

WHAT IS UNRELIABLE IN FICTION AND WHERE IT COMES FROM?*

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Maier's article recalls the idea of finding common ground between different points of view on the truth in fiction and the problem of reliability that it generates. However, the criteria by which it is possible to determine the characteristics of the reliability or unreliability in the artistic narrative are unclear. A naïve-realistic approach leads to contradictions. We propose to proceed from the already established approaches to the problem of "truth in fiction", and consider as determining for the modal pragmaseantics of narrative the concept of narrator bifurcated between the actual and fictional worlds.

Keywords: truth in fiction, unreliable narrator, poetics of cinema, speaker in fiction, modal semantics

ЧТО ЕСТЬ “НЕНАДЕЖНОЕ” В ВЫМЫСЛЕ И ОТКУДА ОНО?

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Статья Майера напоминает об идее нахождения точек соприкосновения между различными концепциями *истины в вымысле* и вытекающей отсюда проблеме недоверности/ненадежности повествования. Однако неясны критерии, по которым можно определить характеристики надежности/ненадежности повествователя и повествования в художественном нарративе. Наивно-реалистический подход приводит к противоречиям. Мы предлагаем исходить из уже сложившихся подходов к проблеме «истина в вымысле» и основываться на факторе раздвоенного между мирами вымысла и актуальным миром нарратора как определяющего модальную прагмасемантику текста.

Ключевые слова: истина в вымысле, ненадежный повествователь, поэтика кино, фактор говорящего, модальная семантика

Maier's article recalls an idea to find common ground between different points of view on the problem of truth in fiction and the problem of reliability.

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bility that it generates, as it can be presented from the standpoint of poetics, linguistics, and logic. As a rule, it is considered in relation to a literary text. The transfer of this problem to the cinematography and, more broadly, to iconic semiosis promises an exciting continuation. Although the iconic models underlie Wittgenstein's picture theory of language and the correspondent theory of truth, it is unclear what the truth conditions are when comparing a picture with some situation. Intuitively, it seems that a picture can lie – since it is a product mediated both by the consciousness of the individual and by the canons of the genre, whereas photography is always true representation. Maier extrapolates this view to film semantics, distinguishing between artistic films and documentaries: *“Film shots, at least in those basic, non-fiction contexts, are indeed much like assertive speech acts in similar contexts – the shot, like a linguistic assertion, is telling us what the world is like, and thereby commits its author to its truthfulness”* [Maier, 2022, p. 28]. Consequently, this produces the distinction that Maier follows in narratology – between first-person narratives and impersonal narratives. Is it correct and reasonable? As the main point for discussion, let us take the topic stated at the beginning:

This paper argues that for these film adaptations, ‘unreliable narration’ is a misnomer. Rather, to achieve a similar effect as the novels they are based on, these films rely on impersonal filmic narration but make heavy use of certain film conventions for attributing mental states to their characters [Maier, 2022, p. 22].

The author compares the possibilities of the manifestation of the first-person narration, which is quite natural in a novel, but in rather complex and non-apparent ways carried out in cinematography. But Maier narrows the question, and it lost its novelty – it is evident that the term *‘unreliable narration’* is a misnomer, – at the same degree, as the other concepts of narration, narrator, reliability, unreliability also may be labeled as misnomers. Their transfer from the non-artistic sphere to the artistic one changes their interpretation. Within the various artistic domains there are also different. At the same time, it is possible to elucidate general patterns of narration, and it makes such a transfer of terms from one area to another quite legitimate. The concept of “unreliable narrator”, which is also well studied; in several researches have been analyzed its applications in relation to filmic poetics [Chatman, 1978; Chatman, 1990; Kozloff, 1988; Bordwell, 1985; Currie, 1995; Zipfel, 2011; Kriel, 2015]. However, there may be discrepancies on it – what is a narrator and what is unreliable – does it refer to the narrator's persona, the content he presents, or the reaction of the audience? Each of the points of view became a ground of various competing conceptions. Still, Maier prefers to be based on a seemingly intuitively clear, but in fact, contradictory naïve-realistic concept of reliability. The above definition presumes an existence of reliable narrators and novels that *“objectively describe what the fictional world is like, but*



present that world from the impersonal, objective, and reliable point of view” (If one paraphrases Maier’s definition). But what it means to *various extents unreliable point of view* – to what extent and who should decide? The example at the very beginning of the article is seemingly obvious: Humbert’s description of Lolita seducing him. However, how did Maier could find out about what really happened and what exactly Humbert distorted in his (or Nabokov’s) narrative? Let us remind that the first who seriously developed the manifestation of an unreliable narrator in films, was Seymour Chatman, and he treated ‘unsavoury’ Humbert, but not his narrative [Chatman, 1978, p. 234].

Indeed, the very notion of non-reliability needs to be clarified – relative to what. So, from Chatman’s observation, it can be assumed that he considers the narrative reliable to describe America’s highways, while Maier’s non-reliability is about the scene of Lolita’s seduction. Can we understand that the narrative of “Lolita” is, to some extent reliable and this is – a description of highways, to some extent nonreliable – and this is the scene of Lolita’s seduction? One can agree upon it: some parts of narration, mainly impersonal, may be reliable, and some parts, mainly 1-personal, unreliable. But if Chatman could present some ground for comparison, pointing to real American roads, then what can Maier present is the “real” scene of seduction that took place in the imagination of the Nabokov that Maier imagines was a case. Or is Maier able to reconstruct the true scene of seduction, in his words – *objectively describing what the fictional world is like*.

The distinction between and first- and third-personal narratives is essential. As a rule, filmmakers find new means to convey the differences between the narrative from the first and third person. This distinction can have different semantic functionality and is not always reduced to a distinction between subjective and objective, reliable and unreliable. Paolo Pasolini, who devoted a special study to the language of cinema, came to the opposite conclusion [Pasolini, (1965) 1976, p. 4]. Pasolini lists the various differentiations of the poetic and prose (narrative) construction of the film text created such a synthesis and describes various of introducing markers of subjective and objective narrative modes. Films of Buñuel, Tarkovsky, and Parajanov are a perfect example of the possibility of demonstrating conventions *for attributing mental states to their characters* (in Mayer’s words, but opposite to his statement).

Of course, there is an essential difference: Pasolini describes filmmaker’s activity, Maier considers the concept of a narrator. His presence in the film Maier tends to associate with the voice-over technique: “*We may get a first intuitively plausible interpretation of the term ‘unreliable narrator’ in a film by relating it to the voice-over narrator*” [Maier, 2022]. This seems to be a simplification. As Chatman wrote in some detail: “The cinematic narrator is not to be identified with the voice-over narrator... The cinematic narrator is the composite of a large and complex variety of communicating devices” [Chatman, 1990, p. 134].



We see an adequate solution in abandoning naïve-realistic approach and considering the problem of a narrator, as well as reliability and/or unreliability of narration in a modal way, it may be associated with the problem of truth conditions in counterfactual worlds. Considering the question of the truth of artistic utterances, Frege proposed to consider that this criterion does not apply to them. Nevertheless, in logical semantics already in the 70s–80s, the problem of truth in fiction receives solutions – by its modal extension. Two of them are directly related to the speaker’s problem. Searle suggested that literary texts should be regarded as non-serious but pretending to be such speech acts. The narrator does not deceive – he indicates through various markers that he is carrying out a pretended speech act [Searle, 1975]. Probably, an unreliable narrator is to be someone who refuses to label his speech act in this way. Another solution was proposed by David Lewis [1978]. Truth conditions are established concerning the world in which the narrator is located. A narrator is placed in the world of the text, where, by the way, he can lie. Truth in fiction is the product of two sources: “the explicit content of the fiction, and a background consisting either of the facts about our world or of the beliefs overt in the community of origin” [Ibid., p. 44]. Apparently, its reliability should be determined in relation to the world where this story is told.

Noting some discrepancies between the topography of real and Conan Doyle’s London, Lewis does not see this as a problem: the second London is in that possible world in which the stories of Holmes are told as stories about a known fact, while the real London is in the actual world, where the same stories were told as fiction [Ibid., p. 41]. The names in the novels are not rigid designators, and the term “Paddington Station” does not denote an actual station. This does not seem obvious, and it is this that once again confirms how ambiguous the concept of reliability is. For example, it can be argued that Watson is an unreliable narrator, since he did not know the topography of actual London.

In general, if we recognize the truth in fiction as dependent on one context (“*when fiction was told for the first time*” [Lewis, 1978], then why not recognize it as context-dependent in general? A theoretical model in which truth appears as a contextual, “constantly changing” value much more closely reflects the common and documented position that each generation reads new content in the same work. Of course, there may be more complex constructions both to the problem of truth in fiction and its applications to films. This demonstrates how complicated the concept of reliability is; it depends both on characteristics of possible worlds and beliefs about the actual world and art, and both keystones are changeable and variable.

Summarizing: it can be argued that the world of the text represents the amalgam (or Kripke’s model structure) – some set of worlds differing by their ontological and modal characteristics. To interpret “War and Peace” ultimately as fiction is as erroneous as reading it as a biography of the characters described in the text. Only in the novel the meeting of Bolkonsky



with Kutuzov and his death – events of the same semantic order, through narration arises the possibility of transworld traveling – this is to trace Prince Andrew among participants in the Battle of Borodino, and Kutuzov – among fictional characters of the fictional world. Of course, the narrator factor is cardinal – it is the component from the world of the text with which an addressee can establish dialogical transworld relations. The narrator is bifurcated – he/she tells some text as fiction in the actual world, where I, its addressee, am located, but at the same time, the same text is told as a fact in the world of the narrator, and I should enter that world. In the case of cinema, such a bifurcation manifests itself as an opportunity to make look (in literal sense) into that world, in which a certain situation is given as a fact or its negation. This involves the interaction of a narrator and an addressee, considering his/her attitudes and competence in language of cinema. In general, one should proceed from the fact that cinema is a sign system, and shots are signs. Therefore, possible solutions are to be connected with the relationship between the signified and the signifier, which can take on diverse and ambiguous manifestations (lies, irony, grotesque, polysemy, etc.).

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