

# On the Unnatural Spaces Narration of the Film *Stranger Than Fiction*

Jialu Li, Hong Zhang, Meng Guo

School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University of Technology, Hohhot 010080, China

**Abstract:** Space is one of the important dimensions of film narrative strategy, and the space narrative of film has received more and more attention from narratologists. The film “Stranger Than Fiction” uses unnatural narration to convey the themes of love, death and life to the audience through the presentation of unnatural narrative space. This paper discusses the unnatural spaces narration of “Stranger Than Fiction” from the perspective of external materialization of inner psychological state, fantasy narrative space and ontological transcription. The use of these three unnatural space narrative methods not only helps the film to better shape its plot, highlight its themes and interpret its connotations, but also enhances the film its own sense of fun and level, provoking people to rethink about life, emotions and moral values.

**Keywords:** Film narration; Unnatural Spaces; Stranger Than Fiction; Life; Morality

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In the narrative strategy of film art, space is an essential element for the presentation of images and the expression of themes. The spatial narration of film is a means for the filmmaker to use space for narration, and the order of its presentation in the film is not governed by the chronological order, but is arranged according to the director’s arrangement of the plot and the rhythm of the narrative. The unnatural space narrative of the film shows a surrealistic unnatural world, which promotes the development of the plot and the generation and expression of the meaning of the theme in the real and unreal, natural and unnatural world, giving the audience novelty and profound enlightenment. In his early paper “Impossible Worlds and How to Deal with Them”, J. Alber (1990-) clearly proposed a definition of “unnatural”: “Unnatural refers to scenes and events that are impossible in terms of physical rules or logical laws. “For Albert, “impossibility” is the key indicator of unnatural narratives. In unnatural texts, space becomes an impossible place, which greatly challenges the reader’s reading experience. The film “Stranger Than Fiction” shows us an impossible world of life through the expression of unnatural space narrative. This paper uses Albert’s theory of unnatural space narrative to explore the film’s unnatural space narrative from three aspects: the external materialization of the inner psychological state, the fantasy narrative space and the ontological transcription, so as to highlight the theme of life and morality and deepen interpretation of the film.

## 1. Numerical Presentation - External Materialization of Inner Mental State

The type of external objectification of inner mental states attempts to objectify inner mental states, reproducing the human yearning for the power to control the external world. This type of space allows the reader or viewer to feel the mental activities of the protagonist more clearly, and what they think is materialized. The audience can gain insight into the inner world of the characters through the figurative psychological activities, thus achieving a deeper interpretation of the characters.

The main character of the movie “Stranger Than Fiction”, Harold, is an IRS auditor, a profession that deals with numbers every day. His character is also influenced by his job, and his life is regular and stereotypical. Every working day for 12 consecutive years, every morning Harold brushes his teeth 76 times, back and forth 38 times, up and down 38 times. And as he brushes his teeth, the numbers running fast in his head are presented to the audience in concrete formulas or lines. In addition to that, the way he tied his bow tie would be laid out in a graphic form in steps. He would run through six districts at nearly 57 steps a block, just catch the bus at 8:17 in time; as an auditor for the IRS, he reviewed 7,134 tax documents every day; when his colleague casually asks for the product of a series of numbers, his brain’s calculation steps appear like a draft diagram before the movie screen; he takes 45.7 minutes to eat lunch and 4.3 minutes to drink coffee. Because of the nature of his work and his unchanging lifestyle, Harold’s life was filled with countless numbers, calculations, and white figures, charts, and formulas that symbolized his personality, stereotypical and uninteresting, and the way of thinking, simple and organized, lacking imagination and warmth.

The external materialization of this inner psychological state presents a spatial unnaturalness, expressing the strict requirements of the main character Harold and the monotonous and unchanging nature of his life. If people in the real world become a machine of

numbers like Harold, and do everything according to the numbers, then such a life will become meaningless. Experience is a treasure, strict planning of life should also be full of fun.

## **2. The suggestion of the watch - fantasy narrative space**

The fantasy narrative space is reflected by the unnatural events and scenes of the narrative. The appearance of a human face in the air and the chicken speaking in human language clearly violate the physical laws of the real world and belong to unnatural narratives. According to Albert, the unnaturalness of fictional texts points to physically and logically impossible scenes and events. He distinguishes between conventional and unconventional unnaturalness. Psychic events in fantasy narratives and talking animals in animal fables are conventional unnaturalness which have become familiar techniques in the history of literature, and are less unnatural. The unnatural narrative scene used for the suggestion of the watch in the movie is detached from the animal fable and fantasy narrative contexts, thus making it impossible to be classified as conventional unnatural.

In the film, writer Karen arranges a love for the male protagonist Harold, so that he meets the lively owner of a bakery, Ms. Pascal, and as the plot progresses, they fall in love with each other. Karen's design is to split a man and woman in love with death, because this is the most dramatic conflict and the most impactful. The writer's narrative voice often unfolds through the perspective and psychological activity of the watch, giving the watch the personality traits of an independent consciousness. In the film, before Harold's love comes, when he comes home from work as usual, his watch suddenly points in a certain direction and keeps on ringing, Harold thinks his watch is broken, but the truth is that Pascal is opposite to him, the direction the watch hand is pointing. The sudden rotation of the watch hands and the sound of a warning was a reminder, and Harold did not notice at all, but also incessantly tapped his watch, and finally the watch completely to zero. After he adjusted, the voice of the writer in his ear again, emphasizing that he would cause his own death by doing so.

At this point, the foreshadowing of the watch is a fantasy narrative in an unnatural narrative space, where the watch has a double function, on the one hand, it refers to time, the course of life. On the other hand, the watch is a modern invention that has changed the rhythm of modern life. Before there was a watch to mark time, people adjusted the rhythm of their lives according to nature; with a watch, people seem to be slaves of their own invention and must arrange their lives according to the time set by the watch. The alarm clock for waking up, the exact time of going to work, and the punctuality of taking trains and planes. Sometimes being a minute late can cause irreparable damage. So when the watch broke down, Harold's life seemed to be disrupted. The watch at this point is closely linked to the external materialization of the inner psychological state and the ontological narrative to be mentioned next. Firstly, the malfunction of the watch suggests that Harold's life is no longer precise or regular, and therefore there is no longer a picture of numbers, charts and formulas. Secondly, the watch symbolizes life, and the sudden failure and zeroing of the watch also suggests the end of Harold's life span.

Harold, whose death date is unknown in the film, decides to change his way of life. He no longer wakes up early, no longer brushes his teeth according to a fixed number, and no longer has to catch that fixed morning bus. He recalled his life and found that memory was also pale and weak. Fortunately, he remembered his childhood dream to buy a guitar, and then began to learn from simple notes. He also began to enjoy the beauty of love, to go on a date with Pascal, to feel the wonder of life.

## **3. Meeting with the Writer - Ontological Metalepsis**

In the real world, it is physically impossible for an entity to interact in different ontological domains. According to the narrative depiction of the movie "Stranger Than Fiction", it is impossible for the main character of the story, Harold, to exist in the real world and appear in the writer Karen's work at the same time. And in the end, Harold also tries to meet with the writer to change his fate. All this is impossible in the real world, and therefore belongs to the unnatural narrative. According to the two different types of ontological metalepsis that Albert distinguishes, namely, "ascending metalepsis" and "descending metalepsis" and the unfolding of the storyline of the film *Stranger Than Fiction*, this movement of a fictional character from an embedded fictional text into a real world belongs to ascending metalepsis. In this way, the film embeds the theme that all people love their lives and will do anything to avoid death.

Karen, the writer, is a God-like being who holds Harold's fate and the value of her literary work. Karen is also in a dilemma, she can not bear to see such a living life died in her own pen, of course, does not want to see the perfect ending becomes bland. At this point, the theme of morality also gradually emerged. In the film Harold finally meets with the writer who manipulated his fate, he gets the final manuscript and reads it in one sitting on the bus. Surprisingly, he fully accepts the ending of the novel and his own death. He was crushed to death by the bus to save a boy who had fallen down. At that moment, he himself disappeared and came to a state of no-self. If you look at all this arrangement from a higher story framework, from a writer's or reader's point of view, this arrangement is perfect. Although the protagonist dies, the boy is saved, and the death of the protagonist will evoke love, compassion and mercy in the hearts of many people. His death, in fact, is a necessary chain in this link. Harold learned of his own end, in the knowledge that what he did would lead to death, but also did not hesitate to stand in front of the car for the boy. This moral supremacy makes the audience sigh with admiration. It is also his bravery and love that touched the master of his own fate, and the end of death was modified by the writer Karen. He saved his own life with his noble moral sentiment. Imagine who would choose to die righteously for the sake of justice?

Such a real-world character's fate in the hands of another person, fight for his own life with the master of his fate, the final reversal ending completes the theme of the entire film sublimation through the unnatural space narrative. Death deserves in order to pursue a higher level of morality. This makes the main character's behavior a tragic heroic tone. The film's ontological metalepsis technique of unnatural space narrative not only highlights the theme, but also provokes the audience to think about life and morality.

## **4. Conclusion**

Space is one of the basic elements that constitute the narrative structure of a film. The characters have always been the main focus of life movies, but in "Stranger Than Fiction", the unnatural space has become the most important narrative language. *Stranger Than Fiction* shows us an unnatural life theme film that allows us to enter a surrealistic and impossible world of life. The unnatural

space narration in the film “Stranger Than Fiction” embodies a multi-dimensional function and effect in the textual information, characterization and narrative rhythm composition of the film, providing support for the film’s thematic expression and the establishment of emotional clues. The film reveals the themes of love, life and morality through unnatural space narration of external materialization of inner psychological states, fantasy narrative space and ontological metalepsis, which are presented by the numerical lines in the film screen, a watch with independent personality characteristics and Harold’s existential space, respectively. The film also tells us that life is full of meaningful things worth trying and exploring and the courage to breakthrough ourselves is needed to live ourselves a wonderful life.

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