

AFTERLIFE OF SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NONLINEAR NARRATION IN KURT VONNEGUT'S NOVEL AND ITS CINEMATIC ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a comparative study of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut and its 1972 film adaptation by George Roy Hill on the use of nonlinear narrative methods used in novel and in film. The novel, renowned for its narrative strategy of employing fragmented temporalities and metafictional commentaries, reimagines traditional war narratives by situating trauma within cyclical and discontinuous temporal experiences. Although limited by the conventions of cinema, Hill tries to reproduce this disjunction of linear time with editing, voice-over, and cross-cutting. But the film adaptation diverges in the simplification of metafictional layers and in the quest to provide a narrative closure. Employing theories from narratology, adaptation studies, and trauma studies, this study tries to understand how the respective media address the challenge of representing memory and trauma beyond linear chronology. Besides, this paper also emphasises the significance of the nonlinear narration for aesthetic and thematic purposes in both literary and cinematic mediums.

Keywords: *Slaughterhouse-Five, nonlinear narration, trauma theory, adaptation studies, Kurt Vonnegut, George Roy Hill, narratology*

INTRODUCTION

Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut (1969) is one of the best novels that defies the rules and principles of linear narration and resorts to nonlinear narrative methods in exploring the trauma of war to mark its place in twentieth century American literature. The protagonist Billy Pilgrim whose temporal experiences make him exist in varied dimensions of time, simultaneously places him both in present and past at the same instance. This palimpsest comes out in fragmented bits in the novel. This non-linear narration disrupts the cause-effect of the conventional narrative and is further linked to the disruption of time of the trauma. It becomes a nonlinear narrative strategy that dislocates memories of war.

In 1972 *Slaughterhouse-Five* was adapted into film by George Roy Hill who attempted to translate the shifting narrative temporalities into action pictures. The editing tricks like flashback, jump cut, voice-over narration etc. were applied to reconstruct the discontinuous time of the novel and to examine both the peculiar opportunities and limitations of the filmmaking as a form at the same time. The adaptation is a tricky undertaking balancing between a hard task of telling a story with the very form which will not allow being coherent and these questions make one wonder the extent to which a story is faithful, to which the story is interpreted, and to which the story is presented.

This study attempts at a comparative analysis of the novel and the movie adaptation on the basis of the narrative tools used to reflect the trauma and the memory. It contemplates on the application of non-linear narration in the novel by the author and the film; on the difficulties of representation of trauma; and also, how the two mediums handle the subjects subject to their own strengths and limitations. This analysis will explore the obvious differences between the representation of nonlinear narration in literature and cinematic works with the aid of the combination of narratology, adaptation studies, and the trauma theory. As an investigation into transmedial narrative treatment, this study illustrates the macro implications of narrative experimentation in the framework of war, especially in expressing its challenges.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

In 1969, when *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published, the U.S was deeply embroiled in the Vietnam war and parallelly, as opposed to it, a vehement anti-war sentiment gained momentum across American populace. Vonnegut himself, serving in World War II, as a war captive incarcerated in Dresden, is reflected in the protagonist of the novel serving as a testament to the crucial historical fact of the novel. The novel is in the form of collage of satire, science fiction, biography and nonlinear narration making it unique in a traditional work of war. The war becomes an impasse, denying heroism and solution and presents a negative view of the past.

Vonnegut could be read in the context of the postmodernism cultural period. Its metafictional intrusions, irony and denial of closure are consistent with the experiments of the moment which were being undertaken in the literature of the time such as that of Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. The novel therefore serves two roles: it is a very personal story of the trauma of war and it is a novel that doubts the account of the same.

The film version of 1972 was released at the day when the anti-war films, such as *M*A*S*H* (1970) (asterisk is part of the title) and *Johnny Got his Gun* (1971) were in the focus of the populace. George Roy Hill made an attempt to retain the temporality disjointed as in the novel, in adapting the novel, however, to condense the enormous narrative. Such techniques as cross-cutting, sound bridges, voice-over narration are examples of such techniques, in fact, an effort to recreate the sense of being unstuck in time on the part of Billy. Nevertheless, this adaptation was not without its issues: the metafictional commentary was downgraded to a minimum, and the need of the audience to have coherence and endings forced modification of the narratives.

THE NONLINEAR NARRATION IN THE NOVEL

Vonnegut exploited the literary possibilities of nonlinear narrative methods in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The time dislocation frequently affecting Billy Pilgrim can be regarded as the Tralfamadorian understanding of time. The time, thus portrayed, presupposes that all events take place in a single moment and the progressive, chronological historical process loses its significance (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 27). The conception also offers a philosophical and narrative frame: Billy is drifting through a series of the memories of World War II, of his alien abduction and trauma that he suffers in the postwar period, and lastly the suburban life. These disjunctions reflect the mental gaps of trauma that cannot be accommodated in a linear time frame.

The portrayal of war trauma and subsequent anti-war attitude of the novel cannot be separated

from the ingenious narrative techniques employed by Vonnegut as it becomes a necessary, indispensable part of the novel itself. The novel contrives the anticipation of the amelioration and the closure that is the standard in war narratives through the denial of the linear progression. The same thread, as it goes, puts everything in the context of death and tragedy because these indicate the way the loss accrued by war continues with no consolation and relief (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 64). This discontinuity of the story, as is noted by Woodlief (1994), is a recreation of the actual effects of post-traumatic stress disorder where the images of the memory are recollected not sequentially but in bursts (p. 112).

The metafictional aspect of the novel also makes the non-linear nature of the novel intricate and vehemently pronounced. Vonnegut continues to place himself into the story, to observe the inability of the Allied forces to capture the city of Dresden and the unrealism of narration that surrounds it. These interruptions fail to help the readers forget that they are reading a mediated reconstruction of trauma. Harris (1998) concludes that the failure of the traditional narrative as a method of constraining the excesses of the historical violence is revealed through Vonnegut nonlinear narration as a critique of the narrative style (p. 67). This becomes the only viable stylistic choice to delineate the nonlinear narration in *Slaughterhouse-Five* that displays a discursive workout of trauma, memory, and controlling of stories over war.

NONLINEAR TECHNIQUES IN THE MOVIE ADAPTATION

Nevertheless, the movie *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972) by George Roy Hill transfers Vonnegut fractured temporality into a visual and aural space. Through editing techniques and specifically jump cuts, cross-cutting, and the hasty swapping of mise-en-scene, the film produces the impression of the experience of Billy Pilgrim, who is out of time, or to borrow the words of Vonnegut, 'unstuck' in time. These techniques that are more or less an approximation of the internal monologues in the novel are buttressed with voice-over narration and lead the viewer back into a state of dislocation in time and space.

The voice-over narration that stands as an approximation of internal monologues is, however, curtailed to a large degree in the film. Unlike the textual intrusions, which Vonnegut uses, of which he foreshadows the instability of the narrative itself, the film by Hill is largely left to the subjective perspective on the part of Billy. The absence of an authorial voice renders the metafictional complexity less pronounced and the story itself becomes more of a conventional character driven narrative (King, 2005, p. 89). The film follows a disjointed chronology, yet in certain scenes, the chaos of narration is given way to order and the linear narrative is closely followed. This becomes evident in the scene of the Dresden bombing depicted in the film that tends to be more susceptible to spatial and time synchronization.

But it can be seen as compensatory strategies in films, in its urge to find an order out of chaos and a neat ending. According to Bordwell, (1985) it is seen that cinema can experiment with the concept of time through its stylistic features which incorporate bridging sounds, change of color and montage (p. 74). The adaptation into film capitalizes on the following resources: the transformation of the musical score suggests a jump of time, and the visual tropes, i.e. the images of trains and clocks that appear in the film are symbolically applied as reference points in the disjointed times. The ironic ending of the novel is completely changed in the final scenes of the film on Tralfamador

where the reader can see Billy and Montana Wildhack in a domestic setting in the country. Sandler (2010) interprets such a change as the concession to the filmmaking tradition of the closure, and the attempt to counter the aspect of fatalism of the novel with a more positive resolution (p. 135).

Thus, in spite of the fact that the film adaptation omits certain aspects of the narrative experiment of the novel, it also demonstrates how the cinematic medium can unveil non-linear narration through sensorial and other formal means that may not be offered by literature.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The comparison of the novel and the film demonstrates the presence and manipulation of nonlinear narratives and the extent of limitation of both the forms. The continuity of the temporality of the novel is at the sources of language and the narrating voice. Vonnegut breaks the plot as he insists on the open artificiality of it and he causes the reader to think about the impossibility of the expression of trauma in such an explicit form. Instead, the exteriorisation of internal disjunction used in editing and visual motifs in the film does not reproduce the metafictional gestures, which is marked as the signature feature of the novel.

In addition, the novel lacks the element of catharsis as rapid alteration between war and non-war scenes fail to immerse the reader in prolonged emotions. However, the film cares more about the events of the war, and treats the novel as a blueprint for a more conventional war film. Such choices of adaptations, as Clark states, are required not only congruent to the needs of the medium, but should also be consistent with the culture of cinematic narration (Clark 2012, p. 41). Despite this, the use of nonlinear narration in these two works is a kind of barrier to offer a definite closure to the narration and also to underline the message on how trauma is always present. A comparison between the techniques used both in novel and in film is given in a table below.

Techniques used	Novel	Film
Narrative Structure	Fragmented, non-linear. Example: On p.22-24, Billy first becomes "unstuck in time."	Around 12:00 min, an abrupt cut from Billy in wartime Luxembourg to his suburban home in Ilium.
Tone/Irony	Use of refrain "So it goes" after every mention of death (e.g., p.25 after the soldiers' deaths).	Actor Michael Sacks (Billy) delivers lines in a detached, almost deadpan tone (e.g., ~14:30 during war camp scenes).
Internal Monologue	Billy's inner thoughts are narrated, such as his detachment during the Dresden bombing (p.152-155).	At ~1:05:00, dreamlike sequence of Billy in Tralfamadore shows visual equivalents of his internal detachment.
Time Shifts	Abrupt textual breaks: e.g., Billy jumps from war hospital (p.56) to his daughter's wedding.	At ~22:00, film cuts suddenly from Billy in the POW train to him in a future hospital bed.

Symbolism	Descriptions of birds singing "Poo-tee-weet?" after the Dresden bombing (final page, p.186).	The closing scene at ~1:39:00 shows bird imagery, visually echoing the absurd silence after destruction.
Pacing	Novel lingers on wartime episodes, e.g., Dresden firebombing chapter (pp.147–157).	Condensed into a few powerful sequences, e.g., bombing shown briefly around ~1:20:00.
Themes of War/Trauma	Billy's time travel as coping with PTSD (p.61–63, hospital ward with other veterans).	Trauma shown visually at ~34:00 when Billy stares blankly after witnessing POW suffering.
Repetition/Motif	"So it goes" appears 100 times across the text (first instance p.25, after Vonnegut's intro).	Repeated through dialogue and tone, e.g., ~18:00 after witnessing the soldier's death.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Three related theoretical approaches to better understand the analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five* are through the prism of the narratology, the adaptation theory and the trauma studies. Gerard Genette, in his concepts of analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis (flash-forward) as narratological devices, showcases how Vonnegut manipulates the order of the narrative sequence to create the fragmented consciousness of Billy Pilgrim (Genette, 1980, p. 45). Cinematically, this concept of parametric narration as defined by David Bordwell is where editing processes are applied to make the narrative subordinate to stylistic patterning, in which time is made discontinuous and nonlinear narration becomes an inherent feature (Bordwell, 1985, p. 74).

The theory of adaptation is also used to describe the relationship between films and novels. According to Linda Hutcheon, the meaning of adaptation is not to be judged on the basis of fidelity to the source but depended on the creative dialogue it establishes with the source text (p.48). This stance, as postulated by Hutcheon, can be observed in the film of Hill. The metafictional techniques that Hill displays in the film is not an imitation of the same employed by Vonnegut in the novel. Instead, the discrepancy of the narrative is projected into the contexts of a film. It is this use of different mediums to translate metafictional and other methods from text to screen that reveals both the affinity and constraints of each medium.

Last but not the least, the nonlinear narration is used to detail the theory of trauma and it closely resembles the discontinuous nature of trauma from war as shown in the novel. Trauma cannot be, to a certain extent, understood through plain linear narration; this is why it manifests itself in the form of fragmentation and recurrence according to LaCapra (p.11) and Caruth (p.36). The portrayal of these experiences in the novel and its editing choices as seen in the film adaptation become a crude approximation of the traumatic temporality and subjects the viewers to engage in the shocks of memory and history rather than making them just observe these.

Reception and Legacy

The novel and its adaptation into film have received a lot of critical appreciation since its

publication. *Slaughterhouse-Five* was heavily praised because of being innovative, even though some critics could not find their way around its nonlinear structure. Its anti-war rhetoric was very successful among the readers of the Vietnam era and therefore it became a classic of counterculture.

The movie was also heavily reviewed by various critics. Although some critics have admired the fact that Hill could draw the essence of the novel, there are those who criticize it because it simplified the complexity of the text. Its stylistic boldness of the film was praised by Roger Ebert and condemned by Pauline Kael who felt that the novelistic nuances are rendered flattened by the effects of the film. Regardless of such divisions, the film received the Jury Prize at the 1972 Cannes Film Festival and secured its niche in the history of the movies. The reception and appreciation of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not contained within the immediate vicinity of its publication. The oft repeated phrase of the novel 'so it goes' is now used to indicate the imminence of death and is a testament to its everlasting legacy.

CONCLUSION

When comparing the use of the nonlinear narrative employed in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and its film adaptation, the methods of its application become evident. Metafictional intrusions that flout the authority of the narration in the novel, support the application of temporal disjunction as a metaphor of trauma in the film. It relies on editing, voice-over and symbolic motifs to remind viewers of the fractured temporality of Billy Pilgrim. At the time, the absence of authorial remarks starkly made it stand away from the written narrative modes. This, ascribes a relatively standard narrative linearity to the film.

Nevertheless, in both works, the chronological norms are disrupted, and viewers are forced to approach the issue of trauma as something that will persist disruption rather than be overcome. The transmedia and nonlinear narration is flexible as noted through the interaction of novel and film. It could be concluded that narrative experimentation has deep cultural significance in postwar reconstruction as observed in the process by which each medium of expression responds to exigencies of representing trauma and memory.

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