



Narrative Transportation as the Mechanism behind the Persuasive Power of Stories: From Parables to Audiovisual Media

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Abstract

Stories persuade audiences whose explicit beliefs diverge, and the question of why this happens motivates a long line of work on narrative transportation. This article asks how the transportation mechanism operates when a story withholds a verdict and leaves its central conflict open, and it does so through a structured content analysis of one director's catalog of short films produced between 2018 and 2026. The corpus comprises more than 15 short films that have collectively won 31 awards and been selected for 84 official festivals across five continents. Each film was coded for narrative features such as open endings, character-first framing, inclusive casting, and formal constraint, and these features were cross-tabulated with the framing of the juries that conferred recognition. The analysis shows that films built around an unresolved question secured awards from juries with opposing vocabularies, including explicitly religious festivals and secular genre festivals. These results indicate that a reduction in overt persuasive intent is associated with broader cross-audience recognition, which supports the prediction that transportation suppresses counterarguing while sustaining emotional and imagistic engagement. The single-author design and the use of festival outcomes as an indirect index of transportation constrain the strength of the causal claim, and the discussion frames these limits as a guide for the direct audience studies that should follow. The findings have practical implications for independent filmmakers who want their work to cross audience boundaries at feature length.

Keywords: Narrative Transportation, Narrative Persuasion, Audiovisual Storytelling, Character Identification, Short Film, Festival Recognition.

INTRODUCTION

The capacity of a story to change what an audience believes has occupied researchers across psychology, communication, and marketing for more than two decades. When a person becomes absorbed in a narrative, attention concentrates on the events of the story world, mental imagery intensifies, and the scrutiny that ordinarily greets a persuasive message weakens. Green and Brock (2000) named this experiential state transportation and demonstrated that the degree of transportation predicts the degree of belief change induced by a public narrative. The mechanism differs from the deliberate weighing of arguments described by classical dual-process models, as transported readers process the story through immersion, generating fewer counterarguments. Green and Appel (2024) consolidated two decades of evidence and described transportation as a convergence of affective engagement, cognitive attention, and vivid mental imagery, a convergence that makes story-based influence both durable and resistant to the defenses that audiences mount against direct appeals.

Religious and morally framed storytelling has long been treated as an exception to this account, on the assumption that audiences outside the relevant faith community resist its claims. The 2026 Faith and Entertainment Index, produced by the research firm HarrisX, tested that assumption by placing more than 100 faith-related scenes before more than 12,000 American viewers. The study reported that 92% of respondents accepted a place for faith in modern entertainment and 77% believed faith content could carry broad appeal, while the scenes that scored highest were reflective and emotionally resonant. Audiences rejected scenes that preached. The pattern in those numbers points to a mechanism that rewards immersion and penalizes explicit instruction, a signature of transportation rather than argument-based persuasion.

The transportation construct sits within a broader family of accounts of narrative influence that share one premise, since each treats the processing of a story as different in kind from the processing of an argument. The chapter by Krause-Galoni and Mazzocco (2023) traces how storytelling

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moves an audience through emotion toward changes in attitude and intention, locating transportation at the center of that movement. Identification with a character provides a parallel route, in which the audience adopts the goals and viewpoint of a character on screen and shifts toward the attitudes implied by the person's experience. These routes operate together in audiovisual media, where the moving image supplies the sensory detail that a written narrative leaves to the reader's imagination, and the combined effect can deepen the immersion that drives belief change. The mechanism depends less on the explicit content of a message than on the conditions that draw an audience into a story world and hold it there.

Research on narrative transportation has concentrated on written texts and on entertainment-education videos presented under laboratory conditions, where a persuasive target can be measured against a control. Less attention has been paid to short films that decline to resolve their central moral question and present no explicit thesis for an audience to accept or refute. Thomas and Grigsby (2024) surveyed the field and identified the antecedents, outcomes, and moderators of transportation, while noting that the construct remains fragmented across disciplines and that the conditions under which open narratives transport diverse audiences are underspecified. A story that offers no verdict gives a hostile viewer nothing to argue against, and this absence may broaden the range of audiences it can reach. The festival circuit reached this conclusion through practice years before the survey evidence accumulated, which is why a body of films recognized across opposed juries offers a window into the mechanism.

This article addresses that gap through a single body of work whose festival record provides an unusual natural test. The catalog of one Lima-based director, accumulated over eight years, was recognized by juries operating within incompatible frames, allowing an examination of whether structurally open films secure recognition across that divide. Two questions organize the analysis. The first question asks which narrative features recur in the films that won recognition from juries with opposing vocabularies. The second question asks how the transportation account explains the cross-audience reach that those features accompany. The argument follows the line named in the title, from the parable as an early open narrative form to contemporary audiovisual media, treating both as channels for a single underlying mechanism.

METHODS

The study uses a qualitative case-study design built on a structured content analysis of a single-author corpus. A single-author corpus removes the variance that would arise from comparing directors with different resources, audiences, and distribution networks, and focuses attention on the narrative features that vary within a single body of work. The design carries a cost, since findings drawn from one director

cannot establish population-level generalization, and the analysis treats its conclusions as a grounded hypothesis for later testing.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model the design operationalizes, tracing the path from narrative features through transportation to cross-audience persuasion, and showing the parable and audiovisual channels through which one mechanism operates. The left node names the features coded in this study, the central node names the psychological state that the features are expected to produce, and the right node names the outcome that the festival record makes observable.

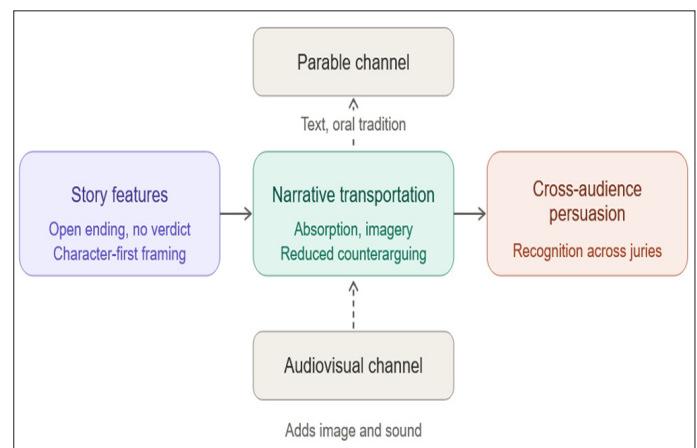


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of narrative transportation across parable and audiovisual channels

The corpus consists of the short films produced by BienAventurados Films between 2018 and 2026, among them *One-to-One*, *Imperfecto*, *Pieces of Me*, *Our Island*, *Mariana*, and *Claustrophobia*. Three data sources support the coding. The first source is the set of film synopses and the narrative devices that each film deploys. The second source is the festival record, which documents 31 awards and 84 official selections together with the location and thematic profile of each festival. The third source is the framing of the awarding juries, classified into two categories. The first category covers explicitly religious or confessional festivals such as *Mirabile Dictu* in Rome and the Great Lakes Christian Film Festival. The second category covers secular festivals organized around genre or social theme, such as the International Hollywood Short Film Festival, the Woodpecker International Film Festival, and the Power24 International Film Festival.

Each film was coded for four narrative features. The first feature is an open ending that withholds a verdict on the central conflict. The second feature is character-first framing, in which the film proceeds from a person whose experience the director wants to make visible, while the thematic frame arrives through that person. The third feature is inclusive casting, recorded when the production places performers from underrepresented groups in central roles. The fourth feature is formal constraint, evident when the conditions of production shape the film's structure, as

in the lockdown assembly of *Claustrophobia* from footage shot by 50 Peruvian actors at home. The coded features were then cross-tabulated with jury framing to test whether films carrying the open-narrative profile drew recognition from both jury categories.

The festival record functions as the observable output of the design, and its scale shapes what the analysis can claim. A catalog that accumulated 31 awards and 84 official selections across festivals on five continents passed through a large number of independent selection panels, and each panel applied its own criteria to the films it received. This breadth turns the record into a natural test of cross-audience reach, since a film that secured recognition from panels with incompatible thematic commitments demonstrated an appeal that did not depend on any single frame. The analysis treats the distribution of awards across jury categories as

Table 1. Corpus and coding scheme of narrative features by film

Film	Open ending	Character-first	Inclusive casting	Formal constraint	Jury framing
One-to-One	yes	yes	no	no	religious + secular
Imperfecto	yes	yes	yes	no	secular
Pieces of Me	yes	yes	no	no	secular
Our Island	yes	yes	no	no	secular
Claustrophobia	yes	yes	no	yes	secular + audience
Mariana	yes	yes	no	no	secular

The cross-tabulation in Table 1 isolates the films that combine an open ending with character-first framing and traces the jury categories each reached, which provides the input for the results that follow.

RESULTS

The clearest instance of cross-audience recognition appears in the director's debut. *One-to-One* stages a confrontation between Jesus and a young man estranged from faith who presses the figure on the injustice of his own sickness, loneliness, and helplessness, and the film hands its protagonist no answer. The work collected 13 awards from juries whose vocabularies stood in opposition, ranging from Best Short Film at the Catholic festival *Mirabile Dictu* in Rome to Best Film on Religion at the Calcutta International Cult Film Festival. A film that resolves nothing drew identical verdicts from a confessional jury and a secular genre jury, which is the pattern the study set out to examine.

Spiritually inflected stories without an explicit faith frame secured recognition from secular juries across several festivals. *Pieces of Me*, which follows a young woman as she confronts the roles life has assigned her while trying to silence the voices of her past, won Best Drama at the International Hollywood Short Film Festival in 2025. *Our Island*, which follows a young man who loses his sight to a congenital condition and works to avoid becoming a burden to the people he loves, won Best Disability Film at the Power24 International Film Festival in South Africa. *Imperfecto*, the

central evidence and the volume of selections as a measure of how widely the films circulated rather than their quality.

Two interpretive cautions govern the coding. The binary classification of each feature reflects the author's reading of the films and stands as analyst-applied coding open to alternative judgment. The classification of juries as religious or secular reflects the same interpretive act and does not report an official status that the festivals themselves assign. The analysis presents festival recognition as an observable correlate of audience response and does not claim that recognition measures transportation using a validated instrument.

Table 1 sets out the corpus and the coding scheme, recording, for each film, the presence of the four narrative features and the framing of the juries that recognized it.

first Peruvian short film to star actors with intellectual disabilities, reverses the usual question of who must earn belonging by depicting a group of people with intellectual disabilities who debate whether to admit a person without a disability into their association, and the film issues no verdict. Juries with no stake in any faith framework named it Best Film on Disability at both the Woodpecker International Film Festival in New Delhi and the Calcutta festival.

Formal constraint produced a comparable crossover. *Claustrophobia*, assembled during the 2020 lockdown from footage that 50 Peruvian actors each filmed alone at home, takes the isolation that produced it as its subject, and the fractured home-shot texture matched the condition that every viewer was living through. The film won Best of the Quarantine Film Challenge at the San Diego International Film Festival, along with audience awards in San Diego and Lima, demonstrating that a film with no doctrinal content reached both a jury and a general audience through a shared experience.

The catalog's reach extended beyond festival venues. In 2024, one of the director's films screened at the World Intellectual Property Organization conference in Geneva before delegates from across the member states, an audience that shares no religious vocabulary. A film selected for that setting carries something that survives the loss of its original context, which marks the upper bound of the cross-audience reach documented here.

Table 2 consolidates the recognition pattern, pairing each film with the award it received, the festival and location, and the jury that conferred it.

Table 2. Cross-audience recognition of structurally open films by jury framing

Film	Award	Festival and location	Jury framing
One-to-One	Best Short Film	Mirabile Dictu, Rome 2018	religious
One-to-One	Best Film on Religion	Calcutta Int. Cult, Calcutta 2019	secular
Imparfecto	Best Film on Disability	Woodpecker, New Delhi 2019	secular
Imparfecto	Best Film on Disability	Calcutta Int. Cult, Calcutta 2019	secular
Pieces of Me	Best Drama	Int. Hollywood SFF, Los Angeles 2025	secular
Our Island	Best Disability Film	Power24, South Africa 2025	secular
Claustrophobia	Best of Quarantine Challenge	San Diego Int. FF, 2020	secular

The rows of Table 2 share one structural property: each listed film presents a verdict and proceeds from a character, and the awarding juries divide across the religious and secular categories that the study treats as opposed. Films built on an open question drew recognition from both sides of that divide.

DISCUSSION

The transportation account offers a parsimonious reading of the recognition pattern. A film that withholds a verdict and proceeds from a character invites the viewer into the story world while presenting no thesis to resist, so the immersion deepens, and the counterarguing that ordinarily protects a viewer from a faith-coded or issue-coded message has nothing to engage. Green and Appel (2024) describe this suppression of counterarguing as a defining property of the transported state, and the festival record fits that description, since juries operating from opposed frames converged on films that supplied no claim to refute. The audience data in the 2026 Faith and Entertainment Index, which records rejection of scenes that preach, aligns with the same logic from the demand side.

Character identification supplies the second strand of the mechanism. When a film proceeds from a person whose experience the audience comes to share, identification with that person carries the audience toward the attitudes the experience implies, and this transfer operates without an explicit argument. Jaén Portillo (2024) traces how the audiovisual and embodied strategies of film elicit empathic responses that move viewers toward the perspective on screen, which explains why the disability films in this corpus reached secular juries through the experience of their protagonists. *Imparfecto* reaches its audience through the people on screen, and the verdict it withholds becomes a question the audience must answer for itself.

The line from parable to audiovisual media follows from this reading. A parable presents a situation and ends without supplying the moral in propositional form, leaving the listener transported into the scene and obliged to complete its meaning, and the open short film performs the same operation through image and sound. Watts (2023)

traces transportation from oral and poetic traditions to contemporary screen media and argues that the construct spans these forms, which supports treating the parable and the short film as two channels for one mechanism. The audiovisual channel adds mental imagery that the parable’s listener must generate alone, and this addition can intensify the transported state that both forms aim to produce.

The audiovisual channel changes the work that the audience performs during transportation. A reader of a parable constructs the scene from the words alone, supplying the faces, the setting, and the weight of the silence at the end, and the imagery that results varies with the reader’s own capacity to picture events. A film fixes that imagery and delivers it through sound and motion, reducing the effort the audience must invest and increasing the intensity of the sensory experience. This shift can deepen immersion for viewers whose own imagery would otherwise remain faint, and it can broaden the audience a story reaches beyond readers equipped to build the scene unaided. The crossover the disability films achieved with secular juries rests on this property, since the experience of a protagonist losing his sight or seeking belonging is conveyed through the image with a directness that an argument could not match.

The persuasive reach of transportation also carries a documented capacity to move audiences toward action and toward emotional engagement that outlasts the viewing. Winkler et al. (2023) show that the shifting emotional responses a story produces feed the persuasive outcome, and that transportation links to affective attitudes in particular, which aligns with the emotional and reflective scenes that the 2026 audience data ranked highest. Moore et al. (2021) demonstrate that inspirational narratives shift the attributions audiences make and increase helping behavior, which connects the cross-audience recognition documented here to the prosocial response that the director reports receiving from viewers across the globe. A film built on an open question can move an audience toward reflection and toward action through the same immersive route.

The transfer from immersion to action deserves separate attention, since a story that only shifts an attitude leaves

its persuasive work incomplete. Storytelling and narrative transportation as a catalyst for self-efficacy and action in the face of climate change (2025) shows that a transported audience moves toward a sense of its ability to act and toward the intention to do so, extending the mechanism beyond belief change into behavior. The films in this corpus aim for a comparable outcome, since the director frames the work as an effort to make visible the experiences of people the audience rarely encounters, and the messages viewers send in response report a felt connection that an argument seldom produces. A film that transports its audience into the situation of a person with an intellectual disability can leave the viewer with a changed sense of what belonging requires, and this change carries the potential to shape conduct beyond the screening.

The mechanism admits a darker reading that the analysis must acknowledge. The suppression of counterarguing that allows an open story to cross audience boundaries also allows narratives to install beliefs that survive little scrutiny, and Adornetti (2023) documents how narrative persuasion operates in the spread of conspiracy belief through the same reduction of resistance. The capacity that lets a transported viewer accept a humane perspective without argument is the capacity that lets a transported viewer accept a false one, and the ethical weight of a storytelling practice therefore depends on the content that the mechanism carries. This caution belongs in any account that recommends transportation as a persuasive strategy.

Four limitations bound these conclusions. The single-author design supports a grounded hypothesis while it forecloses population-level generalization. Festival recognition stands as an indirect correlate of transportation, since an award reflects a jury's aggregate judgment rather than a measured psychological state, and the number of awards a film accrues also reflects how many festivals it received submissions. The study includes no control group and no self-report transportation scale, so the causal path from narrative feature to audience response remains inferred. The author analyzes a corpus he produced, which introduces a researcher's stake that the interpretive coding cannot fully neutralize. A direct test would present the films to audiences under controlled conditions and measure transportation with a validated instrument, which is the path that the present findings recommend.

CONCLUSION

The festival record of one director's catalog indicates that short films built on an open question, proceeding from a character and withholding a verdict, draw recognition from juries whose frames stand opposed. The transportation mechanism accounts for this reach, since immersion deepens when a story supplies no thesis to resist, and the suppression of counterarguing that follows lets a single film cross the boundary between a confessional audience and a secular

one. The line from the parable to the audiovisual short film runs through this shared mechanism, and the screen adds imagery to a form that has always asked its audience to complete the meaning for itself.

The finding has practical implications for independent filmmakers working in emerging markets and aiming for audiences beyond a single community. A film that builds its cross-audience appeal into its first scene, through an open structure and a character whose experience the audience comes to share, reaches further than a film that appends a message and hopes the audience accepts it. The harder question is whether this approach holds at feature length, where a wider distribution forces broader assumptions about who is watching, and the director's first feature will be the next test of the pattern documented here. Future work should shift from indirect evidence of festival outcomes to direct measurement of transportation among audiences who encounter these films, thereby converting the present hypothesis into a finding that survives outside the catalog that produced it.

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