Unreliable Narration and Dual Perspective: Comments on Emar Maier

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In *Unreliability and Point of View in Filmic Narration*, Emar Maier makes a distinction between reliable and unreliable narrators. The latter, Maier claims, must be a first-person narrator, as an impersonal, third-person narrator lacks an individual perspective that can be unreliable (with some exceptions he sets aside). He concludes that most film adaptations of unreliably narrated novels are not themselves unreliably narrated, for they feature third person perspectives (not through the novel's narrator's eyes). I take Maier's major claims to be (1) that there is a strict distinction between reliable and unreliable narration; and (2) that film shots displaying both a character and that character's hallucinations are not unreliable narration. I will challenge both.

Keywords: narration, coherence, point of view, Moore's paradox

Ненадежное повествование и двойственная перспектива: комментарий к Э. Майеру

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В статье «Ненадежность и точка зрения в кинематографическом повествовании» Эмар Майер проводит различие между надежным и ненадежным рассказчиком. Последний, утверждает Майер, должен вести рассказ от первого лица, в то время как безличному рассказчику, повествующему от третьего лица, не хватает индивидуальной перспективы и его рассказ может быть ненадежным (за некоторыми исключениями, которые остаются в стороне). Майер приходит к выводу, что большинство киновоплощений ненадежно рассказанных романов сами по себе не являются рассказанными ненадежно лишь потому, что в них используется перспектива третьего лица (а не перспектива того, кто излагает сам роман). На мой взгляд, основные положения Майера таковы: (1) существует строгое различие между надежным и ненадежным повествованием, (2) кадры фильма, на которых изображен как персонаж, так и его галлюцинация, не являются недостоверным повествованием. Я возражаю на оба эти положения.

Ключевые слова: повествование, согласованность, точка зрения, парадокс Мура

1. All Narrators Are Unreliable

The classical case of an unreliable narrator is one who describes persons, things or events that, within the context of the fictional universe, do not exist or did not happen (as in, famously, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* or Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*). But we find other examples of

unreliable narrators across the literature. The narrator of the first part of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, for example, is unreliable *by omission*. He does not seem to report anything factually incorrect but appears to leave out many relevant details. This makes him an unreliable narrator, as the reader may not be given the, as it were, full story. Omitted facts, once included, might result in a radically different interpretation of the fictional events. The reader is left wondering about what is omitted, why, and how it might change the story. Relatedly, we find narrators who report true (in the fiction) facts but offer mistaken interpretations. A classic example is the titular character of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, who interprets the events of the novel with childish naivete.

For formal precision, consider coherence theory (see, e.g., [Hobbs, 1979; Asher & Lascarides, 2003; Kehler, 2002]). In brief, coherence theory considers the contents of individual sentences to be *elementary narrative units* that connect by *coherence relations*. A coherence relation specifies how two narrative units combine to form a meaningful whole whose meaning is more than the sum of its parts. For example, neither of the sentences *I had a great dinner tonight* and *I made steak* entail on their own that the speaker ate steak for dinner. But in sequence, *I had a great dinner tonight. I made steak.* appears to convey that the speaker ate steak. This, according to coherence theory, is because the two sentences *combine to form a narrative* that has content beyond the sum of the contents of its constituent sentences. How exactly sentences combine to narratives is often underspecified. The sequence *Jane left. Mary cried.* admits at least two interpretations. First, the one where Jane's leaving *resulted in* Mary's crying (the coherence relation *Result*). Second, the one where Jane could not stand Mary's crying and *for that reason* left (the coherence relation *Explanation*).

Adopting the terminology of coherence theory, we can classify unreliable narrators as follows. The first type, as in *Fight Club* or *American Psycho*, presents a narrative in which the contents of some elementary units are false (in the fiction). The second type, as in *Gone Girl*, presents a narrative in which important elementary units are omitted. And the third type, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, presents only true elementary units without significant omissions, but offers a mistaken *narrative structure* to connect them.

Am I correct to label all three types as unreliable narrators? One could insist that only the first type is genuinely deserving of this label, as they are the only ones misrepresenting *facts* whereas the other two are merely misrepresenting *interpretation*. But this is not a useful distinction. When sentences cohere to form a narrative, the *content of the narrative* includes content that is not present in the elementary units, but is only contributed by their combination. One way to appreciate this point is to observe that this content is up for discussion and disagreement. For example, if one speaker opines that *Coffee is amazing. The fruity bitterness.*

they are putting forward *fruity bitterness* as the reason for coffee being amazing, although they do not literally say so. Rather, this interpretation is obtained by connecting the sentences by *Explanation*. Nevertheless, this non-explicit content is up for disagreement, as someone may respond *It is amazing and it is fruity and bitter, but it is amazing despite the bitterness, not because of it*. (See [Lascarides & Asher, 2009] and [Asher & Lascarides, 2013] for related discussion on this point.) Thus, the content of a narrative contains, with equal importance, the content of its constituent sentences and the content contributed by their combination. Unreliability about the content of the sentences and unreliability about their combination is the same kind of unreliability, namely unreliability about the narrative's content. All three types of narrators deserve the label *unreliable*.

One this point is acknowledged, we can see that any narrator can in principle be unreliable. A narration is, by necessity, a *selection* of facts to be presented and, except in extreme cases of emotional detachment, an *interpretation* of these facts. Any selection and any interpretation, even done by an omniscient narrator, may be suspected of omission or misinterpretation. The literature is ripe with works that treat a prior work as being unreliable in this way. Famously, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is written from a perspective that treats the Old Testament as unreliably narrated.

2. Dual Perspective

A third-person narrator is not necessarily unbiased. Many third-person narratives are narrated *from the perspective* of a character in the narrative, but without this character being explicitly the narrator. Famously, this is the case in the *Harry Potter* novels that are almost entirely narrated from the biased (and in the early installments, naive) perspective of the titular character. A distinctive example of this technique can be found in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* cycle. Each chapter is written in the third person but takes the perspective of a particular character. These characters may be mistaken about certain facts or offer idiosyncratic interpretations of the facts. A clear example are the chapters narrated from the perspective of the character Davos Seaworth. This character is a fiercely loyal follower of one of the pretenders to the throne, Stannis Baratheon. In Davos's chapters, Stannis's deeds are reported accurately (as far as one can tell) but Stannis's misdeeds may be omitted or put in a positive light. Reading other chapters reveals that Davos's perception of Stannis is idiosyncratic, and his interpretation is likely misguided.

Davos is an unreliable narrator. Another example of this kind of third person unreliable narrator is the titular character of Jane Austen's *Emma*, who (early in the novel) offers only naive interpretations of her circumstances. An objection has it that these perspectival narrations from the third

person are actually long stretches of free indirect discourse. I think this is unlikely, as such narratives *contain* free indirect discourse from the perspective of their point of view character. Here is an example from *A Song of Ice and Fire*, where, in a chapter from Davos's perspective, his thoughts are presented in free indirect discourse.

(1) "I need the torch." His hands opened and closed. I will not beg her. I will not.

If the whole chapter is free indirect discourse, this is free indirect discourse embedded in free indirect discourse, reporting the attitudes of the same character. This seems nonsensical. So, the overall chapter from Davos's perspective is not just a long stretch of free indirect discourse, as *within* this chapter, free indirect discourse has a distinct literary purpose.

The existence of third-person unreliable narration by itself not a problem for Maier. His argument proceeds from the observation that some shots in *Fight Club*, the film adaption of the novel, are shot from a perspective that *cannot be* the perspective of the character who unreliably narrates the book. In one shot in *Fight Club*, Maier points out, we see both the character narrating the book and one of his hallucinations. It appears absurd to say that the narration is from the perspective of a particular character (due to the presence of his hallucination) *and also* is presenting a perspective that cannot be that character's (due to himself being visible). But the appearance is misleading. In third person unreliable narration, it is not uncommon to mix the characters perspective with the perspective of an observer. The following is an example from *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

(2) A man grows lonely in the dark, and hungers for the sound of a human voice. Davos would talk to the gaolers whenever they came to his cell.

The first sentence in (2) is not the perspective of the point of view character Davos. It is offered, from the perspective of an observer, as an explanation of the character's perspective. Moreover, we find mixtures of observer's perspectives with narrator perspective even in first-person narration. The following is an example from Bret Easton Ellis's *The Informers*.

(3) She lights a joint I mistake for a cigarette.

This example is, on its face, a *Moore paradox*, a sentence that can be true, but cannot be asserted [Moore, 1942]. To say that *I mistake this joint for a cigarette* is as absurd as the classical Moore paradox, *this is a joint but I don't believe that it is a joint*. But the classical Moore paradox is typically taken to be incomprehensible, eliciting a response like *I don't know what you are trying to convey* (see [Baker & Woods, 2015] for discussion). In contrast, the sentence (3) is perfectly comprehensible

in the context of the novel. (Are, hence, narratives not sequences of ordinary assertions, interpreted fictionally? If they were, the same assertibility-conditions should hold, including those that render Moore paradoxes uninterpretable. A question for another time.)

To pre-empt an objection: (3) is not reasonably read as a loose talk version of the past tensed *She lights a joint I <u>mistook</u> for a cigarette*. The novel is narrated in a present-tense stream of consciousness style and there is no indication that the narrator is relating past events, enriched with later acquired knowledge. Rather, I suggest that (3) is akin to the shot from *Fight Club* discussed above. The narrative in (3) is *simultaneously* from the first-person perspective of the narrating character – *She lights a cigarette* is the false report of an unreliable narrator – and from a perspective outside the narrator, as *She lights a joint* is not perceived by the character. The abstract perspective that a narrator can take is therefore not confined to any character's perspective, even in first-person narration. The narrator is not a character in a story, even if they are the same person.

This is analogous to the situation in *Fight Club* observed by Maier, where the narrator (the camera) takes a perspective outside the narrating character but is still taking that characters point of view (hence his hallucination being visible). This means that Maier has not identified a significant difference between unreliable narration in literature and film. In either medium, narrators can take such *dual perspectives*. There remains a salient difference, however. Example (3) reveals the unreliability of the narrator, whereas the dual perspective scene from *Fight Club* does not. But is the difference significant? On the face of it, it appears possible to reveal the narrator to be unreliable by clever cinematography in film. In literature, as noted above, an unreliable narrator can take the shape of narration in the third person, mixing observer's and point of view character's perspectives, but without revealing the narration to be unreliable. Dual perspectives abound in either medium.

> "Is it not miraculous, reader,
> the power of the mind to believe and not believe at once?"
> – Ada Palmer, *Too Like the Lightning*

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