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“He lies like an eyewitness”: Unreliable Narration in Narrative Fiction and Film

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss within the framework of transmedial narratology¹ the ways in which the categories created for an analysis of literary texts can be employed in research into other cultural products, using the example of unreliable narration, one of the key concepts of narrative studies. The saying used in its title captures the essence of this narrative technique, though admittedly in an unscholarly way: it consists in constructing a narrative in such a way that the reader has the impression that it presents a distorted picture of some aspect of the represented world. Originally developed in the field of literary studies, unreliable narration is actually a transmedial category, applicable to other media, as long as they are designed to tell a story. This is especially the case with film. Even though the relevance of the literary notion of the narrator for this medium has been questioned, a particular film can be constructed in a way that will signal to the viewer untrustworthiness of the perspective from which the events are presented.

Unreliable Narration in Narrative Fiction

In his ground-breaking study *The rhetoric of fiction* Wayne Booth (1983) introduces the concept of unreliable narration as follows: “I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not”². For Booth, the essence of unreliable narration lies in the distance between the implied author, that is the author in-

¹ Thon, J.-N., *Transmedial narratology and contemporary media culture*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

² Booth, W., *The rhetoric of fiction*, 2nd ed., Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp. 158–159.

scribed in the text, and the narrator. The author communicates with the reader behind the narrator's back, as it were, through the ironic construction of the latter's discourse and the imposition on the latter of the views that are the opposite of the author's own standpoint. For Booth, the discrepancy between the implied author and the narrator primarily concerns moral norms and values, but he also allows for the possibility of divergence when it comes to facts.

Jason's monologue in William Faulkner's *The sound and the fury* (1929) constitutes an excellent example of unreliable narration as understood by Booth. One can speak here of collusion between the author and the reader, who together watch as Jason continually reveals his bigotry, racism, cruelty, and greed. For example, he begins his monologue by quoting a conversation with his mother, in which he utters, among other things, these words about his niece:

Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say. I says you're lucky if her playing out of school is all that worries you. I says she ought to be down there in that kitchen right now, instead of up there in her room, gobbing paint on her face and waiting for six niggers that cant even stand up out of a chair unless they've got a pan full of bread and meat to balance them, to fix breakfast for her³.

It is these types of statements recurring throughout Jason's monologue that in Booth's view, reveal his obnoxious character to the reader, and the disjunction between his value system and that of the implied author is so evident as to require no direct comment from the latter⁴.

Unreliable representation of facts can, in turn, be observed in texts in which narration is conducted from the point of view of a mentally unstable person, unable to distinguish between creations of his or her own mind and the events that are actually taking place on the level of the depicted world and that can be observed by other characters. In Ken Kesey's novel *One flew over the cuckoo's nest* (1962), the narrator is Chief Bromden, who suffers from schizophrenia; consequently, his monologue describes as much the external world as his hallucinations. Consider the following description of the head nurse, whom he calls the Big Nurse:

She goes into a crouch and advances on where they're trapped in a huddle at the end of the corridor. She knows what they been saying, and I can see she's furious clean out of control. She's going to tear the black bastards limb from limb, she's so furious. She's swelling up, swells till her back's splitting out the white uniform and she's let her arms section out long enough to wrap around the three of them five, six times. She looks around her with a swivel of her huge head [...] she really lets herself go and her painted smile twists, stretches to an open snarl, and she blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor, so big I can smell the machinery inside the way you smell a motor pulling too big a load⁵.

³ Faulkner, 1929, *The sound and the fury* [e-book], New York, W. W. Norton & Company, n.p..

⁴ Booth, W., op. cit., p. 307.

⁵ Kesey, 1962, *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*. New York, New American Library, p. 6.

The realistic description of the nurse walking down a corridor suddenly turns into a record of a phantasmagoria in which she is transformed into a destructive machine. This sudden metamorphosis is a clear indication that Chief Bromden’s account of the events cannot be trusted, as his perception of reality is distorted.

Two main schools can be distinguished in further research on unreliable narration in the novelistic discourse: rhetorical and cognitive. The former develops Booth’s main argument and assumes that unreliable narration involves a distance between the implied author and the narrator. A representative of this approach, James Phelan, in an article co-written with Mary Patricia Martin refines Booth’s definition and emphasises that unreliability refers to the way in which the fictional world is presented by a homodiegetic narrator, i.e. a personified narrator belonging to the presented world. In Phelan and Martin’s understanding of the term, “a homodiegetic narrator is unreliable when he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer”⁶. The assumption that the implied author would present a different version of events than the narrator is a central and at the same time rather problematic element of the rhetorical approach to unreliable narration. It assumes that the implied author can directly, without the narrator’s mediation, participate in narrative transmission, in which the fictional world is described, and that this world exists, as it were, independently of the act of narration and can therefore be presented in a more or less reliable way. However, to consider what version of events would be presented by the implied author – as long as we assume that the author can communicate with the reader not only through the work as a whole, but also in the process of narration – is pure speculation: if the text presents no other description of a given sequence of events, the unreliable narrator’s account is the only one to which the reader has access. The act of narration simultaneously creates the presented world and shows it from a certain subjective perspective. Consequently, we should rather assume that in the case of unreliable narration, we are dealing with double coding; that is, narration is conducted in such a way that we simultaneously receive the narrator’s version and signals that the narrator is untrustworthy or that the author is distancing him- or her-self from what the narrator is saying. In other words, an unreliable narrator is one whose perspective on and/or judgement of the presented world, of which he or she is a part, seems suspicious to the reader.

It is the reader who is placed at the centre in the cognitive approach, which rejects the assumption that the implied author should be the reference point for assessing the reliability of the narrator. According to Ansgar Nünning, one of the major representatives of this approach, the norms of the reader should be taken as the reference point, as it is the reader who gives meaning to the text through the application of conceptual schemes and cognitive frames. He defines unreliable narration as “a projection by

⁶ Phelan, J., Martin, M.P. *The lessons of ‘Weymouth’: homodiegesis, unreliability, ethics, and The remains of the day.* [in:] Herman, D. (ed.). *Narratologies: New perspectives on narrative analysis*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1999, p. 94.

the reader who tries to resolve ambiguities and textual inconsistencies by attributing them to the narrator's unreliability"⁷. Nünning points to two main frameworks applied by the reader when assessing the reliability of the narrator. The first is empirical reality and behaviour that is considered normal and acceptable in a given culture. If what the narrator says and the attitude he or she presents are at odds with the reader's assumptions about the real world and moral norms, we may be dealing with unreliable narration. Whether this is certainly the case depends on the reader's other point of reference, namely literary conventions. The application of the generic rules of science fiction, for example, means that empirical reality is no longer a criterion for assessing the credibility of the narrator.⁸

Contrary to what one might think, defining unreliable narration in relation to the reader does not mean that he or she has complete discretion in assessing the reliability of the narrator. Nünning emphasises that the reader's application of the frame 'unreliable narrator' is triggered by certain signals within the text, which can be grouped into several main categories: internal contradictions, stylistic idiosyncrasies, the presentation of the same events from different perspectives and the narrator's self-consciousness⁹.

The signals of the first type abound in *The sea, the sea* (1978) by Iris Murdoch. On the one hand, the narrator of this work states: "I daresay, an unfashionable thing to say nowadays, I am not 'very highly sexed'. I can live perfectly well without 'sexual relations'"¹⁰. On the other hand, he admits with disarming frankness: "Of course I have had not a few love affairs"¹¹ or "In fact the harem situation would suit me down to the ground"¹². Discrepancies of this kind mean that the narrator's self-representation needs to be critically analysed to take into account his tendency to whitewash his own person.

Another important sign that we may be dealing with unreliable narration are idiosyncrasies manifested at the level of style, such as numerous addresses to the audience, repetitions, or unfinished sentences. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The remains of the day* (1988) is a case in point. The monologue of the narrator, a butler who has sacrificed his private life to work and misplaced loyalty, contains numerous phrases indicating that he strives to convince the narratee that his assessment of the events and people he is talking about is correct, which indirectly indicates that he himself is not sure

⁷ Nünning, A., *Unreliable, compared to what? Towards a cognitive theory of unreliable narration: prolegomena and hypothesis*, [in] Grünzweig, W. & Solbach, A. (eds.). *Grenzüberschreitungen: narratologie in kontext / Transcending boundaries: narratology in context*. Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999, p. 54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 67–68.

⁹ Nünning, A., 'But why will you say that I am mad?': on the theory, history, and signals of unreliable narration in British fiction. "Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik", vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 96–98.

¹⁰ Murdoch, I., *The sea, the sea*, London, Triad Granada, 1978, p. 71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

of it. This is how he describes, for example, his encounters with Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, for whom he had feelings which he did not want to admit to himself in the past and which he still does not want to acknowledge to the listener of his confessions:

I should perhaps say a few words here concerning these meetings in her parlour at the end of each day. *These were, let me say, overwhelmingly professional in tone* – though naturally we might discuss some informal topics from time to time. Our reason for instituting such meetings was simple: we had found that our respective lives were often so busy, several days could go by without our having an opportunity to exchange even the most basic of information. [...] *I must reiterate, these meetings were predominantly professional in character*; that is to say, for instance, we might talk over the plans for a forthcoming event, or else discuss how a new recruit was settling in¹³.

The narrator's insistence that his meetings with Miss Kenton were purely professional indicates that they meant much more to him than he is willing to acknowledge and that therefore his representation of his own actions and feelings cannot be completely trusted.

In a sense, the most prominent way of undermining the narrator's credibility is to juxtapose his or her story with a different version of events. This type of narrative situation can be observed in Julian Barnes's novel *Talking it over* (1991), in which the seemingly banal story of a love triangle in which two friends fall in love with the same woman is given a new dimension through a polyphonic composition in which each character presents his or her own version of events. This is, for example, the climax of the confrontation between the two rivals as told by one of them:

It was at about this time that the accident occurred. Stuart was, as I recall, giving me a light (I know – but at moments of stress a certain nicotine recidivism does beckon), and we stood up for some reason, when an unfortunate clash of heads occurred which quite stunned us both. Luckily he had his lenses in; otherwise he might have broken his glasses¹⁴.

His rival, on the other hand, stresses that there was nothing accidental in his actions: “‘This is a Glasgow kiss,’ I said, and butted him in the face. He fell over, and at first was sort of half-laughing, as if I must have been going to show him something else but had slipped. Then it became clear that it hadn't been a mistake, and he ran away”¹⁵.

The narrator's self-conscious comments about his own narrative competence and the fallibility of human memory are another potent marker of unreliability, according to Nünning¹⁶. Thus, for example, the narrator of Patrick McGrath's neo-Gothic novel

¹³ Ishiguro, K., *The remains of the day* [e-book], New York, Vintage International, 1988, n.p., emphasis added.

¹⁴ Barnes, J., *Talking it over* [e-book], New York, Vintage International, 1991, n.p.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Nünning, A., *But why will you say that I am mad?*, p. 98.

The grotesque (1990) himself admits that he doubts whether he will be able to reconstruct the actual course of events, obviously at the level of the depicted world:

So I [...]try to construct for you as full and coherent account as I can of *how things got this way*. You must forgive me if I appear at times to contradict myself, or in other ways violate the natural order of the events I am disclosing; this business of selecting and organizing one's memories so as to describe precisely *what happened* is a delicate perilous undertaking, and I'm beginning to wonder whether it may not be beyond me.¹⁷

While the other signals of unreliability distinguished by Nünning do not provoke any major objections, in the case of the narrator's self-consciousness the situation becomes more complicated than the scholars dealing with unreliable narration are willing to admit. Paradoxically, the narrator who draws the audience's attention to the gaps and internal contradictions in his or her own story becomes reliable because he or she admits his or her own fallibility.

One of the main functions of unreliable narration in narrative fiction can be approached along similar lines: in most cases it draws the reader's attention to the narrator's psyche and his or her perception of reality and him- or her-self. Thus, it becomes a reliable and mimetic representation of complex psychological processes related to issues, such as the ways in which memory functions or the mechanisms of self-deception.

Unreliable Narration in Film

In his discussion of narration in film David Bordwell argues that "in watching film, we are seldom aware of being told something by an entity resembling a human being"¹⁸. However, some films are constructed in a manner that makes the viewer assume that the events are presented to him or her by an anthropomorphic figure. As Brian McFarlane notes, the filmic devices closest to literary first-person narration are two cinematic techniques: the subjective camera and the voice-over. In the case of the former, the film is shot in such a way that the viewer has the impression that he or she is perceiving the reality of the film through the eyes of one of the characters¹⁹. As the use of this technique imposes an extremely unnatural point of view on the viewer, it is usually used only for short sections of the film. One exception to this rule is the 1946 film *Lady in the lake*, directed by Robert Montgomery. In this film adaptation of a novel by Raymond Chandler, the viewer sees the world through the eyes of detective Philip Marlowe with all the consequences of such a set-up, such as receiving a punch right in the face, which leads to loss of consciousness represented as a few seconds of

¹⁷ McGrath, P., *The grotesque*, London, Penguin, 1990, p. 114.

¹⁸ Bordwell, D., *Narration in the fiction film*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 62.

¹⁹ McFarlane, B., *Novel to film: an introduction to the theory of adaptation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, pp. 15–16.

a blank screen. Contrary to what one might think, however, the technique of subjective camera does not so much generate unreliable narration as reduces the point of view to that of one character. In the self-deprecating scene that introduces the whole story, Marlowe, who addresses the viewer directly, explains that the latter will see and know exactly as much as he does, and will thus be able not only to observe the process of solving the crime mystery but also to solve it him- or her-self using the same clues as the detective does.

Of far greater importance when it comes to unreliable narration in film is the use of voice-over. One could even argue that it is the basic element of unreliable narration in film, for the simple reason that the voice-over is the strongest possible signal of the narrator's presence in the communication structure of a given film, even if it cannot always be attributed to a specific, embodied speaker. However, as McFarlane points out, the voice-over technique cannot be considered a complete equivalent of first-person narration in literature²⁰. This is because it is always accompanied by images, which create meanings in parallel to voice-over narration and which are automatically, as it were, perceived by the viewer as an objective representation of the reality depicted in the film.

On the other hand, it is this duality of the film that makes it possible to achieve the effect of unreliable narration through the discrepancy between what the narrator says and what the camera shows. A narrative set-up of this type can be observed, for example, in the Australian comedy *The Castle* (1997), which tells the story of the Kerrigan family, who are threatened with eviction due to the expansion of the airport next to which they live. After a brief introductory scene, a teenage boy named Dale appears on screen and announces: “My name is Dale Kerrigan, and this is my story”²¹. Dale's voice-over, which introduces the Kerrigan family to the audience in the first ten minutes of the film, reappears from time to time throughout the rest of the film and concludes the entire story at the end. The naivety with which Dale comments on the images and events on screen is one of the main sources of humour in the film. When the camera shows that the Kerrigans' house is right next to a runway and a power line, Dale states:

And we're right next door to the airport. It will be very convenient if we ever have to fly one day. Dad still can't work out how he got it so cheap. It's worth almost as much today as when we bought it. Our street was going to be the heart of a major housing development. But it never took off. They reckon the planes put people off. Them and the power lines. Not Dad. He reckons power lines are a reminder of man's ability to generate electricity. He's always saying great things like that²².

Dale's unreliability as a narrator concerns not so much the facts on the level of the presented world as their interpretation and evaluation: what would be a disadvantage

²⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

²¹ *The Castle*, Miramax Film, 1997.

²² Ibid.

to an average viewer is presented as an advantage. Although Dale states at the beginning that this is his story, his narration is limited to commentary and the story itself unfolds independently of him so that the viewer does not get the impression that what he or she sees has been filtered through his consciousness. Consequently, discrepancies between voice-over narration and the images produce only partial unreliability, resulting from the clash between the two aspects of filmic narration being developed in parallel.

Fully unreliable narration can be achieved in a film when it is constructed in such a way that the viewers get the impression that both what they see and what they hear is a record of a story presented from a subjective point of view²³. The primary way to achieve this effect is through the use of a frame narrative, which presents a communicative situation and introduces a character who tells a story. A 1995 detective film *Usual suspects*, for instance, opens with a scene of a mysterious murder and an explosion on a ship. In the next shot, the audience sees the scene of a police interrogation of the petty thief Verbal, who is one of the two survivors of the explosion depicted at the beginning. He begins to explain that the explosion was the culmination of a sequence of events that began six weeks earlier and his voice-over commentary accompanies images depicting these events. From then on, the film develops two plotlines in parallel: the investigation into the explosion, the focus of which is Verbal's interrogation, and retrospection depicting the sequence of events that led up to it. Verbal's occasional voice-over indicates that the reconstruction of events we see is based on his testimony. As befits its genre, the final scenes of *Usual suspects* force both the police detectives and the viewers to completely revise their previous conclusions about what happened on the ship and it is precisely unreliable narration that is the basic element of the game the viewer is drawn into. What the viewers took for reconstruction turns out to be fabrication, deliberate manipulation on Verbal's part.

Just as in literary narratives, the question of narrative (un)reliability can also be introduced in film by presenting the same events from several points of view. The best-known example of such a composition is Akira Kurosawa's 1951 film *Rashomon*, often evoked as an instance of unreliable narration²⁴. It presents the story of the robbery of a samurai and his wife from four different, mutually exclusive perspectives of the three participants and an eyewitness to the events, introduced by means of a frame story and voice-over narration, signaling the transition to the next version of events. While in *Usual Suspects* unreliable narration is merely an element of the play with the audience and the conventions of the crime story, in *Rashomon* it becomes an element of cinematic reflection on the nature of truth and human egoism.

²³ Ferenz, V., Fight clubs, American psychos and Mementos: *the scope of unreliable narration in film*, "New Review of Film and Television Studies", vol. 3, no. 2, 2006.

²⁴ Currie, G., *Unreliability refigured: narrative in literature and film*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", vol. 53, no. 1, 1995, p. 22.

Conclusion

As can be seen, in both literature and film one can find many examples of narrative design forcing the recipient to reflect on the reliability of the perspective adopted in a given work. The use of unreliable narration can serve a number of functions: it can be an element of a paradoxically reliable representation of the protagonist's disturbed psyche, a component of a sophisticated game with the viewer, or a basis for philosophical reflection on the nature of truth. This technique seems to be particularly popular in contemporary culture and can be construed as another stage in the development of narrative forms, transcending the familiar patterns of omniscient narration towards more complex forms of representation. Seen in a broader, social context, the readers' and viewers' encounters with unreliable narration allow them to acquire competence required to recognize and resolve distorted accounts of reality, a set of skills necessary in this day and age of fake news and post-truth.

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Summary: This article demonstrates that the category of unreliable narration can be fruitfully applied to both narrative fiction and film. Taking as its starting point Wayne Booth's canonical definition of the narrative technique in question, the first part of the article identifies two major strands in narratological research into unreliable narration: rhetorical, represented by James Phelan, and cognitive, developed by Ansgar Nünning. The major aspects of their respective conceptualisations are juxtaposed with examples adduced from narrative fiction in English, with particular attention being paid to problematic elements in their understanding of this literary technique. The second part of the article discusses, in turn, unreliable narration in film. Such devices as voice-over, frame narrative and multiple points of view can indicate that a perspective from which a particular sequence of events is presented cannot be trusted and thus endow a particular film with qualities of unreliable narration. Taken together, the novelistic and filmic instances discussed in this article demonstrate relevance of this narrative device for contemporary culture.

Keywords: unreliable narration, narratology, narrative fiction, film, modern fiction in English

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