

Narrative We-Voice, Reliability and Moral Agency: Forced Entertainment's Stage Adaptation of Ágota Kristóf's Novel *The Notebook*

Marie Fiévé
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Narrative strategies often undergo significant transformations when transferred across different genres and media. This study explores one such transformation: the shift of we-narration and collective storytelling from literature to theatre. Focusing on Forced Entertainment's stage adaptation of Ágota Kristóf's novel, this research examines how the performative we - a literary collective voice who speaks, thinks, and feels as one (Natalya Bekhta 2017) - is reinterpreted in performance. By applying concepts from postclassical and transmedial narratology, this study investigates how this narrative we-voice is reconfigured in performance and how it functions in different media contexts.

In Kristóf's novel, the performative we emerges as a collective narrator whose impersonal and non-individualised tone masks the ethical stakes of the narrative, particularly its complicity in violence. Kristóf's novel talks about two twin boys who narrate their horrifying experiences during the Second World War, capturing their increasingly distorted moral compass, all while maintaining the we-voice. Forced Entertainment's adaptation of the postmodern novel seemingly disrupts this undifferentiated we-voice by having two distinct performers taking turns to read Kristóf's text aloud. The embodiment of the performative we on stage exposes the artificiality of collective speech: it is difficult to represent one voice for a group in reality. Through an analysis of reliability, accountability and moral agency of the we-narrator in the novel and in performance, this research will argue that the narrative's ethical stakes have been shifted in the process of medial transposition. While the novel offers readers the context of the we-voice – collective storytelling functions as the characters' unintentional defence mechanism to hide their individuality which could remind them of their "pre-war selves" (Annjeanette Wiese 2013) – , the performance forces spectators to see the rather unsettling aspects of collective rhetoric. The twins come to stage to recite their crimes such as theft and even attempted murder while maintaining eye contact with the auditorium, making the public aware of their moral agency, implying they consciously employ the we-voice to evade accountability. Furthermore, the frontality with the auditorium makes the audience members aware of their role as witnesses to an unsettling example of an immoral use of the collective voice.

This study highlights how the transfer of collective narration from page to stage not only shifts the plural narrator's authority over the narrative but also alters the ethical implications of collective rhetoric: the medium-specific affordance of audience engagement reveals how collective storytelling can serve to justify violence. By examining how the we-voice shifts across media, this paper contributes to discussions on transmedial narratology, the ethics of collective narration, and performance's potential to expose the unethical mechanisms of groupthink.

References

- Bekhta, Natalya. "Emerging Narrative Situations: A Definition of We-Narratives Proper." *Emerging Vectors of Narratology*, edited by Per Krogh Hansen, John Pier, Philippe Roussin, and Wolf Schmid, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017, pp. 101–126.
- Wiese, Annjeanette. "Narrative Palimpsest: The Representation of Identity in Ágota Kristóf's 'The Notebook', 'The Proof', and 'The Third Lie.'" *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2013, pp. 137–59. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484800>.