

Practical Considerations
of the “Unreliable” Narrator
in Documentary Films

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Introduction

The subject of narrator reliability has been extensively scrutinized since at least the 1961 publication of The Rhetoric of Fiction, in which Wayne Booth wrote: “I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (Booth, 158-9).

Booth understands unreliability to be a function of irony. Irony provides the formal means by which distance is created between the views, actions, and voice of the unreliable narrator and those of the implied author... Detecting irony and narrator unreliability comprises an interpretative strategy that involves reading against the grain of the text and assuming one understands the unspoken message beyond the literal one. (Olson 94)

The style of Booth’s book is comprehensive, organized, tidy, matter-of-fact; yet it launched or at least presaged an increasingly complex and fractured discussion among scholars about nearly every term—including authors, narratives, narrators, and reliability. For a flavor of these discussions, consider this comment from Gregory Currie which is typical:

I have been arguing that narrative unreliability in literature and film can occur in the absence of a narrator, but not in the absence of an implied author. There are two kinds of theories that clash with this idea: theories that deny the necessity of an implied author, and theories that assert the necessity of a narrator. Such theories have been advocated by, respectively, David Bordwell and Seymour Chatman. (Currie 26)

Out of context, Currie’s comments could be read as assuming an equivalence between written and filmed narrative, which is not necessarily true. What is certain is that these scholarly discussions became even more complicated after academics started applying their theories of written narratives to filmed ones. While radio dramas could seamlessly convey the separate voices of the implied author, the narrator, and characters present in written texts, films added a new information track, the image sequence, which had to be read as existing in some form of relationship to the three principal roles of implied author, narrator, and characters, but what relationship? And which of the three roles is responsible for the image track--or has film introduced a fourth player, the “focaliser” or a “cinematic narrator”?

While staking their own conceptual turf in these discussions, three scholars endeavored with some success to map the topography of the larger discussions within the field: Robert Burgoyne's 1990 essay entitled "The Cinematic Narrator: The Logic and Pragmatics of Impersonal Narration"¹, Gregory Currie's 1995 essay entitled "Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film"², and Volker Frenz's 2005 article entitled "Fight Clubs, American Psychos and Mementos: The Scope of Unreliable Narration in Film."³ All three articles are worth reading, but it would take too long to summarize them here. To review these debates as they stand in 2008 would constitute a research paper in its own right, but would not--strangely enough--contribute much to a documentary filmmaker's *practical understanding* of the possibilities and risks inherent in using "unreliable" narrators, which is the subject of this essay.

This is because the scholarly effort to bring rhetorical coherence, precision, and elegance to the subject of narrator unreliability remains a work still very much in progress. Unfortunately, the subject today is mired in esoteric definitions and distinctions that only scholars can comprehend -- and not even agree upon. As Victor Frenz laments: "Today, the term [unreliable narrator] is as popular and imprecise as ever" (Frenz 134). And this confusion and inaccessibility is *before* any attempt to extend the discussion from the realm of fictional texts to non-fiction documentaries as this paper proposes to do. In the fictional realm, the primary distance implicated by "unreliable" narrators is between what the narrator would have us believe about the (fictional) diegetic world versus what other sources (the image track, characters, implied author⁴, reader's own knowledge) tell us is the case. This diegetic distance remains equally relevant in the documentary realm; but added to it is another distance absent in fiction -- namely, the distance between the "actual" world as the reader perceives it, and the actual world as it represented in the film. One should only expect more confusion when scholars begin trying to account for a fourth vertice, the "actual" world, in addition to the three (the reader, narrator, and implied author) that inscribe fictional works as neatly summarized and depicted by Greta Olson in "Reconsidering Unreliability."⁵

This paper, therefore, makes the radical proposal to put aside the *theories* concerning narrator unreliability which have not coalesced sufficiently to be of practical use to documentary filmmakers, and foreground instead the *practices* which documentary filmmakers have already begun using with regard to “unreliable” narrators. Instead of trying to answer the scholar’s question ‘What theory makes sense?’, this paper endeavors to answer the filmmaker’s question ‘What practice makes sense?’ More specifically, ‘how can I use unreliable narrators to help make my documentaries convincing or at least revealing, and what problems will I encounter along the way?’

Narrators in General

At the outset, it deserves noting that there is nothing intrinsically different about the nature and character of narrators in non-fiction versus fiction. Non-fiction filmmakers may employ every kind of narrator that scholars have identified and described in fiction films. Documentary narrators can be seen or unseen, first-person or third-person, omniscient or limited in their knowledge, part of the text’s space-time continuum or outside of it, stand-ins for the filmmaker’s perspective or foils in some measure of counterpoise, disembodied conveniences for describing to audiences what cannot be readily perceived or embodied agents within the action itself, the principal “tellers” of the story or minor contributors.⁶ As with fiction, non-fiction films can have multiple narrators, each possessing very different characteristics. They can even have narrators whose characteristics change in the course of the film. And, of particular relevance to this paper, documentary narrators can be reliable or unreliable.

For the reasons previously enunciated, this paper will sidestep the academic debates about who or what constitutes a narrator, and what qualifies them as reliable or unreliable. From the scholars’ perspectives, though, it is fair to say that this paper construes narrators as narrowly defined, and unreliability as widely defined. This paper focuses solely on narrators who speak with an audible voice directly to a film’s viewers, and interprets unreliability as an uncomfortable distance between what the narrator says about the “actual” world as portrayed in

the film and what is said by other characters, by the image track, or what the viewer already knows or believes about the “actual” world.

Narrators Out of Sync with the Image Track

When narrative theory finally confronted film texts, a new form of “unreliable” narrator emerged, one who was out of sync in some way(s) with this new element that wasn’t present in written texts, the image track. Some of the more interesting examples of this kind of unreliable narrator in the documentary genre come from surrealists like Luis Buñuel. His 1932 documentary *Land Without Bread* deserves some discussion in this regard. As Vivian Sobchack describes⁶, this film’s structure is based on contradictions, though critics have differed on how to characterize those contradictions. At a basic level, Sobchack would like to agree with those who postulate a simple contradiction between sound and image; she argues that the film’s image track presents a thesis, its sound track the antithesis, and leaves it for the viewer to resolve the differences between the two in a critical synthesis in which the narrator comes to be seen as thoroughly unreliable. But Buñuel doesn’t make it as simple as that, as Sobchack realizes. She notes that the sound track features an “internally contradictory) combination of music, narration, and semantic content (Sobchack 72)” and states that it is the music which most obviously clues the viewer to not accept the narration at face value.

What the [narrator’s] voice does in tone is to duplicate the camera’s supposedly objective eye—and, in both cases, the tone of the saying and the mode of the looking are in *inappropriate* response to what is said and what is seen. . . . The very lack of human concern in the narrator’s voice and the camera’s vision is in direction tension with the content of the images, which either beg for humane responses or belie the factual surety imposed by the narrator’s tone. (Sobchack 77)

In the end, Sobchack concludes that the contradictions within the narration, between the narration and the music, and between the narration and the images, cause viewers to reject the narrator as a “culture-laden anthropologist” who “does not see clearly” and “is after all no better (and possibly worse) than we are” (Sobchack 80). In so doing, she also rejects what she sees as

the occasional equating of the narrator's point of view and that of Buñeul; in which case, this film also exemplifies that traditional model of narrator unreliability resulting from the "ironic" (in Wayne Booth's sense of dramatic irony) distance between narrator and author.

Narrators Who Lie to Viewers

Whether the narrator of *Land Without Bread* is considered to have lied to viewers or unknowingly misled them is, in more than one sense, an academic question. To the documentary filmmaker, the narrator is a device to be used in whatever way advances his goal. For surrealist filmmakers like Buñeul, that goal was to make the ordinary strange and, in so doing, uncover another reality hidden below or behind the naturalized one. Using a "lying" narrator helped Buñeul, but the surrealists are not alone in benefitting from this type of unreliable narrator.

For his 1991 film *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, Dennis O'Rourke the filmmaker invents O'Rourke the character, who heads to Bangkok to find a prostitute and film her biography. The opening titles refer to the filmmaker in the third person--"the filmmaker went to Bangkok...He wanted to meet a Thai prostitute and make a film about that"--but the closing titles are written in the first person: "I bought a rice farm for Aoi, and I left Thailand. One year later, I went back but she was not there." Yet despite this difference, both titles are rendered identically, and both were written by the same person, Dennis O'Rourke, about the same person, Dennis O'Rourke, who is in fact only one person, Dennis O'Rourke, albeit with two identities/roles. O'Rourke's narrational titles lie to viewers, but this lie is immaterial to the film's viewers except that it serves as an oblique reference to another lie that O'Rourke (as filmmaker/character/narrator) tells the prostitute, and which he regards as crucial to catalyzing the film into existence.

I procured a prostitute, Aoi, who initially knew me as just another in a succession of more than one thousand of the clients she had endured over the years. Before she learned of my project to document her life story, and before she agreed to cooperate in the making of the film, she saw me and judged me as what I was behind the mask of my so-called 'professionalism'. Her first and abiding sense of me was that I was as bad as all the rest. Any notion of moral superiority on my part was demolished in the

one transaction of sex for money/money of sex. To start from this 'worst-possible condition' was essential. How else could I have made this film?...

Aoi could not have spoken so revealingly about her life and feelings, and about our differences...unless there was also the co-equality of power which intimacy creates.

(Dennis O'Rourke, found at <http://www.nla.gov.au/events/doclife/orourke.html>)

In the beginning, there was the Lie, and the Lie was good.

Frames and Discourses, Oh My!

Narrators can lie as a deliberate strategy. But lying is more than an act (of commission or omission), it is also a perception. Here, the viewer (or 'spectator') position is fundamental.⁸ A number of factors influence the viewer's perception of a narrator's veracity; among them, are framing mechanisms that operate on micro and macro levels. On the micro level, cognitive linguist George Lakoff⁹ argues that our brains are structured around linguistic metaphors or FRAMES which shape how we interpret new information. Information that conflicts with our frames is ignored, downplayed, or rejected. On the macro level of society, DISCOURSES are socially constructed frames that get woven into institutional structures, mass psychology, and all manner of rhetorical communications.

Filmmakers are no less immune than anyone else to the operation of these two framing mechanisms. But documentary filmmakers should endeavor to be as cognizant as possible of them, for they present both opportunities and challenges in the transmission and reception of the filmmaker's work. One reason why many people consider Michael Moore an "unreliable" narrator is precisely because his arguments conflict with their mental frames; others, of course, revere Moore's films for finally depicting a reality, long ignored by the mainstream media, that accords with their own mental frames.¹⁰

Even narrators who were generally considered reliable at one historical moment may find themselves being recast as "unreliable" at a later date when the discourse changes. Consider these intertitles from Martin and Osa Johnson's 1928 film about their travels in Africa entitled *Simba*: "The natives of our country were a pastoral race of half savage blacks." Or "Here was

the age-old story of Man emerging from savagery.” Or this one: “Just a little black flapper,” describing a young teenage girl, bare-breasted, who had the rare gall to stare back at the camera’s condescending gaze. Such descriptions of native Africans, which were largely accepted at face value in the 1920’s and 1930’s¹¹, would provoke shock and outrage today.

This change in viewer reception results from changes in the western discourse about Africa that occurred in the intervening years. One film that rode the cusp of those changes is the 1950 film *Latuko: We Saw Primitive Man* sponsored by the same American Museum of Natural History which had sponsored the Johnsons. *Latuko* became the center of a national censorship debate for its graphic depictions of a Sudanese tribe. Its opening titles include this sentence: “Today, as yesterday, their peoples live in primeval nakedness, knowing not their own history—their lives governed by witchery and their necessities gleaned from Nature alone—even as our ancestors may have existed eons ago.” An enticing opening, surely, but as Amy Staples observes in her study of the film, “while the narrator asserts that the Latuko are ignorant of their own historical past, the film proceeds to showcase oral traditions and customs that have been passed down from generation to generation” (Staples 59). Staples goes on to describe a second debate this film engendered which was as vehement as the nudity/censorship debate—namely, the debate over whether the film was an accurate anthropological document of one of the African tribes “least disturbed by civilization” or yet another contribution to the increasingly suspect western discourse of Africa(ns) as mysterious and primitive.

Clearly, filmmakers can be forgiven for not anticipating future changes in discourses, but these examples offer cautionary warnings for those whose ambitions run to producing “timeless” masterpieces. On this point, it should be noted that discourse (a “loaded” word meant to deal with “loaded” subject matter) is not the only type of information which viewers can draw upon in order to assess the extent of a narrator’s unreliability. While the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ keeps fiction audiences from applying their knowledge of the actual world to the fictional one, no such disincentive exists for the non-fiction audience; quite the opposite is true, as the

documentary genre--a discourse in its own right--predisposes viewers to compare the filmed depiction of “reality” with their own understanding of that reality. Non-fiction viewers can and do base their interpretations of a film, including their assessment of a narrator’s “reliability”, on *any information they have access to*, whether or not it is part of the film or its paratext. As with discourses, this information is inherently beyond the control of the narrator, but when the film is viewed years after its initial release, this information is beyond even the narrator’s comprehension. Edward Brunner discusses this phenomenon as it applies to non-fiction films which are not strictly documentaries in a review of Rick Prelinger’s Ephemeral Film archive entitled “Ersatz Truths: Variations on the Faux Documentary:”

There is both pleasure and scandal in viewing these films. The pleasure lies, in large part, in being placed as late-coming viewers who are in the powerful and superior position of looking over, around, through, and beyond these films. The only subject position never inhabited by the present-day viewer is that of the gullible audience-member who would take them at face value. (Brunner)

Discourses and Knowledge, Oh Boy!

The previous section might have alternatively been labeled ‘Beware the Viewer!’ But there is a more opportunistic way to regard the viewer’s knowledge and dispositions. Nothing prevents filmmakers from taking advantage of known changes to particular discourses and the viewer’s knowledge of subsequent historical developments. The 1982 documentary *The Atomic Café*, for example, strategically creates viewer skepticism toward the narrator by recontextualizing archival footage.

Instead of an omniscient narrator, *Atomic Café* has dozens of narrators—all problematic: the narrators of the different news clips, educational films, and military training films. These voices speak with all the trappings of authority, but each represents a kind of “unreliable narrator.” The point of the film is precisely to critique the statements of these narrators, to expose these narrators as purveyors of lies. (Wiener 73)

In some cases, just the combination of crude animation and overly dramatic narration (“Soviet Russia was expansively stabbing westward, knifing into nations left empty by war”) suffices to

undermine the narrator's reliability. In other cases, the contemporary viewer's ironic reading of the narration is based on knowledge of subsequent events. For example, these lines from the film

The islanders are a nomadic group and are well pleased that the yanks are going to add a little variety to their lives. And here, by the way, you can hear them singing their Marshallese version of "You Are My Sunshine."

gain their subversive force only from the viewer knowing that the "variety" to which the narrator refers is the obliteration of the islander's home, an island in the Bikini Atoll, by an atomic bomb test.

The Reliable Narrator

This paper has thus far described a number of ways in which non-fiction narrators are either "unreliable" or perceived as such, and shown that sometimes this unreliability serves strategic purposes, and at other times occurs unintentionally or even counter to the filmmakers' ambitions. This is useful, practical information for documentary filmmakers, but film scholars like Greta Olson remind us, appropriately, that

all recent models of unreliability, including those of Nunning, Fludernik, Phelan and Martin, and Yacobi, stress that narrators cannot be neatly divided into the categories of unreliable and reliable. Rather, as Phelan and Martin state it: "narrators exist along a wide spectrum from reliability to unreliability", and they can become more or less reliable during the course of the stories they tell. (Olson 100)¹²

This simple observation leads to the thought that it might also be worthwhile to turn the question around, and inquire about "reliable" narrators. What makes for "reliable" narrators, how can they be used successfully by documentary filmmakers, and what risks do reliable narrators present?

One way of answering the question of what makes for a "reliable" narrator is to minimize those conditions that make him/her "unreliable." On these terms, the filmmaker would have the narrator actually tell the truth, act consistently, be in sync with the other characters and with the image and sound tracks, reinforce viewer expectations, and—as much as possible—avoid discourses that are subject to debate or change. The producers of newsreels and government-

sponsored documentaries in the 1930's and 1940's, such as the *Why We Fight* series, tried to take this approach with their "Voice of God" narration. And they might have succeeded to this day except for having incorporated what Sarah Kozloff has described as "pretentious scripting and casting of sonorous, stentorian narrators" (Kozloff 51) and found the "Voice of God" technique itself implicated in the post-modern discourse that bred skepticism towards "totalizing knowledge."

More recent filmmakers, such as Ross McElwee, have found another way to establish the reliability of their narrators, by structuring their films as autobiographical journeys. Yet this form itself is no guarantee that one will be widely regarded as "reliable," as Michael Moore has discovered. What is the difference between their films? One key difference is that McElwee picks subjects which are not divisive, and about which he will inevitably know a great deal more than the audience. True, a very divisive battle between the McElwee and the Duke families figures prominently in McElwee's *Bright Leaves*; but this battle concerns those two families and few other people. Contrast that with Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* that places itself in the middle of America's gun-control battle, or his film *Fahrenheit 9/11* which inserts itself into the debates over the Iraq War and the Bush presidency. Moore jumps into frays where frames and discourses are already well established, as are his own beliefs. This raises another key difference between Moore and McElwee. Both filmmakers construct the narrator as a man on a journey for knowledge with the viewer positioned right beside him. Both men are good company for a long trip: Likeable, funny, sincere, entertaining. But where Moore comes across as strident, McElwee comes across as unpretentious. Where Moore comes across as tourguide, McElwee comes across as tourist (chauffeured around by his former teacher Charleen Swansea, tobacco farmer Howard McPherson, writer friend Allan Gurganus, and—most amusingly—film historian Vlada Petric). These distinctions are important, because they make McElwee's journey seem authentic and Moore's stylistic.

Conclusion

No later than 1966, scholars of the narrative were already noting a skepticism among contemporary audiences about the reliability of *all* narrators. On this point, Sarah Kozloff quotes Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg:

The narrator does not need to be dramatized for the modern audience so much as he needs to be relativized. A narrator who is not in some way suspect, who is not in some way subject to ironic scrutiny, is what the modern temper finds the least bearable. (Kozloff 51)

Indeed, proponents of the “direct cinema” or “cinema verité” movements of the 1950’s and 1960’s rejected the use of narrators--in the narrow definition of “narrator” that this paper has employed--for substantially this very reason. Yet, just a decade or two later, documentary narrators are back in force, whether in the authoritative, third-person mold of David Fanning’s PBS series *Frontline* or the situated, first-person mold of Ross McElwee’s *Six-O’Clock News*.

What has occasioned the return of the narrator? It is not because viewers have become less skeptical of authority; if anything, their skepticism has grown to keep pace with their growing awareness, on a general if not specific level, of media manipulation. But in an environment where manipulation is widely understood to be not only present but *inherent*, all narrative/filmic elements are equally suspect. In such an environment, what sense is there in documentary filmmakers reflexively shunning *any* element, particularly if they can find a way to successfully use it? This paper has shown that the “unreliable” narrator is one of those elements which documentary filmmakers can use with great effect, provided they are duly attentive to the essential role that the viewer, influenced by social discourse and historical events, also plays in the establishment of credibility and meaning.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Burgoyne, Robert. "The Cinematic Narrator: The Logic and Pragmatics of Impersonal Narration." Journal of Film & Video Vol. 42 Issue 1 (Spring 1990): 3-16.
- ² Currie, Gregory. "Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film." The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 53:1 (Winter 1995): 19-29.
- ³ Ferenz, Volker. "Fight Clubs, American Psychos and Mementos: The Scope of Unreliable Narration in Film." New Review of Film and Television Studies Vol. 3, No. 2 (November 2005): 133-159.
- ⁴ Consistent with Wayne Booth's model, Gregory Currie describes this distance as follows: "The narrator's role is it to tell us what is true in the story, and, like tellers in real life, she may have it wrong, or wish to tell us other than what she believes is true. In this model, we perceive narrative unreliability when we perceive a disparity between the (determining) intentions of the implied author concerning what is true in the story and the (reporting) intentions of the narrator concerning what she would have the reader believe occurred." (Currie 20)
- ⁵ Olson, Greta. "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators." Narrative Vol. 11, No. 1 (January 2003): 93-109.
- ⁶ This table lists documentary examples of these various forms of narration:

Type of Narrator	Documentary Using That Type
Unseen	Bunuel's <i>Land Without Bread</i>
Seen	Kuchar's <i>Weather Diary #5</i>
First-Person	McElwee's <i>Bright Leaves</i>
Third Person	Furtado's <i>Island of Flowers</i>
Omniscient	<i>The Naked City</i> , Capra's <i>Why We Fight</i> series
Limited in Knowledge	
Stand-in for Filmmaker	Kluge's <i>The Part-Time Work of a Domestic Slave</i>
Counterpoise for Filmmaker	<i>The Atomic Cafe</i>
Disembodied Conveniences	Flaherty's <i>Nanook of the North</i>
Embodied Agents of Action	Moore's <i>Bowling for Columbine</i>
Principal Tellers of Story	DeMille's <i>Land of Liberty</i>
Minor Contributors	

- ⁷ Sobchack, Vivian. "Synthetic Vision: The Dialectical Imperative of Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes*." Documenting the Documentary. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998. 70-82.

⁸ This view is in some ways consistent with Ansgar Nunning's argument, as described by Greta Olson, "that attributing unreliability is solely a function of reader reception...and hence ascribing unreliability is a strategy for reading texts rather than a text-immanent one." (Olson 97) Such an exclusive view of "unreliability" runs counter to the premise of this paper, however, and I would argue that viewers and filmmakers both have roles in its creation.

⁹ Lakoff, George. Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004.

¹⁰ Though a fictional work, consider the example of Alexander Kluge's *The Part-Time Work of a Domestic Slave*. B. Ruby Rich's analysis of this film in her book Chick Flicks illustrates how a viewer's personal politics affect their assessment of the narrator's reliability. Rich both admires and despises the narrator's power over the protagonist in this film, but her own feminist politics prevents her from identifying with this narrator even as she marvels at how tightly his position is embedded in the film.

The narrator holds a position of omniscience as a *dues ex machina* privy to information unavailable to the film's characters and inaccessible within the film text. In this guise, the narrator quickly becomes the favored replacement for the viewer in search of identification. The narrator, in his display of wit and wisdom, wins the respect of the viewer over the course of the film. The viewer, in turn, repays this narrative generosity with downright chumminess, uniting in a spirit of smug superiority with the narrator over and against the character(s). In a film such as *Part-Time Work*, in which the filmmaker and narrator are male and the protagonist is a woman, the sexual politics are sharply etched within the film's form. The narrator, in league with the author (Kluge), whose point of view he comes to represent and whose words become inflected through the intertitles, consistently undermines the film's female protagonist by a process in which the audience is actively complicitous. (Rich 239-240)

This seems an example where the narrator does NOT lie to another character, but rather lies (in another sense of lying) above them, and in so doing, reinforces discourses which are themselves considered lies by certain viewers.

¹¹ Of course, discourses inform but do not enforce frames. For example, not everyone was happy with image of Africa being portrayed by the Johnsons and others in the 1930's. As Charles Musser details in a 2006 article published in the journal Film History, Paul and Eslanda Robeson endeavored to present an entirely different picture of Africa through Paul's prologue to the 1937 film *My Song Goes Forth* and through Eslanda's 1945 book African Journey.

¹² Olson goes on to divide unreliable narrators into two types, fallible ones who are "are mistaken about their judgments or perceptions or are biased" (Olson 101) and untrustworthy ones who are "dispositionally" motivated to lie.

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