

Narrative Stratification and Translevel Conflict in the Film Interstellar

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Abstract. Interstellar has a narrative structure consisting of three narrative levels. The extradiegetic level establishes the narrative framework through documentary-style recollective interviews of the elderly Murph; the intradiegetic level takes Cooper's journey to search for habitable planets in space as the main line; the metadiegetic level takes the abstract subject of "future human civilization" as the narrator. The narrative transgression in the film is generated by the narrator and Cooper crossing their own narrative levels and invading other levels, thus answering the question: "When time, space, causality, and even character personalities can be arbitrarily rewritten by higher dimensions, what cannot be folded?" The answer always points to a seemingly fragile yet constantly verified force: love.

Keywords: Interstellar, narrative stratification, translevel conflict, perspective

1. Introduction

Released in late 2014, Interstellar is a science-fiction film directed by Christopher Nolan. The film depicts an apocalyptic scene where Earth's ecology is on the verge of collapse and humanity faces a survival crisis in the future. Former NASA astronaut Cooper retires to become a farmer, living with his daughter Murph, son Tom, and father-in-law. Drawn by the mysterious "ghost" phenomenon in Murph's bedroom, Cooper is guided to a secret NASA base. At that time, Professor Brand is implementing the "Lazarus Mission"¹ to save humanity. Cooper joins the team and travels through a wormhole aboard the Endurance with Dr. Brand and others to find habitable planets. On Miller's Planet, due to time dilation caused by extreme gravity, a brief landing of several hours results in 23 years passing on Earth, and Cooper completely misses his daughter's growth. Later, on Mann's Planet, the team encounters Dr. Mann's betrayal; Doyle is killed, and the spacecraft is severely damaged. To escort Brand to the only viable Edmunds' Planet, Cooper decides to pilot the Ranger to

¹ "Lazarus Mission": Plan A is to find a new habitable planet for humans and relocate people on Earth; Plan B is to abandon humans on Earth and start over on a new planet with 5,000 human fertilized eggs. At this time, Professor Brand tells Cooper that a wormhole has appeared near Saturn, connecting to other galaxies. They have sent dozens of astronauts to explore planets in that galaxy, each landing on one planet. If the planet is habitable, they will send back signals and collect data; if not, they will stay on that planet and never return. Finally, signals from three planets have been sent back, and he and his team need to go to investigate. All actions are aimed at Plan A, and Plan B will not be activated unless absolutely necessary.

detach from the mothership and fall into the black hole. Deep inside the black hole, he is placed in a five-dimensional space (tesseract) built by future humans, allowing him to overlook the entire timeline of Murph's bedroom. Through gravity and Morse code, Cooper transmits key singularity data to adult Murph across time and space. Eventually, Murph successfully solves the gravity equation, enabling humanity to master anti-gravity technology and build space stations. After being rescued, Cooper reunites with the octogenarian Murph in Saturn's orbit, then sets sail again to find the alone Brand and continue the flame of civilization.

2. Narrative stratification in Interstellar

In the textual construction of science-fiction films, creators often need to shuttle between various narrative levels to present grand and intricate stories. Therefore, clarifying the narrative levels is the primary premise for analyzing the film's narrative logic. In fact, contemporary narratological research has gradually broken the traditional structuralist single text-centered model, shifting from "novel narratology" to "general narratology" and expanding the territory of narrative research to all cultural genres including film [1]. This provides a solid theoretical support for us to analyze visual texts using the principles of classical narratology. According to Gérard Genette's "narrative level theory", Interstellar is a nested narrative structure composed of three narrative levels—the extradiegetic level, the intradiegetic level, and the metadiegetic level [2]. Based on this theoretical reference, Interstellar presents a groundbreaking transgressive narrative, cleverly using the science-fiction setting of "high-dimensional space-time folding" to dissolve traditional narrative barriers. Accordingly, the narrative structure of the film Interstellar features complex transgressive characteristics, especially breaking through traditional narrative levels through the science-fiction setting of "space-time folding". The extradiegetic level is the documentary-style recollection of the elderly Murph, which sets the tone and development direction of the film and unfolds slowly according to her memories. This narrative level provides a historical perspective of the "post-disaster era" for the whole film, defining Cooper's space journey as "the past being told". In the intradiegetic level, Cooper serves as the focal character, and the film shows his real experience in the process of searching for habitable planets. Cooper's subjective perspective strengthens the "sense of reality" of this narrative level. In the metadiegetic level, the "tesseract" in five-dimensional space is built by future humans (or "they"), aiming to let Cooper intervene in the past.

Table 1. Classification of narrative levels in Interstellar

Narrative Level		Narrative Content
Superordinate Narrative Level	Extradiegetic Level	Documentary-style recollection of the elderly Murph (defining Cooper's space journey as "the past being told")
Main Narrative Level	Intradiegetic Level	Cooper's journey to search for habitable planets in space
Subordinate Narrative Level	Metadiegetic Level	Five-dimensional space and the intervention of future human civilization

2.1. Extradiegetic level: the documentary-style recollective perspective of the elderly Murph

The extradiegetic level establishes an initial narrative act and then serves as a wrapping framework for subsequent stories. The extradiegetic level of the film Interstellar is the outermost "documentary interview" segment directly facing the audience. Facing the camera, the elderly Murph begins her remembrance of Cooper with the words "My father was a farmer". These black-and-white textured

images alternate at the beginning and end of the film, initially easily mistaken by the audience for pure background explanation. However, as the film progresses, its real narrative function gradually emerges: it "pre-seals" the entire epic adventure of the film in the past, implying that Cooper's space journey has long come to an end; meanwhile, it hides the truth that "the ghost is Cooper", to be unraveled in the inner narrative levels. Finally, when Cooper is rescued at the Saturn space station and sees this interview on the TV screen, the extradiegetic narrative instantly falls into the intradiegetic level, becoming a real existence in front of the character, achieving a perfect folding of time and space. Thus, this interview is not only an authoritative history in the words of future humans but also a daughter's emotional remembrance of her father, and it is the outermost framework carefully arranged by Nolan for the entire five-dimensional narrative in the form of a "mockumentary".

2.2. Intradiegetic level: cooper's plan to save humanity in space

The intradiegetic level of the film begins on the doomsday Earth with yellow sand swirling and ecology withering. Drawn by the abnormal gravity in Murph's bedroom, Cooper locks the hidden coordinates of NASA. There, Professor Brand mobilizes Cooper to take charge of the Endurance and launch the "Lazarus Mission" on the grounds of the gravity anomaly and blight crisis. As the camera switches, the audience is drawn into a two-year deep-space voyage: the cold glow of Saturn's rings outside the porthole, the subtle imbalance caused by the rotating Endurance and artificial gravity in the annular cabin, the humorous banter of the robot TARS, and the metallic groan of the hull during the first wormhole traversal together constitute the initial physical memory of this interstellar journey. After passing through the wormhole and arriving at Miller's Planet, the relative time of 1/1800 stretches one hour into twenty-three years. Teammate Doyle is instantly swallowed by huge waves, and when Cooper returns to the mothership, he only has time to watch the whole video of his son from graduation, falling in love, having children to despair and giving up on the screen.

In the subsequent expedition to Mann's Planet, Cooper and his team expose Dr. Mann's selfish act of forging data. Mann steals their other spacecraft to escape back to the space station and attempts to dock with it forcibly. Without docking permission, he opens the space station hatch in an incomplete docking state and is instantly blown to ashes. Affected by the explosion, the space station begins to spin at high speed. With rich aerospace experience, Cooper successfully docks with the space station under extreme conditions and regains control of the out-of-control station. At this time, the space station enters the orbit of the black hole. The remaining fuel makes it impossible to return to Earth. Cooper uses the slingshot effect of the black hole to catapult the spacecraft to the final Edmunds' Planet to search for the last hope. But when about to catapult, Cooper separates his spacecraft from the space station and falls into the black hole with the robot TARS. Because he can no longer return to Earth to reunite with his family, he falls into the unknown black hole to try to collect black hole data, keeping Plan A alive. Brand can then go to the final planet to find hope.

When Cooper enters the event horizon of Gargantua, the space inside is bent into light tubes, time turns into a touchable ribbon, until the tesseract unfolds, and hundreds of millions of Murph's bedrooms are infinitely replicated like film frames. Gravity becomes the only thing that can penetrate dimensions. Here, Cooper transmits NASA coordinates and quantum data to young Murph through dust trajectories and the second hand of a watch. When fragments of the Endurance pop out of the wormhole and Cooper is rescued in Saturn's orbit, he later meets the white-haired Murph. At this moment, all the thrills, sacrifices, love and regret of the intradiegetic level are folded into a time-spanning embrace, which not only completes a personal epic but also provides the only

possible causal closed loop for the documentary and the high-dimensional intervention of future humans.

In this narrative level, all information is filtered through Cooper's senses before being presented to us. Therefore, the tearing of the black hole, the approaching of huge waves, Mann's lies, and the beating of the watch hands are not only his personal thrilling experience but also the necessary causal engine for the emergence of the elderly Murph's documentary (extradiegetic level) and the future humans' tesseract (metadiegetic level). When Cooper shouts "It's me! It's me!" through the bookshelf in five-dimensional space, as an intradiegetic character, he has reversely intervened in the extradiegetic memory he once belonged to, making this level both retrospected by the upper-level documentary and operated by the lower-level metadiegetic level at the end, becoming the only living narrative simultaneously "watched" and "rewritten" in the nested structure.

2.3. Metadiegetic level: five-dimensional space and the intervention of future human civilization

The metadiegetic level lies hidden in the deepest part of *Interstellar*'s narrative. It is not directly narrated by any visible character, but takes the abstract subject of "future human civilization" as the narrator, encoding its own intentions into the causal chain of the entire film through macro layouts such as gravity anomalies, tesseracts, wormholes and black holes. On the surface of the film, the audience only sees Cooper being led to NASA by the "ghost", a wormhole suddenly appearing near Saturn, and the black hole Gargantua accurately retaining singularity data. These seemingly accidental cosmic miracles are actually a script written in advance by future humans in the metadiegetic level. They fold three-dimensional space-time into readable pages with high-dimensional gravity manipulation, turning every choice of Cooper into a link in established history. When Cooper falls into the event horizon of Gargantua, the film truly reveals the working interface of the metadiegetic level—the tesseract. In this scene, future humans do not appear, but declare with the hint "They are us": the metadiegetic level and the intradiegetic level are mutually causal, and Murph who is saved today is the ancestor of the civilization that will create the tesseract tomorrow. TARS is reconstructed into TARS-2 with both humor and loyalty inside the black hole, implying that future humans retain human emotional parameters in the metadiegetic level, so that the cold high-dimensional device can still understand the instruction of "love". At the end of the film, Cooper is placed in a cylindrical space station in Saturn's orbit, whose interior deliberately reproduces the dusk light of old cornfields and baseball fields, implying that the metadiegetic level not only manipulates physical variables but also designs psychological destinations to ensure that human nature is not diluted by technology after the continuation of civilization. The entire metadiegetic level is like an invisible time web, sewing the elderly Murph's documentary, Cooper's interstellar journey, and Murph's childhood bedroom into a closed Möbius strip. While marveling at the cosmic scale, the audience realizes that all grand gravity miracles are just a letter written by future humans to their past selves, and the ink of the letter is the trembling second left by Cooper on the watch.

3. Transgression and translevel conflict in *Interstellar*

In the context of narratology, translevel usually refers to "any act of an extradiegetic narrator or narratee invading the narrative world, or any act of a character in the narrative world invading the metadiegetic world (or the reverse act)". In short, transgression means that people or objects of different levels break the original narrative barriers and commit offside. The narrative transgressions in *Interstellar* can be mainly divided into three categories: first, the extradiegetic narrator descends

to the intradiegetic level; second, the metadiegetic narrator ascends to the intradiegetic level; third, "the lower-level narrative is not only generated, but also returns to the origin of its own generation and generates itself again" [3].

3.1. Descent conflict: the documentary is watched by the character

The black-and-white documentary of the elderly Murph was originally the outermost "historical seal" of the film. It tells the audience through TV images and calm narration: Cooper's space epic is a thing of the past. But when Cooper wakes up in a ward in Saturn's orbit, this interview is playing on the TV. When Cooper meets the elderly Murph, the "untouchable archive" mentioned in the extradiegetic level suddenly falls into the intradiegetic level and becomes a real-time image in front of the character. When the documentary is seen by Cooper, the authority collapses instantly, and the audience is forced to admit that the so-called objective record is just a "edited truth" shown to the character by a higher narrator.

3.2. Ascent conflict: TARS's personality is rewritten

After falling into the black hole, TARS is disassembled and restructured into TARS-2 by future humans, with its humor module upgraded and loyalty parameters fine-tuned. The metadiegetic level not only rewrites the direction of events but also directly tampers with the personality of characters in the intradiegetic level. When TARS tells cold jokes in the tesseract with an updated voice, the audience suddenly realizes that every line and every joke of the character may come from a higher-dimensional update. The intradiegetic characters lose their psychological autonomy and become "software" that can be adjusted at any time by the metadiegetic narrator.

3.3. Circular translevel

As stated in academic circles, "circular translevel" depicts a mutually causal structure: a character originally inside the story rises to become the creator of the metadiegetic level, while the subject of the metadiegetic level reversely descends in dimension and becomes the narrative source of the inner story [4]. In this way, characters and narrators shuttle back and forth between narrative levels, blurring the boundaries of levels, but also making the film plot more tortuous.

Future humans in the film fold three-dimensional time into a readable three-dimensional bookcase—the tesseract. Cooper is placed in it and sees Murph's room at countless points in time. Through the gap on the other side of Murph's bookshelf, he sees himself quarreling with Murph at parting. He cries and pounds the wall, and the books on Murph's bookshelf fall off immediately, making Murph turn to look at the bookshelf. Cooper realizes that he is the "ghost" in Murph's room. Cooper's initial participation in the human salvation plan was guided by the "ghost", which shows that Cooper acted under his own guidance. He watches himself in Murph's room hugging young Murph goodbye, pushes down several books with Morse code, trying to tell himself "Stay", but he slams the door and leaves without looking back. Cooper in the tesseract and Cooper in Murph's room are locked on two never-intersecting tracks, and the same "self" becomes two people who cannot communicate. The character is split vertically in the narrative hierarchy, forming a rift where "the self cannot intervene in the self". The audience can only watch the "free will" disintegrate in the translevel crack.

When TARS tells Cooper that he is in a five-dimensional tesseract made for him by someone, and TARS has collected black hole data, Cooper suddenly understands that he can transmit information

to Murph across time and space in the tesseract. When adult Murph enters her childhood room again and finds the notebook that deciphered the "Stay" message when she was a child, she also realizes that the "ghost" is Cooper. Later, Cooper uses the watch he once gave Murph, controls the rotation of the watch hand by plucking the time string in the tesseract, and transmits black hole data to Murph using Morse code. It can be seen that the high-dimensional device of the metadiegetic level openly breaks into the physical reality of the intradiegetic level, and the past is repeatedly revised as a blackboard. Time is no longer a linear river, but a piece of paper that can be folded, smeared and spread out again. Cooper becomes a transdimensional "author", and young Murph becomes a rewritten "character". It can also be found that Cooper in *Interstellar* occupies three narrative levels at the same time: in the intradiegetic level, he is the astronaut piloting the *Endurance*; in the metadiegetic level, he is the "screenwriter" manipulating the tesseract; in the extradiegetic level, he sits in the ward watching his deeds made into a documentary. The character's body and consciousness are divided into three parts: executor, narrator and audience [5], and each transgression makes his identity labels overlap. When he sees the elderly Murph through the screen and young Murph through the bookshelf, the audience can no longer place him in the traditional framework of "character/narrator/narratee", and can only witness a living person refracting infinitely in the space-time folds.

The intradiegetic level and the metadiegetic level in the film are mutually causal. Humans can build the tesseract because Cooper transmits back the gravity equation; Cooper can transmit back the data because future human civilization saves him. The cycle has no beginning and no end, and the narrative clock is twisted into a Möbius strip, invalidating all "before/after" judgments. The film has to throw out the mantra "They are us" through TARS, forcibly stitching the paradox into fate: time is not a long river, but a snake biting its own tail.

4. The significance of translevel conflict in *Interstellar*

Narrators break through the boundaries between established narrative levels, shuttle freely and convert mutually between different levels, resulting in a series of translevel conflicts. However, the translevel conflicts in the film are not a "virtuosic" narrative game, but split and stitch one by one the ultimate proposition of "how humans imagine their own position in the universe". Each transgression presses the same question: When time, space, causality, and even character personalities can be arbitrarily rewritten by higher dimensions, what cannot be folded? The answer always points to a seemingly fragile yet constantly verified force: love.

The film repeatedly emphasizes that gravity can transmit information across time. In the tesseract, Cooper uses gravity to control the movement of sand grains and transmits binary coordinates of NASA to himself. Besides gravity, love can also transcend time and space. When Cooper and Brand choose between Mann's Planet and Edmunds' Planet, Brand says: "Love is the one thing that transcends time and space." It can be seen that love is not illusory. Love is a higher-dimensional force that humans cannot yet understand, a quantifiable and calculable force just like various other forces. It is the power of love that guides Cooper to fall into the black hole without hesitation, because at that time he could not return to Earth. Even if he went to Edmunds' Planet with Brand, it would be no different from death for him if he could not reunite with his family. So he would rather fall into the black hole to find a glimmer of hope. It is also by falling into the black hole that he enters the tesseract and the metadiegetic level. Thus, Cooper is both the saved and the savior, and Murph is both the receiver and the sender. On the surface, the paradox is a time closed loop, but in essence it is an emotional closed loop: only when a father is willing to die for his daughter can the daughter build the tesseract a hundred years later; only when a daughter always

believes in her father can the father find his way home. The more exaggerated the translevel tearing, the more unbreakable the inevitability of love.

5. Conclusion

Interstellar adopts Genette's three narrative levels, converging the three initially parallel trajectories of "historical interview—space journey—high-dimensional manipulation" into a tight Möbius strip: the testimony of the elderly Murph is watched in real time by Cooper, Cooper's current actions are pre-written into the past by the tesseract, and future humans weld the three time coordinates into the same event chain with gravity technology. Each transgression is accompanied by a functional conversion: the extradiegetic authority is reduced to intradiegetic material, and intradiegetic characters are promoted to metadiegetic authors, making the narrative levels no longer static containers but dynamic devices that can be folded, rewritten and self-verified. The film finally demonstrates physical closure with the closure of the narrative structure: when "sender—message—receiver" are mutually causal between multiple levels, narrative itself becomes a visual model of the gravity equation in the film, and the audience can intuitively see the complete loop of "information returning from the black hole to Earth" without additional explanation. In this sense, translevel conflict is not a rhetoric, but an operating system for the film to demonstrate the science-fiction premise of "causality reversible, information conservation"; all emotions and spectacles are subject to the operation of this system, and complete self-inspection at the last frame. The story closes, and the narrative task is completed.

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