Manfred Jahn[1]

Narratology: A Pictorial Introduction

YouTube https://youtu.be/CIztFm22I_4

Revised 3/20/2023 15:12

1. Intro

Hello and welcome to this introduction to narratology. What is narratology? Narratology is *the theory of narrative*; you can also call it the theory of storytelling. The aim of this video is to present a *pictorial* guide, mainly for beginners. It is based on as many simple graphics and animations as I was able to access or create.[2] This is page 1 of 12.

There are many types of stories, and many types of narratologies, and therefore we must be selective. This overview is an attempt to combine mainly four approaches:
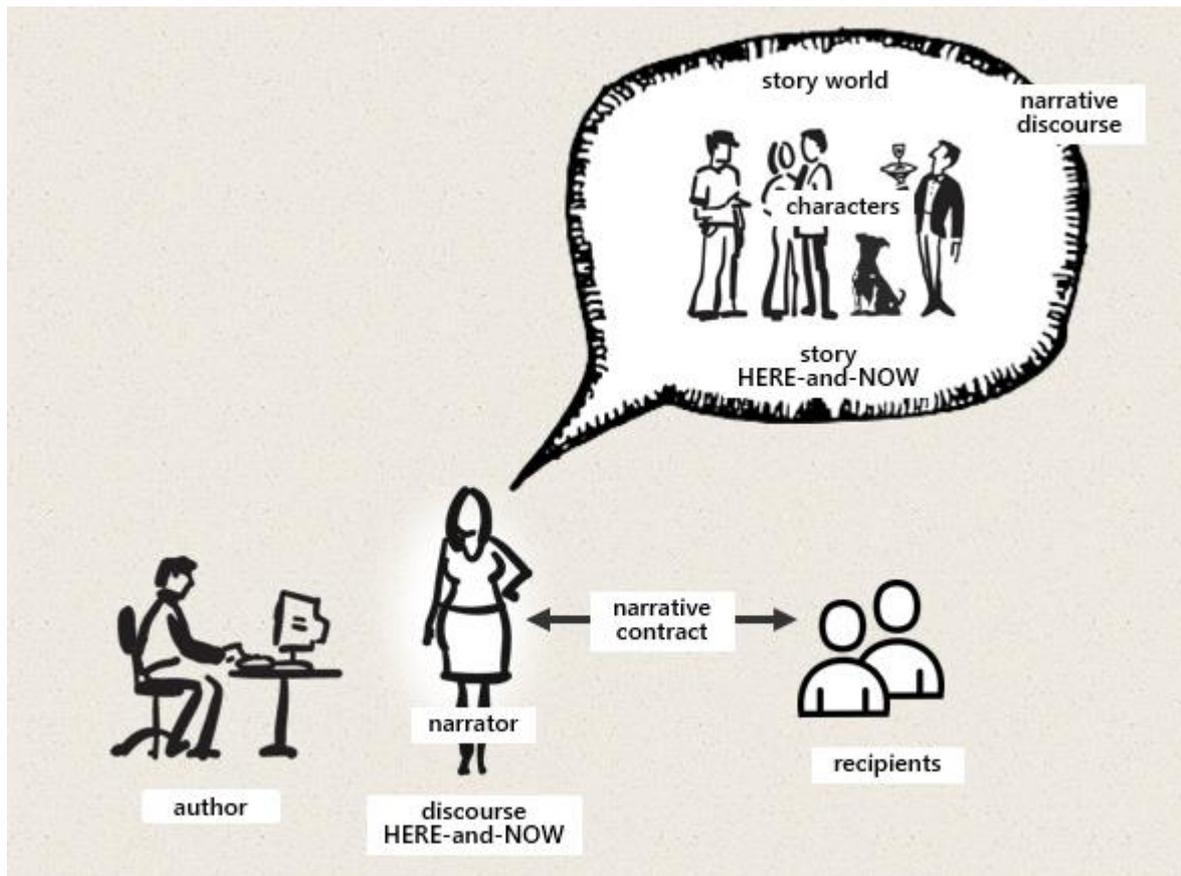
- first, there is Classical Narratology, which is Gérard Genette's approach dating back to as early as 1972;
- then there is Natural Narratology, a model that was introduced by Monika Fludernik in 1996;
- third we have Focalization Theory, also known as point of view theory, as developed by various authors, including myself (Genette 1972 ch4, 1983 ch11-12; Bal 1985; Jahn 2021 ch3.2)
- And finally, Transmedial Narratology, which is a recent approach focusing on storytelling in and across different media, specifically including comics, films, computer games, and so on (Ryan/Thon eds (2014), Thon 2016).

You may want to check the video's description for the full script including references, footnotes, and additional suggestions.

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[1] Email; homepage www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/. This document: www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/Narratology_Pictorial.pdf

[2] Character graphics by Art-Y (iStock-ID 164475357).

2. Elements of narrative texts

This page starts off with a list of nine basic technical terms. Our first graphic is a speech bubble which depicts a *narrative discourse*. A discourse is either a spoken or a written text, and the speaker or writer of it is a *narrator*. When telling a story, the narrator creates a *story world*, which is populated by *characters*. Wait a minute, is there a dog among the characters? Yes, there is; we actually accept all beings, human or not, as possible story characters.[3] Each moment in the story's action takes place at a certain time and location, the *story here-and-now*. Similarly, each moment in the narrator's discourse is situated in place and time, so this is the *discourse here-and-now*. Sometimes, especially when dealing with narrative fiction, we need to add the *real-life author* as a separate agent – mainly because authors of fiction often choose to invent narrators. For instance, an older author may invent a younger narrator; or a male author may let the story be told by a female narrator, as is suggested in the picture.

Narrative discourse is heard or read by an audience of one or more *recipients* [also called *narratees*]. Please note that narrators and recipients are outside or *external* to the story world, while characters are in or *internal* to the story world. This is an important distinction.
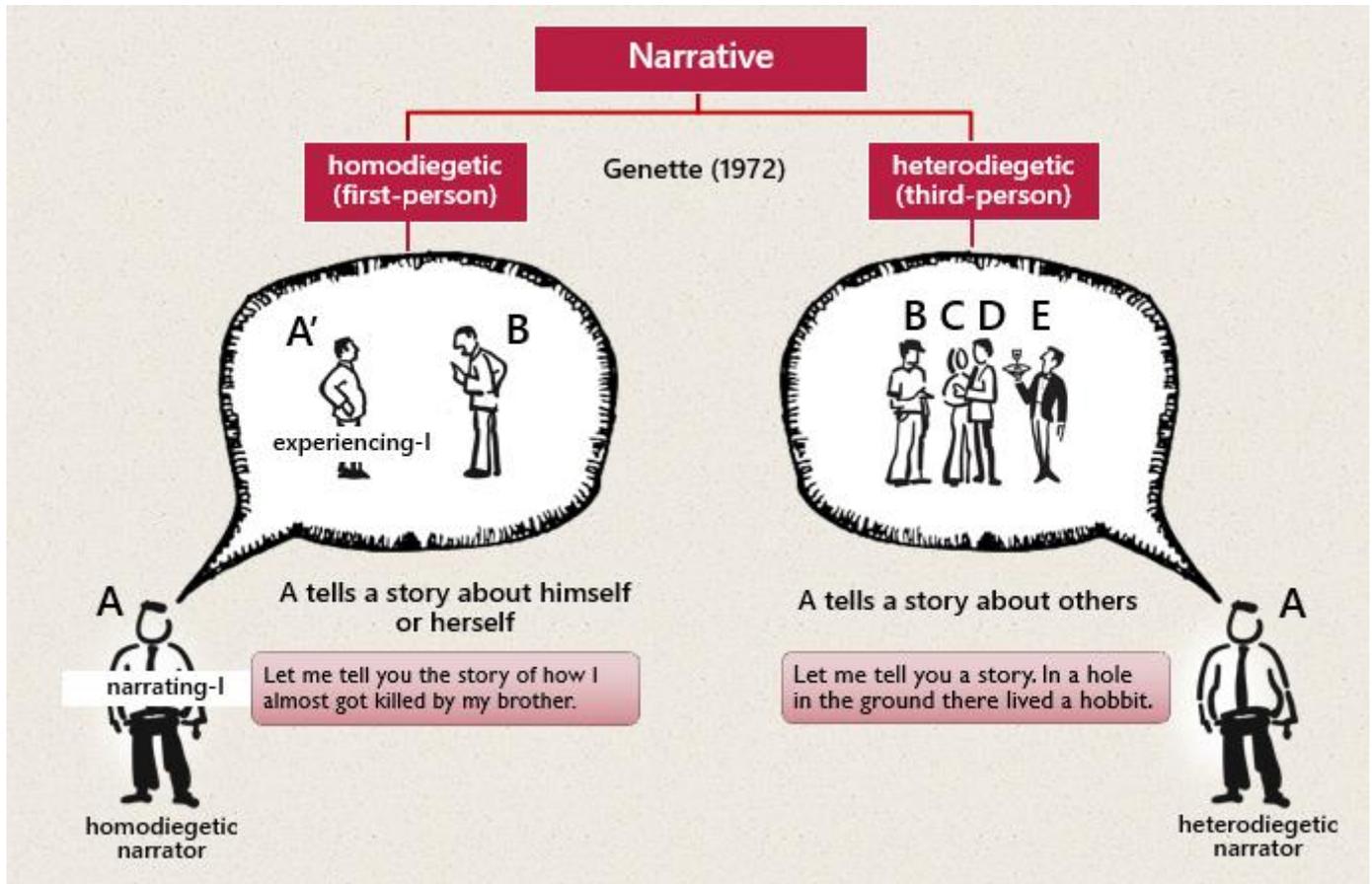
Finally, efficient storytelling usually depends on a certain amount of co-operation between narrators and recipients. Narrators will consider what's new or familiar to their audience, and adjust their discourse accordingly. Likewise, recipients will try to be open-minded and constructive in their processing of the information provided. If assumptions and expectations are largely compatible on both sides, we can speak of an implicit *narrative contract* between the two parties. But, as we all know, contracts do get broken occasionally.[4]

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[3] See Herman (2018) on the role of animals in fiction and Yong (2022) for their special modes of perception.

[4] The notion of a narrative contract is based on H.P. Grice's 1975 essay on the Co-operative Principle (CP) in natural communication. According to Grice, violations of the CP usually lead to meaningful *implicatures*.

That is all there is on this page. So far, the definitions are all fairly obvious, as thankfully most definitions in natural narratology are, at least on the level of basics. When we come to the finer detail of all this, things will become a bit more challenging.

3. Homodiegetic and heterodiegetic texts

There are many types of narrative, but at this point let is focus on the two most important ones, namely first-person or *homodiegetic* narratives, and third-person or *heterodiegetic* narratives. The Greek-based terms, roughly translatable as "same-narrative" and "other-narrative" were coined by Genette (1980 [1972]: ch5), and they have been adopted by practically all modern narratologists.

Let us add a graphic depicting a narrator called A, and two characters, one of them called A' and the other one called B. Why A'? Because we want to indicate that narrator A tells a story about himself. Often this is also called a memoir, or an autobiographical narrative, or a *personal experience narrative*, abbreviated P.E.N. or PEN. Many narratologists identify the homodiegetic narrator as a *narrating-I*, and A' as an *experiencing-I*. The two terms are listed here.

The second main type of narrative is the *heterodiegetic narrative*. Here the narrator tells a story about other people, that is, characters B, C, D etc. What is important is that nowhere in a heterodiegetic story world is there an experiencing-I like the A' that we have on the left. In other words, both types are based on a necessary condition: a homodiegetic narrative *must* have an experiencing-I; and a heterodiegetic narrative *must not* have an experiencing-I.
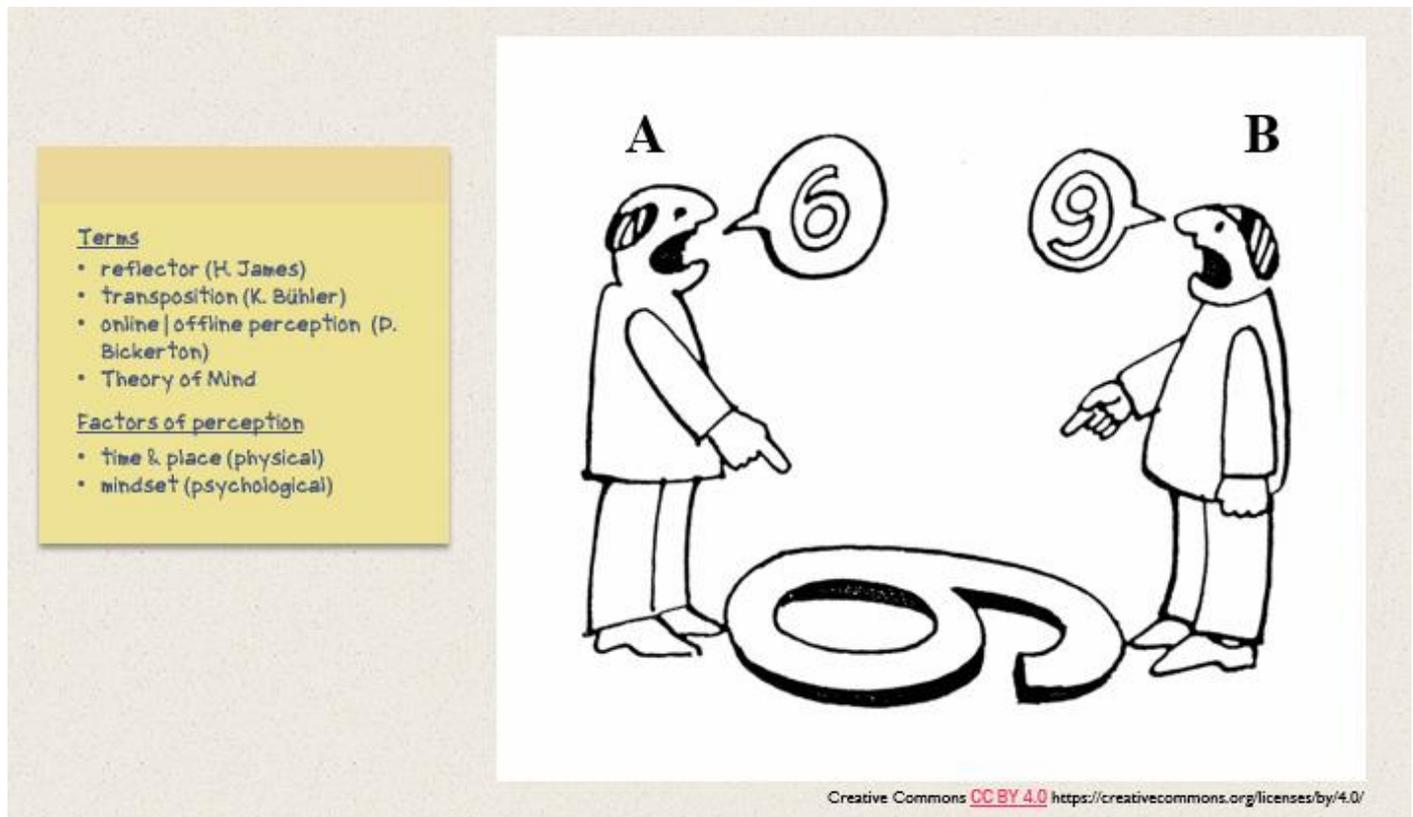
Here is a box giving an example of how a homodiegetic narrator might begin his or her story: "Let me tell you the story of how I almost got killed by my brother".[5] In contrast, a heterodiegetic narrator

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[5] This is the beginning of "Narrative 3" in Labov/Waletzky (1967: 7). For their recordings of PENs, Labov/Waletzky used prompt questions like "Were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger of getting killed?". Labof/Waletzky's study serves as the starting point for Fludernik's 1996 model of Natural Narratology.

might kick off by saying "Let me tell you a story. In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit" – which of course is the famous beginning of the novel by J.R.R. Tolkien.[6]

Let us clear the board and see how our model can be extended by adding aspects of perspective and point of view.

4. Perception and perspective

This wonderful cartoon was accessed from a Creative Commons source on the internet. It is a static picture, but also one that tells a little story. Two guys meet, point at an object lying on the ground, and apparently quarrel about what they see and who sees it correctly. Guy A claims that the object is a 6, guy B says it is a 9. We can immediately understand why this is so because we can easily adopt either A's or B's point of view and see the object just like they do, even if the two interpretations are contradictory.

Now I would like to ask you this question: does the picture offer any other perspectives? The answer is Yes, because we as viewers and also the artist who created the picture see (or saw) the object in question from a different point of view. And unlike characters A and B we would accept that the object could be *either* a 6 or a 9. So, the number of perspectives depicted in the cartoon is at least three.
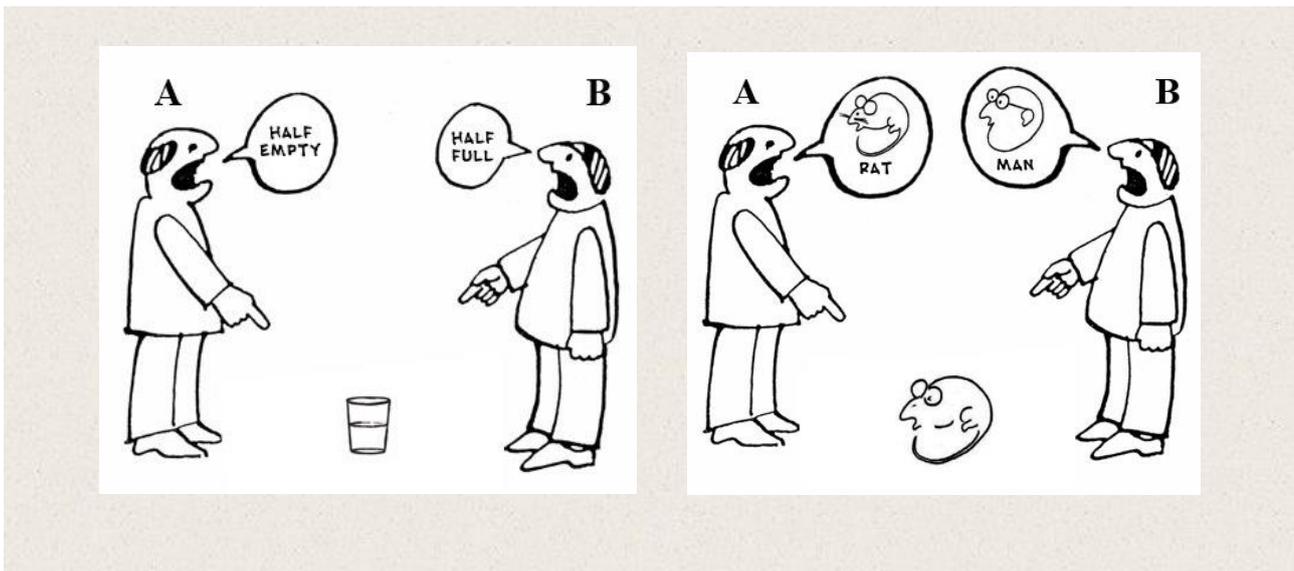
Let us use this Post-it note to introduce some more concepts. Characters shown in the act of perceiving the story world will be called *reflectors*, this is a term invented by Henry James in (1937 [1909]: 300). A and B in the cartoon are reflectors. Reflectors are characters who are presented in such a way that we can access or adopt their points of view, or, as the German linguist Karl Bühler put it in 1934, *transpose* to their points of view, which actually is what we just did. Let us also introduce Daniel Bickerton's (1995) distinction between *online perception* and *offline perception*. Online perception is what we perceive via our ordinary waking senses; *offline perception* is what we see in our mind's eye – such as memories, dreams, visions, and other things purely imagined. What our cartoon also shows is

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[6] *The Hobbit* actually begins "In a hole in the ground …". I have prefaced it by "Let me tell you a story" to draw attention to the fact that a heterodiegetic narrator may refer to himself or herself in the first person (which is a problem for terms like first-person and third-person narration).

that a person's face, bodily stance and behavior can be expressive of a mental state: this is often referred to as attributing a *Theory of Mind*, or guessing the *operation of somebody else's mind* (Zunshine 2006, 2012).[7] For instance, in the cartoon, the facial expressions of the reflectors suggest that both of them are wholly convinced of the correctness of their interpretation. Neither of them seems to be willing to adopt the other's point of view – even though they should be able to do that just like we did.

On the whole then, we see that perception and perspective is not only determined by *physical* factors such as time and place, but also by *psychological* factors such as interest, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. We will use the common term *mindset* to refer to mental makeups and dispositions of this kind.
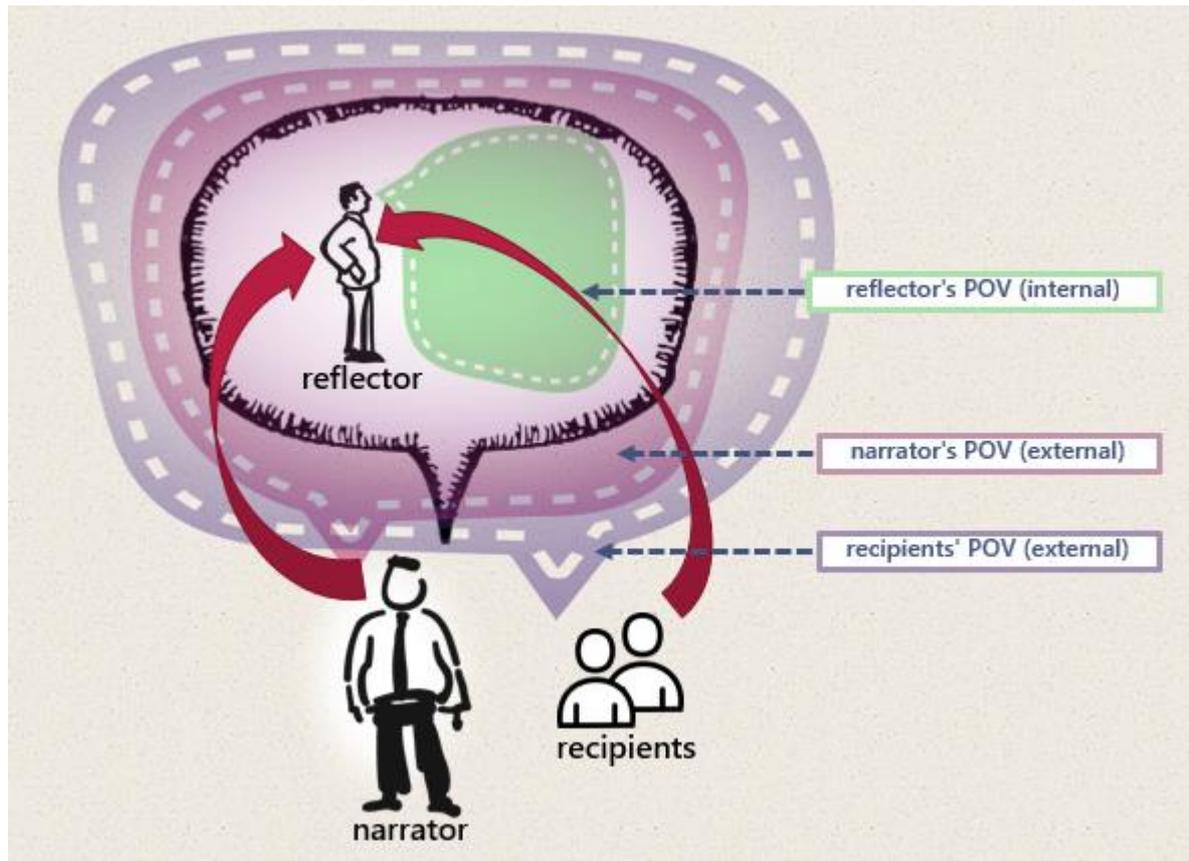
5. Mindsets

Mindset effects can be proverbial: some people cannot see the wood for the trees, others can. The optimist sees the glass as half full, the pessimist sees it as half empty. Let us try another example, a slightly trickier one. Again, our two guys see an object; I am going show you what they see it as in a minute. Before I do, please make a mental note of what *you* are seeing. That object now, what is it?

In cognitive psychology the case is known as the "rat-man experiment" (Neisser 1967: 60). Guy A see a rat-like animal, B sees an old man's head. Look at the unambiguous versions in the two thought bubbles to verify that both interpretations are possible, though perhaps not equally likely. This raises three questions: first, what did you see, a rat or the head of a man? Second, why does one interpretation seem to inhibit the other? And third, why is it so difficult to see both interpretations at the same time? The tricky point is that the decision for or against either interpretation seems to be made automatically; it happens beyond conscious awareness. Personally, I would be happy to extend the concept of mindset to include unconscious motives and preferences. Maybe, for some reason A is more interested in rats, and B is more interested in old men. But who knows; maybe a neuroscientist would be able to give us a less speculative answer.[8]

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[7] Theory of Mind and mindreading are hotly debated subjects in disciplines like philosophy, psychology, pragmatics, and law. One of the biggest problems for advocates of Theory of Mind is the impossibility of verification and the possibility of playacting (note the case of deception discussed on p12 of this presentation).

[8] Neisser reports the following finding from the experiment conducted by Bugelski and Alampay's: "After showing several pictures of animals, they presented subjects with the ambiguous 'rat-man' for identification [...]. Most saw it as a rat, while subjects without special pretraining generally see the man instead". See Gallese/Guerra (2020) for a dedicated neuroscientific approach (to film).

6. Focalization in texts

In narratology, the term *focalization* refers to the *perspectivization* of a story world. As such it is directly related to perceivers, points of view, and our ability to transpose to another person's point of view. There is some controversy about the exact definition of focalization and also about its overall narratological importance. My view, as you can probably guess, is that it is hugely important. In fact, I think everything else depends on it.

Here is a simplified version of the standard storytelling scenario, reduced to the figures of the narrator, the recipients, and just one character. To this, we now add this colored (green) bubble indicating the character's field of perception. Note the difference between the narrator's *discourse bubble* and the character's *perception bubble*. Please also call to mind that perception can be said to be "colored" by the perceiver's mindset. Once a character is used as a reflector the narrative turns into a *reflector-mode narrative*, that is, a story told *from the point of view of a reflector*.[9] When a narrator opts for the reflector mode, we are invited to transpose to the reflector's point of view. Moreover, it is sensible to assume that in order to tell a reflector-mode story the narrator must also transpose to the reflector's point of view. For this reason, the graphic contains *two* transposition arrows.[10]

All told then, there are three kinds of point of view that must be considered when analyzing textual narratives: the reflector's point of view, the narrator's point of view, and the recipients' point of view. We will call these *internal* and *external focalizations* respectively.[11] Why "internal" and "external"? Because, as defined earlier, reflectors are internal to the story world, and narrators and recipients are external to the story world. Note that being external to the story world does not mean that narrators
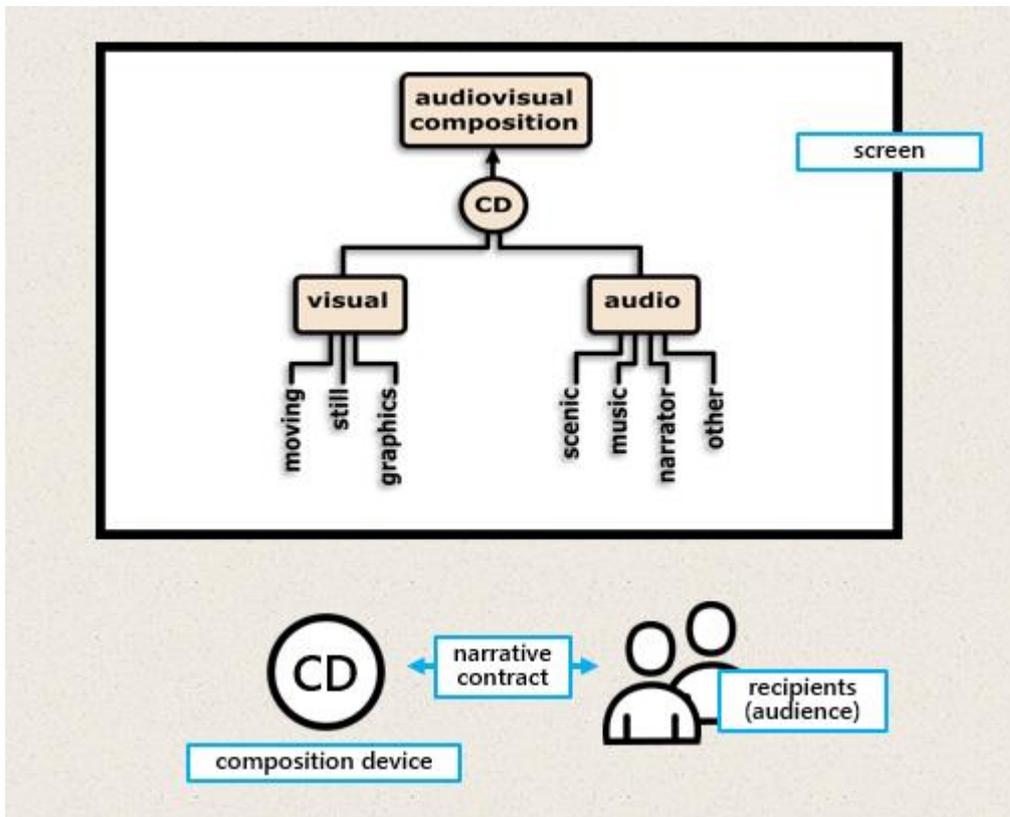
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[9] Reflector-mode narratives are possible in both homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratives. In homodiegetic narratives the reflector would always be the experiencing-I. In heterodiegetic narratives any of the characters may be used as reflectors, and switches from one reflector to another are quite common.

[10] I am assuming that the CD acts like the textual narrator, of whom Henry James said, "the teller of a story is primarily, none the less, the listener to it, the reader of it, too" (James 1937 [1909]: 63).

[11] Many narratologists now call the reflector an *internal focalizer*, but only a few follow Bal (1985) in using the term *external focalizer* to refer to the narrator.

and recipients are necessarily neutral or objective. Their perceptions are subject to time, place, and mindset conditions, too.

7. The composition of film

Earlier we spent some time listing the elements of textual narratives; now let us do the same thing for the components of film. As we all know, a film is projected onto a *screen,* and it is watched by an *audience* of spectators, or let us call them *recipients* as before. We also know that a film is produced by a team of creators, including a director, a scriptwriter, actors, composers, cinematographers, editors, and so on. The director obviously has a special status, and some directors more so than others. For example, in this screenshot the whole film is credited to Alfred Hitchcock, and here it is Stanley Kubrick who gets credited for no less than three creative roles [in *Killer's Kiss*].
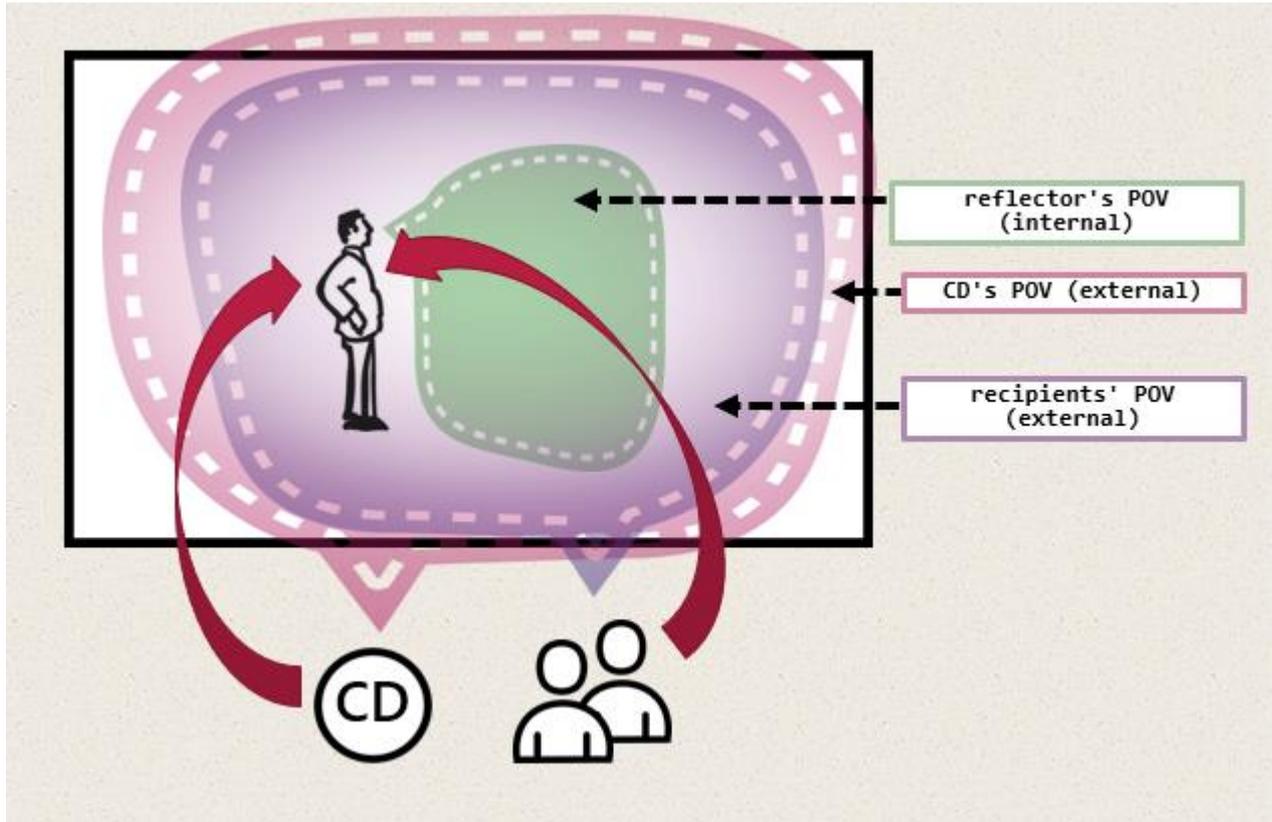
From a narratological perspective, film is a special type of narrative communication. Its substance is not a text or a discourse but a composition of audiovisual elements, as suggested in this tree diagram, which lists still and moving pictures as well as various types of sound and music[12] Let us call the focal point where all of this is orchestrated a *composition device* (CD for short). The CD is just a theoretical construct, but it acts like a communicating instance without us having to associate it with any real-life people, such as a director. Also, because film is a form of meaningful communication the CD is likely to abide by the rules of a narrative contract.

Film analysis usually begins by decomposing the film's various sources of information in order to assess their contribution to the composition as a whole. Often a central part of this exercise is to assess the relevance, the function, the effect, and the reliability of the data.[13] A brief analysis of a film scene will be offered on page 12.

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[12] On narratological approaches to film see Verstraten (2009), Kuhn (2014), Jahn (2021b). For an in-depth analysis of components in films by Stanley Kubrick see Coëgnarts (2019).

[13] On unreliability in various narrative forms, including film, see the essays in Nünning (2015).
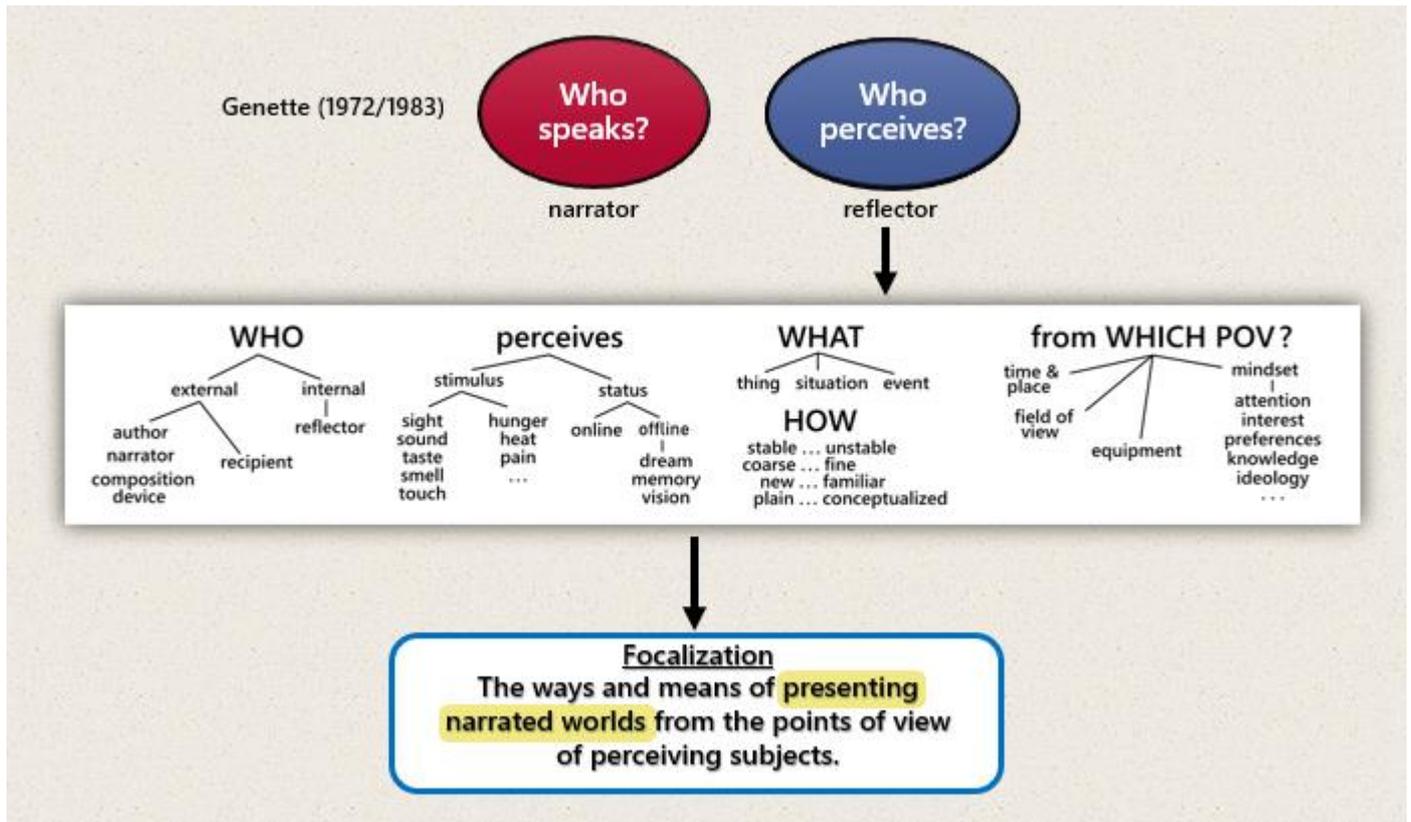
8. Focalization in film

And on page 8 we turn to focalization in film. The natural question is whether it is anything like focalization in texts. For instance, is what was called a "reflector mode" possible in film, and is it also possible for the recipients and the CD to *transpose* to a reflector's point of view. Well, we already assumed as much when discussing our original cartoon (page 4). And in film there is in fact a very remarkable special technique, called the *point of view shot*, that represents the reflector-mode almost perfectly, perhaps even better than is possible in texts.

Of course, as before, the recipients have their own point of view, and so does the CD. In all, then, just like in textual narratives, the basic configuration comprises one type of internal focalization and two types of external focalization.

Additionally, we must call to mind that a film can also make use of an on-screen or off-screen narrator, in which case yet another external point of view needs to be added to the overall scenario.

9. A master template of focalization[14]

Focalization, as you may have gathered, is quite a complex field. The term was coined by Genette, and he used it to draw attention to an important distinction, namely the distinction between *who speaks* and *who sees*. The speaker *of* a narrative text, according to Genette, is a narrator, and the viewer *in* the text is a reflector. Reconsidering this ten years later Genette rephrased the reflector question as *who perceives* – a logical widening of scope, obviously, but also one that lends itself to further modification. Adding an object and an adverbial extension, we can ask *who perceives what, how, and from which point of view*. And we will use this version as our master template.
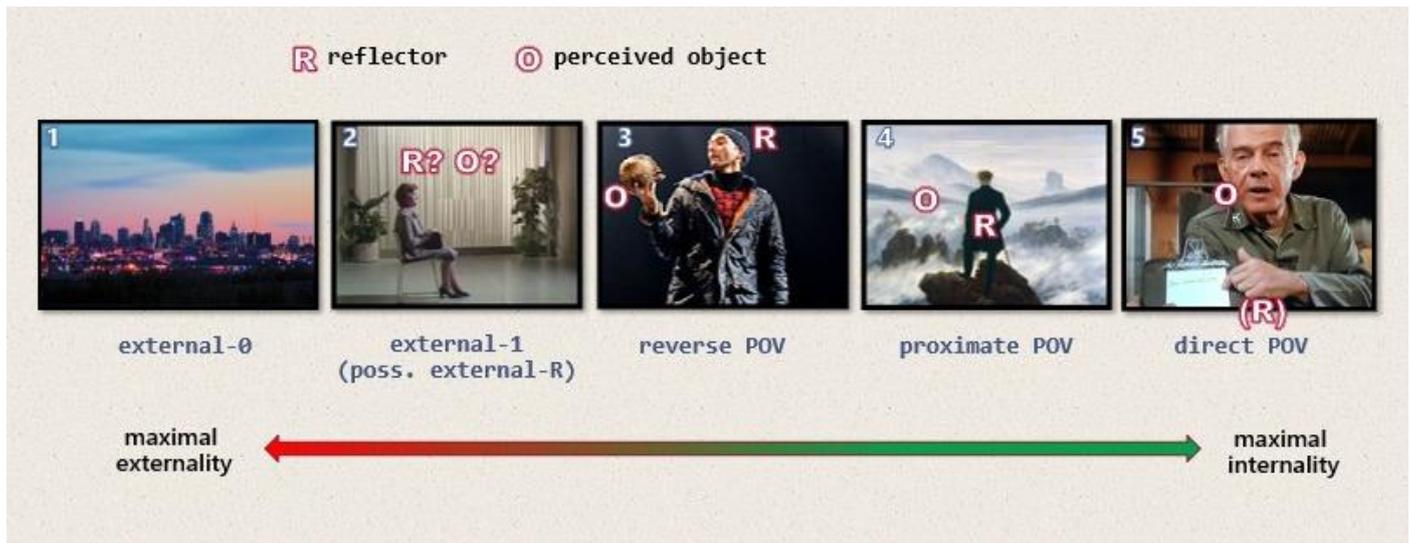
And here is what it looks like with options added. In the subject or *WHO* slot we can distinguish between external and internal subjects of perception, and, as noted, external subjects are either creative subjects like the narrator, the author, and the composition device,[15] or recipients like readers, hearers or viewers. In the verb slot, we place the online/offline modes, and in the point of view slot we register the time, place and mindset conditions. Again, most of the parameters listed are plain everyday concepts.

In sum, then, let *Focalization refer to the ways and means of presenting narrated worlds from the points of view of perceiving subjects*. Specifically, in this definition, p*resenting* refers to any textual, filmic, or pictorial representation, and a *narrated world* can be a fictional or a nonfictional story world.

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[14] See Jahn 2021b (film) und 2021c (drama) for variants of this template (and some further detail).

[15] Listing the narrator as well as the reflector under the common heading of perceiving subject, this account deviates from Genette, who stresses their categorical difference. The counter-argument is that, on the face of it, both narrators and reflectors are capable of speech and perception.

10. Externality and internality

So far our focus was on subjects of perception, and it was their status as external or internal perceivers that was criterial for determining types of focalization. However, degrees of externality and internality can also be found on the surface level of a presentation. I will show you five pictures[16] and put letters 'R' and 'O' to mark reflectors and objects of perception.

As for picture 1, let us treat it as an establishing shot of a cityscape at the beginning of a film. No character is visible, and thus no reflector is present either. Let us label this case as *external-0* – the zero indicating that zero characters are present.

Moving on to picture 2, we see an elderly lady sitting in a waiting room. Could this character be a reflector? Well, it is a possibility, but without any further information we really have no idea what the lady is seeing, feeling, or thinking. I will place question-marked R's and O's but generally accept that the presentation is basically external. We can use the label *external-1* to acknowledge the presence of a character. If we know that the character is a reflector a label like *external-R* would seem appropriate (added in brackets).

Picture 3 shows us Hamlet in Act 5 of Shakespeare's play, and now we evidently have a reflector. Looking at the skull of Yorick, the former court jester, Hamlet reflects on the meaninglessness of life. As viewers we see the object that he sees, and knowing his state of mind, we co-experience what it is like to be in the desperate situation that he finds himself in. In cinematography, this type of shot is called a *reverse point of view shot*, and this is also a convenient label for this type of surface focalization.

Picture 4 is a famous painting by Caspar David Friedrich, entitled *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. If this were a scene in a film, the character would be a reflector shown from behind.[17] The recipients see what the reflector sees from an almost identical point of view, and naturally we are also aware of the reflector's romantic mindset. Let us call it a *proximate point of view* presentation. It is a powerful type of internal focalization, but we do notice that it denies us a view of the reflector's face.

Finally, item 5 is a still from an episode of the TV series MASH, aptly entitled *Point of View*. In this point of view shot, the reflector is a wounded soldier who is visited by the camp commander. We do not see the reflector because the camera is virtually located inside his head, but we know he is there,

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[16] Sources: (1) Clipart Library view of Kansas City; (2) Alan Bennett, *A Woman of No Importance* (1982); (3) David Tennant as Hamlet (RSC 2008); (4) Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818); (5) *MASH* episode 158 (1978).

[17] The technique is known as *Rückenfigur* in German theory of art; evidently it is closely related to the *over-the shoulder-shot* in film.

and we see what he sees. We will call this a *direct point of view* presentation. And we note that neither the reflector's face nor much of his body is visible when using the technique.

Of course, there are many intermediate and borderline cases that can be added to this particular selection. Nevertheless, even given the examples at hand, we can already observe a kind of scalar progression – a steady increase in *degrees of internality* moving from left to right, and a steady increase in *externality* moving from right to left.[18]
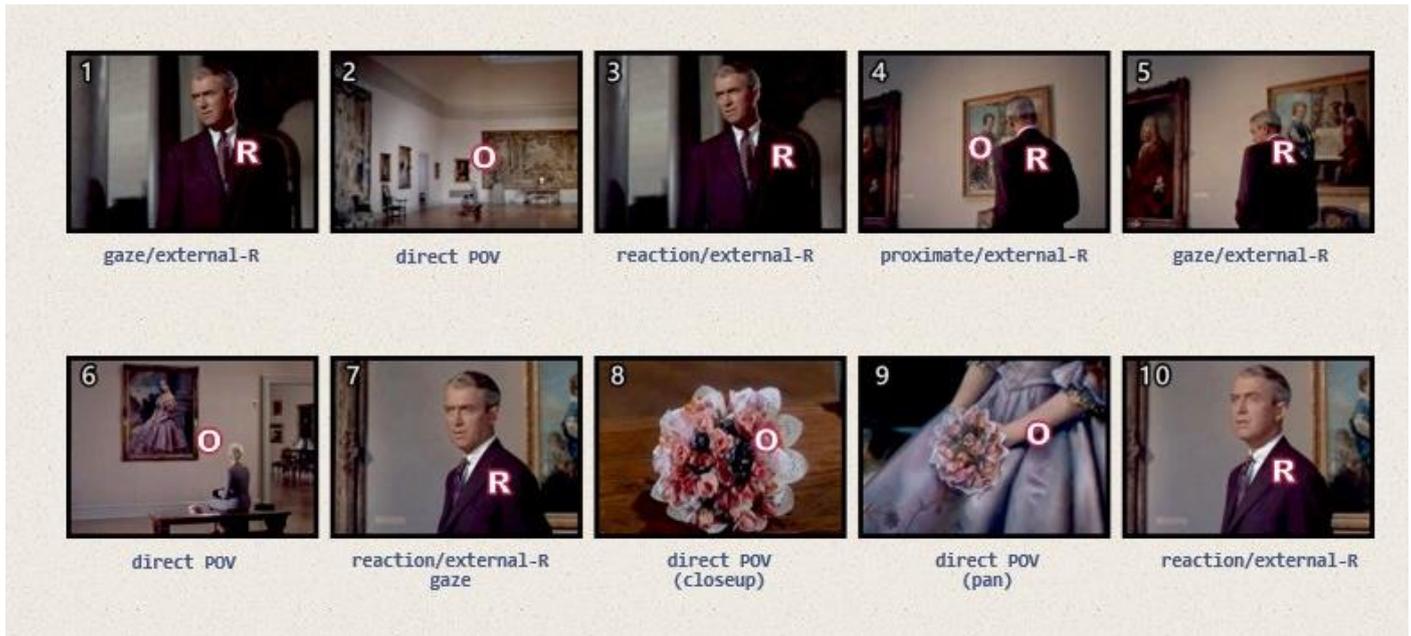
11. A scene from *Vertigo (*1958)

Moovieclips.com https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-kcczAff40

Analyzing pictures in isolation is one thing, but in film and comics contextual knowledge easily overrides local interpretation. A good example is this one frame from the famous museum scene of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. We see the character of Madeleine, played by Kim Novak, from behind, looking at a painting. Seen in isolation we would categorize it as a proximate focalization as used in the Caspar David Friedrich painting on the previous page. However, when seen in the context of its actual filmic sequence it needs to be interpreted differently. [Clip]

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[18] The concept of sliding scales has been pursued in a number of studies. Stanzel (1984 [1979]) uses three scales for his definition of a 'type circle' of narrative forms – externality/internality, first-person/third person, and narrator/reflector. Lanser (1981) offers scalar arrangements of homodiegesis/heterodiegesis and reliability/unreliability (plus many others). McHale (1978) proposes a scalar typology of speech and thought representations.

12. Storyboard analysis

Here, on page 12, I have *decomposed* the clip into ten frames showing each individual shot. The proximate point of view shot presented on the previous page comes up as frame #6 in the storyboard. However, now that we have seen it in context, we know that the scene is oriented not on Madeleine but on a different reflector. It is Scottie, played by James Stewart, the ex-detective whose job it is to secretly observe Madeleine, supposedly the wife of a friend.

The sequence consists of alternating external views of Scottie and direct point of view shots of what he perceives. We get several views of the reflector's face and body, and they are either so-called *gaze shots* as in frames 1 and 7, or *reaction shots* as in frames 3, 7, and 10. Bracketed by the external shots are the direct point of view shots 2, 6, 8 and 9. I have again distributed the letters R and O to mark reflector and object of attention. The external shots are now labeled *external-R*, recognizing them as parts of the scene's overall reflector mode.

But the visual decomposition also challenges our understanding of the reflector's mindset. As the external views connect us to the direction of Scottie's sight, the point of view shots let us see what he is interested in. We know that Scottie has fallen in love with Madeleine, and the persistent musical motif that accompanies the action accentuates his mood of fascination and wonderment. Foremost in his mind are the same questions that we are asking ourselves: why is she behaving so oddly, what is her interest in the painting, and what is the relevance of that bouquet of flowers. Much later we learn that she is only playacting – Madeleine is not even her real name – and it is a playacting that relies on the gut reaction of transposition to achieve its intended deception.

And the deception does its work, both on the reflector and the recipients. One of Hitchcock's often-quoted comments is that he enjoyed "playing" his audience "like a piano".[19] In this case we see that there are two players, Madeleine who plays Scottie, and the director, who plays the recipients.

That's all

That is the end of the video, and hopefully it has served its purpose as a brief introduction, even if only by scratching the surface. Remember, notes and references are accessible from the description.

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[19] Thus quoted without identification of source in the International Movie Database (IMDB Hitchcock), also in this excellent video essay. In Truffaut (1984: 269), Hitchcock says: "*Psycho* has a very interesting construction and that game with the audience was fascinating. I was directing the viewers. You might say I was playing them, like an organ".

If any of this has caught your interest, here is a possible "To Do" list. I will say goodbye at this point, thanks very much for your patience. Any comments, good or bad, are very welcome.

What To Do Next

- Check literature on the approaches discussed;[20]
- Test a chosen approach by applying it to one or more specific works;
- Suggest refinements and modifications;
- Check calls for papers; submit a proposal.[21]

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[20] General introductions and surveys: Herman/Jahn/Ryan (2005), Fludernik (2009), Schmid (2010), Meister (2014), Jahn (2021a). General easy access to articles in LHN: The Living Handbook of Narratology.

[21] Journals promoting narratological topics: *Poetics Today*, *Narrative*, *Style*, *New Literary History*. Conference organizers: ISSN, the International Society for the Study of Narrative, ENN, the European Narratology Network.

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