

ENN Inaugural Conference
January 23-24, University of Hamburg

Per Krogh Hansen
Associate Professor, Director
Institute of Literature, Media and
Cultural Studies
Engstien 1
DK-6000 Kolding

Ph.: +45 6550 1451.
E-mail: pkh@litcul.sdu.dk
www.sdu.dk/narratologi

**ABSTRACT **

UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN CINEMA: FACING THE COGNITIVE CHALLENGE RAISED IN LITERARY STUDIES

The concept of unreliable narration has been widely discussed in literary theory in recent years. One of the major insights gained through this discussion (most forcefully claimed by Nünning in his early works on the subject (Nünning 1997; Nünning, A. 1998; Nünning 1999)) is the fact that the determination of a narrator's (un)reliability depends on the reader's conceptual framework. Another, that the concept covers a great variation of different types and textual strategies (Allrath 1998; Busch 1998; Fludernik 1999; Cohn 2000; Hansen 2003; 2005; Phelan 2005; Hansen 2007 a.o.) How these issues are to be approached in relation to cinematographic narratives, is, of course, a rather large and complicated task, so I will restrict myself to two different angles on the topic. The first focus on narrative technique as a possibility for the change in perception concerning the narrator's reliability. The second confronts the issue of ideology and historical context.

1. **Objective vs. subjective modes of telling**

The distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' modes of cinematographic telling will be outlined, but with special interest in how objective techniques in certain cases are framed within a subjective perspective, resulting in what we might label 'pseudo-objective narration'. The point is that in these cases the spectator has to reconceptualise the conventional cinematographic storytelling frame, where subjective telling normally is codified explicitly. In pseudo-objective narration the subjective point of view isn't necessarily marked, and considered in the light of the increased use in contemporary cinema of this form, we might very well observe a change in our receptive schemes so that our primary response to the conventional codes of objective telling is to consider them as a potential subjective perspective. This necessarily also opens for a reflection of the potential unreliability of the narrator.

2. **Context**

In the second part of my presentation I will consider how the change in ideology and historical context can have an effect on our understanding of a narrator's reliability. I will here turn my attention towards a film which in the general reception has been considered reliable and told in a conventional objective mode, namely Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006). The film has been highly praised for its realistic depiction of the horrors of the former socialist state DDR. But one cannot but be surprised by the fact that no critic have paid attention to the complexities and ambiguities raised in the film's final sequence. Here we learn that the protagonist Dreyman has written a

novel about the incidents we have witnessed and an obvious conclusion for the spectator is that what we have been presented to is Dreyman's recollection of what happened then and his reconstruction of the events. And when one follows this strategy, the film turns into a rather different story which I will approach by way of Phelan's 'ethical criticism'.

The question of why no critic of the film detected this potential and, would I say, plausible understanding of the film is impossible to give a clear answer to. But we might get to some understanding by comparing to similar texts where the trust in the narrator's account by time has changed – like for instance Marlow's from Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1902). As it will be known, it was not until 1958 with Guerard's book *Conrad the Novelist*, that we started getting the understanding "that the story is not primarily about Kurtz or about the brutality of Belgian officials but about Marlow its narrator" (Guerard 1958: 37). – Perhaps because the brutality of imperialism was very urgent, when the first readings of the story was made, just as the horrors of the socialist regime is in the contemporary context of *Das Leben der Anderen*.

This will lead to some concluding thoughts on the dynamics of narrative regarding the relations between reading and re-reading, and between passive and active reading strategies.

References

- Allrath, G. (1998): »'But why *will* you say that I am mad?' Textuelle Signale für die Ermittlung von *unreliable narration*«. In *Unreliable Narration: Studien sur Theorie und Praxis unglaubwürdigen Erzählens in der englischsprachigen Erzähllitteratur*. A. Nünning, C. Surkamp and B. Zerweck (red.). Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier: 59-80.
- Black, D. A. (1986): »Genette and film. Narrative level in the fiction cinema.« In *Wide Angle 8 3/4*: 19-26.
- Booth, W. C. (1991 [1961/83]): *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. London et. al.: Penguin Books.
- Bordwell, D. (1985): *Narration in the fiction film*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Busch, D. (1998): »'Unreliable Narration' aus narratologischer Sicht: Bausteine für ein erzähltheoretisches Analyseraster«. In *Unreliable Narration: Studien sur Theorie und Praxis unglaubwürdigen Erzählens in der englischsprachigen Erzähllitteratur*. A. Nünning, C. Surkamp and B. Zerweck (red.). Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier: 41-58.
- Chatman, S. (1978): *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Chatman, S. (1990): *Coming to Terms. The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Cohn, D. (2000): »Discordant Narration.« In *Style 34 2*: 307-316.
- Currie, G. (1997): *Image and mind film, philosophy and cognitive science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fludernik, M. (1999): »Defining (In)sanity: The Narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the Question of Unreliability«. In *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologien im Kontext/Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*. W. Grünzweig and A. Solbach (red.). Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag: 75-95.
- Hansen, P. K. (2003): »Hvem sagde upålidelig? Om sanktioneringen af upålideligheden i den

- upålitelige narration«. In *Berättaren: En gäckande röst i texten*. L.-Å. Skalin (red.). Örebro: Örebro Universitet: pp.149-176.
- Hansen, P. K. (2005): »When Facts Become Fiction: On Extra-Textual Unreliable Narration«. In *Fact and Fiction in Narrative: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. L.-Å. Skalin (red.). Örebro: Örebro University: 283-307.
- Hansen, P. K. (2007): »Reconsidering the Unreliable Narrator.« In *Semiotica* 165 (1/4): 227-246.
- Helbig, J. (red.) (2006): *'Camera doesn't lie': Spielarten erzählerischer Unzuverlässigkeit im Film*. Focal Point. Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.
- Kozloff, S. (1988): *Invisible storytellers. Voice-over narration in American fiction film*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.
- Liptay, F. and Y. Wolf (2005): *Was stimmt denn jetzt? Unzuverlässiges Erzählen in Literatur und Film*. München: Ed. Text und Kritik.
- Nünning, A. (1997): »"But why will you say that I am mad?" On the Theory, History, and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction.« In *AAA. Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 22 1: 83-105.
- Nünning, A. (1998): »Unreliable Narrator«. In *Encyclopedia of the Novel*. P. E. Schellinger (red.). Chicag & London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers. 2: 1386-1388.
- Nünning, A. (1999): »Unreliable, compared to what? Towards a Cognitive Theory of 'Unreliable Narration': Prolegomena and Hypotheses«. In *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologien im Kontext/Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*. W. Grünzweig and A. Solbach (red.). Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag: 53-73.
- Nünning, V. (1998): »Unreliable narration und die historische Variabilität von Werten und Normen: The Vicar of Wakefield als Testfall für eine kulturgeschichtliche Erzählforschung«. In *Unreliable Narration. Studien zur Theori und Praxis unglaubwürdigen Erzählens in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur*. A. Nünning (red.). Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier: 257-285.
- Phelan, J. (2005): *Living to tell about it. A rhetoric and ethics of character narration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wilson, G. M. (1986): *Narration in light. Studies in cinematic point of view*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Zerweck, B. (2001): »Historicing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction.« In *Style* 35 1: 151-178.