

## **Unreliable narration in film: A comment on Emar Maier's "Unreliability and Point of View in Filmic Narration"<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

In this short comment, I take issue with two aspects of Emar Maier's "Unreliability and Point of View in Filmic Narration". Methodologically, I argue that unreliable literary and filmic narration should not be confined to personal narrators. Furthermore, I argue that the so-called blended perspective shots under discussion should not be considered a conventional visual means for attributing mental states to characters.

### **Keywords**

literary and filmic narration, unreliable narration, personal and impersonal narrators, literary and filmic assertions, blending perspectives

### **1 Introduction**

In literary research, unreliable narration is usually defined in terms of a narrator that "presents a distorted view of the storyworld" ([Maier, 2021, p. 3], following [Booth, 1961], [Zipfel, 2011]). Correspondingly, unreliable narration can account for (certain types of) unreliable information in literary narrations. Against this background, [Maier, 2021] addresses the question of whether (certain types of) unreliable information in filmic narrations should be captured in terms of unreliable narration as well, focusing on filmic adaptations of literary narrations that (clearly) involve unreliable narration. He argues that the relevant filmic narrations do not involve unreliable narration. He proposes that, instead, the filmic narrations employ conventional visual means for attributing mental states to some prominent character of the film (independently of whether this character corresponds to the narrator of the original literary narration or not). Two means are distinguished: In so-called point of view sequences, "[t]ypically, one shot depicts a character's eyes, and the next depicts what that character is seeing" ([Maier, 2021, p. 9], following [Cumming; Greenberg; Kaiser; Kelly, 2021]). In so-called blended perspective shots, "the world [is depicted] as subjectively [...] experienced by a salient character, but from a neutral, impersonal viewpoint" ([Maier, 2021, p. 10], following [Maier; Bimpikou, 2019]). The visual information in both cases is potentially unreliable because it provides the subjective point of view of a character, either completely (second shot of point of view sequence) or partially (blended perspective shot). Correspondingly, the unreliability is not due to a narrating instance that distorts the storyworld. In the following, I will challenge the given approach by methodological notes (Section 2) and by questioning the given analysis of blended perspective shots (Section 3).

### **2 On defining unreliable narration**

The argument in favor of conventional visual means for attributing mental states to characters is accompanied by the following set of hypotheses on literary and filmic narration in general; s. [Maier, 2021, p. 2/5, p. 2/5f., p. 3]:

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Marco Blumhofer and Martin Teichert for discussion. This comment should have been published as part of a special issue on language and perception of "Epistemology & Philosophy of Science", established by the Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences. In view of the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, I have decided to put on hold its publication at the present time.

- (H1) Both literary and filmic narrations necessarily involve narrators. In literary narrations, the narrator commits to the truth of verbally given information by standard assertions; in filmic narrations, the narrator commits to the truth of visually given information by presenting shots.
- (H2) Narrators can be personal (i.e., an identifiable subject of the fictional world) or impersonal (i.e., an abstract instance to which the truth commitments according to (H1) can be ascribed). In comparison to literary narrations, filmic narrations strongly favor impersonal narrators.
- (H3) Unreliable narration necessarily involves personal narrators.

(H1) identifies a potential common core of literary and filmic narrations, namely, their being based on events of truth commitments by narrators. This has the methodological advantage that it abstracts from medial specifics and thereby facilitates a comparison between both narration types (see, however, below for qualifications regarding the content of (H1)). (H2) is undergirded by empirical observations. Specifically, filmic adaptations of literary narrations that involve personal (unreliable) narrators are said to (nearly) always involve impersonal narrators; this includes prominent cases in point such as *Trainspotting*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Fight Club*. (H3) follows from the (explicit) assumption that impersonal narrators are not “endowed with an epistemically limited viewpoint, psychological quirks, emotions, a moral compass, or personal opinion” ([Maier, 2021, p. 3]) and the additional (implicit) assumption that the unreliability of narrators needs to be rooted in an epistemically limited viewpoint, psychological quirks, or the like.

I am doubtful of this framework in the following two respects: First, (H2) and (H3) entail that filmic narrations usually do not involve unreliable narrators. If so, the distinction between reliable and unreliable narration loses its empirical relevance for the relation between the literary narrations under discussion and their filmic adaptations. It is the shift from personal to impersonal narration that matters. Of course, this reasoning does not contradict Maier’s analysis; however, the actual topic is different from what is suggested by the overall set-up of the paper.

Second, and more importantly, I am not convinced by (H3). Specifically, I do not see why unreliable narration must be bound to attitudes of narrators and, thus, to personal narrators. A more basic definition of unreliable narration would only relate to the contents of the given information and their inaccuracy, independently of whether the corresponding distortion of the storyworld is rooted in personal attitudes or not.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in light of the syllogism that (H3) generates in conjunction with (H2), I consider (H3) methodologically undesirable. A definition of unreliable narration that, by contrast to (H3), is neutral with regard to the distinction between personal and impersonal narrators would be applicable to standard filmic narrations as well; this would follow the spirit of (H1), namely, it would abstract from independent specifics of the media under discussion.

There are different ways of making an alternative definition of unreliable narration precise. In keeping with (H1), I propose (H<sub>UN</sub>).

- (H<sub>UN</sub>) A literary or filmic narration is unreliable iff its narrator commits to the truth of at least one relevant piece of information that is not accurate.

A few clarifying comments are in order. First, according to [Köppe; Kindt, 2011, p. 83, p. 87], only those inaccurate pieces of information matter that are licensed by the so-called

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<sup>2</sup> Literary scholars disagree about whether unreliable narrators should be personal or not; s. [Köppe; Kindt, 2011, fn. 4] for relevant references. I suggest following the more neutral definition, if for the methodological reason to be mentioned next. I thus oppose [Maier, 2021, fn. 4], where the neutral definition is explicitly set aside.

composition strategy of the text or film. Correspondingly, details can matter, while minor mistakes do not. The constraint *at least one relevant* is meant to capture this relativization to the composition strategy. Second, in its present form, (H<sub>UN</sub>) is designed for assertions, which, strictly speaking, excludes the contribution of inaccurate pieces of information by, for instance, implicatures or presuppositions. A more neutral version could use *provides* instead of *commits to the truth of*, as in [Köppe; Kindt, 2011, p. 85]. Third, [Köppe; Kindt, 2011] are mainly interested in establishing unreliable narration for narrations without narrators; s. [Köppe; Kindt, 2011, p. 90]. This is linked to a more general reasoning against the ubiquity of narrators in narrations and, thus, against (H1); s. [Köppe; Stühling, 2011] for a detailed discussion from the perspective of literary studies and [Bücking, 2021] for a complementary argument from a linguistic perspective. However, for the sake of remaining close to the original proposal by [Maier, 2021] (i.e., to (H1)), I proceed on the basis of (H<sub>UN</sub>).

### 3 On blended perspective

For illustrating blended perspective shots, [Maier, 2021] uses the still picture in (1) from *Fight Club* by David Fincher (20th Century Fox, 1999). The shot shows two characters, namely, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt, left) and the protagonist (Edward Norton, right), while we know from the end of the film that Durden does not exist in the storyworld because he is hallucinated by the protagonist.

(1)



(s. [Maier, 2021, ex. (4)])

In Maier's analysis, this shot blends the perspective of the impersonal narrator with the perspective of the hallucinating character by conventional visual means, which is why it is partially unreliable. Against the background of definition (H<sub>UN</sub>) from Section 2, I propose that, by contrast, such shots should be considered (potential) instances of unreliable narration. Why? – The shot matches definition (H<sub>UN</sub>): the narrator commits to the truth of the visually given inaccurate information that Durden exists; furthermore, this inaccuracy is certainly in line with the composition strategy of the film as a whole (i.e., it is not a minor mistake). My reasoning is not just sophistry with regard to definition. Crucially, the shot itself does not seem to indicate by conventional formal means that it provides inaccurate information. As a consequence, it contributes a plain visual 'assertion', which is why the inaccuracy passes unnoticed and why there can be "a big reveal at the end" ([Maier, 2021, p. 11]) in the first place. In other words, I cannot identify a 'grammar' that could tell the difference between straightforward truth commitments on the one hand and blending perspectives on the other. So, inaccurate information is not detected by conventional form, but by interpretation of the entirety of filmic contents (s. [Köppe; Kindt, 2011, p. 88] on unreliable narration as a heuristics that guides the interpretation of narrations as wholes).

I will conclude with two further remarks. First, in literary narrations, conventional grammatical cues for the blending of perspectives seem to be more readily available; s. the examples for free

indirect discourse in (2) (building on a corresponding famous example from [Hamburger, 1977]; s. [Rauh, 1985], [Eckardt, 2014], and [Bücking, 2021] for discussion). Roughly, in order to reconcile the seemingly contradictory conventional meanings of *morgen* ‘tomorrow’ and the preterit in (2-a), one can relate the meaning of the adverb(ial) to the perspective of the character Ada, while the meaning of the preterit is related to the perspective of the narrator. The future tense with *würde* ‘would’ in (2-b) is generally associated with the perspective of a character; s. [Fabricius-Hansen, 2002, p. 13].

- (2) Ada war aufgeregt.  
 Ada was excited  
 a. Morgen war Weihnachten.  
 tomorrow was Christmas  
 ‘It was Christmas tomorrow.’  
 b. Ihr Vater würde sie besuchen.  
 her father would her visit  
 ‘Her father would visit her.’

The blending of perspectives is guided by conventional means here. As expected, this does not result in effects of unreliable narration, which argues against an analogous treatment of filmic shots such as (1) and free indirect discourse as in (2).

Second, I am not saying that filmic narrations cannot rely on conventions for shifting or blending perspectives. I am only saying that (1) is not of this kind. For instance, point of view sequences seem to be closer to a conventional form. In spite of the questions raised, I still agree with the more general view defended by [Maier, 2021]: it is worthwhile to investigate visual structures by methodological means that have been proven fruitful for the investigation of linguistic structures.

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