

A Study on Poetic Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Animation: An Analysis of *Father and Daughter*

Introduction

With the development of new media and animation technology, audiences and filmmakers show more desire for fresh attempts at narrative structure that show emotional depth, reflection, and artistic innovation, which are often overshadowed by discussions of technical achievement in mainstream commercial animation. And it is also a new hybrid art form that combines both cinema's visual and audio power and poetry's unique aesthetic, which helps new filmmakers to understand and study a new way of experimental and artistic expression in film & animation. An example of this approach is Michael Dudok de Wit's Academy Award-winning short film, *Father and Daughter* (2000). Thus, this essay will discuss how poetic narrative strategies are employed in the film through the analysis of repetitive narrative structure, visual symbolism that externalizes emotional landscape, and poetic cinematography using empty space in *Father and daughter*.

Theoretical Framework: Defining Poetic Animation

To understand the poetic narrative in animation, it has to be discussed within the framework of cinema critique. Sitney (2014) gives a basic definition of poetic cinema, which is different from the cinema of prose. Sitney (2014) further noted that while prose cinema is driven by cause-and-effect relationships and clear narrative structure, poetic cinema focuses more on the associative emotion, the rhythm, and the metaphor. This aligns with the philosophies of filmmakers like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Andrei Tarkovsky, who argued that film is a process of sculpting in time, which means capturing the subjective feeling of temporal experience rather than just recording chronological events.

Besides, Deleuze's (1989) concept of the time-image is also relevant to poetic film. Unlike the movement-image, which prioritizes cause-and-effect action, the time-image focuses on the experience of time and memory. In *Father and Daughter*, the narrative is less about the physical journey of the main character, Instead, it's more about the internal, psychological experience of long waiting and the passage of years.

In the specific field of animation studies, Paul Wells (1998) distinguishes between orthodox and experimental animation. Wells argues that experimental work such as Dudok de Wit's, often uses associative and metaphorical techniques rather than following a clear, logical purpose. This allows for a non-verbal storytelling style that

prioritizes animation aesthetics and "author theory" over commercial conventions.

Poetic Narrative Structure: Repetition and the Passage of Time

The most defining poetic narrative structure of *Father and Daughter* is the repetition. Traditional narrative structures often follow a linear structure order: exposition, rising action, climax, and ending. Instead, Ye (2022) identifies that poetic animation can follow a circular structure order by using "Repetitive Narrative" as a key strategy, which creates "deposit emotion" layer by layer until it achieves a lingering emotional resonance. That means repeating the same action or showing the same symbol may accumulate deeper emotion and different meanings to the audience in the poetic narrative structure. In *Father and Daughter*, the main repetitive action is riding bike. The film starts with a father and daughter cycling to a lake. The father leaves, and the daughter returns alone. This journey of riding bike repeated throughout her life. We see her cycling against the wind as a schoolgirl, riding casually with friends, cycling with a lover, riding with her own children, and finally struggling as an old woman. Always from screen right to left with the same action.

This repetition is not just showing the passage of time, it is a poetic way to create a silent but emotional rhythm of waiting and longing by creating a series of subtle repetitive symbols. For example, the repetition of the daughter's pushing action, the turning wheels, and the countless long gazes to her father's direction, " serves to "clutch the audience's heart". Every time the repeating action happens, the landscape changes slightly. The director depicts time change in a poetic way through the trees growing, the season shifting, and the wind changing direction. However, its main message to the audience is that behind the repetition, the daughter's internal orientation is always toward that old memory of her father. And as an audience, knowing what exactly happened between them is not important anymore.

This repetitive structural choice also mirrors the function of a refrain in a poem or poetry. It provides a familiar anchor while the context around it may change. In the father and daughter, the repetition transforms the act of cycling from a daily physical activity into a ritual of remembrance by setting an anchor in the changing of time. As Ye (2022) argues, in this type of narrative, the connection between segments is not necessarily causal, the connection of the narrative can be emotion-driven, linked by an internal thread of feeling rather than external exact plot or conversation. Under this emotion driven structure, the audience does not just witness the daughter's life, they feel the weight of the years pressing down on her just in a few minutes as animation plays. This narrative strategy effectively zips her lifetime into a poetic state of always

returning.

Visual Symbolism: The Externalization of Emotional Landscape

Because of the lack of dialogue, poetic animation relies on image symbols to convey meaning. Ye (2022) distinguishes two types of symbols: object symbols (static props or scenes) and action symbols (dynamic movements). They show function as the externalization of a character's emotional landscape. *Father and Daughter* use exact and proper symbols as visual metaphors to construct a rich emotional world.

As for object symbols, the landscape is the primary one. The Dutch landscape using black and white color and mostly distance shot shows a flat and vast world, which serves as an external canvas for the daughter's isolation. The lake represents the boundary between life and death by separating water and land. As time passes, the water recedes, and the riverbed dries up, transforming from a barrier into a bridge. This environmental shift is a powerful metaphor for the life cycle. As the daughter approaches the end of her life, the barrier between her and her father dissolves in that life circle, she becomes that child girl again lying down on the boat. The "dry riverbed" is not just a geological event, it is a spiritual space, blurring the boundary between the real world and imagine world where reunion becomes possible.

As for the action symbol, the bicycle serves as a symbol of life and human endurance. Riding bike is almost the only action for the daughter. By riding toward the opposite direction and struggling against the wind, the daughter navigates her meaning of existence and the memory of her father, which also represents her resilience when facing life's hardships. Ye (2022) notes that action symbols are not just physical movements but are also mapped to complex psychology. When the daughter is young, she rides actively, when she is old, she wobbles and eventually abandons the bike to walk. That shows in different lifetimes the daughter has different life states. But eventually the abandon of the bicycle in the end shows her departure from the actual world, taking her remembrance to enter the spiritual world of the riverbed.

The director also uses the symbol of the bird, which appears in the beginning and ending scenes. In poetic terms, birds are often symbolized as the soul or transcendence. The bird watches the father leave as well as the daughter return. It offers a non-human perspective that suggests the cyclical nature of existence, reinforcing the circle of life structure which is often found in poetic animation. However, unlike a closed loop that returns to the exact starting point, the return in *Father and Daughter* represents a breaking of the boundary of memory or a sublimation. The daughter returns to the lake not as the child she was, but as a complete soul who has lived a full life, transforming the ending into an open spiritual

resolution rather than a simple narrative finish.

Poetic Cinematography: The Aesthetics of Silence and Space

The third specialty of poetic narrative in *Father and Daughter* is the use of cinematic language, particularly the use of space, shots, and music. Ye (2022) identifies Lyrical Long Takes as essential techniques in creating poetic atmosphere, where empty space is left to allow the audience's imagination to inhabit the work.

Dudok de Wit leaves empty space in the scene and beyond the scene. Visually, the film chose high contrast, black and white ink style, creating scenes dominated by the negative space of the sky and the flat horizon. The backgrounds are simple and lack detail, making the audience focus on the small, dark figure of the daughter.

Cinematically, the film uses long, wide shots that also focus on the action and emotion of the character. This visual isolation emphasizes her vulnerability and her loss. By stripping away extra detail, reducing the usage of rapid cutting and close-ups, or in other words, the orthodoxy of realistic backgrounds (Wells, 1998), the film invites the audience to project their own experiences of loneliness and longing into the empty spaces.

The sound design also leaves empty space that parallels this visual style. The film uses a famous waltz *The Danube Waves* as the main background music and also adds some ambient sounds of wind and bicycle wheels, without any human voice or conversation. The music does not lead how the audience should feel in a particular way. Instead, it creates empty space to let audience breathe with the film, and feel the power of silence. This restraint creates a psychological empathy where the audience interacts with the film by adding individual experience and understanding. And this empty space also invites the audience to listen to the inner voice of themselves and align with character. rather than passively consuming a story.

Conclusion

Father and Daughter shows that contemporary short animation can achieve a high level of artistic and emotional expression rooted in poetry and live-action cinema. Through the strategic use of repetitive poetic narrative structures, visual symbolism that externalizes emotional landscape, and poetic cinematography using empty space, Michael Dudok de Wit creates one of the most representative poetic animations that speaks to universal human experiences without the need for words.

By studying from masterpiece like this and practically developing more of this hybrid art form that combines both cinema's visual and audio power and poetry's unique aesthetic, new filmmakers are able to create new way of experimental and artistic expression in film & animation in the future.

Reference

Deleuze, G. (1989) *Cinema 2: The time-image*. Translated by H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hanna, S. (2019) 'Animating poetry: whose line is it anyway? Creation & critique of shared language in poetry animation', *The International Journal of Film and Media Arts*, 4(2), pp. 6–24.

Sitney, P.A. (2014) *The cinema of poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tarkovsky, A. (1989) *Sculpting in time*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Wells, P. (1998) *Understanding animation*. London: Routledge.

Ye, D. (2022) 'Research on poetic narrative strategies of contemporary animation', *Contemporary Animation*, (3).

Filmography: *Father and Daughter* (2000) Directed by Michael Dudok de Wit [Film]. London: Cloudrunner Ltd.