Reading Notes for “Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film” by Gregory Currie

Currie starts by noting that it is not easy to specify *in what* **unreliability** in a narrative consists.

He will show four things:

1. narrative unreliability is distinct from *unreliable narrator*.

2. narrative unreliability requires an *implied author* to be explicable.

3. narrative unreliability has ‘close and interesting connections’ to *an ambiguous narrative*.

4. the prevalence of certain devices in narratives by appeal to the “difficulty of the reader’s task in figuring out whether and how those devices are being used.” [200Lm]

He will also look at the relation between film narrative and literary narrative. This is (presumably) because GC thinks that the difficulties previously encountered in generating an adequate account of film narrative has been to use what is true of literary narrative as the theory which is then applied to different representational modes including film.

GC is testing an hypothesis in the essay: that the comprehension of a narrative depends on what the reader/viewer takes to be the *intentions* of the narrative (based on what is contained/presented in the words/images of the work). [200Rt]

GC thinks that if the theory gives a good account of various features of narrative, especially ‘unreliable narration’, is evidence of the strength of the theory he will present.

**I Fictions Misdescribed**

First-pass definition of ‘unreliability’: the information delivered “misleads us about what actually happened, or would mislead us if we found it credible.” KEY: “[misleading means] a disparity between the world as it is and the world as it is represented to be”.

Old approach: unreliable narration presupposes that there is an at least implied narrator and that narrator misleads us about what is the case in the world of the fictional narrative [because you need an at least *implied narrator* in order to claim *to have been misled* by the narrative].

Currie challenges this view.

JP: Question for breakout rooms: “What is GC’s most general definition of what unreliability consists in and why does he think that unreliability doesn’t **always** require that the reader/viewer take the narration has coming from an *at least implied narrator*?” ANSWER is on page ####.

Second Challenge: GC challenges the idea that what unreliability in a newspaper account requires (a failure-of-fit between the world as it is and the world as described in the article) is required of a narrative fiction’s account (since a failure-of-fit between the fictional world as it is and that world as described requires a kind of magical thinking about a fictional world that is deeply implausible).

GC’s alternative: that unreliability in a fictional narrative has only to do with the mechanism of the unreliability, not that it leads to a failure-of-fit between the actual fictional world and the one as represented in the narrative.

JP: GC’s point is that it is something to do with the ***way*** the fictional world is presented that leads us to discern that there is something ***unreliable about it*** (since the idea that there is an actual fictional world to look to for evidence of unreliable representation is a non-starter), and the mechanism for this ***way the fictional world is presented*** is **the intentions that are evident or implied by the words/images presented in the fiction**.

JP Question for breakout rooms: “According to Currie, what is the *standard account* of narrative unreliability in a fictional narrative?” ANSWER: “…the standard account … is one that appeals, exactly, to the mental economy of agents – though these agents are typically thought of as hypothetical or imaginative constructs rather than living beings. The standard account [of narrative unreliability is that] it is a product of a discrepancy between what we might call internal and external perspectives. The external perspective is that of the so-called ‘implied author,’ a figure who in a sense may herself be fictional or imagined, because her mental economy does not necessarily correspond to that of the actual author, but who is not to be thought of as occupying a position within the world itself…[but rather] is conceptualized as the agent responsible for the story qua fiction.” Whereas “The internal perspective is that of a narrator; a creature who is conceptualized as a product of the work itself, rather than as the work’s producer.”[e.g., in *Rashomon*, the woodcutter] [201Lm]

The narrator may be internal (a character within the story itself who is telling the fiction as a witness) “or she may be an external (*extradiagetic*) narrator, who announces herself as telling the story as fiction, buat whewre athere is some reason to think of this narrator’s voice as distinct from and dependent on that of the implied author.” [201Rt]

GC then asks the 64-dollar question: “What happens to the concept of unreliability *when there is no narrator?*”

GC starts by noting that on the standard account, the implied author “is epistemically dominant over the [intradiegetic/internal] narrator” in which the “mental economy of the [internal] narrator is … part of the story itself and not as authoritative {as that of the implied author}”.

Upshot: unreliability arises when the intentions of the implied author, which are thought to be determinative of what is the case in the fictional world, depart from what the intentions of the internal narrator seem to ask the reader/viewer to believe. [201Rb]

While this comports well as an account of the unreliability in works like Camus’s *The Fall* and llIshiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, it doesn’t do so well for narratives “that are intuitively unreliable, but where the unreliability is not, or at least not obviously, attributable to an [internal] narrator”. [202Lt]

The case of unreliable literary narrative reasonably leans on the idea that there is always a narrator to blame for the unreliability (because there is *always* a single author, and that makes it obvious that *someone* is speaking *at all times* [JP addition]).

Question for Breakout Rooms: “GC says that in the case of literary narrative unreliability, there is always a narrator to blame for the unreliability. What supports that view, in your opinion?”

**II The Asymmetry Between Literature and Film**

GC introduces two distinctions: 1) between *foregrounded* and *backgrounded* internal narrators, and 2) between *controlling* and *noncontrolling* narrators. [JP: an internal narrator is *controlling* if what is communicated in the text/content of the film coincides with what the internal narrator is presenting, and is *noncontrolling* if the text/content of the film communicates something *different* from what the internal narrator[s] is[are] presenting]

Question for Breakout Rooms: “Consider GC’s distinction between *foregrounded* and *backgrounded* internal narrators, and between *controlling* and *noncontrolling* narrators. In the case of each of the witnesses to the crime in *Rashomon*, all [but perhaps the testimony of the dead man delivered through a medium] are *foregrounded,* but are any/all/none of them *controlling* narrators? This will require you to first specify what is required for a *controlling* vs. *noncontrolling* internal narrator, and then decide which best characterizes the various witnesses in *Rashomon*.”

Question for a Breakout Room: “GC argues that of the four possible optional combinations arising from his two distinctions [*foregrounded/backgrounded* and *controlling/uncontrolling*];, the last one [backgrounded/noncontrolling] is problematic and its implausibility yields one of his arguments against the idea that all unreliable narratives imply an unreliable narrator. But *why* is this option problematic?

ANSWER: if a narrator is *backgrounded* they must be *controlling* since it is *problematic* that a narrator would be *noncontrolling* since “it is simpler to assume that a backgrounded narrator is controlling than that she is not [since] to suppose that she is not is to see her appearing as told about in the text, rather than as the source of the text itself [yet] if she is told about in the text, there ought to be some evidence in the text for her existence, [in which case she would be *foregrounded*, not *backgrounded!*]

GC then makes his big argument that the idea of a *controlling narrator* is close to incoherent when applied to film. KEY to the argument: that while it makes sense to imagine that, in the case of literary fiction, there could be such a narrator since in *literary fiction* we generally assume *a single author who creates everything that counts as the fictional presentation*, it **makes no sense in the case of film fiction** because there generally **is not single person who controls all the mechanisms by which the narration is first created and then delivered to the viewer!**

Upshot: this seems to exclude the possibility of a controlling narrator in film, and *that* by implication makes the very idea of *narrative unreliability in film* “ruled out”. “…[I]f controlling narrators in film are ruled out, and backgrounded narrators are almost in inevitably controlling, we may conclude that backgrounded narrators in film are very rare, if possible at all.” This leads to his BIG POINT: “IN that case, it will not do simply to insist on their presence whenever we encounter a film narrative that is unreliable but where there is no foregrounded narrator. Better to say simply that in such a case we have unreliable narrative without a narrator.”[203Lm]

Question for the Breakout Room: Is this claim convincing? If yes, why do you agree? If no, why do you disagree?

GC then points out that this conclusion can be avoided if you suppose that “the only unreliable film narratives there can be are those which involve noncontrolling, and therefore probably foregrounded narrators – as with *Rashomon* … and most of the other filmic narrations we think of as unreliable.”[203Lm]

GC points out there is a counterexample: Fritz L:ang’s *You Only Live Once*. In that film, generations of viewers have assumed that Eddie is innocent even though there is no foregrounded narrator in the film, and no evidence that a backgrounded, noncontrolling narrator is implied by the content of the film. Wilson thinks the evidence given in the film only supports agnosticism about Eddie’s guilt or innocence, but everyone *responds* as if they *know* that they have been *misled* by the evidence presented in the film.

While GC doesn’t agree with Wilson’s interpretation of the evidence in the film, it is enough that a film in which the evidence *does* support his interpretation is more than enough to establish the *possibility* of a film that is unreliable in its narrative but *has no narrator, explicit or implied*.

GC grounds his conclusion about this possibility in the way the *presentation* in this possible film *could include evidence that supports an alternative interpretation of Eddie’s guilt/innocence* and that the conclusion of audiences who spot this evidence and consider this alternative interpretation as reasonable that they have been *lied to* in some sense depends on a direct appeal **not to an unreliable narrator** but to **an unreliable implied author***.* [204Ltm]

**III Which Definition?**

GC defines unreliable narrative “in terms of complex intentions attributable to an implied author”. Here GC contrasts his definition with Booth’s. (and here, remember what GC says on 201Rb, quoting Booth: “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.”

Key to GC’s argument in favor of his definition: Booth’s definition fails to cover *some of GC’s*, which shows that their definitions “**characterize different concepts**”.

Question for Breakout Groups: “What is the difference between what GC calls *unreliability1* and *unreliability2*? [clue: look at 204 righthand column, middle paragraph]

**IV Ambiguity and Unreliablity**

What makes a narrative ambiguous?

Some nonstarters:

NOT that it leaves unanswered questions (since often these are natural questions that are not ones the author of the work could plausibly be thought to have raised unavoidably *as part of the work and pursuant to where the work intentionally takes you* [e.g., *Gone with the Wind* leaves open where the relationship between Scarlet and Rhett will go after the story in the film ends, but this is not *an ambiguity* ***built into the film*** but, rather, just a natural question that we always ask about where relationships go, and need not be something the narrative *intends*).

NOT that a question is left unanswered that the narrative leads to expect *might* be answered (since this way of defining ambiguity would cover cases where the narrative not only beings at the outset to suggest a question for the audience, it can also make clear along the way that this question **will not be answered,** in which case, it would not be an ambiguous narrative.)

NOT that a question is raised but not answered due to incompetence in relating the narrative.

GC’s alternative: “when [a narrative] raises a question in the viewer’s mind which it fails to answer, and where the raising and the nonanswering seem to have been intentional.”[205Rt]

Question for Breakout Room: GC asks whether *Rashomon* is an ambiguous narrative or an unreliable narrative. How does he answer that question, and how does he defend it?

Question from the film:

Notice that all four people who confess (the dead man through the medium plus the woman, the bandit, and the woodcutter) *have mysteriously chosen to tell the truth* when they***didn’t have to*.** What explains this aspect of the story? What is the point, in your group’s opinion?

**Related question:** what does this choice suggest about the moral impression of human beings implied by this choice? Is this something that points to a difference in Japanese vs. American cultures?