

A Study on the Coupling of Cinematic Emotional Narratives and Social Psychology: Makoto Shinkai's Animated Film *Suzume*

Haohan Meng, Qingxia Xu, Jinhua Sun*

College of International Studies, National University of Defense Technology, Nanjing 210039, China

Abstract. The examination of the interaction between cinema and its audience represents a significant area of inquiry in contemporary film theory. In recent years, there has been a shift from a "creator-centered" to an "audience-centered" approach to film narrative. Makoto Shinkai's *Suzume* is a notable addition to his "Disaster Trilogy," acclaimed for its ability to engender emotional experiences within its viewers. The film's narrative mechanisms, meaning construction, and narrative strategies are pivotal aspects that highlight the relationship between emotional storytelling and cinema. By exploring the coupling between the narrative mechanisms and the audience's "social psychology", this study aims to offer insights into how cinema can inspire emotional identity, thus providing a fresh perspective on improving the emotional storytelling efficiency of domestic animated films and enhancing the efficacy of international communication. The findings of this study have the potential to enrich our understanding of the complex ways in which cinema can connect with its audience, whilst also advancing our comprehension of how emotional narratives can be harnessed to enhance the effectiveness of visual storytelling.

1 Introduction

Following the triumph of "Your Name" and "Weathering with You", the esteemed filmmaker Makoto Shinkai dedicated three years to the conception of another vividly imaginative animated masterpiece, entitled *Suzume*. This film, in conjunction with its antecedents, constitutes what is famously referred to as the "disaster trilogy". *Suzume* has achieved commendable prominence, and shattered numerous box office records and transcending the astounding success of its precursor. In line with Shinkai's emblematic style, the narrative of this cinematic creation orbits around themes of love, fantasy, healing, aesthetics, and delicacy. Nevertheless, it also introduces a fresh societal narrative theme, accentuating the necessity for humanity to transcend the shadow cast by the devastating "311" earthquake that transpired twelve years ago, and to wholeheartedly embrace courage to confront the future. Remarkably, the emotional tension within the film is strikingly pronounced, with the emotional backdrop progressively escalating in intensity.

Within modern discourse, the requisite for effective output and engagement with audiences has demanded the utilization of films exhibiting emotional narratives imbued with empathy and universality. A vanguard of emotional narratology, Patrick Colm Hogan, propounds the notion that "emotion constitutes not only the cornerstone of narrative form, but also the bedrock for incorporating recurrent elements into specific stories" [1]. In order to comprehensively scrutinize the interplay between emotional narratives and film, it is imperative to

contemplate three primary facets: how films articulate the emotions of both creators and characters, how films impact the emotions of audiences, and how emotions influence the plot.

These three facets can be interpreted as narrative mechanism, meaning construction, and narrative strategy when examined through the lens of film narratology. The triumph of a film can be credited to its capacity to achieve alignment between the film's narrative configuration and social psychology. Accordingly, this investigation elucidates the reasons underlying the success of the emotional narrative in *Suzume* by examining the correlation between its "narrative mechanism, meaning construction, and narrative strategy" and social psychology. Through this analysis, the study aims to enrich our understanding of the relationship between emotional storytelling and film.

2 Narrative Mechanism: An Interplay of Emotional Context and Cognitive Model

In an interview with Shinkai, he disclosed that the conception of *Suzume* involved creating a cross-cultural animated film intended to captivate a global viewership. Crafting such a work poses a notable challenge in terms of cross-cultural communication, as it necessitates the establishment of a narrative mechanism that can be universally embraced by individuals hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds. Such objective mandates the production of storytelling that encompasses transcendent themes and motifs, appealing not only to a specific group

* Corresponding author: tracy758@163.com

but to humanity at large. Attaining such an aim necessitates meticulous contemplation of cultural nuances and sensitivity to shared experiences and emotions that are ubiquitous among all people. Only then can a cross-cultural animated film, like the one created by Shinkai, accomplish its mission of communicating with an eclectic and international audience.

David Bodwell asserts that films are invariably situated within a contextual reference, whether it emanates from the originator or stems from the audience's adoption of film aesthetics^[2]. The domain of social psychology research posits that people assign things and situations to specific categories based on cognitive influence, where prototypes often function as evaluative standards. Within the context of emotional narratives, the reference context is grounded in emotions. In animated films, emotional context holds greater compatibility compared to language, rhetoric, and symbols owing to cultural disparities and the array of emotional expressions corresponding to relatively stereotyped "emotional narrative prototypes"^[3]. These emotional narrative prototypes reflect the relatively standardized mental models that individuals construct during their social development.

The ecological environment of film's emotional narrative is marked by various elements such as role behaviour, film register, scene sound layout, and social and cultural background, which interact to facilitate the emotional disposition of the film. As a result, the configuration of the ecological environment differs across different emotional contexts. Nonetheless, the audience generates coherent comprehension units by accumulating and restructuring visual and auditory depictions conveyed through films. These conceptual abstractions align with the audience's internal cognitive domain and enable them to assimilate into the ecological environment of emotional narratives, allowing them to comprehend the emotional context and connect with it.

Suzume is a multi-faceted animated film centered around the theme of calamity and restoration, wherein Suzume, a high school student, traverses Japan alongside Sota in search of a "key stone" Dachen to prevent earthquake disasters and attain self-salvation, love, and family reconciliation. The healing motif is predominantly conveyed through the romantic relationship between Suzume and Sota, the familial bonds that reconcile Suzume with Aunt Huan's family strife, and the redemptive thread that aids Suzume in overcoming psychological afflictions throughout her journey. The emotional context derived from these three narrative strands, through the film's manipulative techniques, can be classified as the narrative archetype of romantic love, bearing "meta-emotions" of affection and ambivalence.

The connection between Suzume and Sota arises from their shared sense of helplessness and the desire to atone for past mistakes. However, as they progressively assist, encourage, and rescue each other throughout their odyssey, Suzume's attachment to Sota deepens. Conversely, Suzume's bond with Aunt Huan primarily hinges on role expectations and moral obligations. In any

"immoral" relationships, ethical reasons must justify the interactions, and the outcome must align with audiences' desires while upholding society's conventions^[4]. From a macro perspective, the salvation strand predominantly serves the disaster theme and corresponds to the narrative prototype of confrontation, featuring meta-emotions of apprehension and indignation. *Suzume's* romantic love motif, in essence, reflects conflicting emotions triggered by a clash of origin family ties, choosing between different types of affection, and grappling with psychological wounds.

Regardless of any contextual backdrop, the four meta-emotions of attachment, contradiction, anxiety, and anger represent emotional schemas that audiences possess prior to engaging with a film. As a result, when the film employs narrative techniques and technical applications to communicate these emotions, audiences can receive, evaluate, and synthesize audio-visual cues actively and selectively based on their prior experiences. They can then abstract and correspond these effectively into emotional schemas in their cognitive domains. These emotional schemas, in turn, activate their respective cognitive models and efficiently categorize and meld representational elements within the emotional context, integrating them into their own emotional system for reprocessing.

3 Constructing Meaning: A Coexistence Between Emotional Stimulation and Emotional System

Graeme Turner's *Film as Social Practice* highlights that while watching movies, the emotional information conveyed through the images on the screen is what the creator intends to convey and expects the audience to accept. However, the audience's emotions generated in response to the movie are a reconstruction of the meaning of the information, which ultimately forms an emotional reaction that results from the interaction of individual practice and self-psychological factors. This means that although the film narrative's meaning construction is initially driven by the creator, it ultimately depends on the audience's emotional attitude towards the input information.

On a social and psychological level, the formation and development of emotions occur through emotional accumulation. In the meaning construction of *Suzume*, Shinkai forms a preliminary emotional system by combining narrative time and space and incorporating emotional narrative perspectives and voice into audio-visual elements. Through scene design and sound scene scheduling, the audience's emotional needs are aroused, and their emotional experience is stimulated, which enables them to provide emotional input and feedback.

3.1 Emotional System Building through Narrative Time and Space

According to Hogan, the integration of an archetype in a specific plot by the author and the audience's response to that plot are both influenced by the underlying emotional

system that guides the archetype^[5]. Emotion is a critical element in animated film narration, where narrative space and time play a crucial role in determining the stability, sense of movement, and depth of the emotional system at work within the film. The emotional system's functioning has a significant impact on how effectively the audience responds to the film and the psychological interaction that occurs during viewing.

Narrative space represents a three-dimensional projection of the emotional system in the audience's consciousness on a two-dimensional plane. A stable narrative space can offer better recognition of narrative logic to the audience. In *Suzume*'s hypothetical world, the real space "real world" and the fantasy space "immortal world" intertwine and run parallel. When the plot carried by "real world" in the film cannot be explained by life logic, the audience's subconscious attributes it to the arrival of "immortal world," and the logical framework of the fantasy space mainly relies on the experience of the real space. This allows the audience to actively participate in meaning construction by relying on their own emotional experience during the process of emotional interaction, rather than passively receiving narrative output. An instance of such transcendent storytelling in *Suzume* can be observed when Suzume opens the "immortal world door," and the visage of the "immortal world" is revealed to the audience. While the face of the eternal world directly speaks to the visual senses of the audience, the layout of the starry sky, grassland, and breeze still adheres to the aesthetic principles governing the "real world." This stable narrative space anchors the narrative logic and progression of the entire film, serving as a carrier for the emotional system. In this fictional reality, the audience need not be passive recipients of the narrative output but may actively participate in the construction of meaning through their own emotional experiences in the process of interactive engagement with the film.

Film narrative time refers to the psychological experience time of the audience. Although the transformation of narrative time needs to be reflected by narrative space, time still plays an important role in emotional narrative. Narrative time is fundamentally organized by emotion in narrative works. Isolated and solidified shots in narrative space become the framework of the whole emotional system under the series connection of narrative time. In the world of *Suzume*, the narrative time carries multiple emotional lines. The accumulation, extension, direction change, and subversion of time make the emotional lines more prominent in the narrative, activating the vitality of the emotional system and adding causality and fatalism to it. Furthermore, the lens jumping of adult Suzume and juvenile Suzume, and the synchronic presentation of heavy emotional tone (Sota turns into a stone) and cheerful emotional tone (adventure journey) reflect the reversal of time dimension and dispels the simplification of the emotional system caused by linear narrative^[6]. This enriches the hierarchy and three-dimensional sense of the emotional system. Through the combination and interaction of narrative space and time, a complete,

structured emotional system forms quietly, and the corresponding "psychological gravity" is produced.

3.2 Scene Design Used to Engage Emotional Responses

The emotional demand of audiences represents a primary driving force for effective psychological stimulation and emotional feedback, with each emotion representing a specific psychological demand. To effectively meet the psychological needs of audiences during entertainment activities, filmmakers must carefully design visual scenes that present an emotional narrative perspective with film characteristics while consistently drawing and meeting emotional needs. This ultimately maximizes audience psychological satisfaction.

Shinkai's animated films exemplify this approach, with *Suzume* following Shinkai's scene design concept. The film features a large number of frames derived from Japanese in-situ framing, such as Tianse Hot Spring, Zuoheguan Port, and Kobe Moye Mountain, among others. Furthermore, it combines aesthetic images of mourning, such as ferries, trams, ruins, and starry skies, with real-space textures and romantic styles. This innovative approach aims to weaken the distance between the narrator and receiver while enabling audiences to allocate more energy towards emotional brewing and symbolic emotional acceptance behind each scene.

Additionally, this emotional narrative perspective strengthens audience memory systems by tapping into emotional memory and cognitive experiences in life. Notably, awoken nostalgia is often beautified by the romantic wind of emotional demand, resulting in a long-term impact observed in numerous posts and videos seeking locations and stepping on spots. Audience emotional judgment of characters, limited to the film perspective, is subject to attribution theory, where emotions are difficult to distinguish their source, making them easy to manipulate. The filmmaker's scene design can greatly influence the audience's emotional orientation. Shinkai employs multi-perspective contrast and conflict scene designs that break and rebalance the audience's psychological balance and emotional expectations. When violated or broken, these elements result in attention and emotional pre-arousal, which prepares the specific emotion, thus increasing traction intensity of psychological tension on emotional demand.

3.3 Emotional Experience Enhanced by Sound Scene Design and Scheduling

The use of sound scenes in film carries the narrative voice of emotional storytelling, aiming to create a "psychological dynamic field" that mobilizes the audience's auditory senses and creates an immersive and interactive presence sense. This serves to bridge the gap between the screen, reality, and fiction and enables the stimulation of both instantaneous and long-term emotional experiences, providing a prerequisite for emotional feedback^[7].

In *Suzume*, the opening scene features the sound of a young Suzume's sad crying and heavy breathing for nearly one minute, serving to anchor the painful emotional front tone for the emotional system of the entire film. This approach deepens the narrative accumulation of emotional storytelling in the time dimension and tightens the psychological tension system within the audience. The resulting "psychological field force" quickly pulls the emotional atmosphere into the story's emotional system, bypassing rational step-by-step thinking and "heuristically" producing instinctive emotional experiences of uneasiness, confusion, and even slight fear.

Moreover, the scene of earthworms shaking the earth runs through all the previous plot climaxes of the film, deepening the emotional narrative's tension as a foil. The use of compact rhythm background music, realistic mobile phone prompt sounds in the environmental sound, the sound of "earthworms" breaking the air that ordinary people cannot hear, and the violent shaking sound of the earth all contribute to stimulating the audience's psychological tension system. The sound scenes effectively blur the boundary between real living spaces and virtual narrative spaces, integrating personal life practices into virtual storytelling. This allows the emotional narrative's tension to break through barriers and impact the audience's emotional defense line.

Human voice also plays a significant role in sound scene rendering, with the softness, intensity, or tone of the voice closely linked to psychological stimulation and subsequent emotional responses. For example, Suzume's soft girl timbre softens her wilful behaviour and playful inner monologues, drawing the audience's attention to her psychological description. Her emotional reaction resonates with the "simulation" of empathy with the characters in the story, internalizing and identifying with the work's narrative logic to complete her own role introduction. The resulting simulation process stimulates the audience's emotional memories about romantic love and separation, leading to emotional fluctuations that resonate at the same frequency under the characters' traction.

In summary, sound scene design and scheduling serve as a catalyst for emotional experience in cinema, enabling immersive and interactive presence sense that bridges the gap between reality and fiction, while also stimulating both the instantaneous and long-term emotional responses of the audience.

4 Narrative Strategy: The Isomorphism between Emotional Guidance and Aesthetic Expectation

The aesthetic experience of film and television viewing activities is influenced by the audience's expectation horizon, which encompasses two opposing and complementary aesthetic expectations: the conservative "directional expectation" and the variant "innovative expectation" [8]. The expectation horizon should maintain a moderate psychological distance from the new film. While the work should exceed the original expectation

horizon to evoke emotional peaks, it cannot be too innovative to avoid unfamiliar aesthetic visions that may hinder emotional engagement.

Narrative strategies play a crucial role in emotional narration, where the completion of narrative mechanisms and meaning construction directs the audience's conservative aesthetic expectation based on the narrative logic and emotional generation mechanism. On the other hand, more diversified narrative strategies provide opportunities for the innovative expectation of aesthetic experience. The meta-emotion carried by the film input unprocessed emotional concepts, and narrative strategies can provide possibilities for the imagination, sympathetic resonance between id and aesthetic object, and activate the aesthetic experience with long-term significance.

Suzume's emotional narrative strategy focuses on the guiding role of emotion to effectively convey the meta-emotion bred by the love and salvation lines. Shinkai's emotional embedding, stitching, and blank space narrative strategies fully and concretely explain the prototype of emotional narrative, satisfy the audience's aesthetic psychology of rebelling against tradition and expecting innovation, and mitigate the negative influence of aesthetic fatigue.

The original background of the story in *Suzume* depicts Suzume passive acceptance of Aunt Huan's meticulous love from childhood to adolescence. Suzume's rebellious journey against traditional concepts initiates a sequence of contradictory emotions and, to some extent, conforms to the general aesthetic expectations of young people in modern society to challenge traditional beliefs. Such emotional embedment enhances the resolution of contradictions and strengthens the attachment meta-emotion. In line with Gestalt's "gestalt supplement theory", the aim of rebellious aesthetic psychology is to attain the aesthetic experience of catharsis or reconciliation. The fact that Suzume can ultimately heal himself meets the audience's innovative aesthetic expectations within reasonable limits.

In particular, the plot combination constructed by "key stone" Dachen serves as a guiding strategy of emotional stitching. It provides structural support for catalytic confrontation with the emotional narrative prototype and narrative supplements that align with entertainment movies. Dachen do not represent absolute evil but are presented with innocent, lovely, and pitiful images. This innovative approach may conflict with the audience's reception aesthetics, enhancing their emotional reaction, concentrating their aesthetic attention, deepening their emotional memory, and mitigating the aesthetic fatigue of comedy endings.

Finally, emotional blank space is a Shinkai's usual narrative strategy that leaves warm emotional expression blank, requiring the audience to engage in aesthetic imagination. This emotional blank creates profound emotional contact between the film and the audience, raising the fictional image to the emotional level and resulting in a real aesthetic experience.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this article delves into the impact of affective storytelling in cinema and the various techniques utilized to design and arrange sound scenes for optimizing the affective experience of the audience. The use of affective storytelling acts as a catalyst for eliciting an immersive and interactive presence that effectively bridges the complex dichotomy between reality and fiction, while simultaneously stimulating both instantaneous and long-term affective responses of the viewer.

Notably, it also underscores the pivotal role of the human voice in sound scene rendering, with its softness, intensity, and tone serving as vital cues that resonate with psychological stimulation and subsequent affective responses. Moreover, it highlights the importance of employing diverse narrative strategies that align with meaning construction and the completion of the given narrative mechanisms, directing the audience's conservative aesthetic expectation based on the intricate narrative logic and affective generation mechanism. This further presents significant opportunities for innovative and stimulating aesthetic experiences.

Overall, this study provides invaluable insights into the techniques and strategies crucial to enhancing the affective experience of cinema audiences. It emphasizes aspects such as sound scene design and scheduling as critical catalysts that help bridge the gap between reality and fiction, while diverse narrative strategies provide ample opportunities for creative and thought-provoking aesthetic experiences. Affective storytelling has demonstrated its efficacy in effectively conveying meta-emotion bred by love and salvation lines, thereby facilitating the resolution of contradictions and strengthening attachment meta-emotion.

References

1. X.F. Qiao, Emotional Narratology by Patrick Colm Hogan, *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, **105-113 +159** (2022)
2. B. David, The Part-Time Cognitivist: A View from Film Studies, *Projects*, **3** (2010)
3. E. Rosch, Cognitive Representations of Semantic Categories, *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, **92-233** (1975)
4. H. Yin, Introduction to Contemporary Film Art. *Beijing: Tsinghua University Publishing House*, **51-61** (2021)
5. G. Turner, M. F. Duckham, Film as Social Practice. *London: Routledge*, **62-63** (2006)
6. P.C. Hogan, Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories. *Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P*, **48** (2011)
7. X.Y. Li, Reconstructing Semantic Field: The Theoretical Construction of David Bodwell's Film Cognitivism, *Contemporary Film*, **42-46** (2018)
8. Z.M. Wen, Interpretation of Horizon of Expectation Theory from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics, *Journal of Wuxi Institute of Commerce and Technology*, **109-112** (2019)