

Re-investigation of Cinematic Narrator: An Analysis of Japanese Film Narratage

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This research re-questions the concept of cinematic narrator, to evaluate the understanding towards narrative cinema and its operations. Through a case study on the feature film *Narratage* (2017), this research attempts to problematize how film arranges the logic of its storytelling through narrative structure and narration, as well as how the elements of film style contribute to the narrativity of the cinema. To answer these questions, a narrative analysis based on plot segmentation and close textual reading is used to read *Narratage*. Based on the result of the analysis, it could be argued that the cinematic narrator does not only refer to the “figure of the storyteller,” but instead relates more widely with how the audiovisual enunciation is utilized to form the narrative itself.

Keywords: Narrative, Narration, Cinematic Narrator

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Introduction

It is undeniable that narrative has become the dominant form of cinema recognized today. From a simplified perspective on film history, it can also be acknowledged that at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a paradigm shift of cinema as a medium of attraction—which was later labelled by film theorists as “cinema of attraction”—to the direction of what we now know as narrative cinema. Students of cinema have also accepted this shift, by arguing that Hollywood, as the dominant force, has also participated in the establishment of the hegemony of narrative cinema in the world.

Having said that, is narrative cinema a natural progression of the development of film as a medium? Or, in other words, is it true that cinema is essentially narrative? Such essentialist questions cannot be answered simply. However, the development of the science of narrative—narratology—which took place throughout the 20th century may be able to provide several perspectives to re-examine how cinema also transforms itself into a medium of storytelling. Referring to introductory literature on narratology, the narrative tends to be defined as a “semiotic representation of a series of meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way” (Onega & Landa, 2014, p. 3). Temporal relations and causality are the keywords here because without these two things (and also without the spatial context), it is said that “narrative” cannot be formed.

Film as a moving-image medium has the advantage that with the principles of mimesis and motion, the representation of an event becomes perceptible based on temporal development, and also with a spatial depiction that appears real. As André Bazin points out, cinema, in addition to capturing the essence of reality through photographic mechanism, also captures “the image of their duration, change mummified as it were” (Bazin, 2004, p. 15). In simpler terms, it can be argued that cinema should have narrativity precisely because it already has a kind of built-in temporality. However, is narrativity—the quality or condition of presenting a narrative—universal? Or on the contrary, is narrativity medium-specific, which consequently means that cinema’s narrativity has its particular characteristics?

In an attempt to answer these questions, this research intends to re-investigate the concept of the cinematic narrator as a key figure in the transformation of cinema into a narrative form. The word “cinematic” raises the suspicion that there is something specific about cinema’s narrative operation, especially when compared to other storytelling mediums. To re-examine the concept of the cinematic narrator, we propose a case study of a narrative film text that has several characteristics suitable for discussion in the context of narratological scholarship. The film is a Japanese feature film titled *Narratage* (2017). *Narratage* is a film adaptation of a novel of the same name, which tells the story of a young woman named Izumi Kudo who recalls her complex past with a teacher she knew in high school named Takashi Hayama. Most of the film is a series of memories belonging to Izumi, which are accidentally triggered one day after a conversation with a co-worker. The film presents these memories in a series of non-linear flashbacks that mix Izumi’s point of view with the events happening to other characters around her.

To explain the narrative mechanism of *Narratage*, we will work through two research questions: (1) How does *Narratage* position the narrator in its narration?; (2) How is the narration in *Narratage* enunciated through stylistic elements in the film?

Methodology

This research is a qualitative study, which is a narrative-based textual analysis of a film text. The primary data source used is a narrative fiction feature film titled *Narratage* (2017), by director Isao Yukisada. This film was chosen because of its characteristics of having a character who narrates the story, but in the presentation of the film, a certain level of ambiguity sometimes arises that raises questions such as, “Who is telling the story?”, because the main character’s point of view clashes with the presence of other characters in the story. Its characteristic of playing with temporality, namely with non-linear storytelling techniques, is also an element that is considered to contribute to the discussion about narrativity. The film text will be examined using plot segmentation and close reading method. The results of the data description will then be compared with several related concepts obtained from literature studies on narrative and narratology, as well as the concept of the cinematic narrator itself.

Debates on Cinematic Narrator

Many opinions have been expressed about the figure of the cinematic narrator. André Gaudreault distinguishes between what he calls the underlying narrator and the delegated narrator. According to Gaudreault, the underlying narrator is the primary narrator, who works implicitly as an omnipresent agent outside the narrative that controls what happens in it; whereas, the delegated narrator is the secondary narrator, personified in the narrative (in other words, also known as the character-narrator) (2009, p. 120). Gaudreault argues that the cinematic narrator can be explained through the relationship between these two levels of narrators—one is hidden, while the other is personified. However, not all films have a personified narrator. This fact seems to encourage the idea that the position of the underlying narrator may be more important in explaining the status of the cinematic narrator. However, what or who exactly is this underlying narrator? Can the filmmaker be positioned as a cinematic narrator? Or is there a more precise explanation of the term? To further explore the concept, here is a review of literature relevant to the concept of cinematic narrator.

In an article titled “Silly Questions and Arguments for the Implicit Cinematic Narrator,” Angela Curran (2019) attempts to clarify the terminology related to narration in film, especially fiction films. A fictional film conveys a story, which is a plot, a sequence of events underlying a story, and of course, a narration, so that the story can be conveyed to the audience. Thus, generally speaking, a narrator is a character who tells a story (pp. 98-99). In the article, Curran questions the narrator in a film by comparing it to the narrator in literature. If there is an implicit narrator in literature, a character who narrates events for the reader, is there also an implicit narrator in a film? Curran establishes that even in a fictional film, there should be an implicit narrator, which functions in conveying the overall story to the audience (p. 100). In films, this narrator takes the form of a character, whether human or otherwise. Thus, the implicit narrator mediates the audience’s access to the story by using characters that are explicitly presented in the film. In addition to the implicit narrator, there is also an all-knowing narrator in the film. In this case, the narrator reports events as if they happened, but is not involved in any of them (p. 100). This statement about the implicit narrator can be said to intersect with Gaudreault’s concept of the underlying narrator.

The subject of “hidden narrator” has also been discussed by Sarah Kozloff (1988) in her book *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film*. In the book, Kozloff introduces voice-over narrator, which can be divided into several types, namely first-person narrator, embedded narrator, and frame narrator. The first-person narrator is usually a key

element in a narrative adaptation from novel to film. The first-person narrator serves a variety of functions, including recreating or referencing the narrative voice in the literary text, conveying expositional information, aiding the presentation of a complex chronology of events, influencing the audience by naturalizing the source of the narrative, and increasing identification with the characters (p. 42). Meanwhile, an embedded narrator (or, micro-narrator) has narrow access to the events in the film—for Kozloff, relatively for only about twenty-five per cent of the entire text (p. 50); whereas the frame narrator narrates from multiple points in the time and space outside the boundaries of the story (p. 51). From the frame narrator, the audience usually gets very little information about the events being narrated. Similar to Curran, Kozloff also questions whether narrative in literature can be equated with narrative in film. Here, Kozloff departs from structuralist literary theorist Gerard Genette, by taking the concept of focalization. There are two types of focalizations, namely from *within* (coming from inside the character, revealing the character's thoughts and feelings) and from *without* (looking from the outside of the character) (p. 48).

Finally, in an article entitled “Literary Origins of Cinematic Narrators”, Katherine Thomson-Jones (2007) tries to answer why there should be a narrator in film narratives, like in literature. According to Thomson-Jones, although the theoretical connections between film and literature are important, it is not correct to say that films should be like novels that always have narrators (p. 76). A narrator is a fictional agent who tells or shows a story, be it a film, novel, or drama from within the story. Thus, the narrator's job is to report and present the event to the audience. Thomson-Jones divides several types of narrators: cinematic narrators, visual narrators, and verbal narrators. Verbal narrators are voice-over narrators who introduce and explain past events in the fictional world of the film as shown on screen (p. 79). Characters who are verbal narrators are usually easier to identify. In addition, the verbal narrator can also control the sequence of images so that the audience sees what they see. The visual narrator, on the other hand, is usually involved in the performance, but not in narrating the events of the story. The visual narrator, therefore, has a smaller portion in narrating the events in the film. This could be considered the equivalent of the embedded narrator in Kozloff's terms. Furthermore, the cinematic narrator is an implicit visual narrator from within the story or from a fictional point of view. There are two conceptions of the cinematic narrator: first, as a witness to the events depicted through the camera's point of view; and second, as an agent responsible for showing the audience about the characters and events (p. 81).

***Narratage* (2017): A Case Study on Cinematic Narration**

Narratage is a film adaptation of the novel of the same name written by Rio Shimamoto. The film was released in 2017, directed by Isao Yukisada. The word “*narratage*” itself is associated with a technique used in film or television where a narrator's voice supplements the ongoing story and even gives the illusion that the story is an expansion of the narrator's words. In this particular film, the narrator is the main character, Izumi Kudo (Kasumi Arimura), a young woman who always looks melancholic every time it rains. When a work colleague guesses that she is thinking of a past love, Izumi recalls her experience of falling in love with her high school teacher Takashi Hayama (Jun Matsumoto). The film's story revolves around how Izumi has been holding feelings for Hayama (and is quite open about it)—something that she maintained even until college when she was reunited with Hayama who invited her to help with the school's drama club that is lacking members. Despite knowing Izumi's feelings, Hayama never gave Izumi a clear answer, probably because he

was entangled in his problem of being haunted by the memory of his ex-wife whom he was forced to separate from due to her suffering from a mental disorder.

Based on the narrative structure presented in the film, it can be inferred that the film uses a temporal sequence that Genette would call an analepsis containing an ellipsis, which shows the narrative movement from the present and then brings together several incidents to paradigmatically connect the past (Turim 8-9). *Narratage* opens with a present-day scene, where the main character Izumi is sitting in her office late at night. The scene depicts Izumi talking on the phone with her friend, then continues with Izumi looking at an old pocket watch and the rainy scenery outside the window. When her co-worker suddenly walks in and calls out to her, the dialogue exchange about the memory behind the watch triggers Izumi to remember her past, and that is where the series of flashbacks begin.

Through this opening scene, especially with the presence of voice-over narration that can be identified as coming from Izumi, the audience gets the impression that Izumi is the narrator of this story. According to Kozloff's classification, Izumi can be categorized as a *first-person narrator*, as the series of flashbacks that occur throughout the film are consistently produced by Izumi's voice-over. This suggests that everything shown in the film comes from Izumi's perspective as the protagonist. In other words, the audience is encouraged to identify with Izumi's character.

The conversation about "identification" here needs to be straightened out first, because in the discourse of film studies, "identification" can mean many things. In the context of narrative and narration, identification with a character is a question of how the character and the audience are positioned in the hierarchy of knowledge. By focusing the storytelling through Izumi's point of view, the assumption is that the audience is placed at the same level of knowledge as Izumi. However, since *Narratage* tells a non-linear story and a large part of the narrative is a narrative of past memories, the validity of whether the audience is placed in the same position as Izumi is highly debatable.

The term "point of view" also runs the risk of being ambiguous, especially in narrative discussions. In this regard, the question of identification is better discussed as the discussion of "focalization" (Branigan, 1992). The concept of focalization talks about how characters can be the source of narrative action, or in other words, narrative action is filtered (or focused) through characters' awareness and experience of that action. These experiences include not only objective experiences, but also subjective experiences, such as memories, dreams, or fantasies.

Looking at how the film *Narratage* structures its narrative, with an opening scene in the present time that triggers Izumi to remember her past, followed by a series of flashbacks to those memories, it can be concluded that the film is primarily focalized through Izumi. If *Narratage* is viewed as a whole, almost every scene that appears always involves Izumi. Exceptions occur only in two specific scenes, namely when Hayama discovered that his wife had burned down their house, and when Hayama met up with his father-in-law. In both scenes, Izumi is not present, but when the two scenes are linked back to their causal relationship with the events that preceded them, they are manifestations of how Izumi receives information about the two events from Hayama's focalization. In other words, in the frame of the story presented by this film, both scenes are still filtered through Izumi.

Izumi's focalization also becomes very clear when the final scene of the film is taken into consideration. The final scene of the film *Narratage* begins with an extreme close-up shot of Izumi's sleeping face slowly opening her eyes—tears can be seen falling on her cheek. The next shot is a medium close-up, which reveals that this is Izumi in the present time, still in her office shown in the opening scene. While wiping away the tears, an off-screen diegetic voice suddenly appeared saying, “Did you just dream something sad?” The question turned out to come from Izumi's co-worker who also appeared in the opening scene and asked about Izumi's old watch. Hearing that, Izumi replied, “I was reminded of the person who gave me this watch.” That line sort of confirms that what the audience has just witnessed—a series of non-linear flashbacks to Izumi's high school and college days, as well as her problems with Hayama—is a dream that comes from her memories of the past.

The first and last scenes, set in the present, are important markers of Izumi's position as the focalizer and the narrator of the story. Izumi's existence is a narrative tool in carrying out the narrative. If examined more deeply, it can also be concluded that *Narratage* as a film tends to take the form of restricted narration. How the storytelling is carried out through Izumi's focalization limits the audience's knowledge of what they are witnessing. The audience is given a fragmented amount of narrative information, as it is filtered through Izumi's memories and dreams. Therefore, the audience is encouraged to put together the pieces of the puzzle of how exactly the sequence of events led Izumi to where she is in the present on their own.

However, on the other hand, although seemingly limited because it is filtered through only one character, the narration of *Narratage* also gives more access to the character's vision or mind—a concept that can be called internal focalization. The series of flashbacks that the audience witnesses—which turn out to be Izumi's dreams—are manifestations of Izumi's internal subjectivity. As such, what the audience perceives is what Izumi personally processes. The audience has access to more of this information than any other characters who interact with Izumi. Moreover, the characters depicted in the flashbacks scenes are merely projections of Izumi's memory, so the only other character Izumi interacts with more objectively is her co-worker who asks about her old watch. If we compare the level of knowledge between these characters and the audience, the audience definitely knows more about what Izumi is going through.

Based on the explanation thus far, it can be concluded that Izumi occupies the position of character-narrator. Not only does she focalize the entire narrative, but the presence of her voice-over throughout the film also gives the audience access to her internal state in every event depicted on screen. Does this mean that Izumi is the cinematic narrator of the film? Of course, the answer is not that simple. As Gaudreault has pointed out, however, the character-narrator is only a personified secondary narrator in the film. Although the entire film is focalized from a character's point of view, there is still an underlying narrator implicitly at work in the storytelling. Thus, how does the underlying narrator actually work?

André Gaudreault argues that cinema has been equipped with antennae since its birth (1990, p. 71). However, there is debate on this point. The film history perspective, for example, suggests that narrativity does not exist in cinema naturally, as the essentialist argument says that the essence of cinema is motion and immediate presence, thus not bound to the dimension of time. According to Sean Cubitt, the concept of temporality in film only gained direction when the concept of the “cinematic cut” was invented (2014, p. 49). With the connection between shots, the audience is made to “question” more about what they see and

not just perceive the attraction. In other words, narrativity is a product of the possibility of film editing. On the other hand, according to Gaudreault, early forms of cinema are also narrative, though they may be called “micro-narrative.” He also divides narrativity into two levels, namely: *first-level narrativity*—something he calls “monstration,” or the act of showing; and, *second-level narrativity*—which emerges through editing, or in other words, the narrative is determined by the transition from one shot to the next.

Through this debate, the concept of the underlying narrator, or the hidden narrator outside the narrative, can be juxtaposed with questioning the function of the elements of film styles concerning narrative. Whatever the argument is, both tendencies emphasize that the narrativity of cinema is determined by how a cinematic technique is utilized for storytelling purposes. If we return to the discussion about the film *Narratage*, it is necessary to ask, at what point does the film signal that it is indeed a narrative film? To answer this question, the discussion must go back to the film's opening scene.

The first shot of the film begins by showing a film poster on the wall. Shortly after, there can be heard the sound of a telephone ringing. The same shot then continues with a pan-to-left camera movement, as a female voice—Izumi's voice—picks up the phone and a conversation begins between Izumi and her friend. The camera movement reveals information about where the scene takes place: an office workspace, dimly lit. The panning camera movement then starts to turn into a tracking shot when the camera's point of view has found the source of the voice—Izumi sitting behind a desk, covered by the items on the desk. The shot size is still fairly wide, and Izumi's face is not yet clearly visible. The camera then slowly approaches Izumi, as the phone conversation continues. When the sound of a baby crying is heard through the phone, the shot switches to a medium close-up and this is the point where Izumi's face is clearly seen for the first time.

Through the description above, it can be seen that the first shot connection that occurs in the film only occurs after approximately one minute of the film has passed. That duration seems short, but when perceived as a shot with slow camera movements, the audience will perceive a relatively slow tempo. The film seems to want to give information to its audience rather slowly and carefully. Does this mean that *Narratage* only becomes a narrative film when it switches from a full shot of the office space to a medium close-up of Izumi?

Referring to Sean Cubitt, who argues that the narrativity of cinema lies in its cinematic cut, the simple answer is that it is when there is a shot connection that the film transforms into a narrative. However, this consideration seems inadequate and ignores the fact that there is a specific technical choice in making the first shot of the film, namely the camera movement. The camera movement shown in the shot seems to be designed with a detailed calculation of how to reveal some initial information about what the film is actually going to tell.

There are two particular things to note about the construction of the opening shot of *Narratage*. Firstly, the shot begins with a film poster on the wall. This is certainly not an accident, but rather a choice that is based on characterization. The existence of the poster marks the importance of the subject of film in the story because Izumi (and Hayama) is going to be depicted as being fond of films—this becomes one of the motifs that will be repeated in the subsequent narrative. Thus, the placement of the film poster in the *mise-en-scène* and the fact that the camera shoots for the first time at the object, apart from providing context to the space of the scene (that the setting being shown is the office of a film company), provides a

kind of subtle planting of information to the audience about the things that the character that they will soon get to know likes.

Secondly, the panning and tracking camera movements that occur in the shot can be questioned as to their motivation. Who is the focalizer of the shot? Referring to Branigan's theory of types of focalizations, the shot can be categorized into *Objective Shots*, which are shots that are not focused on the consciousness of any character in the film's narrative. The shot has not been filtered through Izumi, because the audience does not know who Izumi is at that moment. Instead, the shot functions to introduce the audience to Izumi gradually, by combining camera movement with diegetic sound that transitions from off-screen to on-screen. However, even though the shot is unfocused on the character's consciousness, it does not mean it has no focalizer. In this case, it can be argued that the focalizer of the shot is outside of the narrative, or in other words, the filmmaker makes the creative choice to execute the technique of camera movement in that particular shot. This demonstrates Gaudreault's concept of the underlying narrator, who is outside of the narrative, but still serves as a narrative agent that determines how narrative information is conveyed to the audience.

In addition to the two considerations above, it can also be argued that the initial shot of the film is what Gaudreault referred to as first-level narrativity. The shot consists of the act of showing the space of the event, then slowly trying to reveal the character, which can be read as a monstration or the act of showing something. The term "monstration" is understood more in the context of early cinema, where film was still in its very simple form of only "showing" an event, which may not be directly equated with the shot found in *Narratage*. However, in this case, Gaudreault's opinion can be enriched by considering another element of film style, namely sound.

The first shot of *Narratage*, if perceived only in its visual capacity, i.e., focusing only on the camera movement, does seem like it is only an act of showing something. However, the shot is also accompanied by sound elements, namely the sound effect of the telephone ringing, as well as Izumi's voice transitioning from off-screen to on-screen position. There is also dialogue that has relevance in explaining Izumi's characterization, even though the audience is not yet familiar with her.

The combination of the visual form of the shot and the aural elements that are also contained in it triggers curiosity in the minds of the audience about who is talking, what is happening, and how the story will continue. In other words, the narrativity of cinema, apart from being determined by the presence of narrators—both hidden and personified—is also determined by the interaction between the narrative agent and the audience. Warren Buckland, in his discussion of film narrative, emphasizes that the key to a film's narration is how the spectator is placed in relation to the action and the narrative agent (2020, p. 62).

Through the examples found in the film, it can be seen how cinematic narration is not only dependent on the concept of the narrator as a storyteller, but is also very much related to the reading of the technical choices of film style. This corresponds with Katherine Thomson-Jones' two conceptions of the cinematic narrator: as a witness to events through the camera's point of view, and as an image-maker. Narration occurs through the combination of camera shots and how they are syntagmatically combined in the logic of editing, and is complemented by elements of film sound, such as speech, music, and sound effects.

Conclusion

Through the analysis and discussion of the narration and the operation of stylistic elements in the film *Narratage*, the theoretical conversation regarding the concept of the cinematic narrator has been reopened. In the previous sections, the researcher quoted Angela Curran as saying that the narrator is not a real person, so the narrator cannot be implied as a filmmaker. After considering this issue by examining the film, the researcher felt the need to criticize Curran's statement.

Cinematic narration is essentially about selecting and reorganizing narrative actions and placing them in the context of time and space. This does not only mean that narration is there to organize the narrative, but also that narration has the function of revealing or concealing information from the audience. With a character acting within a narrative, and having the capacity to limit the narrative, as can be seen in the case of Izumi in *Narratage*, it seems that the concept of the narrator will always refer to the character's position. No matter how objective a film's narrative is, the presence of a character will determine focalization.

However, cinema is not the same as any other storytelling medium, especially with written literature. Cinema has its own set of technical elements, which enunciate in specific ways, resulting in specific expressions. As the film *Narratage* has shown, decisions related to the stylistic elements of the film—camera placement and movement, *mise-en-scène*, the joining of the shots, as well as the sound elements—produce marks of the act of storytelling that contribute to how the film's narration is constructed. Perhaps this is what Gaudreault means by the term “underlying narrator,” that the logic of a film's audiovisual language can ultimately design a specific process of manipulating narrative information that orientates the story to the audience.

If we agree with Curran that the cinematic narrator is not a human being, then the argument stops there. However, what or who can make choices about a film's technical and aesthetic elements, if not the filmmaker themselves? Admittedly, the term “filmmaker” may not refer to a human figure, but rather an abstract figure that represents creativity, but reducing the cinematic narrator to a non-human figure seems unproductive in trying to re-evaluate the narrative capabilities of cinema.

Through the case study of the film *Narratage*, the researcher would like to suggest that the concept of a cinematic narrator actually refers to the entire interaction in the cinematic process itself, including the figure who makes creative decisions, the possibility of a narrator at the textual level who is personified in the form of a character, and the creative choices in telling stories through audiovisual elements. If we dare to extend this argument, we can also consider Peter Verstraten's suggestion that narrative input can also come from the audience, as long as they interpret it as such (2009, p. 14). In other words, perhaps the sentiment of Seymour Chatman and André Gaudreault is true, that cinema is indeed meant to tell stories.

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