Ecologized Humanity Versus Humanized Ecology: Critical Approach to Camera Narratives in Cinematic Arts

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Abstract

In postmodern cinematic arts, specifically commercially successful ones, the presence of the director on screen through the camera's position could be perceived as a limitation against the notion of heteroglossia, even if the script requires an objective narrative technique. When the script suggests only characters' Point of View shots (PoV) or multi-vocal narratives, camera position from the director's or audience's eye level is a common filming practice. Therefore, a grand narrative or subjective point of view predominates the representation of voices, whether intending to centralize or decentralize camera storytelling. This paper is not arguing about treating all voices—whether human or nonhuman—equally in a particular scene; instead, this paper critically points out filmmakers' eco-conscious contribution to cinematic arts. Through an inductive qualitative approach, this paper criticizes this humanized ecological portrayal where ironically, ecocide is celebrated in mainstream cinema. So, this study prescribes the incorporation of ecologized humanity by reconsidering camera positions. As social justice pedagogy highlights inclusivity, like literary studies, in filmmaking techniques, ecology should

not be a victim or margin the way it was with class, gender, and race. Undeniably, the environment has been filmed mainly as a background or collateral damage. This paper also shares insights into such paradoxes where human protagonists are seen on a 'heroic' voyage to save the world performing ecological catastrophic actions.

Keywords: Humanized Ecology, Ecologized Humanity, Grand Narrative, Heteroglossia, Dialogic Imagination, Ecological Insight, Cinematic Arts, The Death of the Author, Enlightenment as Mass Deception

Introduction

Fiction and drama can be critically analyzed from Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory on the "pragmatics of narrative knowledge" (18), as postmodern literary texts are often perceived to denounce metanarratives or totalizing theories by going beyond the subjective definition of 'truth.' Whether A. S Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) or Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957), questioning grand narratives has become a significant feature in postmodern literature; as Lyotard puts it in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*:

> "Knowledge, then, is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth, extending to the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of a sound or color (auditory and visual sensibility), etc. (ibid)"

Since then, the absolute truth or subjective vision in narrative techniques has been studied as a marginalizing approach. Therefore, the realm of literature evolved to an extent where voices are no more limited to anthropocentric knowledge only. Eco-centric or the voice of Nature or non-human voices in literary texts are widely discussed in contemporary academic environments. For example, critics or academics point out not only the presence of social power system in particular poetry, fiction, or drama but also the ways in which Nature has been portrayed as a character or active performer in a text like *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding shaping the lives and determining of human-voices. Such an interdisciplinary approach

decentralizes the "verbal-ideological world" (570), as Mikhail Bakhtin's mentions in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* This concept of "dialogisized heteroglossia" (576) in literary texts has been questioned from an ecocentric point of view too in Michael McDowell's article 'Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight' where he urges how non-human voices also contribute in the narrative technique.

According to Roland Barthe's theory in *The Death of The Author,* readers can "examine the system of signs" (Laura Seymour 12) beyond authorial narratives in literary texts, giving less significance to the author's intent. However, the gap remains in the technique of cinematic arts where a filmmaker's camera is one of the technical tools like an author's pen. The control of the film director over the narrative technique hardly allows the cinematic text to go beyond anthropocentrism. It can be argued whether this liberty of reading a cinematic text exists without the presence of the director in a film or not, specifically when a camera treatment is human-centric, and mainly it's the director's PoV (Point of View) shot. Thus, this notion could diminish the infinite possibilities of space representation. For example, in many cinematic techniques, whether the scene demands a wide shot or a portrait shot, Nature is often blurred or defocused since humans' voices are supposed to be the center. This can be termed humanized ecology in cinema, as the cinematic text is depicted only from a human lens. Indeed, there are exceptions to this.

In films like *Nirbaak* (2015), Indian director Srijit Mukherji vividly created a convincing love affair between a tree and a woman where the audience can see how the tree feels being in a romantic experience without human voices, narratives, or perspectives (See Appendix 1). Moreover, Korean director Kim Ki Duk's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* diminished those binaries of anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches as the film centralizes the seasons, not the characters, as narrators of the film (See Appendix 2). Another Academy Award-winning international film *Ida* (2013), directed by Polish director Pawel

Pawlikowski, uses the camera to "portray a lack of interest in what the characters are doing," says Northwestern Polish Studies film review (See Appendix 3).

These exceptions cannot be generalized as ecologized humanity; nevertheless, they are resources on how camera treatment can decentralize narratives. Ecologized humanity suggests centralizing ecology as a character in parallel with human voices. This article questions whether cinema portrays Nature as a part of humankind or humankind as a part of Nature through its technical process of narration. Depending on such a binary hierarchical approach, as civilization advanced, Petra Kelly connects this pattern of subordination or marginalization as an "ecological rape" (Warren 116) of our planet. If ecology is treated as the subaltern or in a patriarchal society—the way voices of genders are unheard, this article focuses on whether filmmakers are contributing any significant changes in the narrative techniques of ecological representation through cinematic arts.

Discussion

To begin with, a narrative technique experimented with in a 1992 film, *Scent of a Woman,* directed by Martin Brest, where the grand narrative is explicitly omitted in the whole cinema, and no such scenes are visually presented where one of the protagonists Charlie was absent (See Appendix 4). The possible reason could be Frank's loss of vision, the central character, who was a retired army officer. However, all shots can rarely be point-of-view of characters only. Thereby, maintaining the objectivity of truth becomes technically challenging without the influence of the director—who is the third person present in the scene but invisible to the audience. The question is to what extent the director's presence is rationalized to be present if it's not a part of the script. In theatre plays, the director is absent physically on stage and cannot confine the visions of the audience by narrating where to look at. The audience has the liberty to look anywhere, whether that be the lighting technique, props, or any images presented or performed on staged.

So, the author's death seems technically a less phenomenon in filmmaking. However, there are exceptions. The film *Hardcore Henry* (2015), directed by Ilya Naishuller, is an entirely first-person narrative film where there are no other camera angles except the protagonist's narrative PoV shot (See Appendix 5). As the story is from his perspective, where his eyes act as the camera, his face cannot be seen by the audience unless he looks into a mirror or water reflection. The argument of this article is whether a camera is also a narrator or not; like a character, the camera constructs specific meanings through its framing situations, thereby it acts as a finite being with subjective movements. In a two-character dialogue scene, for instance, in a film like *My Dinner with Andre* (1981), directed by Louis Malle, how can the camera be present as a third-person character? Does the audience need in this film an authorial presence or is that redundant? (See Appendix 6)

The following argument is when an action is happening at a particular moment, then it's the camera or sound that decides which action is to be voiced and which one to reject. For example, the narrowed comprehensibility of human senses might not be able to grasp all kinds of presence at a particular moment. Here, "all kinds of presence" means the presence of props, landscape, nonhuman beings, and cosmic living beings like the air, water, or soil. The author is the maker who controls the sequence with the technical approach to make it understandable to the audience. Some might argue that if all sounds the audience could hear at a time, the scene might not make sense or seem chaotic. There lies the aesthetics of the makers–to make a film not only script-wise objective narrative but also framing-wise.

As Michael McDowell points out, in any dialogic relationship, "multiple voices..interact" (Glotfelty 372). Indeed, William Howarth theorized how "life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information" (77), whereas McDowell suggests "all entities in the great web of nature deserve recognition and a voice" (372). This research seeks possible approaches if a film director can attempt to make the environment or Nature an "active

performer," as David Mazel (139) theorizes. Some might argue that the camera is nothing but a mere observer. However, Lyotard's concept illustrates how knowledge is predetermined by power and preconstructed thereby. Without any argument, such subjective representation of knowledge could also be connected with Plato's allegory of Cave theory, where belief is not challenged by knowledge as the prisoners cannot turn their heads the other way of perception.

Indeed, it is theoretically and practically applicable to make a scene frame objective or give the effect of no-presence of any person who is not in the film script. There are various ways, as evident in a few films, where only the characters' PoV reveals the actions and the plot. The impact of such a technique, if maintained, is expected to give a dimension to the cinematic narrative approach. For ages, literary activists have addressed numerous issues of marginalization; similarly, reports and theorists affirm that the present climatic degradation is alienated from individual and social lives. In the portrayal of daily life and activities, the relationship between Nature and humans can be strengthened rather than alienating Nature from society. The co-existence of all energies known as symbiosis if can be voiced, then "the others who have been silent, or silenced, or unheard, the animals, the trees, the rivers, the rocks" will not feel scared by the ones who got the power to voice. (Warren 128), explains Judith Plant.

Here are a few philosophical reconsiderations for cinematic approaches if the narratives require to go beyond grand or authorial voice.

1. **Each Frame is a Voice:** Each camera frame represents a voice. Filmmakers may rethink whose narratives they are representing, and thereby the framing could take a position. Every shot is a PoV, either of the characters' or director's, sometimes animals' or nature's.

2. **Choosing Voices Critically:** Indeed, while framing or focusing on one action, another might be defocused. This prescription is not about simultaneous representation.

Meanings are not produced with one shot or in that specific moment. Instead, a continuous sequence of information is portrayed through all the techniques of cinematic arts—montage, dialogue, props, lights, and sounds. Thereby, everything acts together to coexist in a scene. Choosing which voice to focus on and which one deserves less focus certainly demands critical consideration.

3. **PoV Parallelism:** While preparing the shooting script, if the filmmakers want the characters' Point-of-View (PoV) narrative only, the camera must act like the characters' eyes. Therefore, the audience can only see what the characters can see, only if the director's treatment is to avoid authorial narrative.

4. **Third-person Narrative:** On the other hand, if the film plot demands a third-person narrative—where the author is not dead but rather an authorial voice is expected in the script, the filmmakers can use the liberty of any suitable representation technique.

5. **Sound and Silence:** Sound plays a significant role in the narration. It transcends space or physical locations. Using the term 'background score' as the ambient sound limits the possibility of it being in the center or 'foreground score.' Voices are necessarily not always human language. Silence is also a language, and ambiance has its language. The sound design of a scene could also be inclusive or non-inclusive. If any scene unintentionally hegemonizes the norm that 'Nature' is alienated from humankind and its only a 'thing' or "temporary excursion" (Glotfelty 234) as if Nature does not perform the role of "environing" (138) as a verb, then compensation for such exclusion is expected too in the next shot or scene to deconstruct such hegemonic representation of Nature in a film. As George Steiner establishes in 'The Hermeneutic Motion' (Venuti 186), compensation is required for any aggression called "restitution" in representation.

6. **Aesthetics and Ethics:** The balance between aesthetics and ethics forms social justice pedagogy. The way decolonizing pedagogy addresses colonized mindset in the content

or curriculum, 'black lives matter' in the cinema, or literature beyond the hegemonic representation of color; similarly, it is high time to revalue environment as a verb, as a doer who performs the act of "environing" (Glotfelty 138). A shot or composition in a cinematic scene is visually beautiful or not—this knowledge is relative and abstract. Such poetic 'rhyming' of shots might look alluring, but that is where mass deceptive enlightenment exists, according to Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (During 31-41). Aesthetics promote certain ethics. Filmmakers can choose which aesthetics are balanced with ethics—specifically, environmental ethics. Whether inclusive narrative or metanarrative, every action leads to inevitable consequences.

Conclusion

Deconstruction or demystification of race, religion, caste, and gender are often addressed through liberal arts in order to form a symbiotic and non-prejudiced inclusive society. The consequence of non-inclusivity, when it comes to the environment and primarily the result of marginalizing ecology, is evident to all. "Our house is on fire," as Greta Thunberg puts it. On the contrary, many films glorify environmental catastrophes caused by human actions or violence—let that be an action movie or science fiction by celebrated Hollywood production houses. The audience finds such 'ecological tape' as collateral damage only, ironically, when the Hollywood superheroes set sail for a voyage to save the world. The result of such representations of Nature in Hollywood cinema needs no more clarification in today's world as the global climate change, sufferings of humankind, and extinction of species are no more new tales to be told. If the camera is also a subconscious mind on screen, let that not be biased by not representing nonhuman voices at all in the story.
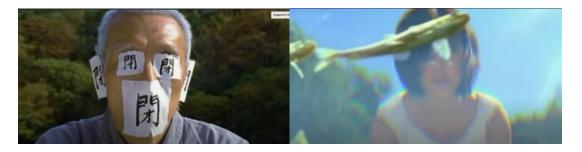
Appendix 1

Figure a

Figure b

These are scenes from the film *Nirbaak* (2015) directed by Srijit Mukherji.

Figure a is the director's PoV shot (Point of View). However, the director here ecologized humanity, not in terms of camera narratives but explicitly from the director's PoV as it represents the tree as a living being—who is in love with a lady siting often under its shade.

Figure b is PoV shot (Point of View) of the tree as the story portrays the tree as a character. It could be an example of ecologized humanity from camera narratives.

Appendix 2

These are scenes from the film *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* directed by Kim Ki Duk (The first shot [left] is from the director's PoV and the second shot [right] is from Nature's PoV)

Appendix 3

These are scenes from the film *Ida* (2013) directed by Pawel Pawlikowski. All four of these shots are character's PoV. None of these are from the director's PoV. These are examples how the director didn't exercise his presence on screen.

Appendix 4

It is a Scene from the film *Scent of a Woman* directed by Martin Brest. This is called Two Shot/Composite Shot from the director's PoV, not the jury's point of view in the school trial scene as we can see the boy Charlie looks at the jury, not in the camera. Such shots confirms the director's presence in the scene known as third person narrative technique.

Appendix 5

It is a scene from the film *Hardcore Henry* (2015) directed by Ilya Naishuller. This whole film is made from the protagonist's PoV.

Appendix 6

These are scenes from the film *My Dinner with Andre* (1981) directed by Louis Malle

This film is about these two characters engaged in deep conversations throughout the

film where third person narrative—as the camera suggests the director's presence—is

irrelevant.

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