

# CONVENTION, COHERENCE AND CONTROL\*

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As Maier's aim is to extend the notion of unreliable narration onto film, this reply focuses on the consequences of the difference between textual and filmic narration. Textual fiction imitates, or at least uses the resources typical of, a true textual description of events, which is itself highly conventional in that it uses arbitrary linguistic signs and chooses to describe those properties of objects and events that matter to the author, leaving the remainder unspecified. On the contrary, filmic narration imitates the perception of real events of which the watcher is supposed to be witness. Even if the arrangement of frames is conventional (as Maier insists), the content of a particular frame is presented to the observer as if the latter happened to be at the scene, thus in the totality of its detail; and the connection between the object filmed and its depiction in film is causal rather than conventional. Moreover, it is natural even for non-fictional texts to describe the scene in some rhetorically plausible order, whereas a real-life scene presented to our sight by pure chance need not follow any coherent plot.

**Keywords:** coherence relations, fiction, film, first-person perception, underspecification

# КОНВЕНЦИЯ, СВЯЗНОСТЬ И КОНТРОЛЬ

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Поскольку цель Э. Майера состоит в распространении понятия ненадежного рассказчика на сферу кинематографии, мы исследуем трудности, обусловленные различиями между текстовым и визуальным повествованием. Художественное повествование притворяется описанием действительно бывших событий, которое и само всегда конвенционально, поскольку использует произвольные языковые знаки и поскольку отображает только те детали, которые рассказчик полагает важными. Кино же помещает зрителя в положение, в котором обычно находится наблюдатель самого события (а не рассказа о нем). Пусть даже монтаж, как настаивает Майер, представляет собой конвенциональный язык – всё равно в пределах кадра все предметы даны в полноте своих свойств и связь между предметом на съемочной площадке и его образом в фильме каузальная, а не конвенциональная. Кроме того, даже описания реальных ситуаций могут быть риторически выстроены (и в этом смысле мало отличаются от вымысла), тогда как реальные события, которые мы по случайности наблюдаем воочию, могут не иметь связного сюжета.

**Ключевые слова:** риторические отношения, вымысел, кино, перспе́ктива первого лица, недоопределенность

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The question of the reliability of the narrator *sensu stricto*, Maier says, presupposes that the narrator is first-person. The first-person narrator in written fiction is nevertheless sufficiently distinct from the reader, and it is often not required for proper understanding that the reader should recite or imagine herself reciting the story written in the first person. On the other hand, in film the first-person perspective of the camera forces some degree of identification – mitigated perhaps by the presence of objects external to the movie (e.g. the backs of the heads of the watchers in the first rows) in the visual field. The present note explores some consequences of this disparity<sup>1</sup> for the functions of the narrator in film.

As Maier notes, one should not think of film as merely footage of real events, either occurring naturally or staged for the purpose of filming. Indeed, his view of film likens it to “a kind of language, in which we tell stories through the presentation of a deliberate sequence of basic, meaningful building blocks (shots) that viewers connect into a coherent story via a process of coherence-based inferences”. No claim about the nature of shots is made though: it is consistent with the professed view that a shot is a straightforward depiction of a particular moment in the development of the staged events. Of course a certain amount of decoding of the spatial arrangement of the scene from the two-dimensional frame is required, but it is no less required to reconstruct a real-life scene from a sketch or a photograph, or the future appearance of a piece of furniture from the schematic depiction in the brochure supplied along with its disassembled parts. Moreover, the placement of the viewpoint for the given shot as well as the choice of the object(s) in focus happen at the director’s will and are therefore more than a “faithful” portrayal of the scene – for the simple reason that the scene dictates no single natural choice. Nevertheless it is here, in the nature of an isolated shot, that an important difference between film and spoken or written narrative lies.

Similar to the film as a sequence of shots, a verbal text too can be decomposed into quanta of communication, be it paragraphs, sentences or more elementary discourse units roughly corresponding to clauses. In the limiting case, each such unit will correspond to its own moment of time in the sequence of events; in another limiting case, they will all contribute to an elaborate articulation of the same scene. But regardless of those differences, almost never is a textual description expected by the hearer or reader to be exhaustive with respect to the scene it is supposed to describe; so an infinite diversity of possible realisations, all verifying the same sequence of descriptive statements, can be imagined. Thus any situation, and indeed any object, featuring in a text of fiction belongs to the kind represented by Sherlock Holmes in the following passage from Dennett [1992]: “Did Sherlock Holmes have a mole on his left shoulder blade? The answer to this question is neither yes nor no. There is

<sup>1</sup> Animation could be an intermediate case: it employs vision, but lacks veridicality.



simply no fact of the matter. Why? Because Sherlock Holmes is a merely fictional character...” Everything – save perhaps for such Platonic entities as numbers or geometrical forms – is descriptively underdetermined in a verbal text; but the part of the scene caught on camera is as fully determined as anything the naked eye can see in real life.<sup>2</sup>

I take this difference to be the consequence of the much more conventional nature of linguistic communication: in film, one carefully arranges the scene and the viewpoint to implement a fictional reality, but the transition from this arrangement to the shot on the screen will not follow any convention; it will just follow the causal chain. In written or oral text, not only the scenes and their arrangement are the prerogative of the author, but also the choice of which properties thereof to describe and which linguistic means to employ for the description.

This brings me to a related issue. The change of viewpoint and of the scene in film, just like the change of topic in text, happens voluntarily, and so does in real life the change of our visual field (with the exception of unconscious eye movements and involuntary reactions e.g. to novel visual stimuli). By changing the location of my body, by moving my head around, or just by controlled movement of my eyes I can bring different objects into my sight and, by switching from one to another, create “narrative paths”. However, unless the environment is well-known to me and relatively stable (e.g. the inside of my apartment), I have little control over what I will see when my sight moves in the planned direction. To the extent the camera imitates human sight (or is presumed by the viewer to be so doing), it suffers from the same lack of control. Even if the camera is tracing the movement of the local protagonist in a way physically possible for a human observer (e.g. not passing through walls or crossing the space between rooftops through the air), the viewer is entitled to an expectation which is often absent from real-life observations – namely, that the protagonist’s future movements will in some important or noticeable way continue her previous behaviour, or that the pattern of her future actions will stand in a relation of parallelism, or perhaps contraposition, to that of her past ones. Similarly, if the next shot has a new protagonist this should mean that the actions of that new protagonist will be reactions to, or a reflection of, the actions hitherto observed. And this once again distinguishes the craft of a movie watcher from the ordinary use of human vision.

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<sup>2</sup> There are other sorts of underdetermination in film. One has to do with the viewer’s inability to complete her perception of objects by changing her viewpoint to actualise some parts of the “infinities of further possible experience” [Husserl, 1960 (1929), p. 62)] of the same object. Another, as Abusch [2020] notes, has to do with various projection possibilities. Yet the difference between text and film remains: whatever you do see, i.e. the visual content of the visible field, cannot be further specified.



By contrast, the textual narrator, *either of fiction or of non-fiction*, enjoys the privilege of knowing in advance what is going to follow, and therefore of being able to plan ahead the choice of the topic and of the pieces of information about the topic she is going to reveal. This, I would like to argue, can play a significant role in the establishment of coherence relations across the text. For example, if Scene 2 is described just after Scene 1, the writer can take advantage of their parallel physical structure or select the features of Scene 2 in such a way that its description looks parallel to the description of Scene 1. Given that any textual description is deliberate and selective in the sense explained above, the pertinent selectiveness and deliberation in text are not perceived as anything unusual or for the most part absent from non-fiction; therefore, the writer's choice, while being more openly her own, is less manifestly artificial as even a faithful account of real events bears on the author's selective intention. In film the camera's prescience of what is going to be seen next is more ostensibly different from natural gaze or documentary footage and thus more clearly understood as a tool for the creation of artistic effect.

The oral or written text, as it is commonly perceived, cannot even pretend to be an impartial and automatic causal imprint of the events it describes. A photographic pictorial representation, whether static or moving, can. Because of this, all instances of coincidence and coherence in film may have a greater degree of "reification", i.e. are more readily attributed to the (fictional) reality rather than to the viewpoint. Thus one can say that the filmic narrator does part of the job the observer is used to attribute to chance: a writer claims something to have happened, a director, to have happened and to have been luckily observed. Whether or not factually *reliable*, the narrator in film is, therefore, instinctively *relied upon* in more respects by the audience than in verbal communication.

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