

Space and Narrative in Cinematic Arts

Paninya Paksa, Bangkok University, Thailand

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Abstract

This study aims to examine space as key component in storytelling by drawing on theories of psychoanalysis, narrative, and formalism. In so doing, the study has chosen two films which were produced in the past five years with an interesting use of space: 1) *Train to Busan* (2016), a Korean film; and 2) *Snap* (2015), a Thai film. Results reveal that space is natural and thus vital for presenting the world of cinematic arts, whether filmmakers plan to use it or not. It can impact the audience's perception, including how they make a sense and build understanding of a film. Importantly, space can persuade viewers to sympathize with films as intended by the filmmakers. Moreover, space functions as a body of knowledge that greatly contributes to cinematic arts. It is one of the features of storytelling on film with the ability to create something new, and also a vehicle to explore the boundaries of narrative.

Keywords: Space, Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Formalism, *Snap*, *Train to Pusan*

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Introduction

Film is one of the media which influence people at large. It can impact people in terms of values, ideas, attitudes, and lifestyles. Film can be entertaining, artistic, animated, historical, including a vehicle to deliver some ideologies or concepts from storytellers to viewers. As a result, film can connect with and dominate the minds of individuals at all ages (Wiwatsinudom, 2002).

The ability of film to communicate and influence viewers is certainly a result of the detailed, yet creative process of producers who understand the functions of film to work with people. Film can create sympathy among viewers. In this regard, stories and narratives play key roles for viewers to understand what is happening in film. Narrative is defined as two or more events that are related in three conditions: space, time, and logic (Taeng-aksorn, 2015). Narrative of film is the content or story that people follow and understand from the first minute the movie starts until the last minute before the movie finishes. The study of narrative is thus important for creating a novel way of narrating, which will bring about quality film scripts or plots.

This article focuses on the importance and concepts of using space in film so as to enhance storytelling and support feelings and emotions by choosing two movies: *Train to Busan* (2016), and *Snap* (2015) as case studies. In so doing, four different types of space have been explored:

1) Physical space is the real space such as locations or areas that are related to or function as starting points of events in movies. It is the space that can be physically reached or accessed to.

2) Psychological space is the space of ideas and memories. It can function as personal space of characters or common space of general people. It is abstract which cannot be felt, yet does exist.

3) On-screen space is the space presented by filmmakers to appear on film through selection and art composition. It can be presented in different ways e.g. the use of symbolic meanings.

4) Off-screen space is the space unseen on the screen, but viewers can perceive the existence of this space. Sometimes, it is the intention of filmmakers to remove that space or to hide it from viewers in order to display or create particular emotions or feelings.

Train to Busan (2016)

Even a survival action movie by genre, the theme of this movie is about humanitarian and human beings, rather than the fight against zombies. Drawing on Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality, it seems that the id (instincts, without conscience or feelings) of human beings is represented by zombies while the human characters with survival attempts from this life-threatening situation are propelled to reveal their true colors and selfishness, also parts of the id inside human minds. Seok-woo, the main character, including other passengers on the train are not stereotyped characters. Unlike ideal human beings, they do not have a good heart, or thinking others before themselves. Instead, they lack kindness and do not sacrifice

themselves. They do not uphold any virtues. Every character on this train is simply a human with conscience to defend themselves or their loved ones. Hence, Train to Busan presents the fight between humans and zombies, and between humans and humanitarian (Hurtik & Yarber, 1971)

Train to Busan begins with Seoul, the capital of South Korea, before bringing viewers to the main events, drawing on the field of the fight between the characters and the zombies on a high-speed train called KTX which travels from Seoul to Busan, a big province in the south of the country. The matching of a zombie movie (a sub-genre of survival horror) to the train as fighting field offers an interesting idea. With the physical characteristics of the train designed in straight line, with individual cars connected to each other, including the plot in which characters are stuck in the train with hundred others who are infected and then turn to zombies. This will lead to unavoidable attacks. The area is become trapped and the characters are forced to face with threats. This will result in pressures, excitement, worries, which are basic feelings displayed by this genre.

Conflicts arise when passengers on the train are infected to the point that they become zombies almost the whole train. In such situation, the characters need to find ways to survive until their arrival to Busan, which is the destination. In the movie, survival on the train or the so-called threat consists of two types (Muller and Williams. 1985):

1) *Zombies*: As trapped in the train, the passengers are forced to go forward or backward in the single route only. The journey to the front end of the train to see their lost friends and families must be done through walking solely. Each car of the train is full of zombies, which represent a basic threat that the characters have to face with and overcome. The only way to do this is to get through zombies in each train safely.

2) *Conflicts with other humans*: These conflicts present another threat, apart from the fight against zombies. There are many instances in which clashes are triggered within humans themselves. These clashes are caused by selfishness, frustration, fear, and stressful situations which make everyone unable to decide with conscience. This means that conflicts within humans become a main threat that all characters have to struggle to survive.

“Scene A” in Train to Busan

Fighting scenes between the main characters (*Seok-woo, Sang-hwa, and Yong-guk*) and the zombies which happen after they know that their families and love ones are in the cars far apart. The three characters decide to prepare themselves and find as many weapons as possible from the environment, in order to walk through zombies each train and rescue another group of survivors that are further ahead. Action scenes in Train to Busan do not throw the characters to fight against enormous zombies by drawing on strength and surrealism. Instead, the producers have designed scenes, settings, and actions logically by making use of physical space of train. This has turned space (as fighting field) into both power and obstacles that the characters cannot break. Physical features train set a rule that if anyone wants to reach the most fronted car, they have no other way, except for walking through zombies in each and every car. This means that characters have to act and move within the limited surrounding space, rather than by their own intention.



Figure 1: Main characters' struggle to survival in the closed area of KTX

At a quick glance, the movie seems to feature a fight between two kinds: humans and zombies. In crisis, humans actually divide themselves for benefits and survival. This means that space within humans does not exist, but it is simply an illusion that appears at front. Humans choose to frame their own space and allow those who can share benefits to live in the same space. Humans usually do not divide or show selfishness clearly. In crisis and life-threatening situation, however, survival instincts make humans release their unconscious mind. This corresponds to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality which says that the id is the dark side of human beings, controlled by super-ego (Kaewkangwan, 2008).

The death scene of Seok-woo, which is like that of Sang-hwa. After Seok-woo is infected with zombie virus, he chooses to sacrifice his life to protect his daughter by throwing himself down from the train. In the last moment before his turning into a zombie, he thinks back to the day Soo-an was born and the feeling to hold her for the first time. Apart from external conflicts between humans and zombies, among humans themselves, there are internal conflicts within the family where the father and the daughter do not understand each other. Throughout the movie, there is an attempt to improve this father-daughter relationship until the end in the death scene of Seok-woo.



Figure 2: Family conflict between father and daughter

Train to Busan spends almost every second to make viewers stressed and excited with fighting and hunting scenes between humans and zombies. The movie does not take viewers to explore deep in the minds of the characters through memory space. There is almost no flashback of events or feelings in the minds of the characters, except the singing show of Seok-woo's daughter, which is quite a recent event. The death scene of Seok-woo is thus the

only chance for viewers to explore and feel the space in his mind. Through this scene, the viewers also know that under the dark and selfish image, he is still a father who always loves and cares his daughter.

Train to Busan is narrated through an omniscient viewpoint, so it presents the story chronologically, from the beginning to the end through several views of different characters (Giannetti, 1976). As a result, there is no need for viewers to concentrate on understanding the plot; thereby allowing them to fully enjoy the hunting and pressure from the characters' struggle to survive. This is derived from the idea that space has an influence over characters and defines events and actions of characters, under the stressful situation in the survival horror genre. As previously mentioned, the train is chosen as the field of Train to Busan. In this regard, the author has analyzed why the train is a perfect field for this genre and makes the film a great success.

Examples of physical characteristics of trains worldwide

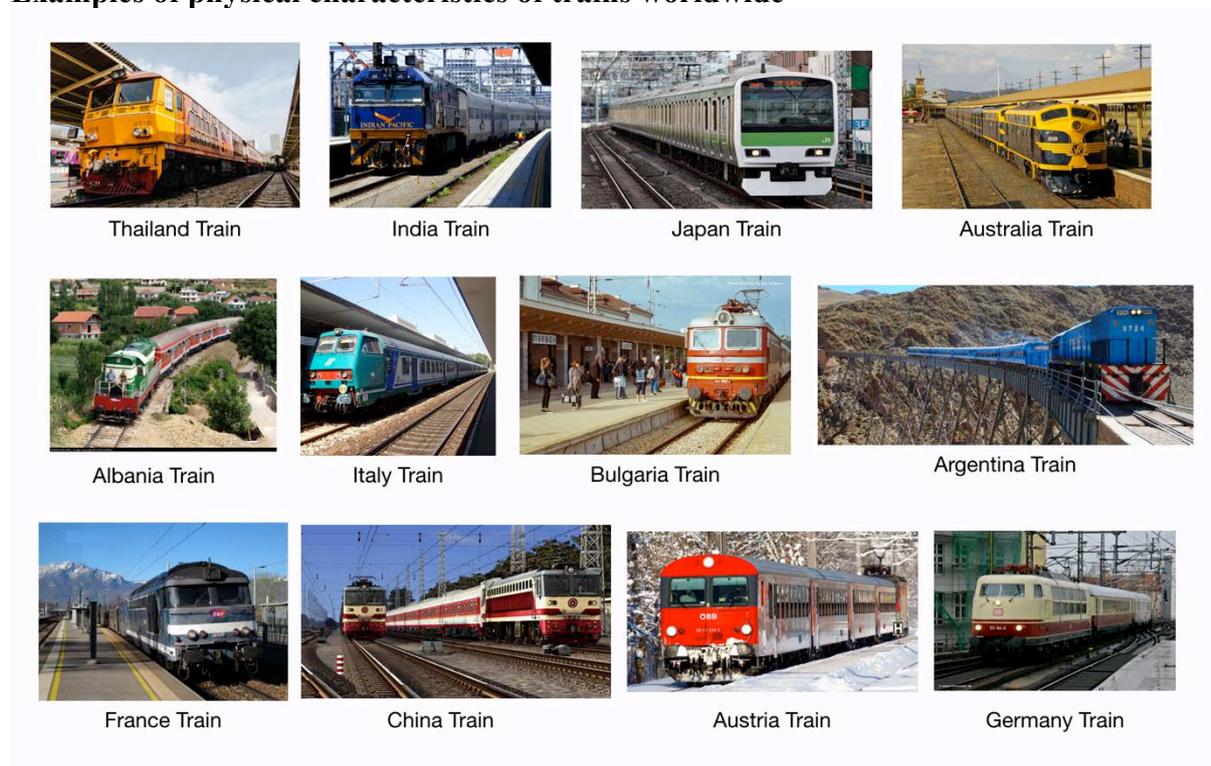


Figure 3: Physical characteristics of trains worldwide

Physical characteristics of the train, regardless of a variety of the train types or differences made by countries building it, provide the common understanding and contain the memory space shared by people worldwide, that is, a long-shaped vehicle with many cars from steering car at the most front until the last car. Other basic features include toilets located between connecting cars, seats arranged turning to the same or opposite directions, and big window screens alongside the wall, including luggage racks above the seats on left and right sides. The abovementioned features are all well understood globally. The choice of train as the field of fighting with zombies creates an advantage edge for Train to Busan as the train space makes the human characters walk this single way; thereby being unable to run away or trick zombies at all. The only way they can make is to attack directly or come out with a plan to survive, which must correspond with the train space. It is likely that most people share the same memory with the train space, so it is not difficult to relate their experience to and

sympathize with the ongoing events. This is quite different from designing new space in some movies such as cities that do not exist or high-rise building complexes which may eliminate the viewers' understanding or sympathy. Taking on the survival horror genre, the main emotion passed on to people are mostly excitement from the events that are fast-flowing, non-stop, and unpredictable. The use of space with which people are familiar is one the methods that work well because it can shorten the distance between realities and fictions, and also between characters and viewers. The smaller the gap between characters and viewers is, the more sympathy viewers will have. Thus, the choice of field as space is so significant. Whether the choice of location is relevant with the content or irrelevant (for such particular purposes as a satire or contradiction to highlight key messages), it will subsequently impact the quality of storytelling.

Train to Busan is a good example of film scripts which pay importance to the use of space in support of storytelling. The consideration of potential and possibility that may happen in film space, or field of events, can be applied to other genres: romance, melodrama, thriller, horror, or even documentary. Different spaces or locations give different meanings and feelings to viewers. If the fight with zombies in Train to Busan is designed for such other different physical locations as 100-story skyscrapers or underground shopping complexes, this will certainly impact events and actions of characters differently. In other words, space in film has the power to define characters.



Figure 4: Train to Busan poster

Snap (2015)

Snap tells a love story of Pueng and Boyd, who have been friends since their high school in a Thai province. Back in their high school days, their relationship appeared unclear and

ambiguous. While they seemed to like each other, neither of them confessed their feelings. Plus, their relationship ended when Pueng moved to study in Bangkok as a result of the 2006 Coup d'état. Pueng's father, a military officer, had to move to work in Bangkok and brought his family along. After eight years, each started a new life and love, but their paths cross again at a friend's wedding under the theme of high school homecoming. This is the turning point of revisiting their unfinished relationship. The story features a chronological or classic narrative, coupled with a series of flashbacks of the main characters. Each piece of story captures the two main characters on a field based on the history and the actual context of Thailand from 2006 to 2015. Snap is thus a fiction with the background of the Thai context during the past eight years until the year of the film screening.

Memories Space: Psychological Space

Snap uses memories as the core to connect with the relationship of both main characters. Memories are personal, and even the shared ones can be kept differently, which depends on how people want to memorize those events. Pueng and Boyd each has memories of their own and keeps them differently. What Snap does is to bring people to explore stories in the memory space of each character, with the field of events drawing from the actual context of Thai society. Changes in society impact the lives of these two characters who are driven to different paths, like many other Thais. Pueng and Boyd represent common people in society and demonstrate what kind of societal impacts has caused to them; thereby leading their lives in different directions. Most viewers in Thailand can well understand the meaning and the social condition of that time. This is especially true for those in Bangkok, who were directly affected and have lived in the same areas with Snap's characters. Therefore, this movie presents the themes of memories, society, and lives from micro level, that is, the surrounding areas of the characters as individuals to the macro level or the big picture, which is Thai society as a whole in which millions of people lead their lives similarly.

Symbols of memory space

Photos: Boyd makes a living as a photographer and thus spend most of his time with photos while Pueng never lets her smartphone away from her. Pueng always takes photos of things around her and uploads them on social network sites right away so that everyone knows where she is and what she is doing. Photos symbolize the representation of all memories that are stopped and stored in physical things. Photos help people remember moments in a concrete way. Each of us have a particular way to remember and save our memories as photos which vary in personal habits. The photos in Snap are a special symbol which means the space used in the movie: physical, and psychological space. Moreover, photos help connect these two types of space with each other.

Old school: One event of the movie takes viewers to explore the memory space in a concrete and conceivable way by bringing the main characters back to their old school, that is, to walk down the memory lane of such familiar things as school buildings, desks, and benches. Hence, their old school symbolizes the memory space shared by several characters. This offers space that everyone can talk about and share the same understanding.

Snap is narrated through the views of the two main characters who see each other through different filters. The filters here refer to the characters' perceptions, which are shaped in accordance with their experience and present time. This is certainly different; thereby reflecting how they see and understand other people and resulting in different, yet equally

important narrating views, delivered by the two characters to viewers. Such different views enable viewers to understand how both characters think about himself/herself and the other side. Together, this process makes the encoding of complex languages to deliver symbolic meanings, which are interconnected (Monaco. 1981/140).

Unequal memory space

To begin with, Pueng and Boyd run into each other at a café, while Pueng is dating with her boyfriend and Boyd at work on photography. Pueng notices Boyd first and immediately recognizes him that the person outside the window is her childhood friend with special feeling. As that feeling happened long time ago, she doesn't care about it and thus pretends not to see him or say hello. On the other hand, when Boyd notices Pueng, he decides to say hello right away and that makes it unavoidable for her to reply. He decides not to let go the chance to see someone important. Both then chat and revive their relationship as childhood friends.



Figure 5: Reunion between Pueng and Boyd, two main characters

Another clear example of unequal memory space is the first meeting between Pueng and her boyfriend, Mann. They talk about how they met. In Pueng's memory, Mann is a handsome gentleman who came to her like a prince on the white horse and made a first good impression like a dream man. In the meanwhile, Mann says that he cannot recall that moment and is not even sure if the first time they met was like that or not. This is very much similar to another event in which their high school friends argue over a trip to another province. While one says that he/she did not join the trip, another says that everyone in the group did by showing some photos to confirm the incomplete memory of that friend. Once again, this means that people give importance to or weigh memory space differently or unequally. One story in the past may be precious to someone, but may mean nothing to another. In other words, although the shared memory space is important, but each person gives different values to the same memory, making us unable to judge others through our lens.

Different memory space

Snap makes use of two main theories in film: physical, and psychological space to relate to and support each other under the narrated story. Snap, an English word used in photography, means a quick act of photo taking without paying much attention to composition, but with a focus on the candid nature of photos. In this movie, photo taking plays an important part

because it is presented almost the whole time. The author is of an opinion that we can turn physical space such as places, people, and things into psychological space, or memories, by using photos as a tool. This is because any memories will fade over time, but photos can remind us of the moments and make us remember the details. Boyd, the main character, admires snapshot photography with a focus on feelings. The photos he takes are realistic and naturally beautiful. He thinks that photos can reflect reality, and there is no need to over-decorate anything for fear that the decoration may destroy the representation of photos. Meanwhile, Pueng, similar to most people these days, likes taking photos of things around her. She often tries to take the best shots, before sharing them on social network sites to show off her identity. When she does so, she usually decorates them with filters and uses Instagram as a brain to keep memories. As time goes by, she will look at her photos again, but what she will recall is what she wants them to be, not what it really was at that time.

If we consider photos as memories which is a kind of psychological space, we can see that both main characters use different ways to keep, manage, and view memories; thereby making them see memory space differently. Boyd sees the past and experiences just the way they were – happiness in high school days, good times with Pueng and other friends, or even painful memory in which he caused his father's injuries and that still hurts and worsens their father-son relationship. Every moment is back on his mind when he sees the photos he took. In the meanwhile, Pueng sees the same photos as the past that has all gone and thus does not give any value to them. When she finds Boyd by accident at a café, she does not want to say hello because she regards him as an old forgotten friend. However, if she sees the photos she takes each day again, she may notice these photos are just filtered memories without any appearance of reality. Thus, she cannot recall these moments or her views or feelings about them.

It is clear that the power of space, or the context of Thai society, greatly influences the characters, especially Pueng. Being born in a military family is like being forced to take the same side with the military from the beginning. The 2006 coup directly affected her, making her move to Bangkok unexpectedly and begin a new life there. Nonetheless, she can adjust herself in quite a short time, including her acceptance without resistance to the pre-designated role since the day she was born – a good listener or follower.

Given the above view, in Thai society at the changing times like a coup, some Thais may feel awkward at first, but later they can accept it, adjust themselves, and live a normal life. Sometimes, they may perceive it as something far away, and then they cannot do anything about it. They also fail to realize that, in the current context of Thai society, space power comes between their lives and influences their daily activities. They are just similar to Pueng, who eventually chooses Mann, her boyfriend who is a military officer. Mann is a safe choice for her. When she is already familiar with this safe comfort zone, it is too late for her to go back or revise anything.

Another interesting use of space in Snap is off-screen or untold space, yet perceived by viewers. Many scenes are untold through screening, but by allowing events to occur, cutting some space off, and supposing that viewers can automatically understand. For example, the scene in which Pueng and Boyd plan to meet at an aquarium. The movie does not tell about their meeting through pictures or conversation, but let the viewers get through to see both

characters arriving the front gate. By using on-the-spot conversation to make viewers understand that this meeting is earlier planned without telling them in advance. The removal of these pictures out of the viewers' eyes is another technique to make viewers imagine what actually happens on the off-screen space. Each viewer may have a different view and answer. This off-screen technique can be applied variously. At the present, there is a number of movies using this technique for such several purposes as tricking viewers into twisted points, hiding some scenes with the answer from viewers and putting those scenes into the viewers' minds unknowingly. It is also used to avoid some violent scenes for marketing purposes, but allowing viewers to imagine those pictures by themselves.

According to the formalism of film criticism, Snap appears to have a form far better than its content. Storytelling based on space and time theory in film, including the actual context of Thai society, mixed with the fiction makes the film distinguished in terms of storytelling of the characters and the ongoing events in society. This clearly and beautifully reflects the views of the film director on daily life, memories, historical events, law and politics. These dimensions in Snap make a perfect combination, and thus creates a single unified movie.

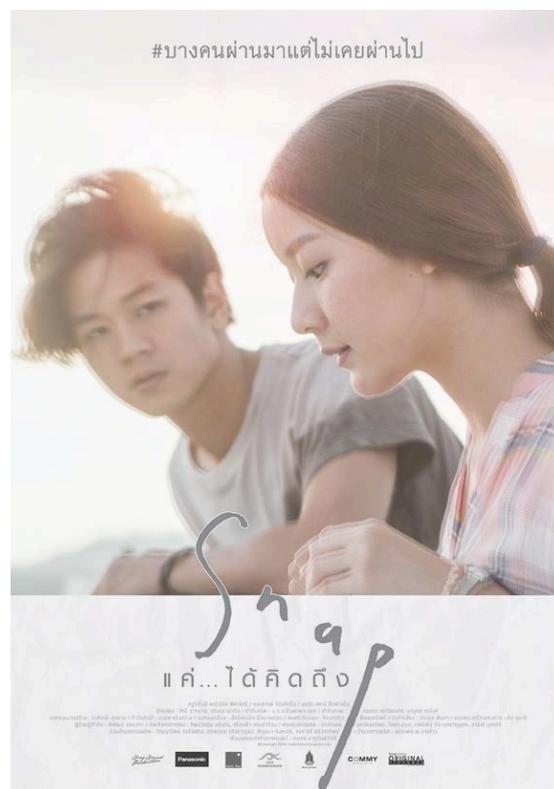


Figure 6: Snap poster

Conclusion: Space and Storytelling

To conclude, it is obvious that the connection between space and storytelling in film can influence the viewers' perception as illustrated in the diagram below.

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