

Proposal for a short paper at the SCSMI 2017

Title

Voice-over narration and subjectivity in serial television drama. An exploration of narratorial functions, subjective access, and narrative engagement.

Abstract

Over the last decades, an increasing number of serial television comedies and dramas have relied on voice-over narration as a dominant element in their narrative logic (e.g., *My So-Called Life*, *Scrubs*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Dexter*, *House of Cards*, *Mr Robot*). A closer look at the voice-over commentaries in *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-13) and *Mr Robot* (USA network, 2015-) suggests that they create a very subjective and ambiguous level of narration that crucially shapes our engagement with these shows.

In the past, voice-over narration in moving images has been discussed mainly under a structuralist perspective, focusing on the status of the speaker in the ontological structure of a given narrative (see Kozloff 1988 for the most prominent discussion). However, the voice-over commentaries in *Dexter*, *Mr Robot* and possibly other shows are difficult to pin down in this framework. Realized in the first person and through the voices of the characters, they are clearly homodiegetic, but their overall status in the narrative remains ambiguous since they seem to oscillate between a range of different narrative functions: They exhibit backstory information (like a classical narrator), but also verbalize characters' subjective responses to particular experiences in a highly idiosyncratic way (which suggests a more immediate representation of character thought). As a performative element, *Dexter*'s witty comments seem to address an implicit narratee, while Elliot Alderson's voice in *Mr Robot* explicitly addresses the viewer in the second person, as his imaginary friend. But in contrast to many embedded narrators in classical Hollywood cinema, the on-screen characters are never introduced as frame narrators that talk to a specified, "surrogate" audience within the represented world (cf. Kozloff 1988, 50). According to our first intuition, then, the voice-over commentaries in *Dexter* and *Mr Robot* create a rather ambiguous blend of narratorial devices and subjective access points to the minds of the central characters.

Our paper explores how these voice-over statements may be analyzed within a cognitive framework, where the audiovisual narrative provides cues for the mental (re-)construction of a storyworld by the audience. As its central element, this mental model includes a character experiencing the events (e.g., see Herman 2009). On this basis, we ask how voice-over commentaries affect our conceptual and emotional engagement during the process of narrative comprehension. Drawing on work by Jens Eder and Murray Smith, we assume this centrally involves our mental access, imaginary proximity (Eder 2010), and sympathetic allegiance (Smith 1995) to and with the central character.

Furthermore, we assume that the interpretation of voice-over statements draws mainly on two types of generalized knowledge and mental architecture. Firstly, we assume that voice-over statements may cue communicative situation models. As Sarah Kozloff has shown, frame narratives in classical Hollywood cinema often establish confessional settings with "audience surrogates," e.g., a courtroom with a jury (Kozloff 1988, 50). Although the status of voice overs in television remains much more ambiguous, their interpretation may involve the activation (or priming) of similar communication models. Secondly, we ask how voice-over statements relate to the specific story situation represented on the screen. Cognitive narratology suggests that relevant story events involve a character's emotional reaction to incidents that disrupt "normalcy" (Hogan 2011). In this regard, we ask how voice-over statements contribute to our understanding of emotional episodes, or whether they highlight other dimensions of narrative meaning-making.

In our talk, we further evaluate the literature on subjectivity and engagement to flesh out an analytical framework that explores possible theoretical categories of voice-over in serial television. In close readings of *Dexter* and *Mr Robot*, we will then explore how different types of voice-over statements contribute to an understanding of the narrating character's subjective mental perspective and thus influence our conceptual and emotional engagement with the unfolding narrative.

As a first working hypothesis, voice-over narration in serial television often seems to create a somewhat paradoxical situation, creating an imaginary proximity to and sympathetic allegiance with the central characters, but at the expense of increasing the distance to the represented world and the character's social environment. For example, *Dexter*'s ironic voice-over commentaries often suggest his emotional detachment from the immediate moment, while Elliot Alderson's statements in *Mr Robot* explicitly point to the factual unreliability of what we are seeing. This suggests a less immediate engagement with canonical emotion episodes on the micro-structural level of narrative comprehension, in favor of a closer allegiance at a higher level of comprehension, focusing on the characters' conscious elaboration on their experiences, actions, and perspectives on the world.

References

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Keywords

subjectivity
character allegiance
viewer engagement
cognitive narratology
serial television

Short Abstract

Our paper explores how voice-over statements in recent serial television dramas like *Dexter* and *Mr Robot* may be analyzed within a cognitive framework, asking how voice-over commentaries affect our conceptual and emotional engagement with a character's subjective experience of the unfolding events. In contrast to voice-over narration in classical Hollywood cinema (as described by Sarah Kozloff), we assume that voice-over statements in contemporary television create rather ambiguous blends of traditional narratorial devices and subjective access points to the minds of the central characters, and explore how this affects our perspective on the represented world.