

Eva Laass

Broken Taboos, Subjective Truths

Forms and Functions of Unreliable Narration in Contemporary American Cinema
A Contribution to Film Narratology

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Knut Hickethier und Ansgar Nünning

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Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
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E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

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Preface and acknowledgements

This book is a slightly revised version of my Ph.D. thesis, submitted to the Department of Language, Literature, and Culture (FB 05) at the Justus-Liebig-Universität (JLU) Giessen in February 2008. Writing the thesis put me in the fortunate position of being allowed to examine a subject academically which I genuinely find intriguing. Most of the films dealt with in this book greatly impressed, unsettled, and moved me when I first saw them on screen. When attempting to grasp the specifics of the intellectual and emotional challenge they posed for me, I was delighted to realise that what linked them – strategies of unreliable narration – was a subject that had hardly gained any academic attention yet. This was not surprising, since the striking cultural proliferation of the phenomenon had only just reached its peak when I first started exploring it for my Master's thesis in 2002. Thus, the topic of my studies not only had the great advantage of being fun, at least for considerable stretches of the time I have spent with it, but also of constituting a field of academic research within literary and cultural studies where substantially new insights were required. And yet another advantage was that I was not the only fan of the movies with which I dealt. Again and again, telling people from different backgrounds about my daily occupation revealed that the very films I analysed in my study were the ones that had had the greatest emotional and intellectual impact on many of them too, which often created a genuine interest in my conclusions, a privileged and not self-evident experience when presenting the results of academic research to non-academic listeners. The inspiring discussions that often followed greatly contributed to the shape of this book, for which I am very grateful.

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Eva Laass
Cologne, October 2008

I. Introduction

1. Central questions and aims of the study

People do it every day. They talk to themselves. They see themselves as they'd like to be. They don't have the courage you have to just run with it. You still wrestle with it, so sometimes you're still you. Other times you imagine yourself watching me. Little by little, you're just letting yourself become ... Tyler Durden. (Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*)

While for most of the film, the primary character of *Fight Club* remains a nameless voiceover narrator, his (imaginary) companion, clearly identified as Tyler Durden, explains in the scene quoted above how and why he exists only in the narrator's mind. Significantly, however, this clarifying conversation between the film's narrator and his *alter ego* only takes place after the first four-fifths of the film have already passed, presenting Tyler as if he were a regular character within the film's storyworld. This, after all, was what the narrator thought he was. And the film's narrative representation is filtered through the narrator's perception: we see what the narrator sees and believe what he tells us, until we realise that maybe we should not – a classic scenario encouraging the viewer to infer narrative unreliability, as a number of movies have recently done.

Whereas literary fiction has always proved to be a rewarding object for narrative experiments, and the concept of unreliable literary narration has enjoyed increasing theoretical popularity during the last decades, unreliable filmic narration has only very recently become an issue. Yet Helbig (2005: 131) emphasises that a theory of unreliable narration is only consistent if its methods and categories can be applied to different media. This claim is obviously based on the premise that unreliable narration is a transmedial phenomenon which finds its distinct expressions in media-specific forms. In the last three years, three German anthologies on the subject have tried to embrace this claim with regard to the medium of film (Kratochwill/Steinlein 2004, Liptay/Wolf 2005, Helbig 2006). These publications testify to the enormous public interest that unreliable filmic narration has lately engendered. An attempt to explain the theoretical void with respect to films until this fairly recent period must consider that contemporary Hollywood movies, which generally dominate the international market, are still deeply rooted in their realist tradition. Whereas Asian and European cinema already started to break with realist norms and overtly play with the artificiality of the medium quite early in the last century, American productions intended for the mass market generally still follow the easily comprehensible, standardised narrative mode and conventionalised plot patterns on which classical Hollywood cinema is based. Accordingly, traditional Hollywood cinema has tended to keep its diegetic qualities as unobtrusive as possible (cf. Bordwell 1985: 156). Most consumers of mainstream Hollywood productions do not expect a film to remind them of its own artificiality, after all,

and a major Hollywood production is so expensive and labour-intensive that it can hardly risk irritating its audiences.

In recent years, however, even such large-scale productions have not only increasingly dared to foreground and question the narrative mediation of their stories through the cinematographic apparatus, but movies to which a specific form of unreliable narration can be attributed have virtually proliferated – examples include *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Lost Highway* (1997), *Fight Club* (1999), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *The Others* (2001), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *Spider* (2002), *Identity* (2003), *The Machinist* (2004), and *Secret Window* (2004). Until recently, the first reaction of most audiences and critics to such films was either enthusiasm or confusion. The competing attempts to interpret the extremely controversial film *Fight Club*, for example, one of the milestones of unreliable filmic narration, went in all possible directions: it was called a “conspiracy thriller” (Whitehouse 1999) or a “frankly and cheerfully fascist big-star movie” (Ebert 1999); its “powerful social message” (Berardinelli 1999) was admired or its “antisocial, anarchist philosophy” (“*Fight Club*”) was criticised; it was seen as “a value-free vessel that offers conflicting views on Nietzschean ideas about men and destruction” (Whitehouse 1999) or as “sensationalism that mistakes itself for satire” (Edelstein 1999). Yet, in spite of the characters’ exhaustive psychological explanations of the twists of the preceding plot towards the end of the film, hardly any of the reviews explicitly relate the film’s contradictory philosophy and self-reflexive narrative mediation to the narrator’s identity crisis, let alone ever use the term “unreliable narration”. Instead, one critic of the film, observing that “[a] lot of recent films seem unsatisfied unless they can add final scenes that redefine the reality of everything that has gone on before”, suggests calling this phenomenon “the Keyser Soze syndrome” (Ebert 1999).¹ Interestingly, later films marked by this ‘syndrome’, such as *The Machinist* (2004) or *Secret Window* (2004), dispense with any final explanation of the contradictory evidence presented before, obviously presupposing a growing interpretative competence on the part of the audiences. These improving reception skills clearly reflect the integration of unreliable filmic narration in Western culture. Still, hardly any critic is able to consistently classify it and give it a proper name.

Considering the socio-cultural dominance of the media of film and television, the recent popularity of narrative unreliability in film as a scholarly subject is not surprising. The intention to deal with it methodically will raise a number of questions, some of which have already been tackled within the anthologies referred to above. Since the articles contained in them only provide individual working definitions, however, mostly based on, from my point of view, somewhat dated essentialist approaches (cf. I.2), these questions have still not been systematically answered within a comprehensive study of the phenomenon. For example, the phenomenon still lacks distinctiveness: how can unreliable filmic narration be consistently defined, first of all? What different forms of narrative unreliability can be distinguished? In which respects do

1 This name refers to the central character in *The Usual Suspects* (1995), one of the first American *neo-noir* films the core of which is factually unreliable narrative mediation (cf. chapter III.3.1 of this thesis).

unreliable literary and unreliable filmic narration differ? What is the particularity of unreliable filmic narration? When do we perceive a film as unreliably narrated and why? A further complex of similarly crucial questions concerns the potential social function of unreliably narrated films: why have they become so strikingly popular within recent years? What tasks do they fulfil within the context of their reception? What are they able to perform which Hollywood movies with more straightforward structures and ethics or literary manifestations of narrative unreliability are not? And, finally, which needs do they meet in American culture?

The present thesis attempts to provide at least some answers to these questions and thus to close the research gap they constitute. It accordingly pursues four central aims: the first aim is a definition of unreliable filmic narration. To this end, the study will, on the one hand, avail itself of analytical categories and insights from literary theory. On the other hand, it will demonstrate the media-specific limits of these insights and develop a modified film-theory conceptualisation of the originally literary phenomenon. The second aim is the constitution of a set of film-narratological categories for an interdisciplinary use within the theoretical framework of a cognitively oriented narrative theory, which will establish a structural frame of reference, allowing for precise analyses of different forms of narrative deviations in the third part of the study. Third, the study aims at developing a systematic typology of unreliable narration in film on the basis of representative examples from contemporary American film history, which draws on the analytical framework established in the second part of the study and which illustrates the media-specific possibilities of staging unreliable narration in film. Last but not least, the fourth aim is a discussion of the potential social functions of the different forms of unreliable filmic narration previously introduced. Based on a variety of mostly well-known examples of recent American cinema, the study is thus meant to provide an introductory cartography of the very heterogeneous field of unreliable filmic narration and an attempt to account for its striking popularity.

The study will concentrate on American cinema because expensive American large-scale productions have always dominated the international film market and, for economic reasons, they are particularly dependent on acceptance by international mass audiences. As a mass medium of entertainment, the Hollywood movie thus constitutes a cultural object of marked societal relevance. In contrast to small arthouse productions addressed to highly specific cineastic audiences, popular manifestations of Hollywood cinema admit of direct conclusions about broader socio-cultural developments. By consciously contravening dominant entertainment conventions, the narrative stagings with which the present thesis will deal show a differentiation and intellectualisation of certain narrative forms within Hollywood cinema. As welcome counterexamples of the frequently lamented increasing triviality of popular culture, this cultural phenomenon constitutes a vital and interesting subject.

2. Overview of current research

The subject of unreliable filmic narration has lately received enormous critical interest. Until several years ago, research on the topic could only draw on a broad array of contributions from literary theory,² which offer instructive analyses, but whose insights can only be applied to the medium of film with considerable reservations. In addition, previously there were only a handful of film-theory articles, chapters, or paragraphs dealing with unreliable narration in film.³ Most of these publications merely mention the medium of film or the question of unreliable narration in passing while actually dealing with other issues. Within the last three years, however, three German anthologies were published that extensively or exclusively deal with unreliable narration in film: *Kino der Lüge* (Kratochwill/Steinlein 2004), *Was stimmt denn jetzt: Unzuverlässiges Erzählen in Literatur und Film* (Liptay/Wolf 2005), and *'Camera doesn't lie': Spielarten erzählerischer Unzuverlässigkeit im Film* (Helbig 2006). This dense array of publications testifies to both the interest the subject has lately attracted among scholars, which is obviously due to the proliferation of the phenomenon, and the perceived theoretical void left by previously existing research on it.

What the above volumes are still lacking, however, is, first and foremost, a consistent and comprehensive conceptualisation of unreliable filmic narration. None of the studies contains an initial, authoritative conceptualisation of the subject that serves as a more or less binding theoretical basis for the following contributions. The first volume, *Kino der Lüge* (Kratochwill/Steinlein 2004), does not even use the term 'unreliable narration', although this is clearly what is meant: it deals with both film narratives in which lying is a central motive on the story level and movies in which the filmic pictures, that is the narrative mediation, is 'lying'. The other two collections string together individual working definitions of unreliable filmic narration which vary considerably regarding their theoretical premises. In all three volumes, these contributions are either not structured at all or only according to very inconsistent principles, be it individual motives in the narratives, the theoretical approaches reflected in the contributions, the degree of their focus on theoretical issues in general, the medium involved (some deal with literature and television, too), or a combination of the above.⁴ Systematic descriptions of the different forms of unreliable filmic narration and their categori-

2 By way of example, cf. Booth (1961), Riggan (1981), Yacobi (1981/2001), Lodge (1992), A. Nünning (1997a/1998c/ 1999a/1999b), Phelan and Martin (1999), Sommer and Zerweck (1999), Cohn (2000), Zerweck (2001), Olson (2003).

3 See Kozloff (1988), Burgoyne (1990), Buckland (1995b), Currie (1995a), Kindt (2002), Tedholm (2003), plus short paragraphs in Chatman (1978/1990), Bordwell (1985), Wilson (1986), Stam/Burgoyne/Flitterman-Lewis (1992).

4 The first part of the anthology *Camera Doesn't Lie* (Helbig 2006), for example, deals with films in which the pathologically deviant perception of the protagonist is a central motive; in the second part the thematically vaguely related motives of writer's block, memory gaps, and sleeplessness are the binding principle; the third part deals with ontologically ambivalent storyworlds; the fourth part contains articles using the theory of possible worlds for their analyses of unreliable filmic narration; and the fifth part deals with unreliable narration in the medium of television.