

A Comparative Study on Narrative Techniques in the Novel *Deutschstunde* and its 2019 Film Adaptation

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Abstract

The adaptation of literary works into films presents unique challenges and opportunities in translating narrative techniques across media. This study provides a comparative analysis of narrative techniques employed in Siegfried Lenz's novel *Deutschstunde* and its 2019 film adaptation directed by Christian Schwochow. It explores the complexities of transforming a thematically dense literary narrative into the visual and auditory medium of film. The primary research problem addressed is the extent to which narrative strategies in Lenz's novel *Deutschstunde* differ from its 2019 adaptation. The methodology consists of a qualitative comparative approach incorporating close reading of the novel and detailed formal analysis of the film. Central narrative aspects focused on are focalisation, temporal structure, character representation, and the presentation of symbolic motifs. Results indicate that while the film effectively utilises cinematic techniques to depict the oppressive setting and Siggi Jepsen's inner turmoil, it alters the pervasive frame narrative and extensive interior monologue utilised in the novel, subtly shifting the portrayal of the protagonist's inner journey and the engagement of the audience with memory. This comparative analysis elucidates the adaptive processes, the impact of different media on narrative delivery, and the continuing relevance of *Deutschstunde* to adaptation studies.

Keywords: Narrative technique; Adaptation studies; *Deutschstunde*; Siegfried Lenz; Christian Schwochow; German literature

Introduction

Siegfried Lenz's 1968 novel, *Deutschstunde* (The German Lesson), is a master work of post-war German literature, presenting a searching examination of personal conscience, the weight of obligation (Pflicht) and the interweaving of guilt and memory in the context of National Socialism and post-war trauma. Famous for its complicated narrative structure, conveyed largely through the retrospective memories of its young protagonist Siggi Jepsen, the novel constitutes a daunting task for the cinematic adaptation. The transposition of its tight prose, dense inner monologue, and multi-tiered temporality into the visual and discursive vocabulary of the moving image provides a compelling study in narrative transfer. This study endeavours to fill this gap by pursuing the following objectives:

- To identify and critically analyse the primary narrative techniques employed in Siegfried Lenz's novel *Deutschstunde*, with particular attention to its frame narrative, focalisation,

- and representation of interiority.
- To identify and critically analyse the primary narrative techniques employed in Christian Schwochow's 2019 film adaptation of *Deutschstunde*, focusing on cinematic equivalents and departures from the strategies of the novel.
- To comparatively evaluate the similarities, differences, and transformations in these narrative techniques and discuss their impact on character portrayal, thematic development, and the overall narrative experience afforded by each medium.

Accordingly, this research article demonstrates a comparative study of the narrative strategies used in the original novel by Lenz and the 2019 German film adaptation by Christian Schwochow, to clarify how each medium uniquely constructs the delivery and resonance of the narrative.

Recent scholarship on narrative techniques in literature and film adaptations provides a foundation for this study. For instance, Hegab (2021) examines structural elements like repetition, sequential narration, and character voices in two novels. Ibrahim and Khalaf (2024) compare *The Kite Runner* novel and film, concluding that the novel surpasses the film in narrative depth (Khalaf, 2024). Zipes (1977) discusses the political dimensions of Böll's novel and Schlöndorff's film adaptation of *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, emphasizing the importance of social context in understanding narrative techniques (Zipes, 1977). Hurst (1996) proposes a model for comparing narrative structures in literature and film adaptations, drawing on Stanzel's theory of typical narrative situations and applying it to works by Mann, Kästner, Frisch, and Döblin, alongside films by Visconti, Schlöndorff, and others (Hurst, 1996). Building on these approaches, this study focuses on Siegfried Lenz's *Deutschstunde* and its 2019 film adaptation by Christian Schwochow to explore intermedial narrative transformations.

Materials and Methods

This study utilises a qualitative comparative methodology, drawing on literary narratology and film analysis principles to examine the interplay between narrative form and content. The primary texts are Siegfried Lenz's novel *Deutschstunde* (Lenz, 1984) and Christian Schwochow's 2019 film adaptation, *The German Lesson* (*Deutschstunde*).

The analytical framework, informed by theorists such as Gérard Genette (1980) for literature and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2017) for films, focuses on key narrative components:

- **Focalisation and Point of View:** This examines how perspective is constructed in the novel (Siggi Jepsen's first-person, internal focalisation) versus the film (camera placement, editing, performance and voice-over).
- **Temporal Structure:** Analysis includes event ordering (e.g., frame narrative, flashbacks), duration, and frequency, comparing the novel's layered temporality with the temporal strategies of the film.
- **Character Representation:** The study investigates the development of Siggi Jepsen, Jens Ole Jepsen, and Max Ludwig Nansen, comparing the use of internal monologue and description of the novel with the dialogue, performance, and visual presentation of the film.
- **Presentation of Symbolic Motifs:** Key symbols (e.g., Nansen's paintings, "Pflicht," art/writing) are traced to analyse their presentation and significance across both media.

Data collection involved meticulous close readings of the novel and repeated analytical viewings of the film, with detailed notetaking and scene-by-scene breakdowns. The comparative analysis highlights how Schwochow's film diverges from, condenses, or reinterprets the novel's narrative strategies and their effects.

Results

The comparative analysis of Siegfried Lenz's *Deutschstunde* and Christian Schwochow's 2019 film adaptation reveals significant transformations in narrative techniques, primarily driven by the inherent affordances and constraints of the literary and cinematic media, respectively. These transformations impact the presentation of the temporal structure of the story, the portrayal of the subjectivity of the protagonist, character dynamics, and the conveyance of thematic concerns.

Transformation of the Frame Narrative and Temporal Structure

Lenz's novel uses an intricate frame narrative: Siggi Jepsen, in a post-war juvenile facility, writes an essay on "Die Freuden der Pflicht" (The Joys of Duty). His inability to write a concise essay leads him to fill numerous notebooks with the extensive story of his childhood, his father's fanatical adherence to duty, and his relationship with the persecuted painter Max Ludwig Nansen. This frame is not merely a container but an active narrative device, constantly reminding the reader of Siggi's present isolation, the act of remembering as a painful, reconstructive process, and the therapeutic, perhaps obsessive, nature of his writing. For instance, Siggi frequently interrupts his recollections with reflections on his current situation or the difficulty of his task:

"...weil ich, gehorsam nach den Freuden der Pflicht suchend, plötzlich zuviel zu erzählen hatte, oder doch so viel, daß mir kein Anfang gelang, so sehr ich mich auch anstrengte" (Lenz, 1984, p. 9).

Translation: "...because, obediently searching for the joys of duty, I suddenly had too much to tell, or at least so much that I couldn't find a beginning, no matter how hard I tried."

This layered temporality creates a reflective, melancholic tone and underscores the theme of grappling with a traumatic past. In contrast, Christian Schwochow's 2019 film adaptation modifies this frame. While Siggi (Tom Gronau) is shown in the institution with his essay task, the frame is less pervasive. The film quickly shifts to a largely linear flashback of young Siggi's (Levi Eisenblätter) childhood. Voice-overs from the older Siggi are sporadic, setting scenes rather than offering continuous narration. This diminishes the emphasis of the novel on memory as an arduous, ongoing reconstruction, prioritizing direct engagement with past events for immediate accessibility.

Focalisation and the Representation of Subjective Experience

The novel is filtered through Siggi Jepsen's internal focalisation, giving readers direct access to his thoughts, emotions, and moral dilemmas. Lenz masterfully uses this perspective to show Siggi's internal conflict between filial obedience and his empathy for Nansen.

The film conveys Siggi's subjectivity differently due to cinema's external nature. While the camera often stays close to young Siggi, using close-ups to show his reactions, this is an external view of his internal state. Point-of-view shots align the viewer's visual perspective with his, but the depth of internal monologue from the novel is curtailed. The film translates Siggi's internal struggles through his observable actions, interactions, and the performance of the actor, for example, his silent acts of hiding Nansen's paintings or his pained expressions during the tirade of his father. This offers more inferred, rather than directly experienced, access to his psyche.

Narrative Techniques in Character Portrayal

The differing narrative techniques significantly impact the portrayal of key characters. For example, the novel presents Jens Ole Jepsen largely through Siggi's fearful and critical lens, portraying him as an oppressive figure shaped by duty and Nazi obedience. Max Ludwig Nansen, conversely, is often idealized through Siggi's admiring gaze, his art and defiance representing a beacon of humanity.

In Schwowchow's film, these characters are brought to life through the performances of Ulrich Noethen (Jens) and Tobias Moretti (Nansen). While Siggis perspective remains important, the film uses action, dialogue, and visual elements to present the characters with greater immediacy. Jens's authoritarian nature is reinforced through Noethen's stern presence, while scenes beyond Siggis viewpoint offer a fuller picture. Nansen's artistic spirit is vividly expressed through Moretti's performance and the direct depiction of his forbidden paintings, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of Selected Narrative Techniques in the Novel and the 2019 Film Adaptation

Narrative Technique	Deutschstunde (Novel)	Deutschstunde (2019 Film Adaptation)
Primary Focaliser	Siggi Jepsen (consistent internal, retrospective first-person)	Primarily Siggi Jepsen (often external observation, with subjective cues like POV shots, selective voice-over)
Frame Narrative	Explicit, structurally central and pervasive (essay writing in an institution)	Present but significantly modified and less pervasive; serves primarily as an entry point for flashbacks
Representation of Art	Detailed textual descriptions of Nansen's paintings, their colours, emotional impact on Siggi	Visual depiction of paintings; focus on the act of painting; symbolic use of colour palette in film
Pacing	Often reflective, digressive, and slow, driven by memory and internal thought	Generally, more linear within flashbacks, with a comparatively faster pace; use of montage for temporal compression
Access to Interiority	Direct and extensive access to Siggi's thoughts, feelings, and internal conflicts	Primarily inferred through performance, visual cues, and limited voice-over; more externalized

Lenz's novel uses rich, sensory language to evoke Schleswig-Holstein's bleakness and the oppressive atmosphere of the era, where the land's "grey monotony" often reflects the psychological states of the characters. Schwowchow's film translates this via Frank Lamm's cinematography, using a desaturated palette, stark lighting, and wide shots to create a palpable sense of isolation. The motif of "Pflicht" (duty), central to the novel through Jens Jepsen's pronouncements and Siggis internal conflict, is conveyed in the film through Jens's stern dialogue, rigid posture, and the visual symbolism of his uniform. Nansen's art, described as vibrant and defiant in the novel, is visually realised in the film through stylised "degenerate art," contrasting sharply with the surrounding drabness and offering an immediacy distinct from the novel's interpreted descriptions.

Discussion

This analysis highlights how *Deutschstunde's* 2019 film adaptation reconfigures key narrative elements to suit the cinematic medium. While the film remains faithful to the novel's core themes, it transforms Siggis introspective narration into more externalised portrayals, using voice-over and visuals rather than internal monologue. This shift reflects the broader challenge of adapting introspective literature into the "showing" mode of film (Stam, 2005), aligning with Hutcheon's (2006) view of adaptations as dialogic, second-order creations.

The frame narrative of the novel, which is centred on Siggis act of writing as a form of processing trauma, is streamlined in the film, which presents memory more as flashback than active reconstruction. This change enhances dramatic pacing but reduces the novel's exploration of memory as unstable and burdensome.

Similarly, Nansen's art, described subjectively in the novel, is concretised on screen. While visually powerful, this reduces the interpretive openness offered by the literary version, reflecting a fundamental difference between textual suggestion and visual representation (Chatman, 1980).

These changes are not shortcomings but adaptations to cinematic possibilities. The film employs stark visuals and strong performances to capture the moral weight of the era, making the narrative accessible to modern audiences. However, the focus of the study on narrative structure limits its analysis of other cinematic techniques. Future research might examine viewer reception or compare other adaptations, such as Beauvais's 1971 version, to broaden understanding of the cinematic legacy of the novel.

Conclusion

This comparative study of narrative techniques in Siegfried Lenz's *Deutschstunde* and Christian Schwochow's 2019 film adaptation illuminates the intricate processes of intermedial translation. The profound exploration of guilt, duty, and memory in the novel, conveyed through its first-person narration and intricate frame structure, grants access to the inner world of Siggi Jepsen. Schwochow's film, while honouring the thematic core of the novel, adapts these strategies to the demands of the cinema, resulting in a more externalised yet emotionally resonant portrayal.

Key transformations include a modified frame narrative, a shift from internal focalisation to an observational perspective with subjective cinematic cues, and the direct visual representation of elements like Nansen's art. These changes alter audience engagement, particularly with memory and the psyche of the protagonist. Nevertheless, the 2019 film uses its distinct narrative tools including powerful cinematography, compelling performances, and focused drive to convey the oppressive atmosphere and moral questions of the story. Ultimately, the comparison shows adaptation as creative reinterpretation, not replication, offering a new lens on a classic. Both novel and film, through their unique artistry, affirm the power of *Deutschstunde* to provoke reflection on individual responsibility in times of collective moral failing.

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