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Dramatic Voice/
Narrative Voice

One definition of mainstream cinema is that it subordinates everything to narrative cause and effect and character motivation. "In Hollywood cinema, a specific sort of narrative causality operates as the dominant, making temporal and spatial systems vehicles for it."[1] These subordinated temporal and spatial systems, the actual elements of film language, are rendered transparent by the functioning of a conventional structure creating the illusion that the story would happen exactly the same way whether the camera were there or not. Most of our dramatic concerns—the plausibility of motivation, the consistency of character, the avoidance of overt coincidence, the construction of a believable back story—come out of the conceit that we are spying on a pre-existing event. As we discussed in Chapter 2, this conceit is deeply embedded in 19th-century notions of realism and naturalism and, like restorative three-act structure, can be traced back to the well-made play.[2]

For our purposes, we identify a scene that seems to tell itself, that plays without making us conscious that it is being narrated, as a scene that is working in the dramatic voice. But as we said earlier, even a scene using the dramatic voice must be given shape by some form of narrating agency that organizes the presentation of events. No matter how realistic the representation, we are not watching reality—the act of representing the world implies narration. The narrating may be overt or virtually invisible, but it is always present.

The use of the terms *narrator* and *narrative voice* in film is problematic. First, a narrator in film is most often understood as a voice-over narrator. Relatively few films use such voice overs and, if our comments pertained only to them, we would be addressing a very narrow concern.

The second reason that narrative voice is problematic in film is that it is deeply embedded in literature and refers to the manner in which the writer speaks directly to us. Such simple and direct address is not possible in most films because there are too many intermediary agencies in the mass media production process to speak of a unified, singular filmmaker's voice. Also,

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in most films, the articulation of the narrative voice is much less direct than in literature.*

However, even given these reservations, we find the notion of voice or narration to be the only terms that speak to the independent filmmaker's desire to be heard, to express a personal vision while still using the story-telling power of narrative (as opposed to experimental) filmmaking. Thus, we use these terms to refer to the agency that communicates the story to us, whether overtly or not. In fact, the literary antecedents are useful to us, because we can understand the development of narrative voice in main-stream film by looking at the movement from the classic 19th-century om-niscient narration to the limited, three-person narrator of Henry James and Gustave Flaubert.

The classic omniscient 19th-century narrator was not only all-knowing, but all-judgmental; not only able to spy on all aspects of this pre-existing world, but also capable of commenting and evaluating. For instance, George Eliot opens *Middlemarch* with this sentence,

> Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the
> mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of
> Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa,
> has not smiled with some gentleness at the thought of the little
> girl walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her still
> smaller brother, to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the
> Moors?[3]

Not only does this sentence serve to introduce Theresa, but also to in-troduce a style of narration in which the narrator is willing to admit to a clear sense of what is important. This is evident in the flat declaration that Theresa is a saint going out to seek martyrdom.

Today, we probably find such prejudgment by the narrative voice old-fashioned, preferring instead to make our own judgment as the story plays out. In effect, we would rather infer the quality of the character by the dra-matic voice, rather than be told by the narrator. Even if we wanted to, it

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*In *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), David Bordwell has an interesting set of chapters which contrast dramatic and narratives analytic approaches to narration. He concludes that neither model is theoretically satisfactory, a conclusion with which we agree as applies to pure theory. However, we still find this distinction extremely useful in describing different modes the writer has at her com-mand.

would be very hard to communicate this omniscient judgment directly in film. How would we show Theresa as a saint? With the superimposition of a statue, church music, an animated halo? All these expressionistic devices have been tried and, for the most part, were found to be heavy-handed and literal. Eisenstein's mocking of the pompous Kerensky by superimposing his walk with the strut of a cock has historical interest, but does not suggest much of a practical alternative to us today. Does this mean, then, that a filmmaker cannot suggest a point of view without being so mannered? No. The late 19th-century development of the narrator within the story provides an analogy for the classic film style.

Reacting against the overt authorial presence of writers like Charles Dickens and George Eliot, many novelists (foremost among them, Gustave Flaubert and Henry James) looked for another way to narrate stories. They shifted their interest from the question of what we know, to how we know it, and, as a result, they saw the omniscient, judging narrator as problematic, asking: Where did this voice of God come from? What explained the certainty with which an omniscient narrator created and claimed to know the fictive world? Though it was possible for a reader to judge the characters' trustworthiness (based on their actions, about which we could form an opinion), how could we possibly engage the narrator who injected a point of view, but stood outside the text?

· Thus, instead of commenting directly on the action, Henry James came up with the notion of the reflector character or the narrator within the story—a character who is presented quite neutrally by the writer, but who is allowed to recount and make judgments about the events in which she was involved. This character narrates in place of the writer, but since she exists in the fictive world of the story, it is possible for us, as readers, to engage with her even as she is presenting information to us.

We can see how this works when we contrast this sentence of Henry James's *The Ambassadors* to the *Middlemarch* section quoted above: "Strether's first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening he was not wholly disconcerted."⁴ Notice, immediately, how little authorial judgment this sentence makes (of course, there are implications of narrative voice in the syntax, word usage, length of the sentence, etc.). The emotion directly described is Strether's, an emotion that we take to be one of which he is fully conscious. By contrast, in *Middlemarch* the judgments are the author's; nothing there allows us to assume that the young Theresa regards herself as a saint.

Strether's being not "wholly disconcerted" is taken up over the next few pages, developed, as it were, through Strether's consciousness, so that we learn as he figures out the reason for being "not wholly disconcerted."

... the fruit of a sharp sense that, delightful as it would be to find himself looking, after so much separation, into his comrade's [Waymarsh's] face, his business would be a trifle bungled should he simply arrange for this countenance to present itself to the nearing steamer as the first "note" of Europe.[5]

Strether is, in effect, setting (narrating) his own situation—we enter the dominant voice of the book with his plotting his own expectations of how he wants to first meet Europe.[6]

The classic film style draws on this idea of allowing the character to, in effect, narrate his or her own story, without forcing the filmmaker to comment overtly. For instance, there is a scene in *The Verdict* in which Galvin enters the victim's hospital room with the intention of taking Polaroid pictures that he can use to get more money from the out-of-court settlement. As he takes the pictures, however, he moves slower and slower until finally he stops altogether, staring at one picture of the victim as it develops in front of his eyes. We know that this is the important moment of the scene, the moment where he begins to realize he must take the case to trial. But how do we know? Without in any way calling attention to them, the narrator employs a number of devices (rhythm, lighting, cutting pattern) that emphasize the importance of this decision, but because they all seem to be at the service of Galvin's realization, we get the sense that Galvin is not only making a decision, but he, not the narrator, is directing our attention to its importance.

Henry James was quite strict in staying with one particular consciousness, while mainstream film generally uses a combination of omniscient narration and various narrators within the story. Very few films use systematic control of point of view as part of their narrative strategies. Those films that do, *Rear Window* for instance, derive considerable formal power by their control of this device.

Hiding the narrator agent behind the character explains one of the paradoxes of the classic style—that, although the story appears to be driven by character, the camera expresses very little of the character's emotion on its own. The lens is almost never distorted by subjectivity, and rarely do we see extreme angle interpretative shots. Rather the narrative agency sets the stage for the character perspective by its use of point-of-view and eyeline-match sequences, structuring a series of neutral shots and reverse shots that are carefully tied to the line of the character's emotion. Our movement through the film is made up of our progressive awareness of the character's (as opposed to the filmmaker's) attitude toward the action. It's as though the filmmaker, much like Flaubert or James, is unwilling to say anything directly, preferring instead to let the characters tell their own story.

This method of storytelling, during which the narrator apparently cedes emotional control of the story to his character (remember, the outside narrator never disappears; he only appears to), raises a major obstacle for the independent narrative filmmaker. Independent films are made out of the desire of the filmmaker to speak in his own voice (whether this is possible or not is another topic). But, by emphasizing the dramatic voice over the narrative, by concealing the filmmaker's voice behind the character's, the effaced narrator of the classic film style restricts direct lyrical expression. The independent filmmaker who is seeking her own voice must find a way to assert the narrative voice over the dramatic pull of events. This may be harder in film (and video) than in all other arts because of the inherent naturalism and apparent transparency of the camera's image.[7]

Voice and Structure

Clearly, much of what we are calling *voice* in film is under the control of the director. Things like the relative realism of color scheme, the lighting contrast ratios, the set design, the casting, the balance of ambient sounds to dialogue, and the final editing pattern are beyond the realm of the writer. Still, it is possible to construct a script that emphasizes the narrative voice at the level of the story. As before, we have to start with structure.

We said that in classic film style, overt narration tends to be hidden behind a structure that functions to organize the meaning of events without calling attention to itself. If we want to place the narrative voice in the foreground, we must reduce the primacy of this unacknowledged structural drive. However, if we reduce the dependence on restorative three-act structure, we must find other ways to supply a narrative voice.

To simplify, we might say that structure is a pattern designed to focus the questions we want the viewer to ask as the story unfolds. Although structure is tied up with character-driven plot in classic Hollywood films, it does not necessarily have to be used that way. Structure is pattern. It may be made of anything that organizes our attention—a repeated line of dialogue, a recurrent situation, a musical theme, an external historical moment, a radio in the background, a return to the same location. The less structure relates to plot, the more formal it seems to be. The more external it is to the action, the more structure reads as the filmmaker's voice.

The realistic use of patterns, which we identify as mainstream structure, functions in two distinct and apparently self-contradicting ways. Structure tells us what is necessary for the movie to come to an end, while at the same time it must not call attention to itself. We know, for instance, that in *Wall Street*, Bud must come to terms with his father before the movie can end; when he does, we must feel that this is an inevitable outgrowth of

character, not an overt manipulation by the filmmaker giving order to what would otherwise be an ambiguous circumstance.

To play against the structural dominance of mainstream film, then, we have to uncouple plot structure from simple story closure (or at least twist it) and find a way to call attention to its patterning. This sounds like it requires a radical approach to filmmaking, but is not necessarily so, as evidenced in an apparently mainstream example, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.

Scottie, a former police lawyer, falls in love with Madeline, the woman he has been employed to protect. Obsessed by bizarre suicide fantasies, she apparently kills herself by jumping from a church bell tower. Overcome by guilt, Scottie breaks down and is unable to pull himself together until he sees a woman who reminds him of Madeline. We are told that this new woman, Judy, actually had disguised herself as Madeline to cover up a murder plot. Scottie doesn't know this and proceeds to make Judy over to recreate an image of Madeline. When Scottie finally realizes what has happened, he takes Judy back to the bell tower where, after having it out, she convinces him that she loves him. As they begin to kiss, a nun, having overheard them, suddenly appears and causes the startled Judy to step back and fall to her death, mimicking the bell tower "suicide" earlier in the film.

The film is divided in half, which suggests a kind of oppositional binary structure (action in the first half, reconstruction of the action in the second) so different from traditional three-act structure. Scottie's recreation of Madeline seems to succeed. The traditional pattern of transgression, recognition, and redemption has been overturned—Judy looks like she will get away with murder and Scottie with his obsessive remaking. Then the nun appears and Judy tumbles to her death. The nun's appearance seems both realistic and self-consciously tacked on to the film. Although the death from the bell tower has certainly been set up, the dominant dramatic force throughout the second half of the film is the question of Scottie's relationship to Judy. Their final embrace seems to resolve this relation, but this would be a disorienting resolution. If they make it together, how are we to take the murder and the illicit perversity of Scottie? Does crime actually pay? But suppose we don't read the nun's appearance with the same sense of realism as the rest of the film? Suppose we have a sense that some agency outside of the fictive world told her to come in, as if Hitchcock quite boldly is saying, "It is time to end the film now and to restore order." Then would the message of the film be that crime does not pay? Or would we be getting a much richer, more self-conscious, and fascinatingly ambiguous message that seems to be primly acceptable, while at the same time winks at the simple morality of more traditional endings? Such a possibility takes us out of the realm of mainstream story closure and leaves us with a linger-

ing, overt, and much more bitter perception of the decorative veneer of story closure and its attendant romance.

Psycho, too, provides an interesting example of what happens when the apparent structural pattern is turned around. Much has been written about how Janet Leigh's murder gains particular power because it breaks the genre expectation that the main character will survive. But the murder does something else. By breaking the apparent dramatic drive of the story, it leaves us confused, uncertain what to look for or whom to follow. Left on our own, the dark tonalities of the film rise to the foreground and we feel a loss of direction that makes us even more anxious than the murders themselves would warrant.

Although he twists our expectations, Hitchcock still works within (and at times against) classic narrative cinema. A much more extreme example can be seen in Antonioni's *Eclipse*. This film, which charts a skittish love affair between Vittoria, a nervous woman played by Monica Vitti, and an unimaginative stockbroker, is more about urban space and how it distorts intimacy than it is about character and relationships. The lovers meet twice at the same suburban intersection. Both times, nothing appears to happen between them; instead, the camera seems more interested in the surroundings—a race horse trotting by, the emptiness of the streets, the permanence of the physical location in contrast to the tentativeness of the characters. The camera, far from being neutral, regards the lovers with the same sense of formal distance it regards everything else and hence the dominant emotional force, this cold formal distance, comes from the camera, not from the characters. By the second visit, Vittoria senses that there is a relationship between this desolation and her own life. It's almost as if she is becoming aware of the camera's distance.

Toward the end of the film, the lovers agree to meet at the intersection for a third time. They never show up, but Antonioni does. In a famous eight-minute sequence, he films the intersection as it appears without the lovers. It slowly darkens and the street lights come on (representing an actual eclipse or merely dusk, we never know). Over the sparse electronic music, the shots become increasingly abstracted and fragmentary until the sequence ends with an extreme close-up of a light bulb going on, which then dissolves into the grain of the film.

The characters have disappeared; they are not important anymore. What had been a narrative film becomes an experimental one—the dramatic voice is completely taken over by the narrative. The only logic informing the shots is the filmmaker's. There appears to be no fictive world, only a lyrical documentary of the street.

Yet this ending is surprisingly powerful. Although the characters do not appear, somehow the filmmaking has taken on the characters' feelings. Or,

more accurately, the characters have taken on the feelings expressed all along by the filmmaking. The devolution of image in the last sequence seems to be a direct personal expression of the filmmaker's sense of the ineffability of emotional experience against the mass meaninglessness of the landscape. The character and the narrator have merged.

Conclusion

We have used the distinction between dramatic and narrative voice to talk about the relative foregrounding of the organizing agency in the story. We note that all films use a combination of these two voices. Mainstream filmmaking tends to follow Henry James's edict for literature—"Dramatize, dramatize, dramatize"—and particularly emphasizes the effaced narrator and the character's narration of his own story by using the point-of-view sequence and the eye match.

We suggest that the independent filmmaker who wants her voice to be heard tip the scales back toward emphasizing the narrative voice. This requires finding ways to uncouple traditional structure's one-to-one linkage with plot. We end by demonstrating that such uncoupling requires only the slightest shift in balance, as in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, or a great commitment to almost lyric experimentation, as in Antonioni's *Eclipse*. In the next chapter, we talk about making the shift.

References

1. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema, Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) p. 12.
2. Of course, it can be traced back to Aristotle, but as Auerbach points out in *Mimesis* (Translated from the German by Willard Trask. Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1953), the combining of "low mimetic forms" and tragic forms, which define what we call realism, comes after the French revolution.
3. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 25.
4. Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 5.
5. Ibid.
6. We repeat again, we are simplifying very complex material in order to present it here. We don't want to imply that the narrator outside the story has been replaced by Strether, only that another level of narration has been cloned (Strether's), which allows the narrator outside the story (there must always be one) to be less evident.

These assumptions of the objective, non-commenting narrator also came under attack in literature. A pivotal book, Wayne Booth's *The Rhetorical Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) demonstrates just how involved the so-called invisible narrators actually were.

7. Rudolf Arnheim made a more general instance of this argument in his book *Film As Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), but he was dealing with experimental film and the whole question of modifying the image per se. We are dealing with a narrative situation rather than experimental film and will suggest that this may be done by story construction.