actress Xu XiyuanThe 1st Douban Film Xinxiang Award (2011)Okara Unit The Most Dregs Actress (Chinese) Xu Xiyuan
Lee's Adventure	2011	0.082		
Amazing	2013	0.4591		
Bugs	2014	0.2244		
The Wandering Earth	2019	43.57	The 14th Asian Film Awards (2020)-Best Art Director (Nominated) Gao Ang-Best Visual Effect (Nominated) Ding Yanlai-Best Audio (Nominated) Tan Rong WangThe 9th Beijing International Film Festival (2019)-Temple of Heaven Award Best Visual Effects AwardThe 11th Macau International Film Festival (2019)Golden Lotus Award Best Feature Film Award	The 32nd China Film Golden Rooster Awards (2019) -Best feature filmThe 35th Popular Film Hundred Flowers Awards (2020)-Best Director Guo FanThe 19th Chinese Film Media Awards (2019)-Recommended movies of the year The 26th Beijing University Student Film Festival (2019)-Best Picture AwardThe 6th Douban Movie Annual List (2019)-The most watched theatrical movies

Figure 2- Similarity of Chinese SF films with Hollywood Taken data from Appendix 1

After 2010, Chinese SF films produced much more than before, but the awards were still not good. Imitation of Hollywood films is also very common, e.g. *Future X-cops 2010* is imitated by *X-Man 2000. Bugs 2014* also can see the monster cannibalism horror sci-fi style of Hollywood. Even though the production level and visual effects of these films have been greatly improved, the audience did not buy them. The famous Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold talked about the presupposition of the drama and said: "Assumption the theatre places its hopes on the unity of its writers, directors, and actors, after the fourth creator, this is the audience." So without audience consumption, movies will not succeed.

The one exception was *Lee's Adventure 2011,* which was very original and creative, but since it was adapted from a short animation video, it did not make a big splash at the box office. Chinese sci-fi movies continued to slump until *The Wandering Earth* hit theaters in 2019.

So *The Wandering Earth 2019* is the most successful Sci-fi movie in China according to the box office production and awards.

The Wandering Earth 2019 was adapted from Liu Cixin's novel of the same name. It finally reached second place in the box office of China's film history with a box office of 4.654 billion (CNY). What was even more gratifying was that the film also performed well in overseas markets, earning $5.87 million in box office revenues.

Liu Cixin is a famous author in China. His work *The Three-Body Problem* won the Hugo Award for the best novel of the Science Fiction Genre in 2015. This is the first Chinese novel that won this global award. Liu's stories are always very creative, not only logical but also gigantic in scale.

The Wandering Earth 2019 tells the story of the sun dying, and that in a short period of time, the entire solar system, including Earth, will be engulfed by the sun. To save themselves, human proposes a bold plan called "the Wandering Earth Project". Human build planetary engines, to drive the Earth out of the solar system, and find new homes. In the background of the catastrophe, the whole story is logically rigorous, the plot is rich, the rhythm of the plot's progression is reasonable, and each plot is set with 1-2 small climaxes. The visual effect part is also well-made. When a film has a good story and visual effects, success can be imagined.

It's a pity that the glory of Wandering Earth is only short-lived, and Chinese science-fiction movies have been regressed to prototypes after 2019. The box office of *Shanghai Fortress 2019* dropped to 0.12 billion with a production cost of 3.6 billion. The others at the box office are not even worth mentioning.

How to make Chinese sci-fi movies well is a topic worth researching. The spectacle presented by technological effects are important, but the narrative is the key to making excellent films. Therefore, it is particularly important and necessary to study the narrative of science fiction films. This article is not a simple analysis of the genre of science fiction movies, but a more in-depth exploration of science fiction films with the narrative as a starting point. Studying the narrative structures of excellent sci-fi movies can enable Chinese sci-fi movies to draw

inspiration from them to shoot excellent sci-fi movies that belong to China.

Research problem

There have been a lot of research studies on this area. E.g. *China and Cinematic Science Fiction: A Lost Genre-A brief history of Chinese science fiction film and its narrative themes. Linus Fredriksson 2015,* This thesis provides the research problem of" Why are there so few sci-fi movies in China?" This article analyzes the research problem through 8 films from the aspects of history, economy, culture, etc. The article expounds on the narrative characteristics of Chinese science fiction films and the reasons for their formation.

And the editor-in-chief of Science Fiction World, which is *the Tree-body Problem* published magazine, Yao Haijun also makes a claim "This was what Chinese science fiction was lacking: a grand narrative." in the article *The Three-Book Problem: Why Chinese Sci-Fi Still Struggles,2018.*[2] "Sci-fi movies have just started to be made in China, so they're taking baby steps," said Li Zhenyi "You can't expect [sci-fi movies] to reach the sky in only one leap." Li Zhenyi also claims this in this article.

The article *Narratives of Modernization: China's History of Science Fiction By Andrewliptak / December 11, 2015[3],* well explained the question of " why Chinese SF is different from Hollywood?".

There's a certain level of cultural anxiety, and he noted that the Western ideals that China has adopted over the 20th Century are alien to the culture at large: "Science, technology, and modernization are not inherent in Chinese culture. They are like alien entities. If we buy into them, we turn ourselves into monsters, and that's the only way we can get along with Western notions of progress." -Han Song. Sci-Fi writers

Ken Liu and Xia Jia each noted that they've heard or been asked a similar question several times: how is Chinese science fiction different from 'regular' (read: American) science fiction? The answer, they note, is complicated:
"I usually disappoint them by replying that the question is ill-defined and there isn't a neat sound bite for an answer." Liu wrote. "Any broad

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[2] The Three-Book Problem: Why Chinese Sci-Fi Still Struggles
Liu Cixin's epic trilogy was expected to take Chinese science fiction into a new era, but the genre is still far from its lofty ambitions.Yin Yijun, Sixthtone, Jul 09, 2018.
[3] Narratives of Modernization: China's History of Science Fiction,
By Andrewliptak / December 11, 2015

literary classification tied to a culture—especially a culture as in flux and contested as China's—encompasses all the complexities and contradictions in that culture. Attempts to provide neat answers will only result in broad generalizations that are of little value or stereotypes that reaffirm existing prejudices."

It's not that there aren't differences in the science fiction that's been produced – reviewers have compared Cixin Liu's Three-Body Problem to the works of that of Arthur C. Clarke – it's that Chinese SF has developed along very different ways that that of its Western counterparts, much as China has undergone tremendous changes in the last century.

Through the answer of Ken Liu, who is a famous SF author and translator and also translated Liu Cixin's Three-body Problem, SF as a broad literary, will always be changed in the development of culture and society. Attempts to provide neat answers will only result in broad generalizations that are of little value or stereotypes that reaffirm existing prejudices.

   Searching on Google Scholar with the keywords "Chinese Science Fiction Film" and "Narrative" will get about 90,900 results. Prominent scholars in this field of study include Robert Mckee (STORY-Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting 2010), Vladimir Propp (1895-1970), Roland Barthes (An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative 1975), Christian Metz (December 12, 1931 – September 7, 1993), David Jay Bordwell (Narration in the Fiction Film 1985) Gérard Genette(1930-2018) (Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method), etc.

Looking at the research results of predecessors in these areas, since the number of Chinese sci-fi movies is not large, they found out the reasons for the backwardness of Chinese sci-fi movies after comparison with Hollywood sci-fi movies, or from the side view to talk about the limitedness of the Chinese Sci-fi industry, but did not discuss the problems in the narratives of Chinese films as a whole.

Definitions

Since Fiction:

There are many explanations for Science fiction. Science Fiction as a film genre is normally understood as stories characterized by conflicts between science and technology, human nature, and social organization in futuristic or fantastical worlds, created in cinema through distinctive iconography, images, and sounds often produced through special effects technology.

According to Namrata Purkar in *Dystopian Writing as a Part of Science*

Fiction[4], he defined what is "fiction", fiction is any literature narrative, and Science Fiction is one of a genre of fiction.

The article *Science Fiction as Cognitive Estrangement: Darko Suvin and the Marxist Critique of Mass Culture,* deeply explained Darko Suvin's cognitive estrangement theory by defining the SF genre. Suvin defines SF as:

... a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's imperial environment.

Suvin sees SF as an oxymoron, a contradictory combination of the fictive and literal in a form that generates literary content capable of critically exploring both the same and others in the social world. [5]

Darko Suvin is an important scholar of Sci-fi studies because he established a systematic theory for SF for the first time in history. His cognitive estrangement theory from a brand new system tells us why science fiction is different from other literary styles.

To easily understand the Cognitive estrangement theory, the author makes coordinate to show obviously:
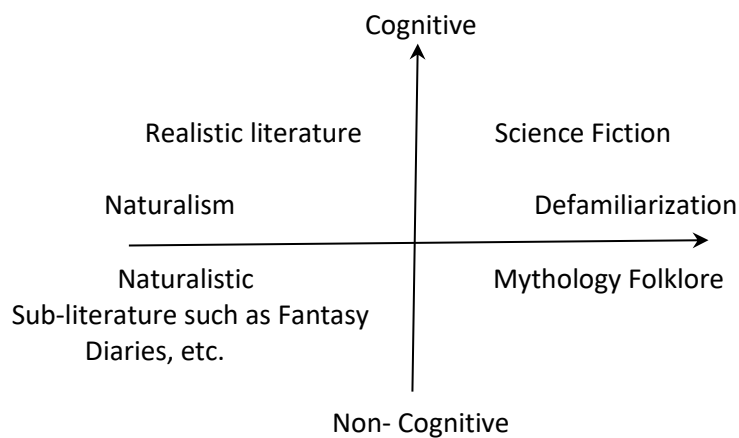

Figure 3 The Definition of SF Summaries from Darko Suvin

In Figure 3, the vertical axis represents the level of cognition, and the horizontal axis represents the different stages from naturalism to defamiliarization in aesthetics and poetics. E.g. if the story is about

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[4] Dystopian Writing as a Part of Science Fiction, Namrata Purkar, Bi-Monthly refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal, Vol. IV. Issue V (October 2013)

[5] Science Fiction as Cognitive Estrangement: Darko Suvin and the Marxist Critique of Mass Culture, Gregory Renault, Discourse Vol. 2, MASS CULTURE ISSUE (Summer, 1980), pp. 113-141 (29 pages)

planting sesame seeds, and getting sesame seeds, this is very consistent with our cognition of the real world. It is logically self-consistent, and it is a concept that can be recognized and understood. So the story can be put in the upper left corner. It is realistic literature. If the story is about planting sesame seeds and getting watermelon, this is beyond daily cognition. It is a phenomenon that does not conform to logical thinking. So the story should go in the lower right corner. It may be myth, folklore, fantasy, or magic literature. If the story is about planting a sesame seed and making it grow into a sesame as big as a watermelon through genetic modification technology, then it is science fiction literature, placed in the upper right corner.

 The Chinese scholar Nie Xinru's *Genre Movies* defines science fiction as

 Science fiction is a combination of human beings' imagination based on science and making this imagination into visual images and music. Philosophically speaking, human imagination cannot go beyond the scope of human cognition. Therefore, scientific knowledge, especially new scientific knowledge, can be said to be the source of human fantasy. In the existing scientific knowledge, there is a part that human beings are not fully aware of or have not been able to know so far, such as the universe, the future, nature, and so on. Generally speaking, science fiction is to reproduce people's imagination of these unknown scientific fields or parts of science.[6]

According to this elaboration, science fiction movies are showing people the unknown and the reasonable human notions of the unknown. This is in line with Darko Suvin's theory to some extent.

"Hard" and "Soft" SF:

Science fiction literature has always divided "hard" and "soft" as a sub-genre. There are a group of researchers who study this sub-genre, e.g. *Modes of Extrapolation: The Formulas of Hard Science Fiction, David N. Samuelson; The Literary Experience of Hard Science Fiction, John J. Pierce; "The Closely Reasoned Technological Story": The Critical History of Hard Science Fiction, Gary Westfahl.*

As long as science fiction has had a coherent existence, writers and critics have debated its relevance to science...

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[6] Translated from: Nie Xinru. Genre Film [M]. Shanghai People's Art Publishing House, 2001. p. 24

Rhetorical features of science do help characterize hard SF since it uses scientific findings and theories as measures of reality. Accurate but unobtrusive science may not define the sub-genre, but neither does a rhetoric of hardness without scientific substance... [7]

As a sub-genre of Sci-fi, " hard Sci-fi " has a strong connection with the scientific, e.g. the movie *Interstellar 2014* is a typical science fiction movie with " Hard SF". This classification has always been controversial, and the development of science fiction films has not been synchronized with literature, so the film industry has not emphasized the distinction between "hard" science fiction and "soft" science fiction. E.g. "*Star Wars*" series is a war movie and a fantasy movie packaged under a sci-fi shell; the "Terminator" series is an action movie set in a dystopian society with the bait of time travel.

The science fiction film intended to be explored in this paper must meet two conditions, first, it must be based on science, and second, it must have imaginative and fantastical elements. E.g. *Crazy Alien 2015* should not be included in this research. Because the story of this movie is two animal breeders who met an alien who came to Earth and wanted to establish diplomatic relations with the Earth. As a result, the breeders mistook the alien for a monkey and trained the alien as a monkey. Later, the alien used its powerful technology to teach them a lesson and then it returns to its planet. It's a typical comedy movie. Some Movie review website label this movie as a "Sci-fi Comedy". But to this research, ~~this~~ movie should not be classified as a sci-fi genre research area, just because there is an alien character or some superpowers appear.

Narrative:

  The dictionary definition of narrative is"a spoken or written account of connected events; a story." In this research, the narrative is referring to the film study, so the narrative will involve in the film narratology theory. Narratology, taking the narrative in the film as the research text, explores narrative issues such as narrator and receiver, time and space, story and plot, and viewpoint and structure in films.

  The article, *The Narrator and Point of View, by Lyman Grant,* provides an easy-to-understand introduction to what a narrator is and how the narrator's point of view of narration affects the recipient.

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[7] Modes of Extrapolation: The Formulas of Hard Science Fiction, David N. Samuelson, Science Fiction Studies
Vol. 20, No. 2 (Jul., 1993), pp. 191-232 (42 pages)

...But this gets at only a portion of the point of view. The writer's choice of point of view essentially controls not only what we know but how we experience the events. If we trust the narrator, and the narrator is scared, you will probably be scared... [8]

It rests on such a pair of supposed contradictions, that of the narrator and the recipient. The narrative is the process in which the narrator struggles with the recipient, in which the narrator always uses various possibilities to control and influence the recipient. And the recipient is always suspicious of what the narrator tells. The recipient always wants to find the narrator behind the text. The most important thing the narrator has to do is to stitch the recipient into the story.

Principles of narrative analysis were shown in Vladimir Propp's famous study, *Morphology of the Folktales*. In *Morphology of the Folktales*, first published in 1928, Vladimir Propp (1985) analyzed hundreds of Russian fairy folktales and then compiled a list of thirty-one functions and seven categories of characters. He found that these thirty-one functions of characters remained unchanged in all folktales.[9]

Russian formalism can be said to be the source of modern narratology, the book *Anthropologie structurale 1958* written by Claude Lévi-Strauss*,* applies the principles of structuralism to analyze ancient Greek mythology and analyze social structures.

Roland Barthes published *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* in 1966*,* in this book Roland thinks that, at that time, western narratology research could only focus on classical or folk works. Once faced with modernist works, structuralist narratology became powerless.

The most notable person who has used the structuralist viewpoint to construct modern literary narratology, and the most comprehensive and representative figure in the study of narratology, should be the French scholar Gérard Genette.

Genette believes that an obvious difference between modern novels and classical novels is that modern novels avoid cohesion. In classical novels, the narrator always tries his best to make the narration clear

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[8] The Narrator and Point of View, Lyman Grant, https://sites.austincc.edu/lgrant/the-narrator-and-point-of-view/
[9] A Narrative Analysis Of The Film, " Titanic ", Alev Fatoş Parsa

and clear to be easy for the receiver to accept. But clarity is not the goal of modern novels, nor the goal of modern films, and modern film narrators are happy to adopt narrative devices such as flashbacks that clearly avoid the temporal or logical relationship between upper and lower.

The role of editing in film narrative is highlighted here, this is an interesting and necessary point worth studying.

In the development of film semiotics, film narratology has gradually become a research method. Many scholars used the method of narratology to study film, and Christian Metz (1931 – 1993) was a representative. Metz believes that the main body of the film is the art of narrative, and the film has produced many narrative forms and structures during its development.

America's leading film narratologist, is David Bordwell, in his book *Narration in the Fiction Film 1985,* provides a fairly comprehensive treatment of all concepts of film narratology, e.g.Viewpoint activity, principles of narrative, narrative and time, narrative and space, historical modes of narrative.

Bordwell's narrative research is mainly based on episodic Hollywood films. He believes that film, as a tool of information dissemination, is the process by which the narrator transmits information to the recipient. In this process of dissemination, the narrator must transform the text for his own purpose, and narration is born in this process. This coincides with the author's point of view on the contradiction between the narrator and the receiver.

By the book of *Narrative and Narration: Analyzing Cinematic Storytelling, by Warren Bucklain,*

The development of cinema into a storytelling medium was not inevitable. Narrative (a linear causal temporal logic), narration (the recounting of narrative events), and narrative agents are not given elements of film but were imposed upon fim form in its early years of development. Cinema began by adopting one mode, the "cinema of attractions," but gradually embraced a different mode, a cinema of "narrative integration" (Gaudreault and Gunning 2006; Gunning 1986, 1991). The cinema could have remained a specialized scientific instrument, or a fairground amusement, but in the early part of the twentieth century it transformed into a popular medium...[10]

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[10] Narrative and Narration: Analyzing Cinematic Storytelling, WARREN

It clearly explains that Film is a medium for storytelling. The research of narrative is also cross-media. Stories are not only articles presented on paper but also can be expressed in other forms, such as pantomime, dance, music, and image. All of these can be used in films, so all the effort of a film should tell the story well.

By the book *STORY-Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting,*
by Robert Mckee,

a "Good story" means something worth telling that the world wants to hear. Finding this is your lonely task. It begins with talent... But the love of a good story, of terrific characters, and a world driven by your passion, courage, and creative gifts is still not enough. Your goal must be a good story well told."

Society, culture, human emotion, history, and many other factors have an important and understated impact on the quality of film works. Form and structure are powerful tools for us to partially understand the work, but not the complete body of work. It is impossible to produce a good sci-fi movie with contagion, just the patchwork of the form.

Research Questions

In order to summarize the applicable narrative modulus of Chinese sci-fi films, the author has asked the following questions:

RQ1: What is the narrative development process of Chinese science fiction films?
RQ2. What are the narrative elements that contribute to the success of Chinese science fiction films?
RQ3. What kind of narrative modules is suitable for Chinese Sci-fi films?

Research Objective and Significant

The objective of this study is to summarize the applicable narrative modulus of Chinese sci-fi films. They are mainly divided into the following three objectives.

1. To examine the narrative development processes for Chinese Sci-fi films
2. To measure the narrative elements that contributed to the success

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of Chinese Sci-fi films.
3. To suggest modules of narrative for Chinese Sci-fi films

This research is not a simple analysis of the genre of science fiction movies, but a more in-depth exploration from the narrative as the starting point. Studying the narrative structures of excellent sci-fi movies can enable Chinese sci-fi movies to draw nourishment from them to shoot sci-fi movies that belong to China.

Conclusion

Modern people live in a highly competitive environment, which requires some unrealistic fiction works to enrich their spiritual entertainment. Science fiction has undoubtedly replaced the social functions of mythology in the past, and movies have become a new entertainment format. This is also the main reason why sci-fi movies have become popular in recent years. The illusions created by sci-fi allow the audience to temporarily divorce themself from reality and gain a moment of detachment and sublimation. At the same time, traditional text narratives are beginning to appear in many unsuitable situations, and the disintegration of the original value system has made the old narratives look pale. It can be said to be a true portrayal of the changes in the current era, and it is also a challenge to traditional text narrative research. Therefore, it is the greatest research value of this study to explore a narrative module that is in line with Chinese science fiction.

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