Between

Focalization as Transmedial Category

Massimo Fusillo

Abstract

In the last decades formalistic and structuralist narratology has been intensively recovered and reinterpreted in a cognitive perspective, and with a new focus on transmedial dissemination. The goal is, as Marie-Laure Ryan and Jean-Nöel Thon state, a media-conscious narratology. In particular focalization appears to be a crucial category to define the various narrative techniques through different media.

The paper will deal first with the theoretical debate on focalization, analyzing the shift from Genette's canonical triadic pattern to the more fluid scale proposed by cognitive narratology (for example by Manfred Jahn), and the coexistence between different meanings and applications (basically: perceptual, emotional, informational). The second part will be devoted to some significant examples: Alfonso Cuaron's recent movie *Roma*, as a vivid example of central focus in cinema; focalization in videogames; and the 360° multifocalization practiced by new media, which radically change the notion of point of view itself.

Keywords

Transmediality, Narratology, Focalization, Literature, Cinema, Videogames, 360° videos.

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Theories and Problems of Focalization

Narratology is certainly the scientific field which best survived poststructuralist and cultural turns, especially as it became an important part of the cognitive approach, increasingly detached from a purely literary perspective, and, consequently, transmedial and multidisciplinary. This series of transformations created what David Herman called post-classic narratology (1999; see also Alber – Fludernik 2010). Narrativity is now a crucial concept in anthropology, psychoanalysis, neurosciences, geography, gender studies and several other fields; at the same time it represents a significant dimension in multifarious, old and new media. This is the reason why Marie-Laure Ryan, in her *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001), was able to develop a phenomenology of narrative experience that encompasses reading, watching and playing; she was able to propose, in some other essays (for example 2014), a cognitive narratology based on processual, analogical and functional approaches, focused respectively on psychological relations with narrated stories, on narrative presentation of characters and on the role of narration in the construction or deconstruction of personal identities.

Focalization is certainly a key concept in narratology, because every narrative act exploits a complex relationship between a narrator and a series of characters, revealing a wide range of possible forms and clearly influencing the reader's response. It is also an effective transmedial concept, since it does have quite different realizations in various media, especially in literature and cinema (as a matter of fact, it is a visual concept which gave birth to the category in literary

criticism). Drawing inspiration from Henry James' brilliant *Prefaces* to the New York edition of his works (a vivid example of a writer's laboratory), Gérard Genette conceived the most canonical theory of focalization in his *Figures 3. Discours du récit* (1972), now considered a classic work of narratology in its semiological and structuralist phase. In particular, Genette's narratology focuses on rhetorical strategies and expressive techniques (the *récit*), and not on the logic structure of the plot (the *histoire*), as demonstrated, on the contrary, by the functionalist, more abstract narratology inspired by Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1929). Moreover, Genette retrieves and expands on the triadic pattern conceived in the same years by Tzvetan Todorov (1966: 141-142); this was extremely successful and effective, owing to the magical and Hegelian lure of the number three. At the same time, Genette was certainly aware of the risks that a rigid categorization always implies, and I think that this often self–ironical consciousness is one of the reasons why his theoretical work is, nowadays, still quite vital; suffice to think of the skeptical closure of his magnum opus on intertextuality, *Palimpsestes* (1982). In the case of focalization, Genette clearly states that there is a rather fluid and problematic difference between zero focalization (i.e. a narrative with an omniscient narrator, symbolized by Todorov's formula *Narrator > Character*, where the narrator knows more than the actual character) and variable, internal focalization (a narrative with a restricted 'point of view', according to Todorov's scheme *Narrator = Character*, where the narrator expresses only what the given character knows). As a matter of fact, a purely panoramic view from above barely exists, or is extremely rare; even the most traditional omniscient narrator (Homer, Balzac or Manzoni) needs to adopt the perception of a single character for a given time. The narrator, more or less frequently, shifts its perspective, bestowing on it the term "variable".

This is one of the two subcategories as defined by Genette, the second one being fixed internal focalization, a quite rare case of a text entirely told from the perspective of a single character, as happens in Henry James' extreme and more programmatic written works (for example *What Maisie Knew*), something that is practically impossible in

the world of movies. Robert Montgomery's *The Lady of the Lake* (1947) is a renowned exception, showing how untenable this solution is for filmic narration. On the other hand, the 2015 Russian-American science fiction film *Hardcore Henry*, by Ilya Naishuller, entirely shot from a first person perspective, works much better, because it stems from an intermedial contamination with videogames. An effective, partial example in classic noir is the first half hour of Delmer Daves' *Dark passage* (1947), chiefly shot from Humphrey Bogart's point of view; we first see his face only when he has recovered from facial plastic surgery.

To sum up, we could say that zero focalization (in the visual, informational and emotional meaning of the term) tends to be the result of multiple internal focalizations, of single subjective sequences.

The other problematic category in Genette's triadic pattern is external focalization (*Narrator < Character*: the narrator says less than the character knows). A narrative in which the narrative voice pretends to know little of the story and nothing about the inner life of its characters, to spy on the action from a limited perspective, is certainly a fascinating experiment, and may be considered a brilliant example of the rebound effect of cinema on literature, and of the transmedial nature of focalization. But to label it as a general category is quite tenuous and questionable; external focalization usually involves limited sequences in different focalization systems (the famous carriage ride in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*), or very specific genres (the hard-boiled, the *nouveau roman*), or authors (Ernest Hemingway, Dashiel Hammett), and rarely entire works (Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* is maybe the most famous example). In my opinion, it ought to be considered, rather, as a variation of internal focalization, of the restricted point of view, based on a deliberate absence of access to the character's inner life, thoughts and emotions. This would be a behavioristic reaction to the psychological and subjective narration of the late 19th century novel, which was influenced by Flaubert and theorized by James.

A Morphological Progression

Among the impressively wide-ranging literature on narratology and focalization, Manfred Jahn's contributions discussed and reformulated Genette's system in the most convincing way. His point of departure is the excessive overlapping of different meanings and criteria in the classification:

> The main problem, perhaps, is that Genette's typology mixes too many heterogeneous ingredients. Among the parameters that go into it is the number and identity of focal agencies (fixed vs. variable focalization, focal character vs. disembodied observer), the distance from which something is seen (close or far), the knowledge potential of narrators and characters (features of characterization involving quantitative and qualitative aspects), perceptional limitations (access or non-access to inside views), scope (whole texts or individual passages), and combinatorial constellations (variable or multiple) (1999: 95).

Jahn decides to concentrate his critical analysis on the visual/perceptive aspect and proposes a four-type scale of focalization, inspired by Ryan's concept of «story line windows», imaginary screens produced by an imaginary camera. The quality of this scale comes from the homogeneity of the types, positioned in a morphological progression and not in binary opposition. The scale is visualized in a diagram, in which Focus 1 indicates the point of view, the deictic center, and Focus 2 the object of focalization; it is summarized by the author in the following terms:

> I have placed four main categories graphically symbolizing a morphological progression. The rightmost type, *strict focalization*, replicates the vector-field shape of figure (1), but in order to indicate its more general nature, its "eye" has been removed and its focus-1 has been indicated by a "+" representing a point of origin. In strict focalization, F2 is perceived from (or by) F1 under conditions of precise and restricted spatio-temporal coordinates.

In *ambient focalization*, the field of subjectivity is shown as an ellipse: like a geometrical ellipse, which has two foci, ambient focalization is based on two (or more) F1's, depicting a thing summarily, from more than one side, possibly from all sides, considerably relaxing the condition of specific time-place anchoring, and allowing a mobile, summary, or communal point of view. In *weak focalization*, all F1's, and with them all spatio-temporal ties, disappear, leaving only a focused object (F2). Lastly, in *zero focalization* the focused object itself disappears, as possibly do the limits of the perceptional field itself (which for this reason is shown as a dotted shape) (1999: 97-98).
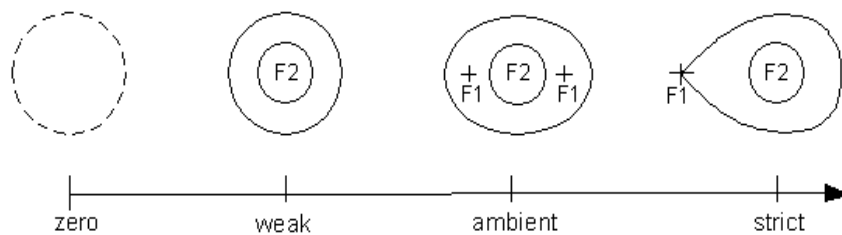
Genettian zero focalization thus became almost an exception, whilst ambient focalization better describes the standard, more widespread kind of focalization, which frequently dominates an entire narration, and can also be applied successfully to cinema and other audio-visual media, thus becoming a true transmedial concept.

Subjectivity in Cinema

This certainly does not mean believing that a story is independent of the media and the techniques that convey it, as functionalist narratology (especially Claude Bremond's radical *Logique du récit*, 1973*)* was inclined to believe, because of its hyper-rationalist and universalistic attitude. Although we do not share «radical media relativism» (Ryan 2004: 35), we are certainly aware of the different

narrative resources of the various media according to their different potential and features (spatial, temporal, diegetic, interactive and so on). The goal is to build a media-conscious narratology, which can handle every act of storytelling, every kind of storyworld. Genette's theory of focalization implies a language-based conception of narrative, which necessarily implies a narrator, a series of characters and a temporal development. Jahn's scale, on the contrary, can be applied to any medium

Ambient focalization seems to be particularly adept at depicting the complexity of the cinematic representation of subjectivity. First of all, point of view (POV) is notably a specific and technical category: a view from a character's eye (also called "ocularization"), usually encountered in the gaze/object/gaze three-shot pattern (very typical of Hitchcock's style), which makes identification with the character explicit; the purest form, the totally restricted view, is rare and rather problematic. But the adoption of a character's point of view is much more complex and varied in cinema, especially because filmic narrative has impressive mobility, produced by a central visual instance (the camera-eye, like Wagner's orchestra, can be considered a narrator only in a metaphorical way). In his landmark book *Point of view in the cinema* (1975), inspired by a vision of narrative as dialectical interaction between a narrator and a reader, Edward R. Branigan offers an extremely rich and nuanced typology of cinematic subjectivity. Subjectivity exists when the six elements which usually produce space in classic movies - origin, vision, time, frame, object and mind - all refer to a single character. I shall not go into detail as regards typology, which produces a matrix of twenty-four combinations (perhaps too articulated and structuralist a taxonomy). However, I do find it interesting that Branigan also includes frames from a character's standpoint «through metaphor», which produce phenomena such as reflection, projection and various mental processes (dreams, hopes, fears, desires, forebodings). His theory of focalization also involves «attitudes», being both perceptual and emotional at the same time. If we go back to Jahn's more visual pattern, we might state that ambient focalization is certainly the standard situation, privileged by classic

cinema which is narrated «as if from the point of view of an observer capable of moving about the room» (Branigan 1975: 24). Because of the rapid mobility of the cinematic narrative instance, we might better say «from the point of view of some observers», in this way conforming to the multiplicity of foci imbedded in Jahn's notion of ambient focalization. Occasionally the continuity of this standard focalization is broken up by some impossible POV shot, which may be considered to be impossible observers (e.g. the interior of a refrigerator,), or by some more or less abrupt shift to non-focalized, total shots, or to a more narratorial viewpoint and weak, or zero, focalization. We might say that when the visual instance, in other words the narrator, is felt to be an observer internal to the diegetic world, we can talk of ambient focalization; when it coincides with a character's eye, we can talk of strict focalization. When it comes from an overhead view, producing more or less total vision not accessible to the characters, we can talk of weak or zero focalization. But even in these cases, if the main character is part of the shot, we may still consider him the central consciousness, as defined by Henry James in his Prefaces (2011).

Alfonso Cuaron's recent and highly successful movie *Roma* (2018) provides an effective example of this kind of focalization. Cleo, the indigenous live-in maid of a middle-class family in the Roma neighborhood of Mexico City, is a figure from the director's autobiographical experience; she represents the focal point of the entire narration, made up of long sequence shots and a detailed representation of daily life in the seventies. The camera mostly remains tight on her, enveloping her, and even in the descriptive, non-focalized total shots (for example the scenes of martial arts, or some beautiful rural landscapes) she is part of the dieghesis; we actually feel her presence and her emotional involvement. The formal configuration featuring her as a center of consciousness, produced by silences, glances and facial expressions, contributes to the political impact of the movie – at the same time a retelling of a recollected personal obsession, and a reflection on political and ethnic issues (the indigenous community, the class conflicts of the seventies). I do not think that her frequent silences should be read as a stereotyped vision of a working-

class figure (a kind of female Job); silence is, in this case, an allusive and sublime form of expression, a cinematic way of expressing emotional states.

Videogames and Focalization

Focalization has proven to be a useful concept in game studies, since players are often given control of character-avatars of the game world. Basically exploiting Genette's model, Fraser Allison (2015) explored the various ways of conveying subjectivity in video games, which involve the various figures of the user (an offline identity), the player (a socially performed identity), the character (a fictional identity) and the avatar (a virtual visualization). The paper also examines previous contributions on focalization in videogames (Nitsche, Calleja), the first based on Mieke Bal's more visual model of focalization (which, in my opinion, rather overcomplicates the number of instances); and analyzes a series of case studies: *The Sims 3* (The Sims Studio 2009), *Top Spin 4* (2K Czech 2011), *Mirror's Edge* (EA Digital Illusions CE 2008) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2014). These are Allison's conclusions:

> Video games in which a player directly controls a character have opportunities to convey the character's subjective experience and ways of thinking to the player. Whether the audiovisual style is photorealistic or stylized, the presentation of the game environment can be suggestive of the subjectivity of the character that views it – as is commonly seen in specific cases such as hallucinatory sequences. The ludic affordances of such video games typically convey a great deal about the character's nature, goals and mental models, as well as their abilities. In doing so, the player's own perspective and way of thinking is shaped according to what is required to operate the video game. This gives game designers a powerful opportunity to present a diversity of perspectives and open up particular desired experiences for the player (Fraser 2015: 13-14).

Even in the case of videogames Jahn's reconfiguration of Genette's canonic model seems to me valuable and useful in describing the complex interplay between author, character and readers; especially ambient focalization can be considered the standard pattern implying various formulations from the visual, emotional and cultural point of view.

Multifocalization: 360° Videos

Videogames often give multiple choice to the users, thus certainly involving aspects of focalization. That is the reason why I would like to conclude with a short mention of 360° videos, a highly immersive case of Virtual Reality, which creates an environment close to real life, and leaves the viewer the choice of focalizations while limiting the director's creativity; this freedom for the viewer has been fully exploited by feminist 360° porn movies, which aim to overwhelm the dominant male gaze. As a matter of fact, this communicative situation resembles that of a very ancient art, i.e. theatre, which is basically a single set with a fixed audience viewpoint. Scholars of 360° videos have highlighted the various audio-visual cues used by directors in order to enhance the viewer's focalization and to orientate the response: «Visual cues include movement of objects or characters, gestures, alignment of objects, the gaze of characters, lighting, extreme contrast, semantic opposites, video in video, text, graphics, special effects and camera movements. Audio cues include characters talking, screams, video in video, sound effects, and music» (Elmezeny, Edenhofer and Wimmer 2018). Some of these are certainly the same as those used by theatre directors (especially gestures, gaze, lighting, sound effect and music); on the other hand, some are more specifically applicable to video expressive strategies. In any case, this last example, which unites an ancient art, based on physical presence and bodily performance, with a sophisticated technological one, brilliantly demonstrates how central focalization may be in a media-conscious narratology and in trans-medial comparative literature.

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The Article

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