

Narration

Whereas narrative speaks to how story information is organized by the plot, narration describes how story information is presented. While audiovisual style describes the form of expression, narration describes how much or how little information is provided. Tension, character depth, audience expectations are all issues of narration.

Forms of Narration

The most basic issue for narration is that of narrative perspective. Since cinematic works do not have narrators (except in the specialized form of voice-over), we tend to refer only to *unrestricted* or *restricted* narration. Unrestricted narration is by far the more typical and provides free-ranging perspectives from different characters. In *The Da Vinci Code* we mostly follow Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu but there are scenes featuring Silas and others. Conversely in *Rocky* we follow Rocky Balboa almost exclusively, which makes that narration restricted.

Recently a form of narration has gained prominence, which is called *multiple narration* — when we follow the interesting stories of multiple characters. Examples include *Crash* and *Breaking Bad*. The distinction between unrestricted and multiple narration may be unclear, but is a matter of whether we get different perspectives on the *same* story, which would be considered unrestricted narration, or if we follow *different* stories that simply happen to intersect. *Stranger Things* is an example of unrestricted narration, while *American Crime* is an example of multiple narration.

A final form of narration is *unreliable narration*, where the truth value of what we are told is in doubt. Maybe details have been left out (that Malcolm Crowe is actually dead in *The Sixth Sense*), or the story we are being told has been manipulated (such as by Verbal Kint in *The Usual Suspects*) or maybe the protagonist in a restricted narration is mentally unstable (such as Teddy Daniels in *Shutter Island*). It is typical for the narration to reveal this unreliability, often quite late, to dramatic effect. There are examples, however, of unreliable narration that is not clearly resolved, such as *Mulholland Drive*.

Points of View

Narrational form provides a sense of how much story information is provided but does not indicate where that information comes from. While narration determines how many characters we follow, point of view is a way of understanding if that information is filtered through a character or not. The conventional point of view is *objective point of view*, where the narration simply registers what happens and provides no information or comment on events. Objective point of view may be present in both unrestricted and restricted narration. *Game of Thrones* is an example of objective point of view in unrestricted narration. We get a lot of unbiased information about a lot of characters. *Carol* is an example of objective point of view in restricted narration. We follow Therese almost exclusively without comment or doubt.

Different types of point of view are *perceptual point of view* and *mental point of view*. With perceptual point of view we see what a character sees. Sometimes this is achieved through subjective camera shots, such as in *Lady in the Lake* or *Hardcore Henry*, where we literally only see what the character sees. Due to the jolting experience of a constant subjective camera shot this technique has been used sparingly. We often get shorter sequences of perceptual point of view, such as in *Saving Private Ryan* where we at times see events through Captain Miller's (Tom Hanks) perspective. Perceptual point of view can suggest identification and engagement with a character but can also be used in cases where characters literally cannot see an event because of their position, such as in the opening of *The Usual Suspects*, where we cannot see the face of Keyser Söze.

Mental point of view is when story information is filtered through character mentalities. Typical examples would be the distorted experience of reality for Teddy Daniels in *Shutter Island*, where his mental disorder is what produces unreliable narration. Often mental point of view is used more sparingly to suggest dreams, drug hallucinations, or similar brief moments and need not be done with subjective camera shots. An unusual example of mental point of view is evident in *She's Gotta Have It*, where character opinions of Nola are expressed quite clearly through mock-documentary scenes. A somewhat similar example can

be found in *House of Cards* with Frank's direct address to the audience. We are aware that he expresses his own thoughts and ideas and not necessarily facts.

Information

Narration, then, organizes a lot of story information in different ways. We speak of *wide* or *narrow* information as well as *deep* or *shallow*. Wide or narrow narration is a question of the breadth of information that we are presented with. Unrestricted narration is typically wide, whereas restricted narration is typically narrow. However, we find examples where narration is unrestricted but still narrow, such as in slasher movies where unrestricted narration gives us access to many different characters but story information remains on the narrow side. Who is the killer, why is he after the teenagers, who will he kill next, and so forth?

Deep or shallow narration is a question of how much information we have about character behavior. Why do they do what they do? While this can be handled through direct address or flashbacks, characters may also discuss their motivations and emotions with other characters. Such scenes provide deep information, whereas many characters remain closed off to us. An example of shallow information is James Bond. Other than queen and country, we have no idea why Bond does what he does (the Craig version is slightly different). *The Lord of the Rings* provide deep information about the world through voice-over narrations, flashbacks, Gandalf and other devices and deep information about some characters, mostly Aragorn and Frodo. Gandalf, Legolas, and others are only given shallow access.

It is helpful to think of wide and narrow and deep and shallow as being on a spectrum. Some movies are narrow but deep, some are wide but shallow, some characters and events have wide and deep information, whereas others do not. The purpose of the terms is to consider how much information audiences get to construct the story from the plot.

Tension

Story desire and conflict articulate the stakes of the story, while tension describes how the audience remains engaged with these stakes. There are three main modes of tension production: curiosity, suspense, and surprise. A movie can employ all though some genres

tend to favor one mode of tension more than the others. *Curiosity* is when we know less than the characters and is often directed towards the past. We keep watching the movie to learn about the secrets or unresolved issues that a character has. Crime movies often favor curiosity in terms of the crime that is under investigation.

Suspense is future-oriented and makes us keep watching the movie to see what will happen. Will Frodo make it to Mount Doom, will Tony Stark escape from the terrorists and so on? Much suspense is contingent on us knowing more than the characters, such as the famous Hitchcock example of two people talking. If we know that there's a bomb ticking away under the table, we feel suspense — will they discover it in time? Thrillers often employ suspense as ways of propelling us through the story. But suspense need not always be of the nail-biting variety — whether or not two people end up together in a love story is also a form of tension.

If two people are talking and suddenly blow up without us knowing that there's a bomb, we feel *surprise*. Surprise can be banal as in Hitchcock's bomb example, or it can be a shocking reversal at the end of a movie, such as the realization that Edward Norton's character *is* Tyler Durden and that he has a dual personality. Surprise is typically the shortest experience of tension because it is unexpected but can have far-ranging consequences for our experience. Horror movies love surprise and shock cuts are often used to produce surprise even for unthreatening moments such as discovering a cat.

Motivation

Finally, motivation speaks to why a scene is presented the way it is, which includes audiovisual style, but also why the scene is included at all. Why that composition, why that pan, why this fight scene are all issues of motivation. Our assumption is that we only watch scenes that have a purpose and so we can ascribe motivations for their inclusion (and even exclusion).

There are three classical motivations: compositional, transtextual, and realistic. *Compositional motivation* are events that must happen or be presented in this way for the story to make sense. In *The Usual Suspects*, Keyser Söze's face must be cast in shadows

otherwise we would know who he is. This is a compositional motivation for lighting. Frodo must accept to carry the One Ring to Mordor, this is a story motivation. *Transtextual motivation* is the broadest category and includes our knowledge of how movies work, whether it is genre, star expectations, or other things that simply must happen. The character in a horror movie must decide to walk into the dark basement, even though it is stupid. Arnold Schwarzenegger must say “I’ll be back,” the lovers must have a fight in romantic comedies, and they must get back together. All these minor and major events are motivated transtextually — we know this must happen from other movies.

The realistic motivation is the most straightforward one — it is simply the way the world works. If someone is shot, the police show up. When friends meet, they hug each other. Often realistic motivations are the most pronounced when they are flouted, because then we look for other explanations. If someone does not want to hug their friend, do they feel anger or guilt or something else?

There are two abstract motivations that are often less apparent. *Thematic motivation* is when an event resonates with the general premise of the movie. Boromir’s corruption by the One Ring is a thematic motivation to make us fear that Frodo will also succumb to its evil power. *Artistic motivation* is somewhat of a catch-all category for things that otherwise make little sense. John Woo’s incessant use of white doves flying in slow-motion is motivated purely by his own aesthetic impulse. Quentin Tarantino’s excessive use of gory violence has become a trademark of his, as has the non-chronological plot of several of his movies.