

# An Analysis of Narrative Art in Liu Cixin's Science Fiction

Xuening Li<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolian Minzu University, Tong Liao, China

Correspondence: Xuening Li, School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolian Minzu University, 536 Huolinhe Street West, Tong Liao, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China.

Received: November 2, 2022

Accepted: December 18, 2022

Online Published: December 30, 2022

doi:10.5539/ells.v13n1p15

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n1p15>

## Abstract

The *Three-Body Trilogy* is Liu Cixin's masterpiece. Since its publication, it has gained widespread attention from both domestic and international literary circles and science fiction enthusiasts, attracting a large number of scholars to study it from various angles. The novel presents a unique narrative art in its narrative language and structural arrangement, and its narrative style demonstrates Liu Cixin's superb narrative skills. Using the trilogy as a specific study text and applying theories related to narratology, this article analyses the narrative art of the novel from two aspects, language and mode, and discusses the unprecedented aesthetic experience it brings to readers.

**Keywords:** *Three-Body Trilogy*, science fiction, narrative art

## 1. Introduction

Narrative, that is, storytelling, forms the hallmark of all narrative literature. Narrative in literature is the process of using words to fictionalise events. Strictly speaking, it is to use a certain language form such as poetry or prose to tell a series of real or fictional events in a specific order. Literary narrative has two fixed characteristics: firstly, the content of the narrative consists of the events of social life, generally speaking, it is the social behavior and results of people; secondly, the imaginary of narrative discourse, that is, the object referred to exists only within the narrative discourse. This concentration reflects the characteristics that narrative theory attaches importance to the performance of narrative life content. On this basis, narrative theory has developed a basic model consisting of three elements: character, plot and setting. The French scholar of narrative, Genette, has suggested that the term narrative contains three different concepts: the content of the story being told, the organisation of the language in which the story is told, and the act of narration. From this we can summarise the three elements of narrative: narrative content (the set of story elements, including place, character and time, that establish the basis of the narrative), narrative discourse (the language used to tell the story in a narrative work) and narrative action (the 'narrative' activity itself that produces the narrative discourse).

Liu Cixin's science fiction novels are different from traditional science fiction novels of the past. The narrative discourse and narrative content of the *Three-Body Trilogy* are subversive and innovative to traditional narratives. On the one hand, he breaks the barrier of the dichotomy between science and humanities, which is manifested in the poetic depiction of science. His works not only provide rational depictions of technology and the universe, but also aesthetic implications, where beauty mainly involves the poetic depiction of cosmic scenes and the rational beauty of science and technology. Liu Cixin connects the two seemingly unrelated concepts of science and aesthetics, leading readers to understand the cold technology and mysterious universe from an aesthetic point of view. This subverts readers' traditional perceptions of technology and the universe, and deconstructs the content of traditional science fiction narratives. On the other hand, he no longer adheres to the traditional single point of view and linear spatio-temporal narrative, but boldly deconstructs it. The multiple narrative perspectives are not bound by the traditional single point of view, nor are the large spans of time bound by the "irreversibility of time movement", which is difficult to match for traditional science fiction literature.

## 2. Romantic Writing About Science

Liu Cixin himself once mentioned in *Science Fiction in Chaos* that "science is a mine of beauty, but the beauty of science has a completely different form of expression from the beauty of traditional literature. The beauty of science is imprisoned in a cold equation, and ordinary people need to make great efforts to catch a glimpse of its light. But once the beauty of science is revealed to people, its power to shock and purify the soul is immense, in

some ways unattainable by traditional literary beauty. And science fiction, which is a bridge to the beauty of science, releases this beauty from the equation and reveals it to the public” (Liu, 2014, p. 79).

Releasing the bounded beauty of science has always been Liu Cixin’s goal in his creative process, and his novels certainly do bring a different kind of beauty to science. The reader is led to open up their eyes to the distant interstellar universe, and the beauty of the universe is clearly presented. The beauty of the technology needs to be savoured by the reader, in the learning and interpretation of the ‘equations’. Liu Cixin’s work deconstructs the dichotomy between science and aesthetics, obsessing over the poetic depiction of the macrocosm and the exquisite display of technological details, giving readers a refreshing sensation.

### 2.1 Poetic Description of the Cosmic Scene

“The essence of literature is the pursuit of beauty”. Liu Cixin’s preface to Ken Liu’s work, “Poetic Science Fiction” calls this beauty in literature poetic. While traditional realist literature usually depicts a world created by God, science fiction literature is able to create worlds as God does. This is one of the differences between science fiction and realistic fiction. The famous science fiction writer Han Song once commented that Liu Cixin’s works are very strange in imagination, boundless and wandering, like Zhuangzi, and that the pursuit of beauty in Liu Cixin’s novels is reflected in the fact that he puts the real in the absurd and the metaphysical. This aesthetic style is due to the fact that the author has projected his human feelings in a very subtle form into the otherwise emotionless universe, expressing the relationship between man and the universe and even objective scientific principles and things in a very grand poetic way, giving the whole universe a wonderful poetic effect, making it like a poem with a profound meaning.

At the beginning of his career in science fiction writing, Arthur Charles Clarke’s (2001): *A Space Odyssey* undoubtedly left a deep impression on Liu Cixin, and the loneliness, awe and fascination of mankind in the face of the mysterious universe shown in it was something he would never forget. Liu Cixin once wrote in an essay, “I remember that winter night 20 years ago, after reading that book and looking up at the night sky, I suddenly felt that everything around me had disappeared, and the earth beneath my feet had become an infinitely extended pure geometric plane of snow-white and smooth, and on this infinitely vast two-dimensional plane, under the magnificent starry sky, there stood me alone, facing this huge mystery that the human mind cannot grasp.... From then on, the starry sky looked different to me, it felt like leaving a pond and seeing the sea. It gave me a deep appreciation of the power of science fiction” (Liu, 2014, p. 88). Perhaps it was also this stirring gaze that led him for a time to devote himself to imagining and depicting the universe in all its grandeur, as exemplified by the poetic depiction of the universe in the *Three-Body*. When the solar system is struck down, the author paints a brutal yet beautiful picture of this cosmic “mega-painting”.

Cheng Xin knew she was talking about Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*. It looked like it, it was so similar. The memory of that painting in her mind overlapped almost perfectly with the two-dimensionalised solar system in front of her. Space was filled with huge stars which took up an area even larger than the space between them, but the immensity of the stars did not give them a sense of solidity; they were like a vortex of space-time. Every tiny part of space in the universe flowed, tumbled and trembled in fear and madness, like a burning flame, but radiating only cold. The sun and the planets, all entities and existences, are only illusions produced by this temporal turbulence (Liu, 2008, p. 445).

This is the kind of language interspersed with science that we do not see in pure literature, but moreover the poetic beauty of the universe from a cosmic perspective that we do not see in real life.

There are many more examples of this, such as the description of the fourth dimension in *Three-Body III—Death’s End*.

The sense of higher dimensional space is the most difficult to describe in words for those who have experienced the fourth dimension first-hand, and they often try to illustrate it in this way: what we call vast in the three dimensions, of this kind, is repeated infinitely in the fourth dimension, reproduced infinitely in a direction that does not exist in that three-dimensional world. They often use the analogy of two opposing mirrors: at this time, in any mirror, you can see countless mirrors that have been copied, a gallery of mirrors extending infinitely into the depths, and if, by analogy, each mirror in the gallery is a three-dimensional space. Or rather: the vastness that one sees in the three-dimensional world is in fact only a cross-section of the true vastness. The difficulty in describing the sense of higher-dimensional space is that the space one sees in four dimensions is also homogeneous and empty, but with an ineffable depth that cannot be described in terms of distance, which is contained in every point of space. A later quote by Guan Yifan became a classic.

“A square inch is too deep to be seen” (Liu, 2008, p. 194).

The imagery of four dimensions, which can only be found in science fiction, is not only visually and sensorially striking, but also contains a profound philosophical metaphor—the ‘infinite details’ that arise when looking at the three-dimensional world from four dimensions may be another reflection of the ‘one flower, one world’, which is similar to the idea of seeing three thousand worlds from a grain of sand. And this similar image is not just of a specific thing or an individual, but of a whole world that is very different from the reality we live in. This poetic depiction breaks the reader’s underlying cognitive paradigm and existing experience of reality, and makes one feel as if one has undergone a baptism of the soul—concepts such as freedom, openness, profundity and infinity suddenly all take on a new meaning in another dimension, and one can’t help but shudder and rejoice while feeling transcendent, and finally creates a sense of romantic poetry that is difficult to describe in words.

The science fiction writer’s eye comes from the universe rather than the earth, and this is a poetic depiction of the beauty of the universe from the height of the cosmos. It is precisely because it breaks the shackles of reality to a certain extent and boldly deconstructs traditional science fiction narratives, so when Liu Cixin’s science fiction is shaping his own grand and ethereal imaginary world, he proceed with a kind of free creation, free construction and free play. In his imaginary world, the writer can turn any impossibility into possibility and any unreality into reality, thus giving his works a romantic poetry that infects the reader and brings them into the epic of the universe constructed by his imagination. This deconstructive gesture of transcending reality is itself a process of creation, and it is precisely this way of creation that gives his works an enchanting romantic poetry, making Liu Cixin’s science fiction, from the entire universe down to the smallest atom, a breathtakingly beautiful poem.

## 2.2 Enchanting Beauty of Science and Technology

Science and technology have always been perceived as logical, rational and ruthless, while aesthetics has always been intuitive, sensual and nice, and thus the two have long seemed incompatible. However, in Liu Cixin’s science fiction novels, the author often strips instrumental rationality from science and technology, and breaks away from its practical properties, standing on a higher level to represent, dissect and play with science and technology or technological artefacts as an aesthetic object, and then objectify and poetise them, making them aesthetically meaningful, as if God is admiring a piece of artwork he has created. When science and technology are freed from their natural instrumental value and are pulled away from the object of observation and kept at a certain aesthetic distance from it to express and play with it, their ‘uselessness’ begins to take precedence over all relevance, stakes and moral evaluation, and the laws of science and the harmony, symmetry, simplicity, novelty and logical self-consistency of scientific and technological creations constitute a high aesthetic value.

A rare optimistic scientist, Liu Cixin has made great efforts to showcase the technical beauty that science brings. In his work *Three-Body Trilogy*, technology is not only an important source of beauty in his work, but also occupies a great deal of space in the novels, gaining almost equal status as a human protagonist, in addition to the almost frenzied depiction of technical details, which he repeatedly presents with delicate brushstrokes and grand imagery, showing an unparalleled admiration for the power of science, such as the detailed description of “Droplets” in the *Dark Forest*:

When the world first saw images of the probe, everyone was enthralled by its stunningly beautiful shape. It was truly a thing of beauty, its shape simple but exquisitely shaped, with every point on the curved surface just right to give the drop of mercury an ethereal movement, as if it were dripping endlessly through the cosmic night at every moment. It gives the impression that even if a human artist had tried all the possible forms of a closed surface smoothly, he would not have found such a shape. It is beyond all possibility, even in Plato’s ideal state there is no such perfect shape; it is a line straighter than a straight line, a circle more round than a square circle, a mirrored dolphin leaping out of the sea of dreams, the fruit of all the love in the universe ... (Liu, 2008, p. 367)

We can see that Liu Cixin has used almost all of his senses in order to portray the beauty of the “droplet”.

In addition to this, there is a detailed depiction of the Trisolaran’s two-dimensional unfolding of the proton, which was intended to be two-dimensional but was unfolded into three dimensions as a result of the Trisolaran’s mishandling, resulting in a beautiful and bizarre scene in the sky.

Several huge, regular geometric shapes appeared in the sky, vertebrae, spheres, cubes, etc. the author likens them to “a giant child scattering boxes of building blocks in the sky” (Liu, 2008, p. 277). Soon afterwards, by accident, the shapes of these geometries gradually changed, no longer appearing as regular as before, and “the sky now no

longer evoked blocks, but rather the dismembered limbs and internal organs of a giant". Later it was noticed that these deformed geometries were becoming more and more like giant eyes and that they were converging towards the same point, that the eyes would meet and then merge into one, that when combined they would still be in the shape of an eye, only larger, until finally all the eyes in the sky merged into one.

It is under this poetic aesthetic perspective that science, principles, technology and technological artefacts, originally devoid of any emotional content, are liberated from their abstruse and obscure theories and are depicted in a concrete and palpable literary and artistic image in a language that corresponds to our realistic experience. At this point, science and technology take on a special, ineffable beauty that abounds in the *Three-Body Trilogy*. The classical narrative style and the linguistic features that flaunt the aesthetics of technology are the most impressive features of Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Trilogy* for readers, and one of the key factors in the recognition of *Three-Body* by the international science fiction community. Unlike traditional science fiction novels, which are always rational and cold in their depiction of science and technology, it is because of his pampering of the aesthetics of science and technology and his adept use of language that he is able to present readers with a different aesthetic experience brought about by technology, create a romantic scientific world with exquisite and delicate language, give science and technology an artistic touch, deconstruct the dichotomy between rationality and sensibility, and smooth the gap between science and aesthetics.

### 3. The Unique Narrative Mode

Generally speaking, traditional narratives follow a chronological progression, narrating stories that take place in different spaces accordingly. Later on, narratology underwent some transformations, and novelists began to rebel against the traditional narrative style, abandoning their loyalty to time and space to a certain extent, breaking away from the inherent pattern, disrupting the time and space, clues and perspectives of the story and arranging them in an arbitrary way, abandoning the inherent pattern of the previous narrative mode.

Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Trilogy* not only subvert the internal form and structure of traditional novels, but also reflect on the novel narratives themselves. He employs narrative strategies that negate and subvert established patterns or orders, such as the intricacy of narrative threads, the uncertainty of character perspectives, the span of time, and the non-linearity of space, reflects a strong artistry.

#### 3.1 Multiple Perspectives and Clues

In the course of a narrative, the writer usually develops the story through a point-of-view approach. As a result, the artistic effect will vary depending on the point of view taken. The reader can take a limited view of the world from the point of view of one character, or they can stand at the top and take an omniscient God's point of view to get an all-encompassing view of the story. In the *Three-Body Trilogy*, Liu Cixin has adopted a diverse narrative approach with multiple characters' perspectives.

For example, the intellectual narrative represented by Wang Miao, the heroic narrative represented by Luo Ji and the apocalyptic narrative represented by Cheng Xin form the narrative perspective and plot line of the trilogy respectively. The first part, from the perspective of the protagonist Wang Miao, narrates the confrontation with the Earth at the time of the imminent approach and arrival of the Trisolaran Fleet. The overall structure of the novel is similar to that of a detective novel, the novel begins with the official force of the earth, represented by police Shi Qiang, to solve the mystery of physicist suicide, thus entering the story, and take Wang Miao, a physicist who is a member of the "Frontier of Science", participated in "The Three-Body Problem" game and joined ETO (Earth-Trisolaris Organization) to break this organization as the main clue, the past events of Ye Wenjie and Evans are narrated in the form of memories, at the same time, the collage text such as the secret files of the red bank base is used to supplement the information. The second part, *The Dark Forest*, is told from the perspective of the human heroes represented by the Wallfacer, Luo Ji, and discusses the attempts made by the Wallfacer and others to break the Sophon blockade and save Earth's civilisation after the crisis of the Trisolaran invasion. The third book, *Death Forever*, starts from the apocalyptic point of view of Cheng Xin, the Swordholder, and explores the morality of the end times and the fate of humanity until the destruction of the Earth in the universe. In the course of the narrative, in order to express the author's feelings and thoughts about the events or the characters, it is undoubtedly necessary to use the narrative perspective to its fullest extent, switching flexibly between a fixed point of view and a variety of perspectives. The whole of the *Three-Body Trilogy* is unified by the interplay of omniscient perspectives and the transformation of various character perspectives.

Liu Cixin includes diverse beings in space other than humans in his novels. The *Dark Forest* opens with an ant's perspective to understand the changes in the world. The tombstone becomes like a lonely peak in its world, the writing on the tombstone is a long groove for it, and Luo Ji and Ye Wenjie in front of the tombstone become

huge existences accordingly. This tiny ant goes from one groove to another in its own limited little world, and its crawling trajectory gradually reveals a series of numbers, which nevertheless conceals the mystery of the world. The *Dark Forest* can be divided into three perspectives: the perspective of the wallfacer, represented by Luo Ji, the perspective of the elite, represented by Zhang Beihai, and the perspective of the masses, represented by Zhang Yuanzhao and Yang Jinwen. In a time of crisis and looming war, the author depicts the different states of existence of the masses and the various social elites, presenting a multi-dimensional view of life in the “apocalypse in progress”.

The three perspectives of Luo Ji, the wallfacer, Zhang Beihai, the commander of the space fleet, and the ordinary people Yang Jinwen and Zhang Yuanzhao appear side by side and overlap, breaking the usual one-line narrative logic. The three perspectives are not necessarily related to each other, but they are interspersed in a way that does not confuse but rather complements each other. Although there are multiple perspectives in the novel and they are constantly shifting between them, they are linked and bridged by the same theme, which allows the multiple perspectives to merge and to be traced back to their source.

### 3.2 Non-Linear Narrative Time and Space

Non-linear narrative is to break the traditional plot pattern of beginning, development, climax, ending. The freedom to stretch the length of time, disrupt the sequence of narrative time, and organize the timeline in an arbitrary manner create a sense of intertwined space and time, and these unconventional narrative techniques create a disruption between natural time and narrative time. As a time-travelling novel, the author of *Three-Body Trilogy* tries to break free from the constraints of existing space by blocking the linear flow of time through the techniques of stretching, shrinking, following and reversing, so that people can move freely in and out of the timeline, forming an arbitrary transformation of space between coming and going, so that the time line can control the space line, and the space line reflects the time line.

The non-linear narrative is reflected in the non-linearity of narrative time on the one hand. The author often uses flashbacks to return from the present to the past, supplementing and explaining the present narrative with events that occurred in the past space. The adoption of this form often breaks the inherent order of time flow, juxtaposing the past and the present in the reader's impression, forming a double or even multiple space overlapping reflection, complementing each other and generating a lot of new meanings. The first part of *Three-Body* focuses on Ye Wenjie's disillusionment with human society and her “betrayal” of the Earth and Wang Miao's exploration of the secrets of the Trisolaran planet. Ye Wenjie's clues are punctuated with her memories of her father's tragic experience and her own Red Coast Base, which pave the way for the emergence of the Earth-Trisolaris Organization and, Wang Miao's exploration process was mainly based on entering the game “Three-Body Problem”. The two threads are intertwined, so that the narrative space follows the time of the story, from the university during the Cultural Revolution to the Red Coast Base, from modern society to the virtual Trisolaran planet, from the present space to the past space, from the real space to the virtual space, with different spaces overlapping, giving the reader a different feeling. In addition to this, there is also the description of Yun Tianming's story in the third part, in which the narration of Yun Tianming's serious illness and imminent death is interspersed with his memories of his own past, the narrative space jumps from the university where he and Cheng Xinchu met to the hospital ward where he is being euthanized. This shift in the spatial context of the story deepens the reader's perception of Yun Tianming as a character and provides a reason for later sending the star to Cheng Xin.

On the other hand, it is reflected in the non-linear narrative space. The *Three-Body Trilogy* often moves instantly from one space to another in the course of the spatial narrative, showing the passage of time through the transformation of space. In the second and third books, the non-chronological nature of space is mainly reflected in the “hibernation technique”. Hibernation is a very high-tech freezing technique, which is a black technology throughout the *Three-Body*. Because of its existence, the protagonists are able to witness the Battle of Armageddon across several centuries and use future-age technology for self-defence. At the same time, due to the invention of this advanced technology, the concept of time is in a sense blurred. For the individual, time no longer flows at a uniform pace, decades or even centuries are in the individual's experience no more than the time it takes to sleep, it can be said that time is compressed or accelerated. Before hibernation and after awakening, people live in completely different worlds and communities; Shi Qiang was a citizen of the People's Republic of China before he hibernated, but when he woke up he belonged to the Asian fleet. People living together in the same area may come from different generations and have very different life experiences and historical memories. While the language has changed to the extent that it does not affect normal communication, the meaning of many words has changed. “The word ‘Beijing’ is a very different concept of space in the minds of Luo Ji and the nurses he meets after waking up from hibernation.

The main character of the third part, Cheng Xin, hibernates several times, each time shifting space instantly by means of hibernation. For example, in the first hibernation, she shifts from the Crisis Era to the Deterrence Era. The author describes the environment in which she lives after awakening: the city is like a forest, each branch is a street, and the human temperament is more reverentially feminine. Through this series of descriptions of current society, the reader can imagine that a long time has passed. The second hibernation travels to the Broadcast Era, while the third reaches the Bunker Era, where Cheng Xin awakens in a space city. Through the descriptions of the surroundings and the dialogue, we learn that human technology has advanced to the point where a space city can be built on the backside of Jupiter, a period of 62 years having passed. The maturity of hibernation technology implies the maturity of time compression technology, a jump in space that differs from the unchanging or slowly changing space of traditional narratives; by fading away time, more space is needed to fill it. Therefore, each time Cheng Xin wakes up, the author's description of the space in which he survives after waking up and the protagonist's feelings of spatial survival in a sense assume the function of the narrative, and through these descriptions the reader can feel the passage of time.

All in all, Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Trilogy* is full of time jumps and spatial shifts, and is a model for the time-travel genre of fiction. The wonderfully non-linear space-time narrative in the work breaks out of the traditional circle of chronological depiction, disrupting time and space and then reorganising them, with the two overlapping each other and writing the story together, brings a new reading experience to the reader.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *Three-Body Trilogy*, Liu Cixin challenges the traditional way of constructing a story. In the process of building a story, he uses a different narrative method, through a variety of narrative perspectives and a non-linear spatio-temporal narrative method, and uses artistic language to make scientific novels poetic and aesthetic, not only to better express the meaning of the text but also to give readers a new reading experience. In his unique creation, the originally cold and rational science and technology takes on a warmth and a unique sense of beauty, and when people look up at the sky and see the distant and mysterious universe, they no longer have the impression of an empty feeling but a poetic one. In addition, Liu Cixin also adopts a multi-perspective approach to narration, with multiple threads running simultaneously, which seemingly have no concrete connection with each other but actually complement each other, allowing the reader to bring in the characters from all angles and to understand and think about them from all angles. In terms of narrative logic, he constantly breaks the inherent temporal and spatial order, deconstructing and reorganising it to form the work's unique temporal and spatial order. In jumping around time and space, the reader is unable to define the end of one story or the beginning of another. This flexible use of language and non-linear narrative subverts the traditional narrative requirement of story normality and opens up more possibilities for the interpretation of the story.

#### References

- Liu, C. X. (2008a). *The Three-Body Problem*. Chongqing: Chongqing Press.
- Liu, C. X. (2008b). *The Dark Forest*. Chongqing: Chongqing Press.
- Liu, C. X. (2008c). *Death's End*. Chongqing: Chongqing Press.
- Liu, C. X. (2014). *Liu Cixin on Science Fiction*. Wuhan: Hubei Science & Technology Press.
- Gaffric, G. P. W. (2022). Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Trilogy* and the Status of Science Fiction in Contemporary China. *Science Fiction Studies*, 46, 01. <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.46.1.0021>
- Jia, L. Y. (2018). Chinese People Not Only Live in the World but Grow in the Universe: Liu Cixin and Chinese Science Fiction (James, F. Trans.). *Chinese Literature Today*, 01.
- Su, M. (2022). "Revival of Narrative" and "Narrative Turn" in Contemporary Western Historiography. *Journal of Historiography*, 2, 72–86.
- Yu, J. (2022). Research Methods in Narrative. *Shanghai Education*, 6, 65–67.

#### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author, with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).