

Exploration of To the Wonder Transmedia Narrative

Kairuo Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Journalism, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, China

a. noora17857183095@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: *To The Wonder* is a TV drama adapted from Li Juan's prose *My Altay*. It retains the literary charm of the original work while successfully constructing a unified and tense story world through cross-media narrative techniques. This approach not only demonstrates the infinite possibilities of adapting prose into film and TV drama but also provides valuable reference and inspiration for the cross-border integration of literature and visual media. This paper delves into how the drama achieves this innovative artistic goal across multiple levels, focusing on four dimensions: the creation of aesthetic space, the emotional linkage within the plot, the resonance of the group's spiritual core, and the audience's in-depth participation. By exploring these aspects, the paper offers new perspectives on film and television adaptations of prose, enriching the scope of application of cross-media narrative theory. Ultimately, this work contributes to the wider dissemination and inheritance of prose's literary value and cultural heritage in the future.

Keywords: cross-media narrative, *To the Wonder*, *My Altai*, story worlds.

1. Introduction

In recent years, novels adapted into dramas have become phenomenal works, such as *A Lifelong Journey* and *Blossoms Shanghai*, all of which relied on the dramatic tension of the literary texture to enter the public's field of vision and become popular dramas. As a drama adapted from prose, *To the Wonder* has more obvious literary attributes, but at the same time, the difficulty of adaptation has also been relatively escalated.

In Li Juan's prose, the boundless loneliness under the brightness is the most important undertone. Her description of the vast world of Altay makes everything become a gazer to the people, which makes the readers feel in awe of the remoteness, but she also expresses the openness and optimism of the nomadic people in easy and natural phrases, which makes the readers yearn for the remote and unfamiliar space with immense vividness. This makes readers yearn for a distant and strange heterogeneous space that is also incomparably vivid. The daily life on the magical land she writes about is spiritual, poetic and philosophical, and the key to the success of presenting this prose work full of literary charm in the form of drama, i.e., the perfect interpretation of cross-media narrative, lies in whether or not to create a unified story world.

The concept of storyworlds was introduced by Henry Jenkins, the pioneer of transmedia narrative, who creatively described transmedia narrative as a transmedia story unfolding across multiple media platforms, in which each new text makes a unique and valuable contribution to the overall story. And states, 'No particular work will reproduce all the elements of a film, but each must contain enough to

be recognisable at a glance as belonging to the same storytelling kingdom.’ [1] Thereby pointing the essential attributes of transmedia narratives towards the creation of a shared story world. Later, Shi Chang summarised this attribute as co-occurrence, i.e. a number of stories based on various media take place within the same world, or a number of stories pointing to the same world are scattered in various media. [2]

The transformation of *To the Wonder* from original prose to episodic drama is achieved precisely through the creation of a unified storyworld, the establishment of which, i.e., co-existence, is manifested in four ways: the creation of an aesthetic space, the emotional stranding of the plot, the resonance of a group spiritual core, and the depth of audience participation.

2. The creation of an aesthetic space

Firstly, the foundation of a unified story world is the construction of the environment. A real and fascinating environment not only immerses the audience, but also provides endless background and possibilities for the storytelling. Compared with the rich imagination depicted in the text, the television production of *My Altay* needs to build an aesthetic space that not only conforms to the spirit of the original, but also has the unique charm of video through a variety of elements such as images, sound effects and colours. Among them, it is especially necessary to focus on achieving the aesthetic experience of ‘Cyber Oxygen Absorption’. ‘Cyber Oxygen’ means that the audience can feel the pure and natural atmosphere of Altay and the deep vast vision presented in the drama as if they are breathing fresh air during the viewing process. This requires the production team to make great efforts in scene selection, photography skills, colour application, etc., and strive to restore the reality and beauty of the magical land in the original story.

With only 8 episodes, *To the Wonder* was filmed with the same standard as a film. The high specification filming and production methods of 4K, native HDR and panoramic sound design show the vastness and magnificence of Altay to the fullest, making people feel that ‘after living in the dust net for a long time, I have returned to nature.’ [3] There are a lot of clever camera language to show the purity and beauty of Altay: for example, in the scene where the main character, Batai, appears, the camera follows the character from left to right and swings horizontally to depict the beautiful picture of the character riding a horse through the woods, and then pulls the camera to a closer view, and slowly swings down to shoot a close-up of the character's face, and just as the viewer thinks that it's a frontal shot, the character fluctuates the surface of the water with the branch, and the viewer comes to realise that it is a reflection in the water, highlighting the purity of the natural environment of Altay.

In addition, ‘*To the Wonder*’ also strives to match the original in the choice of actors, except for the characters set for the Han Chinese, the rest of the characters are minority actors, and relying on the fascinating clothing and line settings to make the whole picture natural, the characters as if out of the book, so that the audience can be immersed in the atmosphere of Altay.

3. Emotional Strands: Retaining the Sense of Prose

On the basis of maintaining the literary qualities of the original prose, how to inject enough dramatic tension to make it adapt to the narrative rhythm of drama and the audience's acceptance habits is another important issue that needs to be solved in the process of creating a unified story world. As Geoffrey Long, a disciple of Jenkins, said, transmedia narrative is not a repetition of narrative, but an expansion of narrative.[4]

As a work of prose that focuses on daily life, the storyline of *My Altay* is relatively loose and lacks an obvious dramatic conflict and climax. Therefore, in the process of adaptation, the plot needs to be reasonably organised and necessary dramatic elements need to be added in order to enhance the

attractiveness and viewability of the story. The scriptwriter chooses to create drama around two major topics: the inherent anxiety and care of gender rights, and the clash of civilisations and intergenerational conflicts.

3.1. Anxiety and care inherent in gender rights

Undoubtedly, the female perspective is the primary feature of *My Altay*, with Li Juan, Li Juan's mother Zhang Fengxia, and Li Juan's grandmother as the main characters, who support and accompany each other as they take root in the boundless grassland. However, unlike the original, *My Altay* episodes place extra emphasis on the inherent anxiety and care of gender rights, as can be seen in the change of the role of Li Juan's maternal grandmother to that of Li Juan's paternal grandmother: a change that the director hopes to embody the understanding and mutual support between women that transcends kinship. In the context of Chinese society, daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law are always in opposition to each other, and in many TV dramas, there are even a lot of scenes deliberately depicting their quarrels, so much so that in the mainstream perception, the two are unable to get along peacefully, and the consequences of such a situation even affects women's marriage choices because they are afraid of their mothers-in-law. However, in *My Altay*, the mother-in-law is tolerated by her daughter-in-law even though she suffers from Alzheimer's disease, and they spend a long time with each other in a foreign land. The author believes that this change is reasonable and valuable, as it is in line with the original story's background of 'people from all over the world meeting and falling in love in Altay, and from meeting each other in passing to starting a family', and it also shows another possibility of female bonding - without the need for the bloodline to remain strong. It also shows another possibility for female bonding - without the need for blood ties, it can still be close and strong, implementing the strength of women emphasised in the original story.

In addition to this, there is another female character in the series who is responsible for carrying the struggles and dilemmas of real-life women, with the intention of evoking empathy and building a wider story world beyond the readers of the original novel. Token is the daughter-in-law of a traditional Kazakh herder who lives on a pasture. Laundry, cooking, and childcare are all she does in life, but she has never been valued or respected by her husband. For example, she has always wanted her husband to bring back a washboard, but has never been able to do so, corresponding to countless real-life housewives whose feelings are neglected; and then her husband died of drunkenness, and she faced the dilemma of marrying her husband's brother or remarrying separately from her children. Just when the audience thinks that she can only be a miserable widow from now on, she pulls herself together, insists on remarrying with her children despite the family's criticisms, meets Zhaohe, a Mongolian boy who respects and loves her, and gets the washboard she has been longing for from her good friend Wenxiu. Thus, the female anxiety and dilemma she represents is understood and supported by her best friend, who is also a woman, and is soothed and rescued by her self-awareness. The uncertainty and helplessness of the traditional Kazakh women in the original prose is stripped away, and the pressure of women from both inside and outside is interpreted with a small piece of rubbing board, which echoes with the predicament of women in real life and triggers empathy, then the predicament is solved with the help of women's consciousness conveyed in the original, which forms a closed loop, and expands the narrative on the basis of not departing from the context of the original text.

3.2. Clash of Civilisations and Intergenerational Conflict

In addition to the female perspective, two sets of character relationships are set up to represent the clash of civilisations and the clash of generations to enrich the story world. The conflict between the Han Chinese, represented by Zhang Fengxia and Gao Xiaoliang, and the ethnic minorities,

represented by Sulitan and Zhaoge, is first reflected in their attitudes towards the grasslands. Zhang Fengman has been running a grocery shop on the grasslands for many years, and with the credo of 'they [the minorities] have their own way of living with the world, you can disagree with them but you can't condescendingly change them', she has managed to live in the area with ease and create her own reputation; while Gao Xiaoliang, on the other hand, travelled to the grassland alone with the aim of picking up jade and making a fortune, and after being rescued by Zhang Fengxia, he was unable to adapt to the simple life of the grassland, and still found it difficult to give up his dream of making a fortune.

Although they are both Han Chinese, they have different value orientations in life, thus, the conflict broke out in the matter of picking fungus: Zhang Fengxia upholds the notion of picking with degree and makes money under the premise of not destroying the prairie, while Gao Xiaoliang is bewitched by others to dig 'Cordyceps sinensis' on the grassland, which has been opposed and questioned by the ethnic minorities who believe in nature, and even implicates Zhang Fengxia's reputation in the region.

Many people thought that Gao Xiaoliang was the only spoiler in such a beautiful drama, and many viewers even thought that this character was unnecessary because it was not mentioned in the original. Looking back at the source material, however, Gao Xiaoliang in fact represents the countless 'outsiders' who travelled to Altay in the chapter *Fungus* in order to buy and pick fungus, and he is a metaphor for greedy human nature, as well as a reflection of the clash of civilisations between different ethnic groups.

The father-son duo of Sulitan and Batai illustrate the clash of generations. Sulitan, meaning 'commander-in-chief' in Kazakh, is a staunch advocate of the primitive nomadic life: he is unwilling to give up his sword for the train, preferring to ride on horseback; he hides his hunting rifle and refuses to hand it over to the village chief; he insists on travelling along the treacherous Fairy Cove Trail when transiting fields. He was unwilling to change, unable to accept his daughter-in-law's remarriage (in traditional Kazakh custom, she deserved to be remarried to her brother-in-law, Batai), and refused to let Batai go to the city. In him, people see the intolerable old-fashionedness and stubbornness just like their own parents, presenting the intergenerational conflict in a subtle way.

However, these two major conflicts are resolved at the end of the episode in an unsatisfactory or compromised way: Zhang Fengxia aims the shotgun at her former lover Gao Xiaoliang and warns him not to set foot on the grassland again; Sulitan apologises to Batai and respects Batai's choices, but underneath his eyes there is still a sense of confusion and bewilderment in the face of the new era..... Such an approach continues the original style of the prose, compared to the flat documentary literature, contains the beauty of ambiguity, and in the white space the audience can imagine the ending to their heart's content.

3.3. Resonance of Group Spiritual Kernel

In Li Juan's prose, readers can always feel her sense of relief in the face of life, a phenomenon that director Teng Congcong intentionally amplifies and elevates to a rejection of the current mechanism of functioning in a meritocratic society. German philosopher Han Byung-chul describes people in meritocratic societies as exerting violence on themselves and engaging in self-exploitation. Violence from outside recedes and is replaced by a self-generated violence that is even more deadly than its predecessor because the victims of this violence mistakenly believe that they are living in freedom and thus fall into destructive self-imposed coercion. [5] Li Wenxiu reveals this state in the episode: she is dismissed from her job in Urumqi, returns to Altay empty-handed to do her writing, and begins to question her own usefulness when she volunteers to help her mother with her bills, but causes a misunderstanding.

This is also the inner reflection of thousands of contemporary people, who are in urgent need of proving themselves, going to school, getting a job, starting a family are trapped in endless internal conflicts and anxieties. In such a social context, relaxation has become a precious but rare quality. My Altay captures this quality of the original text and uses it as a spiritual core throughout the episodes, soothing the anxieties of people living a fast-paced life.

In the episode, facing her daughter's confusion, Zhang Fengxia educated her: 'What do you mean by useful, you were born to serve others? Look at the grassland trees, grass, someone to eat someone to use, it is called useful. If no one eats it, it is also very good in the grassland like this, free and easy.' With an open-minded outlook on life, she repeatedly encourages Li Wenxiu to step out of the social evaluation system; coincidentally, when the Mongolian grandmother sees Zhang Fengxia's family dressed in a messy way, she also tells them, 'Even the bumpiest days should be lived in a shiny way,' educating them to maintain a sense of ritual in their lives at all times; and when Li Wenxiu and Batai are estranged because of the death of the pony, Zhang Fengxia enlightens Li Wenxiu, 'You know why the herdsmen have to keep switching to the summer pasture, because they have to give the summer pasture time to rest, so that the pasture's water and grass will start to recover again, and in the next year, the herdsmen will be able to come back better with their cows and goats, so give him some time as well.'

From both positive and negative perspectives, it awakens the viewers to get rid of the constraints of productivity and personal performance, and return to their true nature. From this point of view, the episodes of *To the Wonder* give more reflective and philosophical meaning than the original 'healing' sense.

4. Audience participation

In Convergence Culture, Jenkins highlights that transmedia narratives impose new demands on consumers and rely on active participation in knowledge communities. Consumers must take on the role of seekers and gatherers, seeking out bits and pieces of the story through various media channels, comparing their findings with each other through online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests their time and effort in this area walks away with a richly entertaining experience. [1] This establishes the main role of consumers (audience) in the process of constructing a unified story world.

The active participation of the audience is an integral part of the transformation of *To the Wonder* from a book to an episodic series. In contrast to other works, where the narrative space for audience participation is more often placed after the reconstruction of the story (e.g., video editing, homoeroticism, etc.), *To the Wonder* consciously captures the voice of the audience from the beginning of the reconstruction.

As in one of the well-received shots in the episode: the women's bathhouse, where the warm yellow dominant colour blends with the dense water vapour, there is first one or two soft hums, and then more and more join in, creating a chorus full of motherhood and divinity. There is no deliberate lingering, flowing with only purity and warmth. Children, young girls, middle-aged women, and the elderly different stages of life come together, naked and guarded, showing the beauty of true femininity. Many viewers leave a message: 'Even in a naked bathhouse can not see a hint of staring' 'Here quietly flow the light and beauty of women' 'Like a mother's womb warmth' In film and television works dominated by male authority, similar shots are often accompanied by gazes, and women become the targets of the violence, fantasy and discipline of the male gaze, thus the discomfort brought by gender inequality has become an object of attack and rejection at a time when women's consciousness is increasingly on the rise. *To the Wonder*, however, deals with this issue properly, interpreting the original's depiction of the bathhouse scene from a delicate perspective: the body is naked, the demeanour is simple, and extra thoughts are suspended. [6] In terms of plotting, *To the*

Wonder also jumps out of the ‘Mary Sue’ ending that the audience has long been tired of, and adds a sense of gravity and depth to the play's light and empty atmosphere with the ‘death of Taxue’, leaving the message that ‘he may come back tomorrow, or he may never come back again’.

As the director said, ‘The times keep moving forward, and there are times when the audience's thoughts even go ahead of the creators. We have some responsibility to make the mind, the perspective of the world, the soul go a little further than the audience. That way you make a work that is worth the hundreds of minutes of the audience's life to see a little different story, and I think that's the whole point of a film or a TV series.’ To the *Wonder* chooses to listen to the voice of the audience, to let the audience participate in the extension and reconstruction of the story, no longer a passive participant, but a strong subjective character, so that the production and consumption of the audience in the media, a space of meaning constructed by a certain form, system, and technology, will continue to lead to the opening up and transformation of the space of meaning. [7]

5. Conclusion

The success of *To the Wonder* is not by chance, behind it lies the creator's exploration and attempt of cross-border integration between literature and drama. This work is not only a simple text-to-video conversion, but also an in-depth artistic innovation and cultural integration. The creative team has deeply explored the cultural connotation of the original text, combined the spiritual core of Altay's vastness and freedom with the pain points of contemporary society, and through the clever use of film and television language, it has successfully created a story world that is both literary and full of modernity, thus truly demonstrating the ‘diffusion aesthetics’ of cross-media narratives. It not only proves the infinite possibilities of adapting prose to film and television, but also has an important reference value for the industry: only by understanding the work and the audience can we create a story world that really touches the hearts of the people.

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