

COMMENTARY

The image artistry of VR film “Killing a Superstar”

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to take “Killing a Superstar” as a typical example, to demonstrate how VR technology generates VR film via virtualizing 3D world from aesthetic perspective, and to give a critical reflection of VR film. The article includes three parts. The first part is about how the film utilizes VR as a technical premise for the implement of interactive narrative, constructing the audio-visual space with panoramic photography, and generating the virtual world with digital programs. Its interactive mode renders human-computer dialogue feasible, and realizes the connection between human and virtual reality with VR playback equipment. The second part is carried out under a further analysis of the artistic dimension of the film. In this section, it's pointed out that the active narrative perspective of the audience, the multilinear narrative structure of time and space, the embodied and remote experience of perception, and the prominent guiding narrative processing, are all combined together for the sake to present interactive narrative art expression of virtual world. And the final part tries to reflect and evaluate on VR film in a broader vision. From both technical and artistic viewpoints, VR film is a breakthrough and innovation compared to traditional film model, although it surely has some drawbacks and limitations. If it can be considered more in a sense of establishing interactable virtual world then stroytelling, it is likely to develop into a more significant VR image art in the future.

Keywords: “Killing a Superstar”; VR film; virtual reality; interactive narrative

1. Introduction

Ever since Plato's cave metaphor in the ancient Greek era, the discussion about virtuality and reality had been a perennial topic in philosophy and art. Right now, in the 21st century, virtual reality has finally come true to some extent. It's based on certain computer technology which can create a 3D virtual world and immerse the audience in a digital delusion of real and interactable environment. “VR film” is seen as a typical art form utilizing virtual reality technology. As an artistic innovation of digital media environment and digital social culture, supported by new media technology, it presents new media features, especially the feature of “interactive narrative”, that transcends traditional film. The 77th Venice International Film Festival in 2020 witnessed the first award-winning Chinese VR film in the international A-level film festival. It is “Killing a Superstar”, the first VR work in Chinese mainland to win the award as the best VR feature film in the VR competition unit^[1]. This is a 360-degree panoramic and immersive 8K VR artwork, that the interactive narrative mode containing time axis and room map is applied to display the characters, space, and time of in the film, namely, the six people including superstar Lisa, agent Binge, assistant Xiaomei, host Shanshan,

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photographer Laoluo and lighting engineer Xiaojun; the five scenes of living room, corridor, bedroom, bathroom and study room; and the specific 16 min of each scene. The story world formed by the superposition and interweaving of all three elements above, builds up a unique perspective for the audience and make them immerse into it.

2. Virtual reality is the technical premise of interactive narrative

The art of film, as the outcome of modern media evolution, features its technology in particular. That is to say, technical changes and upgrades have always functioned as major impetus in the artistic growth of film. Compared with traditional film, VR film like “Killing a Superstar” is distinctive in that it uses virtual reality technology to generate the image art of interactive narrative.

First of all, in “Killing a Superstar”, panoramic photography constructs a special audio-visual space. The shooting and production of traditional films are basically in the style of “montage”, and the director determines what the audience can see by cutting and editing afterwards. By contrast, the shooting of VR film like “Killing a Superstar” is basically complete and coherent. The whole audio-visual space of the film is open to the audience. Therefore, it’s mainly the audience who makes the decision of narrative vision. Post-production mostly focuses on the settings of interactive interface. Because all five narrative spaces in the work are displayed in a 360-degree panoramic view, the actors are required to perform coherently during film-shooting. Director Fan Fan once said the most difficult thing during shooting process is that it must be ensured all the story lines, timings and movements in five scenes are strictly matched, while the overall plot is “perfectly fit”^[2]. Here we can see the film revolution brought about by VR technology not only guarantees the birth of immersive image space, but also breaks through screen border of traditional film via holographic image^[3]. Space itself has been the very important to the expression of film, which means the way of “mise-en-scene” and component of narration have changed^[4].

Secondly, computer programs generate a virtual world in “Killing a Superstar”. In the post-production of a VR film, the “montage” viewpoint has been completely broke away, and director’s mindset of film production is no longer in an absolute dominant position. As mentioned above, the 360-degree space image taken by panoramic photography ensures free views for the audience, allowing them to “walk in” the film space instead of “staying out”. What the post-editing on the computer is required is to produce complete, clear and smooth images for the audience who would like to accept them freely in a comfortable state. The setting ups of film’s tone, pace, aerial perspective and scene frame based on shooting materials fully follow the principle of “as what they are”. Such deconstruction or invalidation of film editing even highlights a sense of reality built by VR film. Under special computer processing of images, sounds and other elements, a 3D virtual world akin to reality is produced, while a certain condition of “being personally on the scene” is provided to the audience. It’s said that “digital attraction” of VR film has won it a name of epitome “cinema of experience”, which brings about the revolution of image perception^[5].

Thirdly, interactive mode of “Killing a Superstar” makes human-computer dialogue possible. The audience can choose to switch among different scenes and timepoints in the film. When a certain timepoint is chosen, by clicking rooms one by one on the screen interface, the audience is able to switch perspectives to see each character’s actions during the same period. For instance, at the beginning of the film, study room is the first scene. By the time the audience receives enough information, they can switch to living room, corridor or other scenes through “room map” module. Furthermore, in case the audience can’t accurately remember what a character says or does, they can pull “time axis” back and forth to get the information they need by watching repeatedly. At the end of the film, there are three questions pointing to different essential details, and the audience are asked to choose their own answers. So this is a typical way of human-computer interaction,

which allows the audience actively participate in the “production” of the film to some extent.

Finally, VR device physically implements the connection between audience and virtual reality for works like “Killing a Superstar”. Everything of the virtual world created by panoramic photography and computer programs, can only be seen via appropriate VR device, providing the audience interactive visual perception between virtual and reality. Different types of VR devices differs from each other in visual clarity and operational interactivity. When the panoramic video is played in VR head-mounted display, the device will capture pictures frame by frame from video sources and kind of “paste” them on the surface of a spherical space. The viewer in the center of such spherical space can control his or her sight by rotating head to see the whole 3D world, so as to accomplish interactive narration at the receiver’s end. As stated by Ryan, Marie-Laure, “It is through immersion that the VR user experiences the “fake”, immaterial world projected by the computer as a physically present reality to which she can relate through the movements of her own body^[6].” Through VR head-mounted display, people can see 3D spaces which are highly close to the real world as if they could reach out to touch the objects in the scene. Various virtual worlds unfold themselves in front of people via VR devices, or literally speaking, immerse people into virtual worlds one after another.

3. The art expression of interactive narrative is for virtual world

The narrative requirements of VR film as “Killing a Superstar” are no different from other films. Influenced by the most basic narrative theories, the explanations of time, locations, characters, causes, processes, and endings of the story are indispensable. And it’s also required to use one or more logical clues to shape stories, express thoughts and emotions, and present aesthetic values. Among all kinds of new media art, the way VR film meets these requirements is the most typical one from the point of interactive narrative, and its expression reveals what a “world” art can create.

Firstly, “Killing a Superstar” provides an audience’s initiative of narrative perspective. What VR technology has brought about is a “viewer turn” in the sense of reception aesthetics of film. The audience change from passive viewers to proactive subjects who select what to see and enjoy such freedom therein. And of course, this also reflects the fact that image technology has always been trying to make people forget about the screens or the media themselves and induce them into a state of theatricalization^[7]. When watching “Killing a Superstar”, the audience can control the spatio-temporal point of the film by the operating joystick of VR device, which means it’s accessible to observe characters, scenes, and events in whatever order. Such proactive narrative perspective offers psychological satisfaction and significant experience, and also leads to a proper form of both immersion and control. Take superstar Lisa as an example. People will find out she’s a pitiful character by focusing on her words and deeds at any time and any place. The audience can observe, extract and combine all the clues and information of the film in their own way, to grasp the plot and understand the whole story.

Secondly, the narrative structure of “Killing a Superstar” is spatio-temporally multilinear. The multilinear narrative of the film has a structural setting for “intensive and elaborative reading”. The plot lines of each scene require the audience to pay close attention, explore carefully and even watch repeatedly to get key and full information. Any temporal or spatial story line does not exist in a synchronically parallel form, but only exists in the formation of various diachronically spatiot-emporal narrative line via the audience’s “assembly”. In other words, the audience make all the choices and decisions of observation sequence, connection mode and viewing frequency on each narrative line. This is how the interactive narrative of “Killing a Superstar” differs from some other VR interactive films, which ingeniously solves the selection problem of diachronic narrative. However, it is worth noting that with regards to spatio-temporal multilinearity of VR film, the narrative tempo needs to be properly slowed down, lest the audience miss or ignore any important plot. Due to such feature of

VR media and the audience's acceptance needs, VR film must enhance 3D density of narrative space by filling it with relevant narrative events and information^[8].

Thirdly, there's a prominent guiding narrative in "Killing a Superstar". Due to the uncertainty incurred by panoramic images, VR film directors need to keep the audience's attention on important details through guided narration. VR technology endows the audience multimodal perceptions, thus the methods to draw attention are more than visually, and the film narrator should consider about how to arrange all the interest-clues in 3D space^[9]. In addition to displaying "a core event to attract the audience's sight"^[10], it is possible to guide the vision area through color, light and shade, making the guiding areas brighter or setting the flashing points to lead the audience. Or it's also feasible to use clear surround sounds to direct attentions, especially when plot development is located behind the audience. In "Killing a Superstar", this kind of guiding narrative is achieved along with specific motional elements, that are the movements of all characters. As they move around, the audience follow up to discover and will gradually find out the personal trait and behavioral motive of each character.

Finally, "Killing a Superstar" offers the audience embodied experience in a virtual world. "As for the development of VR film at this stage, there are roughly two ways for the audience to acquire embodied identity from the first person perspective: one is 'experience as avatar' and the other is 'experience as spectator'^[11]." In "Killing a Superstar", the audience's embodiment is incarnated as a spectator who travels and observes in the story world. And this kind of experience is manifested as the audience's "presence" on the perceptual level of visual, auditory, and even tactile senses. Such embodiment means the reconstruction of sensation. People can see many different virtual worlds, and various sounds of those worlds clearly linger around their ears. Moreover, they control the development and transformation of time and space by operating joysticks, which also satisfies their demands for touching to a certain extent. The process that the audience's bodies receive image information is the process that they comprehend image narrative, and the process that their bodies send out action information is the process that they engage in image narrative^[12]. A sense of presence for VR film audience is a summit state which can only be contributed to highly concentrated attention and highly emotional engagement^[13]. The "immersion" of VR builds a "complete space" that "surrounds" viewers, who confirm the presence of their own bodies relying on the "interactivity" of VR^[14]. And such interactivity reconstructs behavior pattern of the viewer, pointing to the digital existence brought about by virtual reality^[7]. Based on the features mentioned above, "Killing a Superstar" creates a virtual world full of real sense through its art of interactive narrative, and also demonstrates that the interactive narrative of VR film "not only just 'convey' a story, but also constructs a 'world'"^[15].

4. Limitations of VR film and the probable future of VR image art

Many VR films today have implemented interactive narrative to some extent, but there have obvious limitations as well. It is quite a thought-provoking issue as to how VR film should go, or how far it will go. Although the production team of "Killing a Superstar" devoted themselves to polishing film script and adopting industry-leading technical standards, and have got good feedback from the audience, there are still some insufficiencies or problems in emotional fullness and plot novelty, and its narrativity remains inferior to most of traditional films.

It makes sense that the innovation of VR film, as a type of new media art, mainly lies on its interactivity. But if it only has a protracted plot or a monotonous theme, it definitely lacks artistic effects while little chord will be struck with the audience. Therefore, the core breakthrough point is still how to enhance narrativity and somewhat enlighten the audience. Though magnificent images and stunning effects of some VR films fascinate the audience, the value of VR film should be recognized primarily through its immersive narrativity in the long

run. Traditional filming techniques may no longer be applicable to VR film, and what a film script presents should shift from just a story to an entire story “world”. The 360-degree panoramic presentation is more demanding in terms of storyline weaving, scene scheduling and character performance. Besides, it is advisable to appropriately embed some hidden contents while promoting the main plot, so that the audience may experience a different world from each other.

Although the narrative of VR film is yet far from being profound, its deepness and richness should be primary developing direction in the future. No matter what kind of interactive mode it is, it’s for immersive narration. The story is narrated by both the director and the audience, and this is where VR film seeks more breakthroughs. As for “Killing a Superstar”, its advantage comes from its settings of time axis and room map, and its disadvantage is that the audience can’t actually influence the development of the plot. This is what VR film should generally improve, namely, how to achieve further innovation of interactiveness in non-linear or multilinear expression.

From the perspective of media technology, media constructivism acknowledges the premise of interactively productive relationship between human and media, and always emphasizes on the important status and function of “media” in the process of symbolic meaning production^[16]. The main reason for the huge gap of narrative capacity between current VR film and traditional film is the media feature of VR. Specifically speaking, there’s a mismatch between VR film’s immersiveness and traditional film’s narrative montage. “VR movies nowadays are indeed short of micro montage art scenario based on sub-lens editing and its artistic enchantment^[17].” In other words, the lack of storytelling in interactive narration is an inevitable and internal limitation of VR film, given the technologies available. However, it is worth mentioning that more and more filmmakers are making bold editing attempts in VR films, such as regularly putting long shot and medium shot together in the dialogues within the same scene. The result does not deconstruct the audience’s immersiveness, but rather strengthens the film’s spatio-temporal expression. It can be seen that VR films are indeed making progress in narrative language^[18].

Many art theorists consider that VR technology impels a certain revolution of traditional audio-visual language and narrative approach, via its immersive and interactive functions. But in the eyes of some scholars and critics, this is not a true film revolution, but a destruction of the film at the level of telling a story. In the past, technological revolutions never interfered with the absolute core of film, which is the story. Instead, those revolutions have continually improved filmmaker’s capability of storytelling, as well as the audience’s viewing experience. The audacious intrusion of VR not only shakes the foundation of film, but also touches the bottom line of the audience^[19]. Take such argument into consideration, maybe it’s possible to strengthen the interactive features of VR film even more, and lower the standard of narration. That is to say, VR film doesn’t have to aim at replacing traditional film, but seeks to be a special type of film quite similar to computer game. Indeed, the relation between VR film and computer game is ambiguous from the perspective of the mainstream market recently^[20]. But of course, even some films and games have partly been interfused today, they can still be distinguished from each other by two keywords: “watching stories” and “interacting”^[10]. Actually there is a larger issue related to the cross-media and variety of new media art, which will not be discussed here.

In fact, the primary problem of VR film narrative is not the contradiction between immersion and interaction as it is presented in traditional narrative art, but the contradiction between interaction and the story itself. The “world” is no longer the background of the story, but has been placed in the foreground. The focus of narrative has shifted from the story and telling to the world and interacting, so the ultimate manifestation of VR is actually an illumination of “the disappearance of the story and the emergence of the world^[21].” It is under the situation that such world (virtual world) and interaction (interactive narrative) appeared, that new perceptual pattern and new aesthetic experience are established and nurtured. Despite lingered by new types

of ethical issues of freedom, VR film may eventually become an image art in a broader sense, that it helps people understand and identify themselves and devote themselves into the world in a completely different way from the past.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, RW and NH; methodology, RW; investigation, NH; resources, RW; writing—original draft preparation, NH; writing—review and editing, RW; supervision, RW; project administration, RW; funding acquisition, RW. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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