

Research Article

Disrupting Todorov's Equilibrium: The Mobility Dilemma in *Tracks* and *The Man from Earth*

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Abstract: Narratology is engaged in a constant endeavour to study narrative structures by identifying the elements that constitute narrative discourses and tracing their patterns. Tzvetan Todorov's Theory of Equilibrium argues that every narrative discourse begins with an equilibrium that gets disrupted and hence necessitates the formation of a new equilibrium. Though this cyclic pattern keeps almost all narratives going, things come to a head when we analyse narrative discourses that challenge the traditional narrative structure. The current paper is a qualitative study on Todorov's Theory of Equilibrium and how the films chosen for the study challenge it. To this end, the twin concepts of mobility and immobility in the films *Tracks* (2013) and *The Man from Earth* (2007) are considered. Both films deal with the paradoxical coexistence of mobility and immobility in the respective narrative discourse. This state of affairs challenges the very existence of a narrative equilibrium that evolves into a new one. The paper hence offers an analysis of the structural uniqueness of the chosen films and their defiance of Todorov's Theory of Equilibrium.

Keywords: Narratology; Theory of Equilibrium; disruption; mobility/immobility

Introduction

Mobility is an elusive concept and quite a baffling one in narrative discourses. The history of mankind is littered with grand illustrations of man's ventures into the unknown and yet in many an instance; especially those involving conventional ideologies, we are as frozen in time as Ok-soo and Nangong Yan in *The Myth* (2005). Moreover, when someone/something is said to be mobile or immobile, it immediately anticipates the question of context: (im)mobility in relation to what? This is simply because within presumed mobility or immobility, paradoxical existences can always be found. This begs the question as to how a narrative can be said to progress if the very concept of mobility that contributes to the evolution of the discourse is challenged. The current paper aims to examine Todorov's Theory of Equilibrium in the context of the two films chosen for the study: *Tracks* (2013) and *The Man from Earth* (2007) that are replete with paradoxical instances of (im)mobility.

Theoretical Framework

Narrative theory helps to break down and decipher the nuances of various discourses depicted across multiple media. It does so by probing into the narrative structure and laying bare the part played by the key elements like plot, characters, setting, time, form, and point of view. Though all narrative discourses do not follow a fixed pattern of storytelling, they basically stay within the parameters of narratology. This is evident in the theories of Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi-Strauss, A. J. Greimas, and Tzvetan Todorov. Propp in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale* speaks of the seven spheres of action and thirty one functions of the narrative. Greimas' actants or six structural units, Lévi-Strauss' grammar of mythology that hypothesizes cultural deep structures, and Todorov's Theory of Equilibrium all trace a perceptible pattern in narrative structures. However, there shall always be outliers in any pattern and the concept of mobility in narrative discourses offer a fertile ground for a qualitative probe.

Tzvetan Todorov employs the term narratology to refer to structural analysis of a story thereby unravelling the interconnectedness of its parts. He defines the story as what is told or narrated, which usually is a chronological depiction of themes, plot lines, motives, and change. While the story's plot presents the logical flow of events, as observed by Taum, the discourse is used to highlight stylistic choices that shape the narrative text or performance as it is presented to the readers or viewers for consumption. Todorov maintained that all stories begin in equilibrium, a non-confrontational and relatively peaceful state where things are at ease. Since a narrative demands a rising tempo, this has to change and there happens a disruption of the initial peace. It is only when the disruption is addressed and tackled that a new equilibrium can be reached. As Richardson illustrates, this whole process may be divided into five stages of narrative development: equilibrium, disruption, realization or recognition, damage repair, and new equilibrium. However, these five stages do not follow a linear pattern, but form a cycle thereby keeping the narrative dynamic.

The Journey of Disruptions in *Tracks*

Tracks is a biopic on the life of Robyn Davidson who undertook the apparently impossible nine month journey from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean crossing 1,700 miles of the Australian desert. Superficially, her mobility is unfettered though many people tell her that her plan is ridiculous and that she is dreaming if the ocean is her destination. Even the camel wrangler Sallay Mahomet who acts as her mentor says, "You must be mad girly. You know that's about 2,000 miles. Six months of hard walking. It gets tougher if you get an injury. Na, it's easy enough to get lost; run out of water, food... You don't have to be unlucky to die out there" (*Tracks* 00:13:09 – 00:13:29). Nevertheless, she manages to complete her mission, partly because in her own words, "The trip wasn't conceived as an adventure in the sense of something to be proved or conquered. And when people ask me why I'm doing it, my usual answer is 'why not?'" (*Tracks* 00:03:15 – 00:03:23).

Though Robyn turns down her friend Jenny's offer to accompany and even chip in if she concludes her journey at Ayres Rock, and turns a deaf ear to her sister's misgivings about the trip, in many instances we find her on the verge of uncertainty, loneliness, and desperation. In the final leg of the journey, shortly before she reaches the ocean, she finally breaks down and regrets having set out on the seemingly impossible adventure. Curiously enough, her journey was neither an escape from anything nor an attempt at setting a record. Throughout the film, the only thing made known is that this is something that has to be done partly because her father tried and failed in the past: "In 1848 he attempted to cross Australia to the ocean with 7 horses and 20 mules. He disappeared and was never found" (*Tracks* 00:10:22 – 00:10:31). Hence in a sense, though Robyn's journey takes her forward in time and space, her goal is actually to settle a tab of the past and in doing so her physical mobility throws into relief her emotional immobility.

Robyn's emotional immobility is further foregrounded by her love-hate relationship with Rick Smolan, the American photographer first introduced by her friends at her impromptu farewell gathering and later assigned by the National Geographic magazine to record her monumental journey. She finds him highly irksome and dismisses his words of caution at every turn. Though he meets her only at set intervals and goes out of his way to assist in her drawn-out battle with the hostile terrain, she largely remains indifferent to him. Her comment on Rick to Glendle comes out downright brutal: "I can deal with pigs really easily, but nice people confound me. You know, how can you tell a nice person that you just wish they'd crawl into a hole and die?" (*Tracks* 00:58:42 – 00:58:51). Robyn's emotional immobility is matched only by Rick's who has fallen in love with her and thereby occupies the other end of the spectrum. He takes the rare, fleeting moments of vulnerability she exhibits which once leads to unexpected sex, as divine morsels of hope. His physical journey along the same route (though by jeep), intersecting with that of Robyn once in a while, thus turns into a paradigm of emotional immobility that parallels and parodies hers. We find them at different ends of the same scale: moving yet unmoving.

Yet another factor that influences Robyn's mobility is her gender identity as perceived by the society and herself. While everyone around her (even random people she runs into) is concerned about her safety and decries her expedition as being reckless, she is not worried about the dangers that could infest the course of her solo journey across untamed Australia. She even turns down the gun Sallay offers for her defense, and sleeps out in the open vulnerable to the forces of nature. Months of separation from civilization gradually frees her of the fetters of modesty and along stretches where the sun gets too intense, she sheds all layers of clothing and walks perfectly at peace with her sunburnt body. However, far from being free of her gender identity, she slowly becomes its willing prisoner.

Consequently, though alone and short on provisions she refuses to take the short route through sacred land as it is forbidden to women to traverse it unaccompanied by an elder or an 'old fella.' Even when presented with a long-awaited chance to have some kangaroo meat, she walks away because as Eddy, her elder guide warns her, women should never break the law or in other words, women are not supposed to carve kangaroo meat. She chooses to hold fast to the gender roles assigned even by the aboriginal societies and opts to go hungry rather than defile customs. Also, the rifle she gifts Eddy is not only useful but also complementary to his gender identity. As the odd pair cross the sacred land, the distribution of power between the two becomes quite obvious. Every character, right from the archetypal male Kurt Posel to the old lady whom Robyn meets before Wiluna, accepts his/her perceived gender identity and never strays outside its limits set by the laws of the society.

Another aspect that draws attention to the immobility of Robyn is the presence of her dog Diggity and the camels Dookie, Bub, Zelly, and Baby Goliath. Though known as the 'camel lady' among the locals, Robyn is however way more attached to Diggity, her dog and constant companion. Once along the way when Diggity gets exhausted by the unrelenting heat, she takes off her wrap-around and creates a shade for him to rest. Like Eddy, Diggity also complements Robyn and if it were not for him, she would have been lost in the unforgiving Australian desert when she goes off in a mad pursuit to recover her father's compass. Naturally, she is distraught when she has to put down Diggity, who appears to have consumed poison. This is contrasted with the dream sequence wherein her father puts down Goldie, her childhood pet dog.

Robyn's movement can be charted as a journey from one trauma to another and this contributes to her further emotional estrangement from everyone and everything around her, justifying Rick's observation that she seems to have a problem with people. An emotionally distraught Robyn even tells Rick that her trip does not matter, when she herself had written to the National Geographic magazine, "I am well aware of the hardship I'll be facing, and the first to admit I am remarkably unqualified for such a hazardous undertaking. But this is precisely the point of my journey. I'd like to think an ordinary person is capable of anything" (*Tracks* 00:23:42 – 00:23:55). However, after the completion of the adventure when she becomes a celebrity, thanks to Rick's photo features in the National Geographic, she reacts vehemently to being constantly pursued by tourists and the press. For someone who undertook the journey saying that she just

wants to be by herself, the adventure gradually turns into a nightmare that poses a direct threat to the niches of social immobility that her personality finds refuge in.

The narrative of *Tracks* offers a direct challenge to Todorov's Theory of Equilibrium which anticipates a disruption to follow the initial equilibrium of the narrative discourse. Robyn's life at the beginning of the narrative is in no state that have even a remote semblance to equilibrium. Instead, there exists a series of disruptions that punctuate her journey; right from the planning stage to the moment she wades into the Indian Ocean. Todorov's theory, however, necessitates the initial equilibrium because the final equilibrium reached after the disruption, recognition, and repair is pitted against it and declared different. Since Robyn's journey at the beginning of the narrative lacks an equilibrium, her state at the end of the journey too cannot be identified as the new equilibrium. In short, her obvious mobility transfers her only from one disruption to another.

The recognition of the disruption and attempts at repair also does not come from Robyn; but from Jenny, Rick, Sallay, Eddy, and others. She is simply caught in a loop of presumed mobility. Even as she successfully concludes her adventurous journey across the harsh Australian wilderness, her narrative and personality remains in pursuit of the elusive equilibrium. This posits a narrative paradox as the discursive text is a travel movie that highlights the theme of mobility. However, throughout Robyn's journey from Angel Springs to the Indian Ocean, we are made acutely aware of her character's immobility or disruptive mobility. Her personality not only fails to evolve but also shows tendencies of regression. She completes her journey but only to realize that there is no peace at the end of the road as at the beginning.

Hence, the narrative of *Tracks* may be described as a series of disruptions and failed attempts at finding an equilibrium. Robyn's elusive equilibrium is a Lacanian signified that constantly keeps her on the move. If her decisions and actions are regarded as signifiers, it can be seen that they only lead to other signifiers. As argued by Lacan, they fail not only in overcoming the resistance of signification but also in revealing the true subject of her restlessness. Caught in the chain of signification, she chases after something she herself is not sure about. Yet, like Sisyphus she cannot stop the incessant movements though they fail to bring her any closer to an equilibrium.

The Pursuit of Transitory Equilibriums in *The Man from Earth*

The Man from Earth, on the other hand, is a science fiction drama film that runs like an advertisement for apparent immobility. The action is located inside the house of Professor John Oldman and even when it occasionally shifts, it does so only to the courtyard and no further. Complementing the spatial immobility, the time frame of the narrative is also short: just an evening and nightfall. At first glance, one might be tempted to think that there is no mobility at all and that the disconcerting plot leaves more questions than answers. However, a closer inspection reveals an undercurrent of plot movement that begins in the Cro-Magnon era and extends into the 21st century. Unlike in *Tracks*, the movement is not perceptible though. The characters are caught in

a fantastic story; one that disrupts everything that they have ever known and believed in.

The Man from Earth opens with the news of Professor Oldman's resignation and his decision to shift to someplace new. This news of anticipated mobility is soon put on hold by the arrival of his now former colleagues who turn up unannounced to bid him farewell. Their casual chat soon turns into an intellectual argument about a man who has survived around 14,000 years on Earth. A distraught Oldman, when complimented that he has not aged a day in ten years, proposes a hypothetical question: "What if a man from the Upper Paleolithic survived until the present day?" (*The Man from Earth* 00:08:55 – 00:09:00). His colleagues instantly take it up as a refreshing hypothetical puzzle and argue out the different scenarios from the perspective of their concerned area of specialization. From that point forth it is virtually a roller coaster ride that taxes the imagination of the viewers.

It is subtly suggested that the character John Oldman (who looks about 35), was a Cro-Magnon who later became a Sumerian, then a Babylonian, survived even the plague, and was Christ himself spreading the teachings of Buddha in the West. The narrative he presents has an unrestricted mobility that spans centuries. It is further thrown into sharp relief by the stagnant physical setting. His colleagues and the viewers alike are torn between doubt and belief as his fantastic narrative of travelling with Columbus and friendship with Van Gogh unfurls. At one point, his elderly colleague, the psychologist Dr. Will Gruber, who recently lost his beloved wife, even draws a gun on Oldman and threatens him to recant his 'story.'

And yet, the immortality of Professor Oldman is a symbol of stagnation. As he himself puts it, it is nothing magical. He can of course die or be killed; only by some weird twist of fate, he is biologically built to survive time. Oldman's inability to age or scar forces him to shift his location every ten years and, in his lifetime, he has gone by many names and personas, even posing as his own son once. Though such mobility by compulsion is an encumbrance, it is well managed and even relished by Oldman. After he finally recants his tale when threatened by Dr. Gruber with psychiatric incarceration, Oldman reveals to Sandy (a former colleague from the Department of History) a few of his aliases in the past; one among which is John T. Partee, the biological father of Dr. Gruber. The latter chances to hear this and suffers a cardiac arrest in the excitement forcing Oldman, who has outlived almost all his children, to witness the death of one for the first time. His plight recalls that of Tithonus in the Greek mythology, who is also stuck in time while everything he ever cherished dies and decays around him.

Oldman's final decision to spend a few years of his immortal life with Sandy who has feelings for him, also cannot be considered as a sign of mobility because in the grand plan of things, he will outlive her and all their possible progeny. For him, the decision trumpets just another episode in his drawn-out life. Sandy, on the other hand, accepts the situation gracefully and perceives it beyond its macabre future. Her life moves ahead; his runs in a loop. The only form of mobility for Oldman comes in the form of education. His timeless existence has contributed to his gaining deep knowledge in multiple subjects that had secured for him the professorship he quit at

the beginning of the film and an earlier one at Harvard. His only movement is from one persona to another amassing an immense wealth of knowledge.

In short, *The Man from Earth* also challenges Todorov's Theory of Equilibrium by beginning with a disruption rather than an equilibrium. The film opens with the disruption in Oldman's life as he has reached yet another ten year mark of his eternal exodus. His constant movement from one place and identity to another is contrasted with the immobility of the narrative setting wherein the action progresses exclusively through verbal narratives. If the protagonist's narrative is deemed trustworthy or if we take a leaf out of Coleridge's book and employ a "willing suspension of disbelief" (208), it has to be acknowledged that Oldman's life is caught in a narrative loop. He does achieve equilibrium after every exile, but it is not a new equilibrium as posited by Todorov. Oldman's new equilibrium is the same as his old ones. His immortality persuades him to be constantly on the run. He evolves from one historical figure to another but the peace and quiet he finds are short-lived. His life narrative may be summed up as a constant pursuit of momentary equilibriums. Hence, an analysis of Oldman's narrative reveals a pattern that begins with disruption rather than equilibrium, which is followed by recognition and an attempt to repair by changing location and identity and the resultant equilibrium, which morphs into an immutable existential refrain.

Conclusion

Both *Tracks* and *The Man from Earth* are indeed outliers in the set patterns of narratology and carve a unique niche for themselves. They labour to challenge our conceived notions of life, time and space. By doing so, they defy Todorov's Theory of Equilibrium that sketches a narrative path from an initial equilibrium to a new equilibrium via disruption, recognition, and repair. They are both distinguished by their heavy reliance on disruptions in furthering the narrative momentum. Also, they both lack the conventional climax and their equilibriums are highly questionable as the new one cannot significantly be differentiated from the initial one. Accustomed to a steady diet of neatly dovetailed narratives, the viewers might feel uneasy by such discourses like *Tracks* and *The Man from Earth* but that is hardly the narratives' fault. As Martin Esslin points out in *Theatre of the Absurd*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* had initially been severely critiqued because it was measured against the standards of traditional plays that have a well-defined structure and not evaluated for its unique qualities.

Both the films chosen for the study superficially bear a linear structure. However, on close inspection they reveal different patterns of narrative movement. They dare to break free of the straitjackets of established narrative theories and demand to be evaluated for their genuine worth. In doing so they postulate the possibility of alternate narrative theories that accommodate the concept of narrative (im)mobility. Though a narrative that does not reach a resolution invariably leaves the readers or viewers in a lurch, neither of the films discussed can be regarded as a narrative failure. They simply defy the set theories and march to the beat of their own drums. They prove that though we desire it to be so, life might not offer us new equilibriums after every disruption.

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