



Review Article

The Mind's Eye: Focalization in Postmodern Films

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Abstract

This paper explores a key mechanism by which the audience is connected to character in contemporary film, namely through the narrative action of focalization. Focalization is the process by which we see from a character's perspective. Interestingly, there has been a trend in contemporary filmmaking that makes the technical process of focalization a feature point of the plot. That is, the films that I want to analyze do not just use focalization, but are explicitly focused about focalization. In the film *Being John Malkovich* (1999), the characters place themselves into someone else's body and interact with others to find out more about themselves. As the characters enter someone else, the audience views this "outer" character, yet the "inner" character is acting and thinking for them. The action of plot comes to revolve around the consequences of this inner/outer dynamic. Using this process, the audience can gain an understanding of the characters and how they interact with their "outer" and "inner" body. We will explore how this process works in some representative "postmodern" films and what this move to make formal narrative elements like focalization the substance or content of the narrative has to say about film and society.

Keywords: Focalization, Narratology, Empathy, Movies

When going to a movie, the audience typically focuses into a film that they are drawn to through different and various aspects. A question to ask is what draws people to watch movies in our society? One of the popular reasons is to see how specific characters develop throughout the course of the film. An important idea that the audience zeroes in on is that of character empathy, or the ability to connect to the character or group of characters on an emotional level. Movies try to connect to the audience at a more personal level by speaking to them at an emotional level. This idea of character empathy is developed through the use of focalization and how it helps the audience connect with the characters. The concept of focalization can be defined as the process by which the audience sees from within a character's perspective. I am going to explore how the process of focalization and the overlying theme of character empathy is represented in postmodern films, what these ideas have on the postmodern film industry as well as exploring focalization by which the viewers are connected to characters in contemporary

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films, namely through the narrative action of focalization through the 1999 movie *Being John Malkovich*.

One way that we, as an audience, can feel sympathetic towards the characters is through the setting in which the character is in as well as the musical score that is played around them. When the audience is involved with the character and how they interact with one another, we tend to experience the same emotions that they have when something happens on screen. If the character is emotional, the audience tends to feel the same way. This ability to connect with the audience gives them the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding as to what is going on in the film. The movie industry also gives hints as to how the audience should feel at specific moments. For example, when a character is upset, the weather outside may be dark, dreary, and ominous. The actions on screen can affect the mood of not just the characters in the movie, but also the audience as well. Not only is their attitude affected by depression, the music that is chosen to go along with what the character is feeling is also in a depression mood. The music is typically played in a melancholy way, allowing the audience to feel that what the character is feeling at that particular moment. When the audience hears the music and sees the character acting depressed, one can speculate that the character is reflecting on their past actions, what the consequences are that lead them to this point, and what they can do to make the situation better. Yet along the way, they receive some sort of motivation to push themselves past their sadness in order to achieve their ultimate goal.

While the soundtrack and setting of a movie are able to connect the audience to the characters at a sentimental level, the idea of focalization connects us at the cognitive level. With character empathy as the overlying idea in terms of how the audience connects to a character, this connection is brought about through the concept of focalization. Focalization is defined as the perspective to understand and see what others see through someone else's point of view when a character enters into someone else's body, either physically or mentally. The difference between the concept of focalization and visual narratology is that visual narratology is the study of the narrative technique in film and focalization allows the audience to enter into another characters' body and find out what he or she is thinking. The concept of focalization has been around for many years, but the term "focalization" is more of a postmodern term. Although narratologists have started to use the idea of focalization, the term only became popular recently, thanks to the help and research of people like Noël Carroll and Gerard Genette.

More postmodern films are starting to use the idea of focalization in order to help the audience connect with a character at a more personal level. While this idea is still new for both narratologists and audiences alike, the use of focalization has been limited because these concepts have not been used often. In Horstkotte's article titled "Seeing or Speaking: Visual Narratology and Focalization, Literature to Film," the author argues about the amount of time cinematic focalizer is placed in films:

"While a significant amount of research has been done on cinematic narrators, less attention has been paid to the possibility of a cinematic focalizer. This is surprising because focalization, through its basis in the notion of perspective, is closely associated with matters of vision. It would therefore seem a much more promising starting point for film narratology than narration, a concept originating with linguistic codes."

The "cinematic focalizer" the author is talking about can only work on some films genres. Certain films can use focalization to their advantage, like *Being John Malkovich*, which surrounds the entire movie on the idea of focalization. With the amount of success it has in order to move the story plot along and how it connects to the audience, movie goers are given a better understanding of what is going on in the movie. Just like character empathy does in these films, focalization also draws the audience into what is being shown on the screen.

This concept of focalization can help the audience understand what is happening in the film. In Noël Carroll's article "Toward a Theory of Point-of-View Editing: Communication, Emotion, and the Movies," the author talks about two concepts that she created when talking about focalization in films. The first concept is that the idea of focalization succeeds as an instrument of representation due to its exploration of human tendencies to follow their specific targets. Second, the point-of-view editing communicates emotions due to facial recognition. Carroll argues that focalization only works if it follows their specific targets and goes according to a specific plan. Just like in the film *Being John Malkovich*, there is a set plan that the movie follows in order to tell the story of how characters enter into the mind of John Malkovich. Her first theory states that the concept of point-of-view succeeds because humans need to be engaged with the film to understand what is happening. If the audience is not engaged with the film and the characters that are in it, then the concepts of focalization and empathy falls through the cracks and won't live up to the expectations of the critics. Humans tend to follow specific characters in movies, the author points out. If the audience is engaged in the storyline and the character that they see, the audience would react positively in understanding what the character is acting or feeling. The second point Carroll brings up is that the point-of-view communicates emotions through facial recognition. In *Being John Malkovich*, the audience is able to connect to the main characters like Craig and Maxine, based on the fact that they have seen their faces many times. This concept of facial recognition allows the audience to connect with the characters that are being shown to them. Once the audience is engaged in the film, they seem to connect their own feelings to the characters. With the idea of focalization, Carroll's theory helps the viewer understand how the audience can connect with the characters. If they see the character on a regular basis, the audience can start to piece together what is happening with the characters and are able to draw a parallel to the same things that may be happening in their lives.

Focalization does not "appear" in films, but rather, it's happening throughout the movie. One of the many times that this happens is towards the beginning of the movie where a relatively sad man decides that he wants to improve his life by entering in the body of one John Malkovich. After paying \$200 that Maxine and Craig asks for, the sad man crawls into a hole, slowly enters it, and is sucked into the body and mind of Malkovich. The sad man is baffled and confused as to what just happened and tries to quickly grasp what he is seeing, hearing, and feeling inside this new body that he has entered. After about 15 minutes, he is thrown out of John Malkovich's body and into a ditch on the side of a busy freeway. This is one of the few times that the audience witnesses a character "entering" into Malkovich's body. The audience begins the journey of understanding who John Malkovich is as a character through the few times the audience enters his body.

The concept that the film is trying to portray is to set up focalization early on in the film so that when they need to harken back to it, the audience will have some understanding as to what is going on. Just like Carroll states, the key for focalization to work is to use it in the beginning and often as well as having the audience connect to the characters. The first time Craig enters the body of Malkovich, the audience starts to understand where the movie is heading towards. The understanding that Craig will enter into Malkovich multiple times gives the audience someone that they can connect to on an emotional level. They become intrigued as to what is going to happen with the new portal that Craig has discovered. The movie draws the audience in and by doing so, the audience wants to know more with what is happening in the film. When Craig enters the body of Malkovich, there is the possibility for turning the process of focalization into an element of the plot itself. The concept of focalization can be seen in William Nelles article titled "Getting Focalization into Focus", in which he states that "in Genette's theory...there is an insistence that *somebody* always 'sees' the story." The concept of

focalization that both Carroll and Genette are stating is that whenever a character enters into someone else's body, one character is always there to see the story. Meaning, the character is also a part of the story, regardless of whether he or she is in someone else's body or not. The characters in *Being John Malkovich* are a part of the overall story of being able to live and be John Malkovich even if they are not in the body.

When the audience can enter the mind of John Malkovich, it gives them the ability to understand the character in not only a psychological level (as to what he is thinking and seeing) but also through an emotional level. The way that the film shows the audience that they are inside the mind of Malkovich is that it does not show what is going on around him, but only shows the audience what he is seeing by using the camera as his eyes. To hear what the character is hearing while inside of Malkovich's body, the movie cuts out all of the audible noise that surrounds Malkovich and turns the focus to the voices in his head and what he is thinking. This gives the audience the ability to see only what he is seeing and hear the thoughts that are going on in his mind at that time. In Els Andringa's article titled "Effects of Focalization in Film", she talks about how films are using focalization to connect with the audience: "In most cases, the character is the focalizer, the camera revealing to the audience what the character sees, feels, thinks or remembers." In movies, we can enter the characters minds through different ways, but one avenue we try to understand what a character thinks is by actually getting into the heads of the characters through camera angles. Specific camera angles help the viewer understand what is going on. Through the work of the camera, the audience begins to understand how and why the character is acting a certain way by the way the camera angles are being shot. In a sense, this movie is what some people desire, which is the ability to go into a person's mind and see the world as they would.

Another question that can arise from the concept of focalization is defining what identity is when focalization occurs. The concept that focalization can destroy the concept of a specific characters' identity can hurt the overall development of the character. In Scott Repass's article, "Being John Malkovich", he brings up the concept of what is identity if one enters into someone else's body. "The big question the film raises is, if you can simply pass through a door, enter someone else's body, and take over his life, what constitutes identity? As the body itself is no longer a reliable means of identification, it has become entirely objectified." When a character enters into someone else's body, the identity of both characters becomes skewed because they audience could become confused as to who is talking at a particular moment. The character that enters into the other person's body is no longer identifiable as a person that can act by him or herself, as in the case in *Being John Malkovich*. In the movie, when the main character enters into someone else's body, his or her identity and their personality become morphed into the person that he or she is entering. Not only is the person who enters into his or her body lose their identity, the identity of the person that he or she enters is also lost. When the focalizing character enters into the body of someone else, the "host" body loses their identity as he or she is going to be controlled by the person inside of them. Since the body is no longer a means of identifying who a character is in the movie, they become objectified as a character. Once the character exits the body of the focalizer, they may be seen in a different light by the audience as they may be confused if they are seeing the character as a person or if they see the character as still part of the focalization process. The audience then cannot connect with the character as much as they normally would because they would be too confused to understand what is happening.

This idea of focalization and character empathy is starting to be used more often in the movie industry. Films itself are giving their viewers an in-depth look into a character's mind in order for them to connect with them on screen. This idea is becoming highly popular and more postmodern films are using this technique at a higher rate. Letting the audience enter the mind

of the characters allows the audiences to gain a deeper respect as to how the characters are feeling at specific moments of the film. It also gives movies a new outlet to connect characters to audience that may draw them in. Thinking in this context offers the films the opportunity to expand how they can forward the plot of their film and how they can connect with their viewing audience in a new and different way. Focalization helps us gain an understanding of what's going on in a movie, which helps the audience understand empathy better. It forges an empathetic connection between the onscreen characters and the viewers. Instead of just watching movies for entertainment purposes, viewers can start to make their own interpretations of what is happening in the movie. Through focalization, the audience can better connect with what is going on in the movie and therefore enhance their movie going experience.

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