



Analysis of Time Narrative in ‘The Father’

Shuyi Li^(✉)

Literature and Art Major, Liaoning Normal University, Dalian, Liaoning, China
18013971695@163.com

Abstract. ‘The Father’, a film directed by Florian Zeller, is adapted from its drama of the same name, which shows the change of mental time of an old man with Alzheimer’s disease. The narrative of the film belongs to a complicated combination mode of segments, in which we witnessed the change of the psychological perspective of Anthony, and at the same time, this change had an impact on the time narrative of the film. The narrative time of ‘The Father’ can be divided into three types: psychological time, space time and nonlinear film narrative time. The transition from psychological time to space time is a process in which the father Anthony gradually realizes the truth behind it, and the nonlinear time narrative of the film itself reflects the originality of director Zeiler. Through the chaotic fragments of time and space, this film reproduces the illusory images in the minds of Alzheimer’s patients. When the complete time narrative chain is reconstructed, the unbearable lightness in the life of Alzheimer’s patients is exposed.

Keywords: Zeiler · ‘The Father’ · Time narration

1 Introduction

‘The Father’ directed by Florian Zeller and released in February 2020 in the United States, tells the story of an old man with Alzheimer’s disease who began to doubt everything around him. The film won six nominations and two awards at the 93rd Academy Awards and the 74th British Film Academy Awards respectively. In addition to the solid script and the excellent acting skills of the actors, the narrative style of this film alone deserves attention: the narrative style of the combination of fragments, the ingenious interspersed editing, the mysterious suspense setting as attractive as a puzzle, together constitute the superb space-time art of the film. Time narration is the key to the interpretation of this film. After rearranging the different time sequences in the film, we can rediscover the truth behind it. As Zeiler himself, who regards David Lynch as the godfather, said, “As a viewer, you have to play with all the pieces of that puzzle, to try to find the correct combination to make it work” [1].

2 Psychological Time in ‘The Father’

Psychological time is the most dominant time in the whole movie. It was put forward by French philosopher Bergson, who divided time into traditional space time and the opposite psychological time [2]. Psychological time, that is, the time of individual subjective

perception, refers to the reflection of the continuity and order of objective things in the course of the subject's mental journey, and is a time concept that expresses strength and quality. By using the expression of "psychological time" in the film theme, reality and illusion, reality and potential, memories and the present can be presented at the same time, so as to extend the depth and span of the work.

The hero of 'The Father' is Anthony, a father with Alzheimer's disease. When he gets old, he suffers from the disease and is forced to measure the scale of time in perceptual form. The film shows the time narrative of the combination of reality and fiction. On the one hand, the psychological time is everywhere, on the other hand, the real time is irreversible. The two kinds of time are intertwined, and a montage world in which the present and memory permeate each other is constructed. When filming this film, director Zeiler took psychological time as the main line, trying to make the audience walk into the heart of the father Anthony, and drive into the maze of narration from a unified perspective. In Bergson's concept of psychological time, time is no longer an objective, one-dimensional mechanical time, but a heterogeneous, fickle and constantly flowing life time, a kind of continuous extension and coverage.

The story of 'The Father' does not develop in chronological order, but revolves around the imagination of the elderly father's mind which is at a loss because he can't grasp the time of his life. With the progress of time, the father Anthony's inner world gradually became confused and scared, and even began to doubt his position. In Anthony's perspective, his daughter Anne didn't go to Paris to live, but stayed in London all the time. Anne's boyfriend Paul ignored his existence, thought that the father was hindering his daughter's pursuit of happiness, and rebuked him for "how much longer do you intend to hang around?". And Laura, the new care, is young and beautiful, and looks just like his little daughter Lucy... All this can be traced. Anthony didn't want his daughter to leave, so Anne stayed with him in his psychological time and stressed that she would not go to Paris (47: 26-47: 56). Paul is Anne's current boyfriend, and her predecessor is James. In the movie, Paul doesn't even appear, and Anthony just knows his name. The only people who really may have physical contact with Anthony are the daughter's ex-husband James (41: 19) or male care Bill (01: 26: 17). However, Anthony subconsciously thinks that Paul, who is far away in Paris, abducted his daughter, so he called that man "Paul" in his memory. In addition, new care Laura (26: 53-35: 09) was the key figure on the time coordinate of the day Anthony was diagnosed by the doctor (46: 00-48: 37). She appeared three times, and the first two times showed her face as Lucy, which conveyed the father's feelings of missing his deceased daughter. It is worth mentioning that just as Lucy herself was "absent", it also implied that Laura didn't choose to take care of the father's job in the end, which indirectly led to Anthony being sent to a sanatorium.

When the scenes mentioned in Zeller's drama stage are visualized in the film, the corridor becomes the hub of the film layout. In the memory of the father Anthony, the furnishings in the room are both real and dreamy. Only the two closed doors leading to the corridor are fixed. Every time Anthony crosses the corridor and opens and closes the door, it means the alternating flow of psychological time and real time. The bedroom door is actually the door of the sanatorium in space time, while the storage room door belongs to the tunnel door leading to the hospital in Anthony's psychological time. In the dim light, it is from this door that my father witnessed the death of his beloved daughter

on the operating table (01: 13: 16). The strong emotional tone constitutes an illusion in his heart, and even though time changes, the pain will not diminish. Similarly, when "Paul" slapped Anthony with his hand, Anthony stood there crying helplessly (01: 09: 08). However, from the furnishings of the living room and Anthony's clothes, it can be known that he was in the sanatorium at this time. The prototype of "Paul", that is, whether his ex-husband James or Bill, the care, had ever beaten him, was unknown to the audience, but the audience could understand that the existence of "Paul" had brought Anthony a deep sense of insecurity. After Laura, the care, arrived at Anne's apartment, Anthony deliberately stabbed his daughter Anne with words in front of Laura, and then there was a disturbing scene (36: 34–37: 00), when Anne crept into the bedroom, as if to suffocate her father. From the father's perspective (psychological time), perhaps Anthony's guilt about his daughter caused the illusion to appear as the victim to make up for it, while the real scene (present time) is that Anne comes to her father's bed and gently touches his sleeping face.

3 Space Time in 'The Father'

Bergson calls the traditional objective time space time, that is, the fixed concept of space is used to explain time. Space time extends and develops according to the order of past, present and future, and it is a concept of time showing width and quantity. The development and narration of 'The Father' is not the traditional linear time. Zeiler reproduced a fragmented world in the eyes of the elderly with Alzheimer's disease by splicing time and space, and the objective sequence of events will play a role in integrating movie logic.

French narratologist Genette thinks that time series is the comparison between story series and narrative series, he divides time sequence into the following types: sequence, narration interspersed with flashbacks, flashback, retrospective account and flash-forward [3]. The film 'The Father' focuses on two narrative methods: flashback and narration interspersed with flashbacks. It was not until the last fifth of the film was ready to unravel the mystery that it began to adopt the traditional narrative method.

3.1 Flashback

Flashback, as a kind of reverse time sequence in film narration, puts the ending of the event or the most important segment at the beginning according to the director's intention, and then tells the cause of the story. At the beginning of the film, the daughter Anne meets her father Anthony in a hurry. Anthony complains that Angela, the former care, is suspected of stealing his watch, and his daughter clearly points out that it is under the bathroom. Then Anne shows her father that she will go to Paris to settle down, and she is reluctant to leave him alone in London. His daughter says, "If you refuse to have a care, I'm going to have to ...", while Anthony asks, "To what?". As soon as the camera turns, Anthony stands by the window and watches the back of his daughter Anne leave (10: 43–10: 51). Anne is wearing the same coat as when she first appeared. It can be seen that it is still in the same time period until now, and the next second, the father's clothes begin to change (10: 52), from the previous black suit to the sweater coat. Through the

instantaneous change of the hero's clothes, it has been suggested to the audience that this film does not follow the ordinary chronological order.

In fact, the dialogue between the father and daughter at the beginning is the most critical node of the film. It was this clip that revealed to the audience the reason why Anne wanted to send her father to a sanatorium. After that, everything seen from the hero Anthony's perspective is a fantasy memory in his mind. The people who were always by his side were Catherine, a female care, and Bill, a male care, so their faces appeared in the first half of the film. Unlike Bill who was incarnated as "Paul", Catherine almost always ran through the whole film as a "strange woman", sometimes she appeared as Anne. Sometimes, she appeared as Laura, the care, which made the audience and Anthony fall into suspense. Until finally, Anthony witnessed the appearance of the two men as reality, thus opening the door to the truth and showing the story to the audience in a rewind manner.

3.2 Narration Interspersed with Flashbacks

Narration interspersed with flashbacks is a narrative that is not inserted in chronological order in the process of narrating the central events of the film. Zeiler is good at using narrative techniques to break a complete story into different time and space segments, and set it into a delicate narrative structure in a seamless way. The whole film can be roughly divided into three time periods: five years ago, before Anne went to Paris, now. The locations corresponding to the three time periods are: Anne and James' apartment, Anthony's apartment and sanatorium. The normal logical development sequence of the story is: (1) Five years ago, because Anthony drove away care Angela, his daughter Anne took her father home to live with her husband James. (2) James suggested sending Anthony to a sanatorium, but Anne refused. After Anne and James divorced, Anthony returned to his apartment and was taken care of by his daughter Anne. (3) Anne hired a care named Laura (the real Laura) for Anthony and accompanied her father to see a doctor that day. (4) The doctor diagnosed that Anthony's condition would continue to deteriorate. (5) Anthony finally found himself in the sanatorium.

Laura is the crux of distinguishing these time and space fragments. There are two doubts about her: one is the front and back problems between her and Angela, the other is the time period when she appeared. In the movie, when Anthony meets Paul for the first time, Anthony declares his sovereignty over the apartment (19: 10), while Paul points out that it is not Anthony's apartment (19: 13), but "our" (that is, James and Anne) apartment. Because Anthony fell out with Angela, the last care, he had to move to his daughter's apartment. But in this dialogue, Anthony and Paul also mentioned the name of Laura (17: 25), so the sequence is still in doubt. The real moment to discover the truth is hidden in the conversation between Anthony and Anne in the sanatorium. This is one of Anthony's few sober moments in the whole film. Anne asked Anthony, "Do you remember the first time you came to stay with me?" (01: 18: 18), and then Anne said "it was a stopgap, because you'd fallen out with Angela ..." (01: 18: 22). The two messages of "stay with me" and "a stopgap" in Anne's mouth both point to the time when Anthony moved to Anne and James' apartment, which proves that Angela appeared before Laura. The second question is when Laura really appeared. From the warm color and layout of the apartment, we can know that Anthony met Laura in his own apartment, that is, in

the second time, before Anne told Anthony to go to Paris. It is Laura's name or image that is interspersed in each timeline of the film, which constitutes a superficial illusion that deliberately confuses the audience [4].

3.3 Sequence

The sequence is to tell the story according to causality and chronological order. In the second half of the film, when Anthony suddenly found himself in a sanatorium (01: 17: 55), the whole film began to resume the normal timing sequence. Anne knocked on the door of the sanatorium. "Dad, can I talk to you?" At the beginning of the film, the dialogue between Anne and Anthony has formed an echo structure with the present. Anne explained all the reasons to Anthony with tears, and said that she and Paul were in Paris and could visit him from time to time on weekends. It was also after this that Anthony discovered the true identity of care Catherine and male care Bill. Catherine told Anthony that he had lived in a sanatorium for several months, but at this time Anthony had no relevant memory. He can't even recall his own name, mistaking the postcard sent by his daughter for a gift from his mother, and he fell into a sad mood of homelessness "I ... I want to go home". In the end, he could only lean on Catherine's shoulder and cry like a baby, while a large piece of vibrant green was displayed outside the window not far away, which brought a deeper visual impact to the audience: time can't stop for anyone, just as the aging and exhaustion of life are inevitable.

4 The Nonlinear Narration Time of 'The Father'

Zeiler broke the boundaries of time and space in movies, brought the audience into the narrator's story time, and followed the characters' memories in various time dimensions. Memory is based on the reproduction and re-imagination of reality. The continuous psychological time makes every space and every character keep their own details, feelings and hints, and implies the uncertainty of life.

'The Father' is not a time movie in the general sense. Zeiler broke through the narrative mode of traditional movies, and the staggered time narrative made it a distinctive stream-of-consciousness movie, which is also an extremely important entry point for the audience when trying to uncover the mystery [5]. The story of 'The Father' takes place in different time periods, unfolds with nonlinear time logic, and presents it in a combination of segments. The film skillfully uses scene scheduling and editing. The scenes that my father heard and saw all originated from his subconscious activities. It is these non-sequential time segments that interweave into Anthony's restless spiritual world.

Time itself is endowed with a soul in movies, and this soul is adrift. In 'The Father', the room is an abstract space carrier, which switches back and forth between the father's apartment, the daughter's apartment and the sanatorium. As an emotional synthesis, atmosphere and field, it invisibly expresses the time concept that is gone forever in the movie: "We have to go while it's sunny, cause it never lasts long when the weather's this good, does it?" In Zeiler's films, he doesn't skimp on the use of temporal symbolic language. For example, the watch Anthony has been looking for symbolizes the order of

time, and the dense leaves outside the window and his aging form a metaphor for annual rings. The light, color and scenery of the room are all used to indicate the changes in the time axis. It is these striking visual symbols that adorn Zeiler's bizarre movie world.

The film is interspersed with two narrative times, showing the psychological time of the father Anthony from doubt to pursuit, and the space time when he finally discovers the truth. The themes of love and loss run through it, which constitutes the unique time narrative of Zeiler's film. The starting point of the film is no longer to tell stories, but to show the deepest pain and sincere feelings of the characters. 'The Father' presents the conflict between psychological time and space time with nonlinear time narration. The time of this "conflict" is not to show dramatic plot sharply, but to highlight the reassembly of time and space and characters in the minds of Alzheimer's patients, and the strong loneliness that they can't locate themselves, which carries the endless extension of infinite time to limited life.

5 Conclusion

The course of life aging is actually a process of time passing. Life is like a journey, and the inevitable destination of the journey is acceptance. 'The Father' builds a maze of memory about time by combining fragments, and shows the loss and hesitation of the hero Anthony's spiritual world through the interweaving of psychological time and space time. The construction of time in movies is not only an "immersion experience" from the perspective of Alzheimer's patients, but also a deep reflection on director Zeiler's life experience of time and family: when love and companionship can't have both sides, we should regard what as our home.

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