

SELF-REFLEXIVITY, DESCRIPTION, AND THE BOUNDARIES OF NARRATIVE CINEMA

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Abstract

This article proposes a bridge between an early and a late work of Gérard Genette, namely his article *Frontières du récit* and his collection of essays *Fiction et diction*. In *Frontières du récit*, Genette points at two instances of “anti-narrative” intrusion into narrative. The first is what Emile Benveniste called “discourse,” meaning the self-reflexive comments of the narrator, and the second is description, a mode of utterance that when found in a narrative, temporarily withholds the flow of the story. In the context of the proliferation of these instances in current narrative films and in the light of Genette’s observations in *Fiction et diction*, I will suggest that these anti-narrative elements provide us with a chance to fundamentally reconsider the notion of narrative and to configure a paradigm shift in narratology, which Genette had already foreseen in his early work.

The border of self-referential discourse

The self-reference or “self-reflexivity” of a text has been associated with a (more or less explicit) self-conscious/self-expository move on behalf of the maker that has a distancing effect upon the reader/recipient. In the case of storytelling, self-reflexivity suspends the reader’s or viewer’s immersion into the story, and adds multiple layers of signification.¹ In general, self-referential methods in art, literature and film have been considered tools that trigger critical reflection on behalf of the recipient.²

There is a certain tension between self-reflexivity and narrative related to self-reflexivity’s association with discourse. Highlighting this tension in his article *Frontières du récit*,³ Genette refers to discourse (*discours*), meaning the voice of the author and his or her self-referential accounts, which “intrudes” the text and suggests a threat to the “purity” of narrative. In the complex model of narrative that Genette later developed, self-reflexivity would correspond to the analytical category of “narrating instance,” the manifestation of which, in the form of discourse, disrupts the *récit* (narrative).⁴ The distinction between narrative and discourse was initiated by Aristotle, who considered separately certain types of poetry, the lyric, satiric and didactic poetry, that were not representational, that is, they did not reflect external actions (real or fictional), but rather expressed the poet’s own thoughts. In the 1960s the French linguist and semiotician Emile

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Benveniste reintroduced the distinction between narrative as story (what he called *histoire*) and discourse. Benveniste defined the pure form of narrative as one that remains uncontaminated by the subjectivity of discourse; in pure narrative, the narrator's presence goes unnoticeable, and nothing distracts the recipient from the immersive experience of reading: "The objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator. Truly there is no longer a 'narrator.' The events are chronologically recorded as they appear on the horizon of the story. Here no one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves."⁵

Chronological sequentiality or "linearity" here also appears as a feature of "pure narrative." Genette stresses that instances of pure narrative,⁶ such as the ones that Benveniste finds in some passages of Balzac, are isolated, and that almost every text comprises of both narrative and discursive passages.⁷ This hybridization notwithstanding, a tension is still introduced by the discursive, and in this sense, self-referential passages of stories: "Any intrusion of discursive elements into the interior of a narrative is perceived as a disruption of the discipline of the narrative portion."⁸ This is not the case when narrative is embedded in discursive modes of expression. "Narrative inserted into discourse transforms itself into an element of discourse, but discourse inserted into narrative remains discourse and forms a sort of cyst, easily recognized and localized. One might say that the purity of narrative is more obvious than that of discourse."⁹

Continues Genette:

*Discourse has no purity to preserve since it is the natural mode of language, the broadest and most universal mode, by definition open to all forms. On the contrary, narrative is a particular mode, marked and defined by a certain number of exclusions and restrictive conditions (no present tense, no first person, etc.). Discourse can "narrate" without ceasing to be discourse. Narrative can't "discourse" without betraying itself.*¹⁰

According to Genette, the anti-narrative function of discourse lies in the insertion of subjectivity to the otherwise seemingly "objective" sequence of events (*récit*). Self-reflexive discourse has an anti-mimetic and, in this sense, "anti-narrative" character, as long as it intervenes through everything that undermines objectivity. The self-reflexive attributes of discourse are closely related to the function of cinematic enunciation, also studied by Benveniste. Discourse always reminds the viewers about the discrepancy between them being, on the one hand, enunciators of the filmic text (and "makers" of the story) and, on the other hand, enunciated, subjects situated by the filmic discourse.¹¹ It thus rejects the objectivity and naturalness of *histoire*, close to which Genette places "pure narrative."

When it comes to film, direct instances of self-referential discourse are not common. However, self-reflexivity makes its presence noticeable through various metanarrational or metafictional techniques and stylistic devices that break with narrative's "purity."¹² Literary and semiotic models of self-reference became particularly influential in the decades of 1960s and 1970s, and determined the conceptualization of self-reflexivity in film theory.¹³ The (post-)Marxist and structuralist tradition of film theory stepped on self-reflexivity's anti-mimetic character, to associate the term with an ideologically loaded, Brechtian "break with the illusionism of the spectacle." Apparatus theory, especially, drawing on Barthes and also on Althusser and Lacan, considered cinema a medium intrinsically ideological, and pointed at the necessity to find ways to resist the

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imposition of the apparatus over the spectator's consciousness; one of these ways was found in self-reflexivity. This theoretical background of self-reflexivity determined the way self-reflexivity, was (until today) conceived in film theory and also in the cognitive strands of film narratology. As representative of the latter, Edward Branigan places (self-)reflexivity among other "anti-narrative devices," as he calls them, such as "irony, paradox, contradiction, novelty, or alienation." The reflexive device is for him "prescribed to provide a critical and intellectual distance ('opacity') that frees the viewer from delusion."¹⁴

Thus, even when detached from the actual narrating "voice" and Genette's literary discourse, self-reflexivity in film is also found in tension with the supposed objectivity of pure narrative, as well as with that of the filmic mode of representation, which, for certain critical stands of film theory, is inherently mimetic.¹⁵

The border of description

Another, albeit "ill-defined" border of narrative is, according to Genette's 1966 article, description. His discussion of description reflects a tension in both the literary and the film theoretical tradition between narrative and description. The traditional view of narrative considers it to be distinct from description, because description does not conform to the overall causal and temporal succession of the story; it rather suspends time and action. This tension between description and narrative comes from the period of Enlightenment and its system of ideas and was systematically treated by Lessing in his distinction between temporal and spatial arts, particularly poetry and painting. As Joseph Frank notes, Lessing used to advise poets to give emphasis on action and not on description, because action fits the linear temporality of language.¹⁶ In the same vein, descriptive passages in narratives have been considered extra-narrative prostheses rather than organic parts of narrative. They are, in a way, "cysts" as well.

As Genette recognizes, description *per se* has different attributes from narrative. It lingers on objects, turning actions into "scenes." The word scene is relevant to the juxtaposition of objects in space.¹⁷ There have been periods in literary and art history where the descriptive and spatial aspects of texts came to the fore. For instance, description has been a central characteristic of baroque art and poetry, as Genette notes.¹⁸ The development of the novel, however, gave prevalence to another, "explicative and symbolic" function of description,¹⁹ one that *serves* the fundamental processes of narrative, that is, the logical order (causality) and temporal order (succession), as Tzvetan Todorov would have it,²⁰ or, in other words, its dramatic and temporal aspects.²¹ For example, in the novels of Balzac the description of things is expressive of the inner life of the characters, serving in a way the development of the narrative. In general, for Genette, description comes to serve the needs of the dramatic unfolding of the diegesis, and thus it is, in a sense, subordinate to narrative.²²

As with self-referential discourse, in the case of cinema description becomes a problematic category. Based on the work of Genette but also on that of the French theorist Philippe Hamon, Seymour Chatman attempted, from the aspect of film narratology, to clarify the instances of description in cinema. Following Genette's contrast between narrative and description, Chatman problematized the role of description in narrative films. In his book *Story and Discourse* he

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declares his conviction that “description *per se* is generally impossible in narrative films.”²³ Description in literature is associated with pause and lingering; in film, however, “the story-time keeps going as long as images are projected on the screen, as long as we feel that the camera continues to run.”²⁴ Thus, for Chatman “pure” description is impossible in the medium of cinema. Films do not permit the “lingering” found in literary texts. In film, even when no action takes place, “the focus remains on the event.”²⁵ Descriptive details, Chatman repeats in *Coming to Terms*, “can only occur as a product of plot action; they do not have a separate existence.”²⁶ The effect of description can be however created by cinematic means, as it happens in the case of freeze frame.²⁷ A freeze frame, instead of serving plot needs, would allow more time to be given to objects or persons in the frame “to reveal their own properties;”²⁸ it would thus cinematically produce the pause and the lingering so characteristic of literary description.

These “boundaries of narrative,” self-reflexivity and description, are all the more challenged by the tendency of films made in the post-1990s to have complex narratives. Certainly such challenging has been the case in many avant-garde and art films of the past, but it still formed part of an alternative and rather marginal way of storytelling, in relation to the dominant Hollywood practices. What is stressed here is that now it seems that new forces tend to turn complex modes of narration into a new norm, as film narratives in which discourse and description proliferate are massively being promoted.

Self-reflexivity and description in contemporary complex films

The way that Genette problematized the boundaries of narrative may provide insight into a recent tendency in narrative cinema, where, since the mid-1990s, films that have generally been characterized as “complex narratives” proliferate. Titles include films that belong to various genres and traditions and that have also been called by critics “puzzle films” or “network narratives;” from *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) and *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky, 2000), to *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006), *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) and *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011). In these contemporary “complex” films, self-reflexive discourse and description – in their particular cinematic modes – gain ground, to the point that they tend to become their defining characteristics.

Self-reflexivity, also found in postclassical modes of Hollywood narration after the 1970s,²⁹ has a very intense presence in complex films. Referring to films such as *Chunking Express* (*Chung Hing sam lam*, Wong Kar-wai, 1994), *Run Lola Run* (*Lola Rennt*, Tom Tykwer, 1998), *Fight Club* and *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999), Eleftheria Thanouli finds that in them self-reflexivity disrupts the continuous and linear style of classical narration, through a proliferation and intensification of *avant-garde* techniques and “disruptive visual effects.” Thus, the techniques of “back projections, collages and optical tricks,” neglected in the past as “too artificial or self-reflexive,” make an impressive comeback in contemporary cinema.³⁰ These are particular modes of cinematic self-reflexive discourse, but also indicators of the knowingness or self-consciousness of the narration. The self-reflexivity at the level of cinematography and montage is accompanied by self-reflexivity at the level of narration: thus, as Thanouli maintains, in films such as the ones mentioned above, “the narrating act comes forward,”³¹ acknowledging the audience, providing

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them with clues to comprehend the story and showing its knowledgeability and spatiotemporal omnipresence.

David Bordwell has also pointed out the high degree of self-consciousness in the complex films that he calls “network narratives” because they create networks of different characters and their stories, as happens in *Pulp Fiction*, *Chunking Express*, *Magnolia* and *Babel*. Bordwell considers marks of the self-conscious stance of these film devices such as crosscutting, intertitles, montage according to a motif, time-juggling, and openly suppressive narration.³² The non-sequential ordering of events in a film, especially, is a form of overt, self-conscious – and self-referential – narration; a narration that also makes the viewer conscious of the presence of a narrative principle that manipulates the telling.

Genette was perhaps the first who indicated the self-reflexive function of time-juggling (cases of “anachrony”) in (literary) texts. Referring specifically to “prolepses” – the premature reference to future events, the equivalent of which in cinema is for Chatman the device of “flashforwards”³³ – Genette states that the latter are “not only data of narrative temporality but also data of voice,” which “bring the narrating instance itself directly into play.”³⁴ This type of self-reflexivity is strongly communicated by contemporary complex films that play with temporal linearity.

Through their constant self-reflexivity and unwillingness to “suspend disbelief” – considered to be a precondition for narrative immersion – contemporary complex films orientate the viewers’ attention towards mediation (as opposed to transparency), which characterizes not only the film’s world but also the “factual” world where the viewers live in, permeated by informational networks.³⁵ In this context of “hypermediated realism,”³⁶ filmic self-reflexivity not only points at how reality is being transformed and “augmented” through various media, but also, and especially, at how only through these we can access reality (just like the protagonists often attempt). The same holds for our enjoyment of the films as viewers. Pleasure and connection to the story world comes through an awareness of the medium and its manipulation.

While the discursive cyst seems to be threatening the purity of narrative with its overwhelming presence in complex films, the other cyst traditionally subordinate to narrative, description, also seems to be growing, decisively shifting its hierarchical position in relation to narrative. All the more, as it becomes clear in contemporary complex films, narrative gets to serve description, instead of the other way around.

Chatman foresaw the possibility of such shift of hierarchy like the one that can be observed in complex films, especially those that have an episodic or “thread” structure.³⁷ As he pointed out in *Coming to Terms*, apart from the particular case of freeze frame, in cinema it is by means of contiguity and parallelism that description might be at work, evoking spatial patterns that connect disparate images, objects or even narrative episodes. Drawing on Christian Metz and his account of description as a mode of editing, Chatman argued that even action, one of the main foundations of narrative, is possible to be described instead of narrated in cinema, provided that this action is composed by elements, the relation between which is one of “spatial parallelism at any given moment in time.”³⁸ Description renders contiguity (spatial proximity) more important than causality. As Chatman stresses, “description has a logic of its own, and it is unreasonable to belittle it because it does not resemble the chrono-logic of Narration.”³⁹

The aspect of description is highlighted through the iterative editing rhythm of films such as *Night on Earth*, *Run Lola Run*, and *Gomorra* (*Gomorra*, Matteo Garrone, 2008), a rhythm that

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often suspends the narrative causal-logical connections between the film's separate elements. The order in which the elements appear can thus be conceived as contingent and the relation between them as paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic. The narrative elements, i.e. characters, events and story-threads, become objects that the viewers traverse as the film lingers on them in its *parcours* from one to the other, a *parcours* less and less motivated by narrative action and causality. The excerpts from the stories of different characters become pieces that are juxtaposed in the space of the film, often considered to be contemporaneous and with no temporal successiveness among them. On the one hand, in films composed by multiple stories, the latter become "mini-narratives" that do not serve the composition of an overarching narrative, since there is not a beginning, middle and end in which we can place these autonomous stories, as it is the case in *Gomorrah*. On the other hand, in films where a certain chronological sequence between the multiple stories is ultimately suggested, and something reminiscent of a narrative whole may be created – as it happens for instance in *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001) or *Babel* – this whole is yet explicitly given as tentative, and open to multiple possibilities and new contingent connections, latent not only inside the diegesis but also between the diegetic universe and the "real" world of the viewers. Hence, the multiple mini-narratives or threads of the films may be themselves seen as objects of description, opening out to a larger – but equally contingent and poorly ordered in a causal-logical way – real world.

Complex reality and complex diction

Taking into consideration the proliferation of self-reflexivity and description in recent complex films, it seems that in them it is the narrative, as defined by its temporal and dramatic attributes, that tends to become the cyst, and a micro-element of a larger composition. However, can we dismiss the word narrative altogether when talking about films that ultimately still create story worlds? The problem seems to lie in the definition of the word narrative itself, and its connotations of a certain objective and verisimilar representation, which would imitate the causal-logical and spatio-temporal sequence of events in an idealized version of the real world. By adding many layers and dimensions of analysis, Genette and other prominent narratologists demonstrated that the study of narrative needs to take into account a complex textual and cognitive weaving, a mixture of *discours* and *récit* that spreads across multiple narrational levels. However, it is the laws of causality and spatiotemporal sequentiality, presupposed or expected in narrative, that introduce an internal tension with all the "anti-narrative" characteristics of texts, such as those of self-reflexivity and description. The recent proliferation of these characteristics in complex films points at the transcendence of narrative in the strict, "pure" definition of the term, against which narratology has always been struggling, however still without having achieved a radical emancipation from it. Self-reflexivity and description are anti-narrative according to the old norms of a certain verisimilitude of the *histoire*, against the backdrop of which the *récit* and the *narration* were always conceived. Narrative (the *récit*) can no longer be conceived to stand closer to the *histoire* (as it does in *Frontières du récit*), as contemporary mainstream narratives become more and more complex. On the other hand, the *histoire*, mimicking the order of an idealized representation of facts, can no longer be conceived as such, because, as I will argue, our own conception of

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what reality is has significantly changed – to the point that verisimilar representations do not appear convincing anymore.

A solution to the inner contradiction created between self-reflexive discourse and description on the one hand, and narrative on the other, is suggested by Genette through his own self-referential reflections at a later phase of his work. Specifically in *Fiction et Diction*⁴⁰, Genette looks back at his earlier work including *Narrative Discourse* (based on *Figures III*)⁴¹ and *Nouveau discours du récit*,⁴² and points at the problem of verisimilitude (or representational realism) and its association with narrative, which is, as I believe, also key for the understanding of contemporary complex films.

Fiction and Diction is a collection of essays dealing with special narratological problems such as how do we define literariness, for instance whether we do so according to the theme and intention of a work (fiction) or according to aesthetic criteria (diction). In the essay *Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative* Genette observes that in a large part of his earlier work he tended to associate narrative with fiction, and to neglect factual narrative. Thus, he attempts to test whether his analytical categories of order, pace, frequency, mode, and voice, which he developed based on fictional narrative, can also be applied to cases of factual narrative, such as historical narratives and autobiographies. The conclusion that he draws is that the differences between the two types of narrative, albeit existent, are not as rigid as one would imagine, as both fictional and factual narratives make use of the same stylistic elements. Fiction imitates, as Searle would have it, “nonfictional assertions,” but also factual narratives borrow fictional modes, and narratology should trespass the border between fictional and factual genres. As for contemporary complex fiction films, they heavily rely on factual diction with the proliferation of self-reflexive and descriptive modes. At the same time, however, this does not make them appear more factual. On the contrary, by using these modes they seem to become even more “fictional,” creating an unreal effect (e.g. *The Jacket* [John Maybury, 2005], *Source Code*, *Take Shelter* [Jeff Nichols, 2011]), perhaps because of the fact that our perception of reality feels more unreal than ever.⁴³ In *Source Code*, the protagonist is called to make mnemonic patterns out of objects described to him, and to self-reflexively evaluate the borders of his own reality in relation to the one presented to him. The viewer of this and other complex films is required to do exactly the same. In our hypermediated environment, the ways we use to connect to the real are through reflexivity, and openness to contingent connectivity among seemingly unconnected objects (what description effectuates as a mode of textual diction). This results into fiction being less verisimilar to its own norms as a genre (a tendency Genette observes in *Fiction and Diction*),⁴⁴ but closer to our conception of a hypermediated real. Thus, in the same way that Genette calls narratology to cross the borders between fiction and non-fiction, as literature itself does, we could nowadays suggest a similar move on behalf of contemporary (film) narratology, to reconsider these borders once again, the way that contemporary cinema does.

Narrative norms can well prevail for a long period, but as Genette notes, they can be subject to transformation. Such transformation is I think taking place with the contemporary wave of complex narratives, a shift in the prevailing norms, which perhaps also suggests a – long awaited – paradigm shift for narratology. At first, the two elements that Genette indicated as boundaries of narrative in 1966, namely discourse and description, seem to be pointing beyond the borders of the fictional world of narrative, and thus to be introducing an internal tension with it. On the one

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hand, self-reflexivity inserts the “reality” of the narrating instance, and of the medium itself. On the other hand, description inserts a “factual” and contingent way of engaging with the elements of the diegetic world but also with what remains out of it. However, taking into account Genette’s subsequent reconsideration – and integration – of factual narrative into his general narrative model, the tension that these two elements, self-reflexivity and description, introduce is now more clearly drawn not with one specific instance of narrative, namely the fictional one, but with narrative altogether, and more precisely, with certain verisimilar presumptions “built” in the conception and definition of narrative, which tie it to representation. These are issues coming to the fore by the current wave of research on “unnatural narratology.”⁴⁵ The emancipation of narrative as a notion from the dominant norms of verisimilitude and “legitimacy”⁴⁶ and from representational schemata would verify a prediction Genette had made already in *Frontières du récit*, commenting on the way the literary “experiments” of the 20th century, from Hemingway to Robbe-Grillet, tested narrative against others incompatible to it modes of utterance, such as discourse:

*Perhaps the novel, after poetry, will definitively leave the age of representation. Perhaps narrative, in the negative singularity that we have attributed to it, is, like art for Hegel, already for us a thing of the past which we must hasten to consider as it passes away, before it has completely deserted our horizon.*⁴⁷

My “circular” reading of early and late Genette suggests that both self-reflexivity and description blur the borders between the fictional and the factual, and create modes of diction that, on the one hand do not contradict storytelling, and on the other hand, may organize story worlds in different and more complex ways from the ones that have classically been associated with “narrative,” in literary but also in cinema theory.

Genette’s own self-reflexive discourse about his theory of narrative gives us the chance to rethink current film narratives from this perspective. The “anti-narrative” characteristics of self-reflexivity and description point at the merging of the factual with the fictional: on the one hand, in the case of the self-reflexive complex films, at a reality that is so much mediated that it is difficult to pose the borders between it and fiction; on the other hand, in the case of network-like complex films, at increasingly contingent and life-like narrative forms, to the extent that life is more and more recognized as coupling with randomness and uncertainty, rather than following idealized cause and effect sequences and the spatiotemporal continuity that has been linked with narrative. A two-way merger of fiction and reality expressed by contemporary films makes Genette’s insights into the nature of narrative pertinent. As they constantly challenge the boundaries between fiction and reality, contemporary complex narratives in cinema seem to make a significant case for a long-awaited emancipation of narrative from representation.

1 See Maria Poulaki, “Impanted Time: The Final Cut and the Reflexive Loops of Complex Narratives,” in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2011, pp. 415-434.

2 Roland Barthes had a significant contribution in making reflexivity, as narratologist David Herman notes, a “structuralist desideratum;” see David Herman, “Lateral Reflexivity: Levels, Versions, and the

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Logic of Paraphrase,” in *Style*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2000, pp. 293-306. According to Barthes, narration implies a degree of self-reflexivity because its role is not to transmit narrative but “to make it conspicuous:” Roland Barthes, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” in *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1975, pp. 237-272. Barthes pointed at the dangers inherent in the tendency of bourgeois society to “naturalize narratives” by de-emphasizing the codes of the narrative situation, in other words, its self-reflexive markers.

- 3 Gérard Genette, *Frontières du récit*, in Id., *Figures*, Seuil, Paris 1966 (eng. ed. “Boundaries of Narrative,” in *New Literary History*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1976, pp. 1-13).
- 4 A debate over the role of the narrating instance in narrative dates back to proto-narratological concerns such as the one expressed by the critics Friedrich Spielhagen and Käte Friedemann. The former declared, in 1883 (*Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans*), that “the ideal narrative never alerts the reader to the ongoing process of narration,” while the latter (*Die Rolle des Erzählers in der Epik*, 1910) considered the narrating instance an indispensable feature of narrative; see Jan Christoph Meister, *Narratology*, in Peter Hühn et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Hamburg University Press, Hamburg 2010, <http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narratology>, last visit 11 April 2012.
- 5 Gérard Genette, “Boundaries of Narrative,” cit., p. 9, quoting Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Gallimard, Paris 1966, pp. 237-250.
- 6 Here “purity” is not meant as qualitative category; it rather refers to the linguistic “autonomy” of narrative in relation to other modes of linguistic expression.
- 7 Gérard Genette, “Boundaries of Narrative,” cit., p. 10.
- 8 *Ibidem*.
- 9 *Idem*, pp. 10-11.
- 10 *Idem*, p. 11.
- 11 Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, London 2006 (3rd edition), p. 102.
- 12 As Monika Fludernik notes, until recently the metafictional and metanarrational aspects of self-reflexivity have been used interchangeably. Metanarration takes place at the level of discourse (both diegetic and extra-diegetic) and involves “comments [...] concerned with the act and/or process of narration”; cf. Monika Fludernik, “Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary: From Metadiscursivity to Metanarration and Metafiction,” in *Poetica*, no. 35, 2003, pp. 1-39. While metafiction concerns instances of self-reflexivity particularly in narrative *fictions*, and has an anti-mimetic character, meta-narration just “thematizes” the act of narration, and, when used in non-fictional narratives, can also serve the credibility of the narrated events: see Birgit Neumann, Ansgar Nünning, *Metanarration and Metafiction*, in Peter Hühn et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, cit. Forms of metafiction can be self-reflexive without involving self-reflexive discourse. For example, according to Werner Wolf, *mise-en-abyme* is a type of “implicit metafiction,” because it is a non-narrational instance of self-reflexivity (*Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst. Theorie und Geschichte mit Schwerpunkt auf englischem illusionsstörenden Erzählen*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1993, p. 307, as cited in Monika Fludernik, “Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary,” cit.). Although here metafiction does not occur with the intervention of the narrator’s or author’s comments upon the act of narration (by discourse), it still is self-reflexive, because, through the unreal effect that it creates, fiction demonstrates itself as such.
- 13 Two articles that appeared in the film journal *Jump Cut* in 1974 are indicative of the film theoretical discussions on self-reflexivity in that period: Chuck Kleinhans, “Types of Audience Response: From Tear-jerkers to Thought-provokers,” in *Jump Cut*, no. 4, 1974, pp. 21-23, and Dana Polan, “Brecht and the Politics of Self-reflexive Cinema,” in *Jump Cut*, no. 1, 1974, pp. 29-32.
- 14 Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, Routledge, New York 1992, p. 84.
- 15 Christian Metz, drawing on Benveniste, related the absence of self-referential discourse in (classical) film, where the purity of *histoire* gives the impression of objectivity, with ideology: see Christian Metz, *Story/Discourse: Notes on Two Kinds of Voyeurism*, in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods Vol. II*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1985, pp. 543-548.

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- 16 Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form: Some Further Reflections," in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1978, pp. 275-290.
- 17 Gérard Genette, "Boundaries of Narrative," cit., p. 7.
- 18 *Idem*, p. 6.
- 19 *Ibidem*.
- 20 Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose*, Seuil, Paris 1971 (eng. ed. *The Poetics of Prose*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1977, p. 136).
- 21 Gérard Genette, "Boundaries of Narrative," cit., p. 7.
- 22 *Idem*, p. 6.
- 23 Seymour B. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1978, p. 74.
- 24 *Ibidem*.
- 25 *Ibidem*.
- 26 Seymour B. Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1990, p. 42.
- 27 Seymour B. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, cit., p. 75.
- 28 Seymour B. Chatman, *Coming to Terms*, cit., p. 50.
- 29 Thomas Elsaesser, Warren Buckland, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis*, Arnold – Oxford University Press, London-New York 2002, p. 78.
- 30 Eleftheria Thanouli, "Post-classical Narration: A New Paradigm in Contemporary Cinema," in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2006, pp. 183-196 and p. 189.
- 31 *Idem*, p. 192.
- 32 David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, Routledge, New York 2007, pp. 210-211.
- 33 Seymour B. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, cit., p. 64.
- 34 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1986, p. 70.
- 35 Sylvie Bissonnette, "Cyborg Brain in Robert Lepage's *Possible Worlds*," in *Screen*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2009, pp. 392-410.
- 36 Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1999.
- 37 See Evan Smith, "Thread Structure: Rewriting the Hollywood Formula," in *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 51, no. 3-4, 2000, pp. 88-96.
- 38 Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, p. 128.
- 39 Seymour B. Chatman, *Coming to Terms*, cit., p. 24. Apart from Chatman, in the more recent years other theorists have also proposed a reconsideration of the role of description, which cannot anymore be considered just *ancilla narrationis* – as Genette refers to it in *Frontières du récit*. See, among others, Don Paul Fowler, "Narrate and Describe: The Problem of Ekphrasis," in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, no. 81, 1991, pp. 25-35; Peter Klaus, "Description and Event in Narrative," in *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1982, pp. 201-216; and Ruth Ronen, "Description, Narrative and Representation," in *Narrative*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1997, pp. 274-286.
- 40 Gérard Genette, *Fiction et diction*, Seuil, Paris 1991 (eng. ed. *Fiction and Diction*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1993).
- 41 Gérard Genette, *Figures III*, Seuil, Paris 1972.
- 42 Gérard Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit*, Seuil, Paris 1983.
- 43 This is what Thomas Elsaesser seems to suggest in his theorization of "mind-game films;" see *The Mind-Game Film*, in Warren Buckland (ed.), *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Blackwell, Chichester 2009.
- 44 Gérard Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, cit., p. 83.
- 45 See Jan Alber et al., "Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models," in *Narrative*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 113-136. With this of course I do not imply that there are no stories that are not verisimilar. Doing this would be to neglect all fantastic literature, to start with. The argument

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that I make here is more theoretical, and criticizes certain conceptions and presumptions of narrative theory, ultimately boiling down to how narrative is defined.

46 Gérard Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, cit., p. 83.

47 Gérard Genette, "Boundaries of Narrative," cit., p.12.