

When a Sunken Ship Brings History to the Surface: A Brief Analysis of the Narrative Strategies in the Sinking of the Lisbon Maru

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Abstract: As a World War II documentary, *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* not only conducts rigorous historical research but also employs sophisticated narrative strategies to systematically organize and artistically reconstruct vast historical archives. Through its nested dual narrative structure, multifaceted humanistic perspectives, and poetic storytelling style, the film constructs an emotionally resonant historical narrative while fostering equal dialogue among diverse viewpoints. This approach effectively evokes emotional responses from audiences, reigniting public attention toward the Lisbon Maru-long submerged and silent for over seven decades.

1. Dual-Line Nested Narrative Structure: Letting Historical Echoes Illuminate Reality

The film masterfully employs a nested dual narrative structure, intertwining "forgotten pasts" with "lost present moments" to weave a central storyline of "reconstructing and recounting" historical truths through natural storytelling flow. The rational-driven "historical thread" is embedded within the emotionally-driven "realistic thread," complementing the narrative reality. This approach enables *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* to not only authentically reconstruct historical events but also significantly enhance its dramatic tension and emotional resonance.

1.1 Historical Timeline: Unearthing the Past and Reconstructing the Truth

The documentary "Historical Line" primarily revolves around the Lisbon Maru sinking incident, following a linear narrative structure supported by firsthand accounts, memoirs, letters, and other detailed materials. The director emphasized in interviews that the most compelling historical records combine human testimonies with physical evidence [1]. Within this framework designed to reconstruct historical facts, various sources mutually corroborate each other through extensive research, where testimonies and physical evidence complement one another. This approach fully embodies the objectivity and rigor inherent in traditional documentaries, ensuring the narrative system constructs a credible historical truth. Utilizing the cinematic medium's inclusive artistic strengths, *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* integrates abundant historical materials-including letters, audio recordings, photographs, and oral histories-to recreate past events. Animated techniques are employed to reconstruct historical scenes, making it a monumental cross-media historical

archaeology [2]. The director also stressed in interviews that excessive emotional manipulation or overacting should be avoided during historical reconstruction to preserve the film's archaeological authenticity and documentary integrity [3]. Despite these constraints, the film successfully achieves dramatic tension and emotional resonance, largely due to the event's inherent dramatic fluctuations. By skillfully maintaining the linear progression of historical events in its narrative structure, the director effectively showcases the intense narrative suspense inherent in the incident. As historian Tony Banham noted in the film: "It feels authentic yet possesses a three-act structure 'drama that aligns with audiences' suspense expectations and emotional needs."

1.2 Reality Line: Emotional Drive and Memory Intertextuality

The "reality line" diverges from its predecessors. Driven by a sense of mission to rescue historical narratives, the filmmakers consciously and dramatically restructured and intervened in the process of historical reconstruction—this arduous investigation, documentation, and interpretation of events became the primary force propelling the film's narrative.[4] Director Fang Li actively shaped the plot development, with the production team conducting extensive interviews with eyewitnesses to piece together fragmented memories. This approach not only constructed a cohesive dramatic structure but also enhanced narrative fluidity. When the narrator intently recounts, "I first heard about the Lisbon Maru in..." the first-person narration employs a "puzzle-solving" approach to effectively engage viewers. The preservation of these fading historical records creates an intertextual relationship between audiences undergoing "re-memory" and creators seeking to reclaim history, both on and off screen. The final farewell ceremony for victims' families brings the timeline back to the present, using visual storytelling to soften the harshness of history's brutality. This allows viewers to glimpse the subtle emergence of humanistic idealism amidst the sea of suffering.

The excavation of the "realistic line" restores the details and warmth of "history," while the return of the "historical line" continues to future generations, comforting the regrets in the hearts of "realistic" people. At the balance point between emotion and narrative, at the wreck site of the Lisbon Maru, the two narrative threads ultimately converge. The echoes of history illuminate reality on China's Dongji Island, with two generations of Chinese people spanning over seventy years, upholding an unbroken spirit, collectively completing the historical loop of "saving the Lisbon Maru."

2. The Narrative Perspective of Humanism: Weaving History from Microscopic Memories

2.1 Focusing on Perspective Embedding: Hierarchical Structure and Depth of Narrative Perspectives

By applying Gerard Genette's focus theory framework to film classification, we observe that "The Lisbon Shipwreck" employs an "inner focus" perspective centered on the "director" role. As the narrative progresses linearly, the director's team conducts interviews with multiple families and gathers extensive materials, allowing audiences to witness increasingly detailed storylines. However, when stepping beyond the "realistic timeline" narrative structure, Fang Li—as an external observer representing the "historical timeline"—acquires unique perspectives and creative freedom. Transcending the limitations of Lisbon Shipwreck eyewitnesses, he conducts comprehensive historical research to grasp the event's macroscopic historical context. Utilizing omniscient zero-focus narrative techniques, Fang Li proactively constructs the story's framework. This zero-focus perspective enables him to explore emotional currents within creators, audiences, and survivors without visual constraints, uncovering sincere emotions buried in historical records. The

nested zero-focus narrative approach not only enhances story credibility but also fosters emotional resonance with historical events. It allows directors to seamlessly switch between characters and events while objectively presenting historical truths.

In practice, however, the director exercises remarkable restraint in employing omniscience within the "historical timeline," consciously maintaining the identity of an explorer within the "realistic timeline." By dedicating substantial narrative space to first-person accounts from event participants and their descendants, the film maintains a consistent sense of internal focalization throughout-allowing audiences to witness historical details solely through the characters' perspectives, with the director himself being one of them. The director's rare use of omniscience in historical narratives typically occurs before tragedies unfold, employing macro-historical frameworks to predestine characters' fates. This preemptive revelation of tragic outcomes casts a shadow of destiny over the characters' initially optimistic outlook of eternal separation, rendering the narrative profoundly moving and emotionally resonant.

2.2 Microscopic Multidimensional Perspective: The Integration of Individual Narratives and Historical Reconstruction

Traditional World War II documentaries predominantly employ "zero-degree narration" and third-person perspectives, adopting an omniscient viewpoint to objectively reconstruct historical narratives while maintaining a restrained detachment from actual events. In stark contrast, *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* breaks this mold. The director not only employs first-person narration but also constructs a personal narrative that challenges the dominance of grand narratives prevalent in conventional historical films and broader historical writings [2].

At the film's opening, the director poses two questions: "Who are they? What happened?" As the music begins and the title appears, these timely inquiries reveal the film's fundamental historical perspective-focusing on specific individuals rather than macroscopic historical narratives. By letting emotionally charged personal memories dominate the storytelling, the film not only demonstrates the director's deep concern for individual lives but also recalibrates, supplements, and repairs grand historical narratives, ultimately constructing a "humanized" history. Simultaneously, this individual-centered approach significantly facilitates equal dialogue between diverse national perspectives within the film. Transcending national and ethnic boundaries while avoiding definitive historical judgments, the film portrays all witnesses and their descendants as victims and captives of war's shadow. Through emotional memories rooted in familial bonds and mass media dissemination, the film spreads its message across international communities, shaping shared historical memories. [2] This universal sentiment aligns with the spirit of a "community with a shared future for mankind" in the report- "to transcend civilizational barriers through cultural exchange". By employing diverse narrative perspectives, "The Lisbon Maru Submarine" establishes an empathetic foundation for global dissemination.

3. Poetic and Lyric Narrative Style: Evoking Emotional Response through Subject Resonance

Jaroslav Prusek once analyzed literary emotional genres through the concepts of "lyricism" and "epics" -where "lyricism" reflects "the desire for individual subjectivity discovery and liberation," while "epics" embody "collective subject demands and revolutionary solidarity." [5] War historical films typically emphasize epic grandeur, whereas *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* prioritizes poetic lyricism in its narrative style. Behind this poetic veil lies the director's meticulous refinement of narrative aesthetics, aiming to transcend historical weight to resonate with creators, audiences, and eyewitnesses through enduring emotional authenticity. Scholar He Cheng posits that cinema's poetic strategy progresses from "visual imagery" to "lyric expression" and ultimately connects to

"emotional engagement" [6], which complements the film's humanistic narrative perspective, delivering audiences a profoundly moving experience rooted in authentic historical storytelling.

Every detail in the film reflects the director's profound concern for humanity: the fleeting Chinese calligraphy "Dennis" on a veteran's home wall, the close-up of an elderly man's trembling hands during wartime captivity, and the boundless azure expanse of the sea... These delicate cinematographic choices flow like lyrical prose, conveying the director's tender gaze and deep empathy for human experience. Such poetic and subtle visual language often resonates emotionally, subtly touching viewers without deliberate effort. The film also features direct emotional expressions-when countless deceased names are projected onto the director's face, the imagery of "the present carrying the past" is poetically materialized. The lingering long shot of surging waves at the end, accompanied by the theme melody's gentle cadence, directly evokes the audience's emotional responses.

Moreover, stylized animation scenes visually emphasize lyrical resonance. The character models are deliberately static, rendered in a muted, rough aesthetic, yet the richly layered voiceovers and sound effects dramatically expand the film's auditory dimension-vividly recreating everything from roaring ocean waves to subtle breaths and coughs. The printmaking-inspired stop-motion animation and realistic sound design create a paradoxical tension between visual and auditory dimensions [1], collectively crafting an empathetic space for audience imagination. From poetic visual storytelling to the creators' emotional expression, viewers' emotions ripple like Spinoza's "waves of the sea," stirred by the historical sea breeze into waves of emotional resonance.

4. Conclusion

This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the narrative strategies employed in the documentary *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru*, revealing how it captures public attention to a submerged historical episode through a dual-layered nested structure, humanistic storytelling perspectives, and poetic lyrical style. By intertwining historical narratives with contemporary realities, the film challenges grand historical narratives from a human-centric perspective while focusing on individual memories, evoking emotional resonance through lyrical storytelling. *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* demonstrates its historical and contemporary significance, proving that memory can transcend being a silent past to become a "living" history imbued with human experience in the present day.

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