


Tracing the Discursivity of Narrative in *Le Transperceneige* and *Snowpiercer*

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Abstract

A conventional perspective of narratology dissociates it from the idea of discursivity, associating it entirely with the structural elements of a story like plot, character, setting and more. However, the narrative mode and the elements employed in a work of fiction significantly alter the perception and add to its discursivity. Taking this as the hypothesis, this paper intends a comparative study between the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* and its 2013 movie iteration *Snowpiercer*, directed by Bong Joon-Ho, to delve into the narrative changes and the consequential discursive shifts. To this end, the paper will employ the narratological theories propounded by French literary critic Gérard Genette.

Keywords: Narratology, Narration and Discourse.

Introduction

Narration is integral to human life and can assume various forms, from bedtime stories to historical novels. As Gerald Prince points out, humankind inherently identifies narratives and has internalised a system that differentiates them from non-narrative expressions (179). On a surface level, these narratives function with the help of several essential narrative components like plot, story, character, setting and time. According to Mieke Bal, such closed analysis with the object of "pure narratives" is obsolete and no longer the object of narratology (730). Narrative studies of recent times have shifted the focus towards deeper structures of narrative texts by employing discursive tools unearthed at a later period of narratological development.

Contrary to conventional assumptions, narrative elements carry out functions that transcend the narrative boundaries of the text. "The study of narrative is particularly important since our ordering of time and space in narrative forms constitutes one of the primary ways we construct meaning in general" (Felluga). Even later narratology concepts like transtextuality by Gérard Genette implicate the discursive nature of narrative elements. Hence, this paper aims to study the discursivity of narration through a comparative narratological study of the graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* (1982) by Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette alongside its 2013 film adaptation titled *Snowpiercer* by Bong Joon-Ho, corroborated by narrative theories of Gérard Genette. The study hopes to delve into the symbiotic nature of influence between contemporary discourses and the narrative elements through these texts.

Narratology- An Introduction

Narratology is a discipline of study aimed at scrutinising the narrative structures of texts and the fundamental mechanisms of meaning-making in storytelling methods (Barry 214). Nevertheless, such a simplification would also arise problematic, given the rich and diverse theoretical corpus of the discipline that dates, at least, back to the early Twentieth century. The earliest contributor to narratology would be the Russian formalist critic Vladimir Propp, whose formative work *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928) predates even the official inception of narrative study by decades. Based on the narrative information from his analysis, Propp scrutinised a collection of a hundred Russian folk tales under a unified grammar containing seven ‘Spheres’ and thirty-one ‘Functions’ (218-222). The book, however, remained unnoticed until the publication of the Bloomington English translation in the 1950s, when structuralists took up and expanded these ideas.

Claude Levi Strauss furthered narratological ideas in his famous volume, *Structural Anthropology*, which came out in 1958 (218). Through a structuralist study, Levi Strauss claims that myths worldwide work like language at the primary level and brings out the fundamental component of mythology known as ‘mytheme.’ Another figure to borrow profusely from structuralism is A. J. Greimas, who introduced the six fundamental narrative components he calls ‘actants.’ Actants differ from perfunctory elements like characters or events and refer to deeper structural models in binary opposition like ‘Subject-object’, ‘Sender-receiver’ and ‘Helper-opponent’ (Baldick).

Despite these well-renowned theoretical developments concerning the narrative in the first half of the century, the formal introduction of narratology did not happen until 1969, when Tzvetan Todorov first published *The Grammar of the Decameron* (Amerian and Jofi 183). It is mainly because the texts in question marked the initial stages of narratology or narrative study primarily as part of in-vogue theoretical schools like structuralism and formalism. Nevertheless, the narrative study never went off-trend, even when emerging ideas like poststructuralism and deconstruction were dethroning the structuralist and formalist schools.

As the changes were underway, multiple voices within the spectrum of narrative study asked for a change in the approach and a widening of the scope. Mieke Bal, in his article *The Point of Narratology* (1990), points out the need for a shift from the text-based structuralist approach to a “discursive mode which affects semiotic objects in variable degrees” (730). He claims that expanding narratological approaches while providing the much-needed tools for other forms of literary inquiry will also open various routes to the analyses of non-narrative media, which thus far have been under-illuminated from the narratological perspective (730).

By this time, the new approaches in the narrative study began showing poststructuralist and postmodernist influences. Gérard Genette is the most noteworthy among narrative theorists from this period owing to his two seminal volumes, namely *Figures III* (1972) and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1980). Genette introduced a method of analysis concerned with the five broader elements of the narrative: ‘Order’, ‘Duration’, ‘Frequency’, ‘Mood’ and ‘Voice’ (Amerian and Jofi 186). The primary concern of Genette’s work is the shift of the focus from ‘what is in a story’ to ‘how a story is told’ (Barry 222). Other notable narrative theorists from this period are Roland Barthes, Peter Brooks, Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman and Claude Bremond.

The past few decades have been instrumental in creating a newer roadmap in the domain, which is generally termed post-classical narratology. Rimmon-Kenan notes that post-classical narratology marks a “shift from a fairly unified discipline to one characterised by a diversity of approaches” (Rimmon-Kenan qt. in Amerian and Jofi 185). He further states that narratology is becoming interdisciplinary and has already extended to different areas, such as feminist narratology, cognitive narratology, and modern narratology (185). Moreover, post-classical narratology’s move away from the more conventional formalist-structuralist narratology also illuminates the role of discursive elements in shaping a narrative structure, which brings us to the idea undertaken in this article.

Narrative Analysis – *Le Transperceneige* and *Snowpiercer*

Le Transperceneige is a French graphic novel by Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette and was first brought out in 1982. The novel features a dystopian earth entirely covered in ice where a train, thousand-and-one cars long, goes endlessly around the planet with the last hope of humanity. The story begins abruptly with protagonist Proloff's breakout from the 'tail,' the last few cars of the train used as a ghetto. While in quarantine, he comes across a woman named Adeline Bellau, a third-class resident who is sympathetic towards the people from the ghetto. From there, the narrative follows their journey and hurdles as they dash to the train's engine while being chased by those in power. Together, they both manage to escape the political plots surrounding them and run for an engine where they hope to find asylum, which they finally do. Adeline dies exposed to the cold during the escape when he shoots the train car's windows next to the engine. Proloff is saved by a mysterious man who is revealed as engineer Forrester. The novel ends with Proloff travelling alone on the train as everyone else has died of the epidemic caused by the virus from the ghetto.

The post-apocalyptic dystopia of this French graphic novel was adapted into a feature film titled *Snowpiercer* in 2013 by the Korean director Bong Joon-Ho. Despite being an adaptation, the movie's plot does not adhere to the source religiously. Instead, Bong Joon-Ho produces a new tale based on the snow-clad world of the graphic novel with an entirely different perspective and contemporary discursive patterns. The movie follows the character Curtis Everett, who organises a coup from the tail against those that keep the tail marginalised with minimal sustenance. Everett attempts to get to the train's engine, hoping to get control of the entire structure. However, in an unfortunate turn of events, he derails the *Snowpiercer*, putting its iron wheels to rest. The movie culminates with a revelation to the passengers that the harshness of the cold is no more, and the planet is becoming habitable.

Beginning with the characters, the director introduces new characters into the fold instead of the minimalistic writing taken up by Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette in *Le Tranperceneige*. The inclusion transforms the narrative into a collective affair, an element that remains concealed in the story featuring Proloff. In addition to this inclusion, the film modifies the characteristics of the tail from an entirely cut-off ghetto into a space like an immigration detention facility. The residents of the tail in the movie resemble immigrants who do not have proper authorisation to travel. Those in power treat the tail as a fallback, finding skills that become scarce amidst the controlled population of the train. The changes incurred by the adaptation are as much change in the discourse as in the narrative elements implicating the co-existence of narrative and discourse. Hence, the paper will conduct a comparative study of the narrative elements in the source and the adaptation to emphasise the discursivity of the narration. The paper will employ the narrative analysis method proposed by Gérard Genette as the narrative parameter for analysing the texts.

The voluminous theoretical corpus of Gérard Genette sheds light on several aspects of the narrative, starting with the traditional structuralist ideas of narration to the claims of poststructuralism. He shifted the focus of narratology from the 'what' to the 'how' of the story, opening a whole new spectrum of discursivity for the analyst to uncover. However, the Gériardian narrative analysis is not a unified theoretical work but derived from his most famous work, *Narrative Discourse* (1980), and later works like *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982) and *Paratexts* (1987). Given the comprehensiveness of his narrative theories, the article will employ the condensed ideas of Genette's analytical methods propounded by Peter Barry in his work *Beginning Theory – An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2009). The method asks some seminal questions about the narrative in question, involving aspects like 'narrative mode', 'focalisation', 'narrator', and 'treatment of time', among others.

1) Narrative Mode

As Peter Barry points out, his narrative analysis begins by asking questions about the narration and the narrative modes (223). For this, Genette borrows a couple of ideas from Book III of Plato's *Republic*: 'Mimesis', which refers to the dramatisation of the events, and 'Diegesis', a simple telling or recounting of the events (Genette 30). At first, both the graphic novel and the movie take the mimetic mode of narration, dramatising the events to create an illusion of a direct encounter that is "detailed, precise, and 'alive'" (164). This assumption results from the inherently visual nature of the texts in question. However, a closer look at the narration reveals a few parts where diegetic mode is used. Both texts employ diegetic mode to describe the time prior to the departure of the train and the disastrous events that ensue. The following image is an example of diegetic narration in the novel where the authors recount the entire event named 'White Death' through a conversation between Proloff and Adeline.



Figure 1 (*Le Transperceneige*, (in English Translation), Pg. 25)

Diegetic narration in the movie comes in the beginning, where the events which occurred a few years prior to boarding the *Snowpiercer* are condensed into a two-minute summary. Even later in the movie, the references to the past are predominantly diegetic. Authors usually employ diegetic mode when some events do not directly move the action but serve as a background for the current events of the text. The diegetic mode in a text often intends to conserve narrative space.

However, such selective use of mimetic and diegetic modes often helps build the narrative's central viewpoint (Barry 224). For example, narrative modes used to describe the tail in the two texts differ, implicating a change in the mood in the texts. In the original text, *Le Transperceneige*, the readers get the description of the 'tail' or the ghetto only through some passing remarks from the characters. It essentially takes diegetic mode as the narrative only tries to capture Proloff's actions, and the tail becomes a distant symbol of suppression from his point of view as he already feels liberated. On the other hand, Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer* brings mimetic significance to the tail as the first marker of the discursive shift between the two texts. Unlike Proloff, the tail is still the reality for Curtis Everett, which he shares with many others. As shown in the next frame, the shift to the mimetic mode or dramatisation animates the tail as an active part of the events in the movie.



Figure 2 (*Snowpiercer*, 00:04:26)

2) Focalisation

The next significant aspect in the G erardian narrative system is focalisation, which, in Genette’s terms, corresponds to other mainly visual ideas like “vision, field, and point of view” that the narrative takes up (189). The character whose point of view the narrative presents is called the focaliser (Barry 225). The perspective of the events can be significantly altered depending on where the narrative is focalised. In the graphic novel, the story, as shown earlier, begins abruptly with Proloff’s break-in into the third class of the train. The readers are not given much insight into his life before the break-in despite the passing remarks about the tail section. Even as the narrative progresses, the focaliser, Proloff, chooses to keep silent about his past and the conditions of the tail. This example of external focalisation becomes vital for the narrative to build a suspenseful culmination when the reality of the tail remains dismal and diseased at the end. Borrowing Michel Raimond’s idea, Genette states that external focalisation excites the audience by offering a mystery (Genette 190). By keeping a more significant part of the narrative under concealment, the graphic novel focalises on the psychological state of the individual who escaped the morbid conditions of the tail, which is not revealed until later.

However, the 2013 film adaptation of the novel shifts the general focalisation of the narrative from external to internal. Here, the ‘tail’ is the focaliser, and Curtis Everett is not a single person but an image representing the collective body of the tail. Despite some elements of surprise, it is evident from the beginning that the tail is preparing for a mutiny against the oppressors. The mood is set from the movie’s beginning, and viewers are made aware of the intentions of the tail. Bong Joon-Ho’s vision of the narrative focalises on a part that was distanced and removed from the focal point of the original work. This slight shift in the focalisation kickstarts a ‘domino effect’ that results in an ideological change analogous to discourses on various contemporary issues ranging from Marxism to the immigrant crisis. In narratological terms, the fixed internal focalisation accentuates the discursive shift in the adaptation through what Genette calls the “restriction of field” (189). In the film, the author intentionally limits the field by filling the narrative frame with signifiers corresponding to contemporary events.

3) Narrator

The text’s perspective can be changed significantly depending on who the narrator is. Frequently, the text’s narrator is a character in the text themselves with a name and peculiar traits. Such a

narrator is, in narratological terms, known as a ‘dramatised narrator.’ (188). A dramatised narrator may be homodiegetic, that is, telling their own story, or heterodiegetic, narrating someone else’s story (Barry 226). In such cases, the narrative focalisation is subject to the inclinations of this character. Another type is the abstract narrative figure, traditionally called the omniscient narrator, and such narrators are innately heterodiegetic as they narrate the life events of someone else (226).

As far as the texts in question are concerned, the narratives open with an out-of-story heterodiegetic voice, introducing the setting before the mimetic mode of narration takes over. The narrator reappears at the beginning of every chapter and acts as a reminder of the desolate condition of the world. The recurring narrative voice foreshadows the bleak end that awaits Proloff and the people on the train. In *Narrative Discourse*, this aspect is called “heterodiegetic prolepses” (71). However, the omniscient voice in the movie merely fulfils an expository function and does not return. This could be due to the performative narration of the film. Nevertheless, the absence of the omniscient voice after the film’s beginning complements the conscious narrative changes in the adaptation. The lack of recurring pessimism can be a prognosis of the rebellion’s success in finding or building a better world for humanity.

4) Treatment of Time

The treatment of time is also a crucial factor in narration as it contributes to the narrative’s structure and emotion. It is visible that the narrative does not always take the events linearly but rearranges them as per the requirements of the text. Genette calls this aspect of temporal rearrangement in *Narrative Discourse* an interpolated temporal position (Genette 217). For instance, Proloff recalls the events from his time from the tail and before in flashback episodes in the novel. Each of these episodes from the past is recalled through his encounters with different objects as he treads through the cars of the train with his companion, Adeline Bellau. The recalled episodes are from the subjective perspective of the protagonist, as the narrative focalises on Proloff. The interpolated episodic inclusion of the past in the novel may signify the ongoing trauma in the protagonist.

Nonetheless, *Snowpiercer* does not distort the temporal order of the narrative and follows the linear narration or what Genette calls the subsequent positioning of time (217). Unlike the graphic novel, this happens in the film as the narrative does not focus on an individual. Instead, it provides a synoptic account of the collective past in adherence to the linearity of the narrative, as the focalisation of collectivity is the conscious discursive change the film is trying to achieve.

Narrative elements are usually not looked at from a semantic point of view, giving the impression that the narrative context remains ignored in narratology. However, as Gerald Prince points out, “texts in modern narratology are frequently more semantics-bound than they may seem” (184). As one might think, a narrative is not a fixed set of structures and elements; on the contrary, these elements can change or modify to create a new reading of the signifiers in the narrative.

As far as *Le Transperceneige* is concerned, the narrative is a simple tale of what a fugitive in a futuristic world goes through. However, the same statement may not be true concerning the movie. Director Bong Joon-Ho stated in an interview that his attempt at filming the novel was to create a new narrative and not follow the ways taken by the original text. Despite the new inclusions, the reworking retains the story of survival from the oppressive apparatuses and the attached signifiers. The narrative and the context are modified to help specific signifiers contemporise the events. However, the narrative modification here cannot be treated merely as a byproduct of intermedial translation, although it plays a crucial role. Instead, it allows for accentuating newer discourses that had remained untapped in the original story. Apart from the contemporary discourses analogous to the image of the tail, the movie also sets into motion other discourses, particularly ecological ones, which would be beyond the scope of this paper. This analysis demonstrates that the film

employs various narratological elements in accentuating contemporary discourses within the same narrative frame. From the analytical insights derived from this study, the research concludes that the discursive shifts of a story are as much a narrative affair as it is contextual and, by extension, establish the discursivity of narrative elements employed.

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