Unreliability and Point of View in Filmic Narration[1]

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Introduction

The unreliable narrator is a key concept in literary scholarship. Humbert Humbert's description of Lolita seducing him; Patrick Bateman's analysis of the lyrics of Huey Lewis and the News (in *American Psycho*); or the unnamed narrator's fist fight with Tyler Durden (in *Fight Club*). These books all feature prominent first-person narrators that describe the events of the story. In doing so, they don't objectively describe what the fictional world is like, but they present that world from their limited, subjective, and to various extents unreliable point of view. By now all these novels have been turned into movies. These too are often described as involving unreliable narration. 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.

Varieties of narration and unreliability

Novels can present us with elaborate fictional worlds, describing events that never happened and characters that never existed. Yet the novelist producing these fictional accounts is not usually considered a liar. Apparently they manage to avoid the commitment to tell the truth that comes with non-fictional descriptions of events and people. Still, the novelist uses the same kind of indicative statements that are grammatically associated with the speech act of assertion. Now, asserting presupposes an asserter, who (by most current and classic definitions of assertion, see Pagin 2016 for an overview) is committed to the truth of what they assert. This asserter then is not the actual author living in the actual world, but must be some entity that has the kind of direct epistemic access to the fictional world that allows them to assert things about it and thereby commit to the truth thereof.

This inferred entity we call the narrator (Genette, 1980; Lewis, 1978; Margolin, 2012; Eckardt, 2021).

Following the above speech-act-theoretic reasoning, any fictional story gives rise to the inference of a narrator, in the sense of a fictional entity distinct from the author and responsible for telling the story as a factual account. In some cases the narrator is indeed just an abstract inference licensed by the text's fictionality. This happens in what I'll refer to as impersonal narration, where the events are presented as objective matters of fact described from a detached third-person perspective ("Once upon a time, there was a princess. She liked fighting dragons …"). Common terminology associated with this style of narration include the 'effaced narrator', referring to the fact that in these kinds of stories, outside direct quotations, there are no first-person pronouns or other indexicals or expressives that would reveal the presence of a fictional entity participating in, or merely observing, the events and then telling us about them. The other common term, 'omniscient narrator', highlights the fact that stories of this type often authoritatively present events happening at different times and places, including minute details about what various individuals are saying, or even privately thinking, feeling, wishing or dreaming.

Some narratologists take the apparent objectivity, omniscience, and "effacement" of impersonal narrators as evidence that there is no narrator after all in these types of stories. Thus, Banfield (1982) famously posits that in this style, which she deems characteristic of the modern novel, the events 'narrate themselves', without the mediation of an inferred speech act agent. We'll put this narratorless option aside here and instead hold up the general speech-act-theoretic argument for the necessity of a narrator, keeping in mind that this narrator can be quite abstract, impersonal, effaced, and omniscient.

There are also stories where the narrator is not merely an implicit inference but is explicitly introduced as one of the characters inhabiting the fictional world and observing or even actively participating in the events. I'll refer to this as first-person narration, because typically the narrator reveals themselves by referring to themselves with a first-person pronoun, not seldom in the opening paragraph ("I had called upon my friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, one day in the autumn of last year"[2]). Often the first-person narrator is also the main protagonist (Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield), sometimes a close friend (Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, or Dr. Watson), or an even more peripheral observer (Chief Bromden in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*).

There are various forms of narration that do not neatly fit my simplistic dichotomy between impersonal and first-person narration. In some cases the presence of a personal narrator is revealed not by the use of first-person pronouns, but more subtly by evaluative or ironic narratorial comments ("It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife"[3]), in which case we're perhaps not

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[2] Arthur Conan Doyle (1892), *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.*
[3] Jane Austen (1813), *Pride and Prejudice.*

really given an identifiable fictional character as narrator, but the inferred narrator is by no means objective or effaced either. In other cases, the presence of a first-person narrator may be restricted to a prologue, appendix or certain marked passages constituting genuine or pretend instances of authorial intrusion where the author themselves (appears to) jump in to offer commentary or background explanation (e.g. Melville's zoological facts in *Moby Dick*, or Tolkien's claims of having translated a copy of the Red Book of Westmarch in the foreword of the first edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*). Finally, though some forms of so-called second-person narration will count as first-personal on our definition, some may fall outside our dichotomy (Fludernik, 1993). I will put these possible exceptions and grey areas aside here because the main focus of this paper is not narration or narrators as such, but *unreliable* narration.

Unreliable narration occurs when the narrator presents a distorted view of the storyworld (Booth, 1961; Zipfel, 2011). This distortion may be caused by the narrator's youthful naivety (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*), drugs (*Trainspotting*, *Jesus' Son*), cognitive disorder (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*) or mental illness (*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *American Psycho*), or it may be wholly or partly deliberate, giving us a deceptive (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*), or outright lying narrator (*Life of Pi*).

All of the famous examples of unreliable narration listed above are clear instances of first-person narration. This is not surprising, since a narrator being impersonal yet unreliable seems like a contradiction: an impersonal narrator is just an abstract, theoretical construct, inferred to warrant the use of indicative statements for sketching a fictional world, not a (real or fictional) agent endowed with an epistemically limited viewpoint, psychological quirks, emotions, a moral compass, or personal opinions. The takeaway message of this section is that unreliable narration requires not just the presence of a narrator, but of a first-person narrator.[4]

Film as narrative

Like novels, movies tell stories too, but they do so by presenting a deliberate sequence of 'shots' rather than of sentences. The shot -- a piece of film, shot (as if) by a continuous run of a camera -- is the basic unit of filmic story-telling (Cumming et al., 2017). These shots are like the statements that make up novels in that they convey discrete chunks of information about what the fictional world is like. The main difference between shots and statements is the way they convey those discrete chunks of information. Film shots convey their contents primarily iconically, while statements convey their contents primarily through grammatically structured conventional symbols.

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[4] For possible exceptions and opposing views that I will not discuss here, see e.g. Köppe & Kindt (2011).

Some caveats before we move on. Drawing a clear line between iconic/pictorial and symbolic/linguistic forms of content is not my concern here. It is now fairly well-established, I take it, that pictorial content does not merely rest on a primitive notion of resemblance, but is best thought of in terms of rule-based, partly conventional, arguably even language-like, system of geometric projection (Abusch, 2020; Goodman, 1976; Greenberg, 2013) -- I refer the interested reader to these cited works and will not delve into it here. I likewise won't say much about film audio. Shots are typically audiovisual depictions: the audio resembles (in some intuitive sense not to be made precise here) what the fictional world sounds like from some point (or path) in fictional space and time, while the video resembles (in the geometric projection sense, also not made precise here) what the fictional world looks like from that same point. We'll refer to this fictional vantage point, intuitively corresponding to where (the fictional counterpart of) the film camera is located, as the shot's viewpoint. I will not take a stance on whether the simple resemblance account of shot audio can be applied to so-called extradiegetic sound, like film music (e.g. as iconically depicting certain non-sound events, a la Schlenker, 2019).

The cognitive systems by which the basic information chunks conveyed by individual shots, or statements, are combined to make a coherent story are presumably similar across (sequential) media. Following linguistic theories of discourse structure (Asher & Lascarides, 2003; Hobbs, 1979), there is a finite number of basic coherence relations, grounded in general cognition. The coherence relation of Narration for instance holds between two elementary meaningful units (shots, clauses, panels) if both contribute (i.e., describe or depict) an event, and the second unit's event immediately follows the first's. The relation of Explanation holds if the first event causes the second, etc. Very simplistically put, a consumer of a piece of sequential media computes the basic discourse unit contents and the events they contribute and then infers as many plausible coherence relations between them as possible, given global rationality constraints like consistency.

Filmic narrators

In order to talk about unreliable narration in film we first need to get clear on what a filmic narrator is. Our key argument in favor of a narrator was based on speech act theory: indicative statements constitute assertions which commit their speaker to their truth, but authors are obviously not so committed to their fictional works, so there must be a fictional counterpart of the author, living in the fictional world, that does the asserting.

Do pictures or shots come with the same truth commitments as linguistic assertions? To answer this question we should first consider film as used in a non-fictional communicative setting, say, a documentary film or a piece of investigative journalism. In such cases it seems clear that the responsible author, the director and their team, can and will be criticized for manipulating shots beyond selective cutting and pasting, e.g., when they are secretly using deepfake technology to make Trump say outrageous things on the

news. This suggests that 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.

For shots in a fiction movie it's clear that the actual director is in no way committed to the truthfulness of their shots. Using animation to add a life-like dragon to a *Game of Thrones* scene is not lying or even deceptive. So, as with written fiction, we can again argue that there must be some fictional entity, the narrator, that (i) has access to the fictional world and (ii) 'tells' a truthful story about it. In film fiction this telling is not a verbal act but an act of visual storytelling, by presenting a sequence of shots. So the filmic narrator is the fictional source showing us what's happening in the fictional world.

We saw that linguistic narrators come in two main flavors. Filmic narrators are typically of the effaced, impersonal variety. A first-person filmic narration would involve a fictional character that shows us the fictional world from their perspective. Examples exist. *Hardcore Henry* is a feature length movie shot like a first-person shooter video game, i.e., filmed as if through the eyes of the main character. A more common subgenre involves 'found footage' horror movies like *The Blair Witch Project*, which pretend to show (an edited montage of) footage shot by the protagonist's phone or handheld camera. Finally, there are 'mockumentary' tv series like *The Office* in which it is part of the fiction that there is always a camera crew present alongside the protagonists, occasionally subtly revealing their presence, e.g., by interviewing the protagonists.

It is safe to say that most mainstream Hollywood movies rely on impersonal filmic narration, i.e. a style of filmic narration where the fictional source of the images (and sound) is not supposed to be a fictional character but just some abstract viewpoint, intuitively corresponding to the fictional counterpart of the camera, not involved in the story at all. This inferred viewpoint has all the characteristics typically associated with impersonal narration, like effacement and apparent omniscience with respect to what's going on across various fictional times and places. As in the novel, in film there is an interesting grey area between clear first-person and clear impersonal narration, like scenes or entire movies shot by a somewhat shaky handheld camera, or with water or blood droplets occasionally hitting the camera lens. An especially interesting phenomenon is the use of voice-over, which we return to below.

So far we've seen that movies, like novels, can have both first-personal and impersonal narrators, though the latter are far more common -- only in somewhat specific genres of fiction film do we literally identify the viewpoint, from whence the images and audio (supposedly) shot, with a fictional character. As argued already above, unreliable narration requires an unreliable and hence personal narrator. What does this mean for movies based on novels with unreliable narrators? Many of the literary examples of unreliable narration have indeed been turned into movies, sometimes rivaling or eclipsing the successes of the books they are based on (*American Psycho*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Trainspotting*, *Forrest Gump*, *Fight Club*). These movies -- and many others not based

on famous novels -- are informally said to involve unreliable narrators (as witness countless listicles like '10 Most Unreliable Narrators In Movies & TV[5]), yet none (or very few) of the movies on these lists involve what we have described as first-person filmic narrators. So what could be meant by unreliable narration here?

In the following I will first discard some prima facie plausible reinterpretations of what a filmic narrator amounts to. I then propose that what's really going on is that since film is less suitable for first-person (unreliable) narration, it uses a variety of different techniques to give access to the distorted views of the fictional world that certain fictional characters -- in particular the narrators of the corresponding novels -- are prone to.

Looking for the unreliable filmic narrator

We may get a first intuitively plausible interpretation of the term 'unreliable narrator' in film by relating it to the voice-over narrator. To understand this it's important to distinguish different kinds of voice-over. First, there's the kind of impersonal voice-over, or text-over, typically found in a Hollywood movie's opening scenes, giving some relevant general background information about the fictional world. Take the famous opening text in the Star Wars movies ("A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away"). In cases like this, where the voice-over reveals no 'I', i.e. no emotional, thinking, feeling, and/or opinionated first-person agent, we might equate it's inferred impersonal narrator with the impersonal filmic narrator. The narrator in such a case is an impersonal, abstract entity that offers a combination of text, sound, and images to give the audience access to the fictional world. Typically, these voice-over narrations, like the accompanying sound and imagery, will be taken to be reliable, since there's no reason to suspect a person behind it.

More to the point, sometimes a narrating voice clearly does belong to one of the fictional characters, even if they are not shown as speaking in the shot and they are clearly narrating from a different place and time than what's shown in the shot. These voice-overs need not be reliable, they present what a specific fictional individual is saying or thinking and hence reflect their personal point of view. They could well be confused or deceptive and hence it seems prima facie plausible that it is these kinds of personal voice-overs that are called 'unreliable narration' and the characters to which they are attributed are the unreliable narrators in the movies listed above. Indeed, the character played by Edward Norton in *Fight Club* does a lot of first-person voice-over narrating and is even listed as 'The Narrator' in the credits.

It's quite plausible that this literal notion of 'narration' is partly responsible for the overuse of the term 'unreliable narrator' in movies. From a theoretical perspective though this terminology is misleading. Film is to a large extent a visual medium. The fictional world is sketched primarily by presenting sound and images. The narrator in our theoretical

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[5] https://screenrant.com/most-unreliable-narrators-movies-tv/

sense, borrowed from the literary domain, is the entity that is the source of the audiovisual depicting, the viewpoint from which the world is presented. In the movie version of *Fight Club*, the narrator in this theoretical sense cannot be straightforwardly identified with Norton's confused character, whom we will henceforth refer to as 'Jack', a name he occasionally uses for himself in the movie. We clearly see Jack in many shots, from various angles, including shots showing things he himself cannot possibly have seen (like the back of his own head, or bystanders beyond his field of vision). Visually, *Fight Club* appears to be 'told' by a typical impersonal filmic narrator, shot using cameras placed in neutral observer positions and always remaining outside of the action.

In defense of the analysis of *Fight Club* as unreliable narration it might be objected that the supposedly neutral filmic narrator is not really presenting the fictional world reliably and impersonally after all: throughout *Fight Club* we see Jack's imaginary alter ego, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), interact with him as if they are both flesh and blood individuals talking and fighting with each other. In the fictional reality of the movie, there is no Tyler Durden, so it would seem to follow that these images and audio of him must be unreliable depictions, attributable to a delusional filmic narrator.

Again, it is quite plausible that this somewhat intuitive notion of an unreliable narrator is what's intended by fans and critics discussing these movies. In fact, we see this use of the term even in the work of the leading philosopher of fiction and film, Gregorie Currie (1995), who applies it to *Stage Fright* and *Rashomon*.[6] Ultimately, I propose, the equivocation of first-person unreliable filmic narration and the occurrence of shots depicting characters and events that only exist in a fictional character's (unreliable) imagination, hallucination, or dream is too hasty, and should be resisted if we want to maintain some uniformity between filmic and linguistic narrators. The first-person narrator, by definition, presents the fictional world from their point of view, i.e. in their words, and/or with sound and images as they perceive them. As pointed out above, neither *Fight Club* nor any of the other famous movies listed above are shot from a first-person point of view -- even in those scenes where we are shown figments of a character's delusions, the camera mostly takes up a neutral, 'third-person' point of view, e.g. showing both The Narrator and Tyler Durden together in the same shot.

Representing other points of view in language and film

Let's return to linguistic narration. Even if a first-person narrator can be considered fairly reliable, like Dr. Watson in the Sherlock Holmes novels, the events are presented as filtered through their consciousness. But typically it's not only the narrator whose subjective

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[6] Currie calls the relevant scenes in *Stage Fright*, *Rashomon*, and presumably *Fight Club*, instances of 'embedded narration'. In his terminology, Jack would be an unreliable, 'foregrounded, and non-controlling' narrator. The 'non-controlling' here means this narrator is not the one responsible for presenting the story, which in my somewhat stricter terminology would simply mean they are not a narrator.

experiences are presented in a story. There are various grammatical and stylistic ways to present what any of a cast of fictional characters is thinking, feeling, seeing, hallucinating, or saying.

A linguistic narrator, whether first-person or impersonal, can of course use all kinds of mental state predicates (*think*, *lovely*, *sad*, *hallucinate*, *want*). They can choose to describe some of their characters' mental states in more detail by specifying their contents, typically by means of a co-called indirect report construction:

(1) a. She thought she'd never see him again.
   b. He suddenly remembered that he'd been there before.

These kinds of constructions present what the fictional world is like by describing a character's mental state in some detail, but without really presenting that character's own subjective point of view. It's the narrator -- first-person or impersonal -- describing the character's feelings, in the narrator's words, from the narrator's point of view.[7]

Direct discourse (2a), free indirect discourse (2b), and represented perception (2c) are common ways of linguistically representing certain mental states, more vividly and more directly from the attitude holder's perspective.[8]

(2) a. *Now I'll never get out of here!* she thought.
   b. She stood up. How the hell was she going to get out of here?
   c. He looked out the window. The zombies were coming.

Since humans often have only very indirect and limited access to others' streams of consciousness the types of perspective shifting reports exemplified in (2) are more common in impersonal narration where the omniscient narrator is not bound by mere mortals' epistemic limitations on mindreading.[9]

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[7] We find linguistic evidence for this narratorial perspective in the choice of pronouns and indexicals used in these indirect report constructions: (1a) may report the character having a thought of the form "I'll never see you again", i.e., the report changes the original first-person pronoun and the future tense to conform to the narrator's third-person, past tense, perspective.

[8] Linguistically, we see that at least some indexicals and expressives in (2) directly represent the perspective of the character rather than that of the narrator. In (2a), all the character's thoughts or inner monologue is represented in more or less the form that, allegedly, they are passing through the character's consciousness. In (2b) we find a blend of both perspectives: the form of the expressives, questions and the indexical *here* clearly represent the character's first-person perspective, but tenses and pronouns represent the narrator's third-person perspective. For (2c), the most likely interpretation is not that there necessarily are zombies approaching or that he's literally thinking "The zombies are coming", but rather that the character has a (veridical or delusional) perceptual experience of zombies approaching the window. The deictic verb *come* arguably represents the character's perspective (Abrusán, 2020; Brinton, 1980).

[9] Indeed, Banfield (1982) argues that free indirect discourse in particular is strictly reserved for the impersonal narration style (or, in her view, narratorless or 'unspeakable' narration) of the modern novel, though linguists tend to disagree (Schlenker, 2004).

The medium of film does not have obvious analogues for the use of mental state verbs, with or without embedded propositional complements, nor for (partial) indexical shifts or quotation. But instead there are some well-known film conventions that will allow viewers visual access to certain mental state contents.

The first type of visual mental state representation convention, found in both film and comics, is the point of view sequence. Typically, one shot depicts a character's eyes, and the next depicts what that character is seeing (Abusch & Rooth, 2017; Cumming et al., forthcoming). These sequences can be used to give the viewer access to the way the fictional world is subjectively -- and hence not necessarily reliably -- experienced by the character. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* we find point of view sequences clearly showing the protagonist's drug induced hallucinations, from his first-person viewpoint.

(3)   a.   b.

Stills from a point of view sequence in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, (Terry Gilliam, Universal Pictures, 1998).
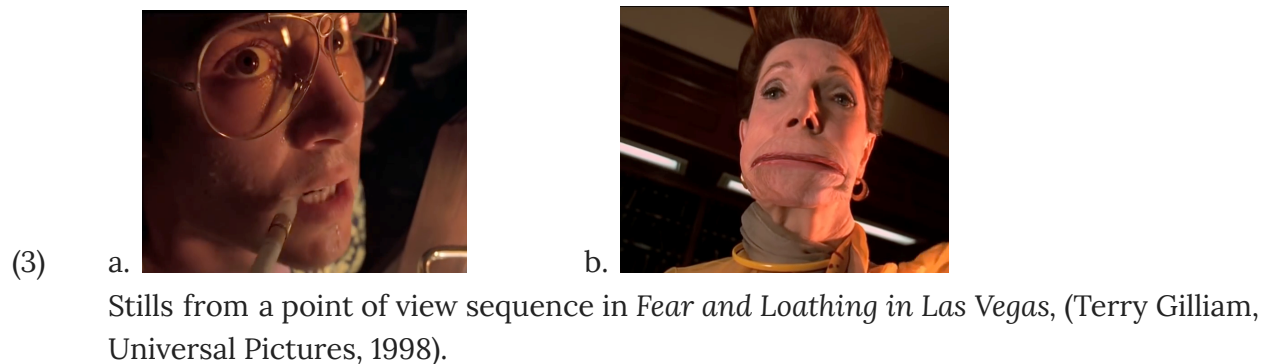
Does the occurrence of such subjective point of view shots entail the presence of a first-person unreliable narrator? Crucially, the majority of *Fear and Loathing* is shot from impersonal camera positions, often showing the protagonist himself, and occasionally even showing events he is not privy to. Of course, one could say that precisely these sequences involve a temporary switch to first-person narration, just for the duration of shots like (3b). Perhaps Currie (1995) would indeed file such shots under 'embedded narration'. However, by analogy with the literary terminology it seems more natural to classify them instead as cases of mental state representation. In fact, point of view sequences are not dissimilar to the novelist's use of thought quotation (or thought bubbles, in comics), or represented perception, as illustrated in (2) above. In those linguistic report constructions we don't say that the protagonist temporarily becomes the narrator -- for then what happens to the global narrator? Would there then be two simultaneous narrators? Is every novel that contains quotation marks then a (partly) first-person narrative? Instead, we say that the narrator uses an attribution or report construction, whether as a matter of grammar or as a matter of discourse structure and pragmatics,[10] to give the viewer access to a mental state.

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[10] Maier (2021) develops a uniform discourse-structural account of various forms of linguistic reporting, using a coherence relation of Attribution, that straightforwardly extends to point of view sequences and blended perspective shots in comics and film.

I propose that the same thing happens in point of view sequences: they constitute a visual narrative convention that the narrator exploits to give us access to subjective experiences.

Beyond subjective point of view shots there's another widespread film convention for showing characters' mental states, a type of shot that, in the context of comics panels, Maier & Bimpikou (2019) call 'blended perspective'. A blended perspective shot depicts the world as subjectively (and hence unreliably) experienced by a salient character, but from a neutral, impersonal viewpoint. Typically, a blended perspective shot prominently includes the experiencing character themselves in the frame. Thus, in *Fight Club* we often see Tyler Durden and Jack together in a shot, presented from an impersonal viewpoint, even though Durden only exists in the subjective, unreliable imagination of Jack.

(4)

Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), left, and Jack (Edward Norton), right. Still from *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1999)

These blended shots of the two founding members of Fight Club can only be interpreted as presenting the hallucinations of the protagonist, but unlike in point of view shots, the narrator chooses to present these hallucinations not from the viewpoint of the hallucinator, but from their usual impersonal viewpoint.

With a point of view shot, it's often clear that we've switched to a character's point of view, but the blended shot is not always easily recognized as such. This makes it a highly effective tool for directors who want to hide from the (first-time) viewer whether certain events really did happen or were just hallucinations. This is rather similar to the ambiguity we experience with some of the literary works with unreliable narrators. Thus, the fact that some of the key events in both the novels and film adaptations of *Fight Club* or *Life of Pi*, may not have occurred in the way they've been presented by their narrators remains more or less hidden, or at least ambiguous, until the end. In the novels this is possible because without clear evidence to the contrary readers presume that a first-person narrator is more or less reliable about the events they're describing. Only when we detect, say, inexplicable weirdness or inconsistencies, or are given clues about drug abuse or mental illness, or a clear motive for lying, would we start reinterpreting the text as presented by an unreliable narrator. In the film versions, first-person narration is often not a feasible mode of story-telling, so we stick with impersonal filmic narration. The impersonal narrator can

freely switch between regular narration and blended perspective shots, presenting what the world is like according to one (or more) of the main characters, without giving any clue about this to the viewer, perhaps until a big reveal at the end.

Conclusion

Novels are mostly made up of indicative statements, the responsibility for which is taken by a fictional entity known as the narrator. There are two main types of narrators. Impersonal narrators are reliable as they do not really have a perspective of their own. They can however represent the various fictional characters' perspectives by using techniques like free indirect discourse or quotation. First-person narrators have a perspective of their own and are generally also unreliable to some degree, i.e. they don't always accurately depict the story world they inhabit. In any case, unreliable narration requires a personal narrator.

Films are made up of audiovisual shots. By the same reasoning, we can infer a fictional filmic narrator responsible for these audiovisual depictions of events in the story world. First-person filmic narration is fairly rare, most fiction movies and tv shows are told as impersonal filmic narration, i.e., shot from impersonal viewpoints.

I have argued that most if not all famous movie adaptations of novels with unreliable narrators are not themselves instances of unreliable filmic narration. Nonetheless, crucial scenes in these movies depict events and characters that do not exist in the story world, but merely in one of the characters' unreliable mental states. Rather than broadening the scope of term 'unreliable narration' to include all temporary shifts of perspective and attributions of mental states, I propose that what is going on in these scenes is not unreliable narration but a kind of film language analogue of linguistic report constructions like free indirect discourse or quotation. The use of blended perspective shots in particular can be used in film to achieve exactly the kind of ambiguity effect that the corresponding novelists tend to achieve through unreliable narration.

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