CIN105 (Summer 2025)
9 – Narration

Housekeeping

Lecture

In order to kick off our discussion of narration, I want to start today by reading something that filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock once said during an interview with fellow filmmaker and film critic Francois Truffaut.

SLIDE

READ quotation

There is a distinct difference between "suspense" and "surprise," and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. I'll explain what I mean.

We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let's suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, "Boom!" There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions, the same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: "You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There is a bomb beneath you and it is about to explode!"

In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed.

In this quotation Hitchcock speaks to the heart of the matter of narration and in the process helps us understand how our topic this week builds quite naturally upon our topic from last week.

[**slide**]

Last week, in the process of discussing style, I showed you all a number of clips that served to illustrate the fact that a certain bit of narrative action -- for example, a conversation between two people -- can be represented in any number of ways.

[**slide**]

Moreover, I stressed that while all of those ways may **denote** the same thing, they may differ appreciably in terms of their **connotations**.

Denotation is what is depicted at the basic level of representation; connotation is how that representation might be interpreted.

In other words, these scenes may differ appreciably in terms of the kinds of meanings they generate in addition to the literal meaning of "two people are talking to each other."

This week we will be doing something quite similar since we will once again be thinking about the multiple ways a film could possibly represent its narrative action in order to assess their diverse effects.

When we do so, however, what we will be concerned with first and foremost is knowledge.

SLIDE

This week we're reading an excerpt from film scholar Edward Branigan, and he notes that to study narration is to study the way a film "regulat[es] our access to a fluctuating field of information" (68)

In other words, it demands posing the following question to ourselves as we watch a movie: "How is it possible for us to possess the knowledge we come to possess in a narrative?"

This is a question we have asked over and over as we have considered the various elements of film style and the way they each uniquely contribute to the transmission of information we as viewers receive. Another way to frame this might be: how does this flux of transmission constantly reshape my understanding of what is happening, what might come next, and what came before?

SLIDE

So let's figure out what that means by returning to our quotation from Hitchcock.

What we see in that quotation is that Hitchcock is comparing two possible ways of representing a certain situation: one wherein two characters are sitting at a table under which is located a bomb that will go off in 15 minutes.

One way of representing this action entails keeping the spectator in the dark about the bomb's presence so that we, like the characters whom the bomb is targeting, are surprised by its explosion.

The second one involves providing the spectator with information about the bomb so that we, *unlike* the film's characters, are expecting its eventual explosion

Obviously Hitchcock, who was known throughout his career as the "master of suspense," preferred the second manner of representation.

After all, if we know the bomb is there but the characters don't, what is being cultivated effectively is suspense, and hence spectatorial involvement, by way of a mixture of anticipation and dread on the part of the viewer.

Despite this preference, however, the two approaches are equally viable. They just constitute different ways of telling a story and thereby different ways of positioning the spectator in relation to that story.

So, this all leads us back to the definition of narration that I presented you all with during the third week of this course, during our week dedicated to narrative.

SLIDE

T**he process by which story information is made available to us via the plot**

As we review this definition it would benefit us to remember the distinction between **story and plot.** To review, while **story** encompasses the entire narrative of a film, incorporating both those events which are actually depicted on screen and those which we infer as having, **plot** refers to the ordering and presentation of those events as they occur in the film.

Put another way, **plot** is the **actual arrangement of narrative material** which the film makes available to us, while the **story** is what we construct from the plot provided.

So then, again as a reminder, what is the distinction between **plot and narration**?

Well, while plot refers to those story events that are directly or explicitly represented in a film, **narration** refers to **the *manner*** in which those story events are presented to us.

[**slide**]

In other words, narration involves not just **what the plot presents** to us, but also **how it does so**.

It is precisely this "how" that lets us know that when we are talking about narration we are also talking about style.

For an example of what I am talking about, we need only think through the two hypothetical options Hitchcock presents more carefully

Imagine that, in the story at hand, the anarchist approached the table before his targets were seated at it in order to plant the bomb

In the suspenseful version of the scene shots detailing this action would be included while, in the surprise one, they wouldn't.

In other words, the two renditions would differ in terms of whether certain story material -- that is, the anarchist's actions prior to the arrival of his targets -- made it into the plot.

Alternately, however, it is conceivable that the anarchist could have planted the bomb while his targets were already seated, somehow managing to divert their attention and remain undetected.

In this case the difference between the suspenseful and the surprise renditions of the scene would depend on style

For example, with a long shot, the film could simultaneously convey all of the pertinent story information, including the actions of both the anarchist and his targets

If, in contrast, the targets were being filmed in a shot-reverse shot sequence composed exclusively of medium close-ups, the film would then fail to show us the area under the table and thus the actions of the anarchist

So, a component of style -- namely, shot scale -- would be determining how much information the viewer has access to over the course of the scene

But importantly, so would every single element of style that we've covered so far, in one way or another. They are all working in tandem to determine not just *what* we see and hear, but *how* we see and hear it.

[**slide**]

Based on this second scenario, we can say narration is precisely that thing that serves to link the narrative system – story and plot – and the stylistic system, our two distinct formal systems that interact to produce an individual film's unique form

Narration puts style in the service of telling us a story

And narration uses style to realize, to bring into being, or to represent a film's plot.

So, when we are trying to analyze a film's narration, we need to be thinking about the stylistic **choices that a filmmaker has made in any given scene in order to regulate our access to information *at any given moment*.**

AND we need to be thinking about the way the filmmaker has distilled a story into a plot in order regulate our access to information *across the entirety of a film.*

Now, I will be the first to admit that talking about narration in general or abstract terms can get quite confusing, so what we need to do now is get concrete.

And the way we are going to do so is by discussing some tools we can use to analyze narration. We'll also be invoking a number of filmic examples to illustrate different approaches to narration.

SLIDE

Means of analyzing narration

In order to think through issues of narration this week we are going to use certain terms and strategies developed by a scholar named **Meir Sternberg** in relation to literature and then adapted to the study of cinema by **David Bordwell.**

To be specific, we are going to analyze narration in terms of three factors: knowledge, communicativeness, and self-consciousness

[slide]

KNOWLEDGE

SLIDE

Simply put, knowledge pertains to **how much and what kind of information** the narration provides and it is typically described in terms of two dimensions that you all are already familiar with: **range and depth.**

This should all look familiar to you since we discussed this for the first time back in our week dedicated to narrative. So just to review:

In terms of the **range of knowledge** a film produces, the range of information it offers, it can run the gamut from restricted to unrestricted

We say that the narration of a film is **restricted** if it deliberately limits our knowledge to that possessed by a single character. In an extreme case, our knowledge might even be less than that of a single character.

In contrast, we call narration **unrestricted** if our knowledge is greater than that of the characters, if it includes information about events and people outside of their experience, things the characters couldn't possibly know.

[slide]

Returning to the Hitchcock quotation with which we started lecture, we can say that the surprise scenario, the one in which the viewer has no awareness of the bomb under the table, is an illustration of restricted narration. We have the same knowledge range as the characters at the table.

While the suspense scenario, the one in which the viewer is aware of the bomb and thus besieged by anxious anticipation, is an illustration of unrestricted narration.

[**slide**]

In terms of the films we've seen this semester, two that might illustrate these extremes could be *The Player* for restricted narration and *Do the Right Thing* for unrestricted. Why?

NOTE: In the second instance, with *Do the Right Thing*, we don't know absolutely everything about these characters, but that isn't necessary. The point is our knowledge is not limited to one or even only a couple characters, we get information from the perspective of several different characters living in the neighbourhood, in bouncing around between different perspectives we possess more knowledge in total than any one of the characters does themselves.

[**slide**]

When it comes to **depth of narration**, we say that a film engages in subjective narration if the type of information it presents us with is that related to a **character's interiority** or to the world as seen through their eyes.

While we say a film engages in objective narration if the information presented pertains to the external world and is experienced from a **disembodied perspective.**

Very often films vacillate between subjective and objective narration in an ongoing and dynamic manner. These are not terms that often describe an entire film but terms that are in flux – one shot to the next could change the depth of narration we are receiving.

For example, a scene involving only one character may cut from a long shot of that character to a point of view shot from that character's perspective and thereby may move from objective to subjective narration freely.

OR, we may see a dream sequence, which gives us access to a character's anxieties or preoccupations, within the context of a film that otherwise tends to view that character from afar.

These kinds of scenarios are quite common.
But perhaps the best way to illustrate subjective and objective narration is by thinking about them in their most extreme form

To that end let me show you a clip illustrating the subjective end of this continuum

[**slide**]

SHOW CLIP from The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is a film about a man who has a stroke and develops locked-in syndrome, he is almost completely paralyzed except for the blinking of his eye.

SLIDE

What you see in this clip is the combination of the two stylistic techniques that are most readily associated with subjective narration: **point of view shots** and **internal sound that produces a voice-over effect.** The intended effect is for the entire stylistic system to be interpreted as representing this character's subjective experience.

In contrast to the clip we just watched, probably the most extreme example of objective narration would be footage caught on a surveillance camera, footage produced by a camera that occupies a position that is inaccessible to any of the characters featured in the footage and that is thus in no way associated with a body on screen.

A good example of such footage can be seen in this clip from the movie Yes

CLIP

Objective narration presents a relatively distanced account of narrative events or an account of narrative events that relies on the external

appearance of those events. We don't see things from a character's point of view but from a removed, semi-objective perspective, observing their actions from outside their perspective.

SLIDE

Before we move on to the next factor we need to take into consideration, I want to note that in the reading, Edward Branigan speaks to the range and depth of narration in the course of a discussion of what he calls "disparities of knowledge."

He makes the claim the narration comes into being when knowledge is unevenly distributed among spectators and characters. So, this is another way of thinking about the possibilities we already know -- restricted and unrestricted, subjective and objective. They all distribute knowledge among spectator and characters differently.

We speak of this distribution in terms of "range" because it is always in flux, but the point is at any given time in a film there is some kind of dynamic relationship between what we know relative to what the character's of the story know, and narration is the thing that determines this relationship, and it does so purposefully for dramaturgical effect.

So if you can answer the following question, you are well on your way to understanding a film's narration: how much knowledge does the spectator have, especially in relation to that of a film's characters, at any given moment or across the entirety of that film?

This is a question that is constantly on filmmaker's minds when they craft the intended experience of their films. They do not randomly make these choices, because how an audience receives information is foundational to their understanding of the film's overall form and purpose.

Here is a clip from the Marc Maron podcast where Steven Soderbergh explains this process in his own words, from a filmmaking perspective.

[**slide**]

[slide]

COMMUNICATIVENESS

Communicativeness involves the degree to which the narration willingly supplies information when it can be made available.

In other words, the question at hand when analyzing this factor is: does the narration display a tendency to reveal whatever information it can at any given moment, or does it withhold information deliberately for some reason?

SLIDE

Let's think back to *April Story*

Initially this film withholds story information that would make the plot easier to follow, or at least more straightforward.

The information it withholds is *why* Uzuki chose to go to this particular university in Tokyo – the reason is later revealed that it was because she was following a boy she has a crush on, and the film retroactively makes more literal sense, albeit in a minor way.

The reason I chose *April Story* for our week on narrative was precisely because the stakes of this reveal are minor. The information being withheld does not need to be as dramatic as a bomb under a table. The point is films are constantly playing with what they tell us vs what they do not tell us. In doing so, they can create unique effects by, as in this instance, choosing not to reveal certain information until later than it was initially relevant to our interest.

Once *April Story* reveals Uzuki's crush, her actions suddenly take on new meaning – now we understand why she continues to return to the bookstore, for instance.

SLIDE

One film we've seen this semester that is quite communicative, on the other hand, is *Dreadnaught*. In this film we actually, at all times, understand all of the character's motivations, even when they themselves do not understand the competing motivations of eachother. We know painted face's backstory even when the other character's don't, so we understand his actions while the other characters are often confused. For instance, in this sequence, we know that painted face is being triggered to violence by the sound of Mousey's bells, a family heirloom he carries around, because of the association of the noise with the murder of painted face's wife. Mousey doesn't know this, which leads to a comical silent comedy-esque chase sequence.

While the motivations in this film may be relatively simple, given the emphasis of the film is on action and comedy and not on narrative complexity, the point would be the film is open in its communication of *why* things are happening at most times when it comes to viewer knowledge. In this sequence we possess more knowledge than either of these characters, and this balance holds true for most of the film in general.

SLIDE

But let's take another example for a moment, just to consider the ways narration can be a little more complicated than that: *Millennium Mambo*, which carefully controls the information we have available at all times.

In this instance, we are clearly dealing with a film that is relatively restricted in its narration. Pretty much every sequence is either following Vicky very closely or is narrated by her in a non-simultaneous fashion, from some place ten years in the future. We do not possess information that she does not – a great example being, for instance, when she is in the shower and the police show up to execute a search warrant of Hao-Hao's apartment, which she has no knowledge of (and neither do we, until it happens – we learn about it when she does)

That said, *Millennium Mambo* would not properly be described as highly subjective. The camera deliberately distances us from Vicky's interiority constantly, abstracting our perspective on her actions. We always follow her, but at something of a remove.

When she does provide voiceover, it is from the future, reflecting on her past actions in a way that, it is implied, she doesn't even fully understand herself. The film is asking us to observe her, but we don't know her own thoughts most of the time. This narrational choice is a huge part of what gives the film its dreamlike and lackadaisical aura. All of the stylistic tools are subordinated to underlining this type of feeling, one of nostalgia and remembrance, not of total knowledge of Vicky's internal state but of a vague understanding of her as a person in the past.

A film like *Millennium Mambo* thus illustrates the complexity at play in the range and depth of narration – one could easily imagine how the same film could have been shot and edited quite differently, such that we frequently see shots from Vicky's point of view and gain insight into her thoughts as they are happening, two choices which would completely change the feeling of the entire film.

For these reasons, as it exists, I would characterize *Millennium Mambo* as an example of at least the frequent use of **restricted objective** narration

SLIDE

But the larger point here is that you also note the difference between range of narration and communicativeness.

The restricted/unrestricted distinction is predicated on how broad our knowledge is.

The question is: does the film present information about only one character or does it provide us with information about other characters, other events, even other spaces than are extend beyond a single character and his/her experience and knowledge?

The communicative/uncommunicative distinction, in contrast, is predicated on the film's willingness to supply information when it can be made available.

To be sure, these things operate in tandem to a certain extent

Restricted narration does often involve a certain degree of uncommunicativeness since a film may very well be withholding certain information by narrowing its focus on one character.

BUT that doesn't mean that restricted narration maps perfectly onto uncommunicative narration.

SLIDE

In order to illustrate this issue of communicativeness further, let me invoke Hitchcock yet again.

As the "master of suspense," Hitchcock was particular skilled at playing with the possibilities of communicative and uncommunicative narration, often combining these two modes in dynamic ways in order to keep his spectators involved in the story at all times.

One film in which he does this is his 1964 film Marnie

Let me show you a couple of clips to illustrate what I mean

The very beginning of this film is relatively uncommunicative, and so it has this capacity to draw us in by creating an enigma out of the starting gate.

SLIDE: SHOW CLIP

Later in the film, however, once we know the identity of our thief and follow her to a new work situation, he gives us all the information we need to anticipate her future actions and thus get caught up in the film's suspense.

SLIDE: SHOW CLIP

So we are following one character, we have restricted access of knowledge to this character, but the film becomes more communicative.

Before we leave this topic of communicativeness, I'll share one more example from a film that is both quite famous and infamous, because it illustrates the degree to which narration can be intentionally extremely uncommunicative.

S**HOW CLIP of <u>The Silence of the Lambs</u>**

[[[QQQ: How would we describe what is going on here, in terms of style and, by extension, narration?]]]

It is unrestricted in that we get access to everything that is happening, and it is relatively objective, but through editing, it withholds vital information. We don't know that the FBI and Clarice are entering different houses at the same time. By being uncommunicative, we are surprised and horrified when we learn that Clarice has entered the serial killer's house without any back-up.

<u>[slide] SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS</u>

And now onto our final factor.

The manner in which narration announces its recognition of its address to the audience is a question of self-consciousness.

Another term we will use and have used to describe this quality is "reflexiveness" – we say a film is self-reflexive to indicate the idea that it is, in part, reflecting on itself as a film. Narration is key here – narration can indicate the degree to which a film, for lack of a better term, displays a consciousness of its own design.

This is always a matter of degree, but extreme self-consciousness is usually signaled by some overt demonstration of the film's power to supply information.

SLIDE

A good example of this is direct address, or breaking the fourth wall, something we have spoken out previously in this class.

An excellent example of this is *Do the Right Thing*, the film we watched on Thursday but did not have time to discuss because I was not feeling well. Think about this scene.

[clip]

Here, the film uses self-conscious narration to assault us as spectators and directly implicate us in the film's frank discussion of racism in America. We could quibble with the exact effect that this use of self-consciousness actually has, but the point is in this moment the film is breaking conventions of continuity intentionally to draw attention to its own status as a text that has something to say about racism.

It wants you, the viewer, to think about the fact that you are watching a movie, and to overtly think about the message that the movie is intended to deliver. It wants to pull you OUT of immersion, the opposite of the desire for total immersion that the continuity system, which most of the film adheres to, typically strives for.

Another director who takes this kind of self-conscious narrative to its extreme is Wes Anderson – I'll just show you one example from his body of work. Here, the use of self-consciousness is obviously put toward very different ends.

SHOW CLIP from <u>Fantastic Mr. Fox</u>

As far as the opposite of self-conscious narration, there is no specific term reserved for such a thing. This is largely because most narration is not that self-conscious – it strives to suck you into the story and therefore intentionally effaces its own construction as much as possible.

So, if we had to label the opposite, we might just call it “un-self-conscious.”

Or we could borrow a term associated with continuity editing and speak of “invisible narration.”

CONCLUSION

So to wrap up this lecture on narration let me emphasize a few things

First of all, it is important to remember that narration is a process, *an ongoing process*, and therefore it is dynamic.

As a result a single film will often move *between* the various modes of narration we have been discussing since different methods of distributing story information will suit the film’s purposes better at different times.

This leads me to my second point and that has to do with the fact that the analysis of narration can happen at varying scales.

What I mean by this is that we can describe an entire film in terms of a particular narrational strategy: for example, *April Story* is *generally* characterized by restricted narration

OR we can describe a film in terms of certain scenes or sequences that lend themselves to categorization: for example, *Do the Right Thing* employs both un-self conscious and self conscious narrational sequences throughout for different effects.

Finally, we can even trace the flow of information from one shot to the next, something Edward Branigan does toward the end of the excerpt you all are reading for this week – this may be a helpful exercise for you to consider when writing your paper, so I encourage you to look at his example and try to make sense of its frankly strange use of diagrams. The point would be to consider how a film’s flux of narration, which normally we receive as a constant stream, *can* be broken down into its disparate parts, and in doing so we can come to understand better a films formal structure.

Disparities of knowledge: how does the film distribute knowledge across the film? When do we have access to knowledge about the principle characters? What knowledge do we get access to, and what knowledge is withheld?

Hierarchies of knowledge: Returning to Bordwell and Thompson, how restricted or subjective is the knowledge that we have? Does this change throughout the film? Is the film communicative or uncommunicative? Ist the narration self-conscious or not?