Subjectivity in Film as a Result of a First-person, Homodiegetic Narrator and How it Affects the Audience's Perception Object Reality in Film.

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Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technology in candidacy for the BA (Hons) Degree in (Animation DL832)

Submitted March 21st 2022

Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to those who have supported me in writing this thesis and aiding me through my degree. I am grateful for the opportunity provided to me by the institution to engage in this research and to my tutors of the IADT Animation department for equipping me with the academic tools required.

I am forever thankful to my friends and family who have supported me through my degree and learning over these past four years. It is unimaginable to think of the heights I would not have achieved without their support. I am truly appreciative of every moment of love, laughter and encouragement given to me so freely by these people. I would sincerely like to thank my parents for their financial, emotional, and loving support and unwavering certainty in me that I am capable to achieve.

I would like to thank my tutor, Thomas Kennedy, for the guidance throughout my research and for the consistent reminders that “it will get written.” I wholly appreciated his enthusiasm for my topic and his eager participation in discussing my writing was immensely encouraging and completely invaluable to my thesis research and completion.

Sincerely, I could not have achieved this thesis without everyone’s unique support and I am truly indebted to you all.

Abstract

In this study, I would like to examine subjectivity in film as an inherent vice in cinema when using a first-person, homodiegetic narrator and also subjectivity as an intentional narrative tool in the telling of a story. I would like to investigate subjectivity when it is at the forefront of a narrative, a key component to the telling of the prose, but moreover, when subjectivity is hidden within the narrator's own recounts, concealed by their own perspectives and perception. I want to highlight the relationship between external viewers and narrators on-screen and how they interact with their storytelling, particularly contrasting between their relationship before and after their subjectivity is revealed to the audience and how they perceive them to be reliable or unreliable. Finally, I wish to examine the invisible relationship and covert contact the audience shares with the filmmaker throughout the films' presentation and how that impacts how the audience regards the homodiegetic narrator.

I will be discussing the inherent subjectivity as seen through Lynne Ramsey's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and the filmmaker's intentional use of subjectivity in Mary Harron's *American Psycho* and David Fincher's *Fight Club.*

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INTRODUCTION

"Narrators are no more inherently knowledgeable, and consequently powerful, than any other kind of narrator- but also no less. However overt or covert, all narration requires knowledge, reveals biases, connotes power."[1]

The aim of this essay is to explore the relationship between first-person, homodiegetic narrators' inherent subjectivity and the audience's perception of object reality in film. The concepts of human perception and limitation, and external, authorial interference are central to my study into subjective cinema and storytelling. This paper investigates the factors involved with these concepts which determine the multitude of ways subjectivity can be purposefully or unwittingly introduced into film and text. Three films will be examined, all of which contain first-person, homodiegetic narrators but each will be examined under different conditions to reveal their subjectivity.

When examining the potential of subjectivity when a story is told through a homodiegetic narrator, the audience must also consider; if the narrating character plays an active role in deliberately distorting the narrative; narrators who are aware of their deception. Perhaps, a narrator who unintentionally, delivers a narrative completely untethered to reality, unbeknownst to themselves or indeed the audience. As it may be, either, a narrator, just by being of human construct, liable to human emotions and perception, can only provide a subjective discourse. Due to practical constraints, this paper cannot provide a comprehensive review of every model of subjective or unreliable narrators. In considering this, I have chosen to omit narrators who purposefully lie to deceive the characters that populate their diegeses and audience in favour of unsuspecting and involuntarily unreliable narrators.

This paper begins by indicating the manner in which to read and understand the role of a homodiegetic narrator in film in order to recognise the influence these narrators possess over the overall interpretation of the text. It also aims to distinguish between subjectivity as a narrative device and also as a psychological process. Using the insights established in chapter one, the paper will then go on to further delve into the innate subjectivity as a result of human limitation in an interpretative approach to Lynne Ramsey's We Need to Talk About Kevin. Here the paper explores

[1] Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers*. University Of California Press, 1988. Pg.98

how an audience may battle to find objectivity when a text is overpowered with human perspective and bias. Finally, the paper examines subjectivity as created through authorial manipulation and the audience's pre-existing trust in on-screen images to be truth-telling devices. It explores how a filmmaker may choose to obscure objectivity for an audience as means to further their own exploration into subjectivity using Mary Harron's American Psycho (2000) and David Fincher's Fight Club (1999).

CHAPTER 1:

The Role of a Homodiegetic Narrator.

Subjectivity can be introduced deliberately in a text by a filmmaker as a means to purposefully distort the audience's sense of objectivity, as an intentional ploy to mislead the spectator or obscure the text. Although, subjectivity can surface, unintentionally, as a psychological understanding of the human condition by using human narrators.

"In fiction, as soon as we encounter an 'I,' we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experience will come between us and the event"[2]

An inherent consequence of adopting a first-person, homodiegetic character as the storyteller in any text is that, as an innate, unavoidable effect, as the story is filtered through the narrating character, is that of perception. It remains entirely unattainable for the filmmaker or author to provide an unbiased, uncoloured, objective articulation of events when delivered this way and an attempt to otherwise correct this is futile. "The ordinarily unreliable narrator, whose world view, predispositions, ignorance, or absentmindedness determine in some way what he or she notices, and how he or she interprets certain situation… [t]o some degree, all narrators, like all human beings, fall into this category"[3] When a homodiegetic narrator relays their account of an event it is important that the external viewer understands the narrator's own subjectivity, that how that narrating character may perceive an event different to that of another, who carries their own predispositions and understandings. "Perception, however, is a psychological process, strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body."[4]

In the film Rashoman (1950), directed by Akira Kurosawa, Kurosawa explores this idea of the inherent bias and infeasibility of objectivity when one encounters first-person, homodiegetic narrators. He explores and reveals to the audience the complexity of human consciousness and perception and how that affects the text and delivery of a story. He employs four different narrators to recount the same event and hypothesises how each narrator would provide different versions and reports despite all four members being present at the same event. How he shows the subjectivity of their accounts in an obvious and observable way to the audience by using this method of storytelling. By emphasising the varying backgrounds and particularly, the varying motives of all

[2] Booth, Wayne C. *A rhetoric of irony*. University of Chicago Press, 1974. Pg. 151-152
[3] *The Dynamics of Narrative Form: Studies in Anglo-American Narratology*, edited by John Pier, De Gruyter, Inc., 2005. Pg.61
[4] Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to The Theory Of Narrative*. University Of Toronto Press, 2009. Pg.100

four narrators, the audience can see how each narrator deliberately misinterprets the event in order to fit their own perception of the event and indeed their perception of themselves. What is so significant in showing four different accounts of the same event, is that it shows how paramount it is to understand that each character has their own agency and influence, separate from an objective filmmaker.

> "The single most crucial factor in our acceptance of the prose is that the film emphasizes the character's claim to be telling the story"[5]

An essential part of employing a homodiegetic, first-person narrator to tell a story is that first, the author/filmmaker ensures the correct conditions are created to fully immerse the character in the diegesis.[6] It is important that the audience believes the narrator to be completely involved with, and indeed an active participant in, the story they are relating. It is important for the filmmaker to facilitate an environment where the audience believes the narrator to be the singular storytelling voice so that the author remains invisible to the viewer and the narrator steps into their stead. How this can be achieved is through the "willing suspension of disbelief."[7]

The term was coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria*. He proposes that this term can be used to describe how an audience engages in an acceptance of prose where ordinarily they would throw doubt over or entirely dismiss in reality;[8] such as the existence of magic or witches, for example. They are willing to buy into these matters in being of reality for the duration of the material presented before them. This can be described as a voluntary act in which the viewer or reader chooses to believe in something which they know to be untrue or false. "The reason for this is simple: in fantasy and science fiction narratives, when animals speak or time and space warp, the spectator does not struggle to understand these events but rather accepts them as conventions of the genre."[9]

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[5] Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers*. University Of California Press, 1988. Pg.45
[6] Ibid. Pg.45
[7] Tomko, Michael. *Beyond the Willing Suspension of Disbelief: Poetic Faith from Coleridge to Tolkien*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015. Pg.3
[8] Ibid. Pg.1
[9] Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*, Berghahn Books, Incorporated, 2014. Pg.60

While ultimately the audience knows of the reality of an author or filmmaker, who created the narrative piece, by constructing the conditions in which an audience can engage in their willingness to suspend their disbelief, it lends to the acceptance of the narrator being the sole voice and the true chronicler of the narrative piece. By accepting this, the viewers "put our faith in the voice as not created but creator."[10] Under the conditions for this belief to be accepted and maintained, it requires the subject of belief to be grounded in reality; it needs a "standard of probability or coherence within the work."[11] It must remain probable within the norms of the work that, in the eyes of the spectator, the narrator continues to be the true, incontestable narrator of the story. Kozloff, in understanding this, asserts that "according to the canons of plausibility, credible first-person narrators must be bound by human limitations. Such narrators should only be humanly wise, know only their own thoughts and feelings and be constricted in time and space to their own experiences and surroundings."[12] For the viewer to accept the character's claim to be telling the story, to suspend their disbelief, the narrator must simulate the conditions based on reality.

Granting this, homodiegetic first-person narrators cannot be omniscient if we are to accept their accounts of events to be seen through them and coloured by their perspective. We cannot give credence to the narrator to be telling the story if they have boundless access to knowledge outside their own involvement and participation in the story. We cannot truly believe them to be genuine, integrated narrators of the story if information is gifted to them through some higher power, i.e. the filmmaker. It is imperative that the audience believes the narrator to be fully immersed in this diegesis.

Kozloff, again, emphasises the importance of the fictitious narrator being seen by the audience as not just an usher of the discourse nor a narrative tool by means to facilitate the verbalisation of the narrative events but to accept it as an equal part of the fictitious dialogue. It is necessary that the audience recognises the narrator as not just a vessel in which to deliver a story or impartial body through which the story is told but is an equal component to the overall diegesis and integral to the

[10] Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers*. University Of California Press, 1988. Pg.45
[11] Tomko, Michael. *Beyond the Willing Suspension of Disbelief: Poetic Faith from Coleridge to Tolkien*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015. Pg4
[12] Ibid. Pg.98

intended reading of the story as presented by the filmmaker. The narrator is integral to our perception of the text.[13]

In film, often third-person narration presents itself as a purely visual embodiment, the pictures on the screen act as the only narrative device, with no personified voiceover narration. This offers the audience an impartial view of the events unfolding on screen and allows audiences to draw their own conclusions and interpretations without having to consider the innate subjectivity of the personified first-person narrator. The reliability of third-person narrative boils down to the fact that it has no narrating person.[14]

However, with the notion that a homodiegetic, first-person narrator is equally a part of the narrative construct as are the events recounted by them, I think it is reasonable to assume the narrator is as legitimate to scrutinize as the actual instances they give an account of. First-person narrators, because they are more inclined to emulate the experience of an individual, it allows for the exploration of human subjectivity as events are filtered through the perception and understanding of these narrating characters. It is not as easy to disregard the influence and importance a narrator has on the interpretation of a text and to ignore the intentional use of this kind of narrator is to ignore the considered attempt to play with the audience's sense of subject and objectivity in film.

Genette expresses the same idea in Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method. We can begin to see how a narrator might taint our perspective of the story being told with subjectivity through internal factors such as their perception, personality, pre-existing biases etc. He defines narration as "not the event that is recounted but the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself."[15] If we view narration through this lens, we can more fully understand the effect narration has on the viewer's experience and perception of the text. By accepting the narrator as human creator, who is caged to human experience, we can begin to question the reliability of the narrator and examine how much that has been presented to us can we as the audience believe to be

[13] Ibid. Pg.45
[14] *The Dynamics of Narrative Form: Studies in Anglo-American Narratology*, edited by John Pier, De Gruyter, Inc., 2005. Pg. 70
[15] Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press, 2021, Pg. 27

true. I believe there to be no true objective storytelling and for subjectivity to be practically unavoidable when considering the role of our narrator in this way.

CHAPTER 2:

The Inherent Subjectivity in We Need to Talk About Kevin.

Immediately, a homodiegetic narrator, just by being both narrator and narrated, throws doubt over the objectivity of a text. A homodiegetic narrator, therefore, is telling their own story, something they experienced and were part of. This distinction is important because the narrative is presented through the perspective of a narrator that experienced the same event they are speaking on. This introduces subjectivity in the narrative when taking into consideration the potential human consciousness has on the impartiality of the discourse. Accepting that narration adds an undeniable bias to a diegesis, we can really begin to examine how or why this bias occurs.

Edward Branigan states that there are six major forms of subjectivity: reflection, POV, perception, projection, flashback, and mental process. These six forms can fit into the three variables he establishes that facilitate these forms of subjectivity: time, frame, and mind.[16]

One phenomenon that occurs through first-person, homodiegetic narration is one of the experiencing-self versus the narrating-self. Bakhtin explains this as "If I relate (or write about) an event that has just happened to me, then I as the teller (or writer) of this event am already outside the time and space in which the event occurred."[17] In acknowledging this we can begin to see just how unavoidable subjectivity is, particularly when recounting an event involving the previous, experiencing self. The inescapable passage of time means that, for the homodiegetic narrator, any retelling of an event they provide is presented as a memory. "If I relate an event that has just happened to me, then I as the teller of this event am already outside the time and space in which the event occurred."[18]

The narrator that we encounter in Lynne Ramsay's, We Need to Talk About Kevin, is Eva Khatchadourian (Tilda Swinton). Eva is the mother of Kevin (Ezra Miller), a teenager, who has been incarcerated for planning and perpetrating a school shooting, in which he kills nine of his classmates, and for carrying out the murder of his father and younger sister on the same night. We follow Eva, two years post-shooting, still grieving the tragedy of her son's act, coupled with the immense loss of her husband, Franklin (John C. Reilly), and her daughter, Celia. She also wrestles with a different kind

[16] Branigan, Edward. *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film*, De Gruyter, Inc., 1984. Pg 79.
[17] Bakhtin, M.M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. C. Emerson, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press. 1984. n.pag.
[18] Bray, Joe. *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2003. Pg. 17

of grief and guilt as the mother of a killer, wondering if she was responsible for how Kevin turned out and in turn how culpable she is, herself, in the school shooting and murder of Kevin's victims.

We follow Eva through two different storylines, one of the experiencing self, and one of the narrating self. These two storylines comprise of the memories leading up to the event of the shooting and the other being the post-event life that is Eva's narrative present. The audience sees Eva struggling in the wake of her son's terrible action, ostracised by the community, as she tries to continue with daily life. Her present-day is filled with guilt, loneliness, and strife. We see the current, present-day struggle Eva must endure; red paint thrown over her home and car, eggs smashed in the carton by another mother at the supermarket, harassment from her new co-worker. Eva tends to spend a lot of time dissociating from her reality and consistently finds herself reliving her past, perhaps to escape her inner and external torment.

(Fig.1)

"In a first-person narrative, the narrating self can thus never completely hand over the narrative to the past, experiencing self, the two must remain yoked."[19] As Eva brings the viewer on a trip through her memories, the audience must recognise that what we are seeing is not an objective account of past events but, in fact, Eva's interpretation of said events and the unreliable nature of these events being a memory of her past, experiencing self. The audience must understand that "the narrating

[19] Ibid. Pg.27

self can never completely merge with the experiencing self"[20] This means that any information presented on screen to the external viewer about the past is completely coloured by the act of remembering after a passage of time. "Such narrators should only be humanly wise, know only their own thoughts and feelings and be constricted in time and space to their own experiences and surroundings."[21] Granting this, it means that Eva, bound by human limitations, is vulnerable to misremembering events previous to her narrating self.

The viewer only sees the moments leading up to the shooting, the moments of Kevin's childhood, the relationships between all the members of Eva's household through Eva's memories. These memories can only be tainted by subjectivity and provide no frame of objectivity to the viewer. This can be especially highlighted because neither the audience, nor Eva, is granted any verification of Eva's version or perspective of events nor any contradicting account to refute Eva's narration. The emotions of the experiencing self are shaped and transformed by an articulate narrating self. As a result of allowing distance between Eva's experiencing self and her narrating self, she has allowed time for reflection and invites scrutiny on the question subjectivity of her accounts when allowed time for the formulation of opinions and conclusions of his observations of the events. Particularly, in Eva's case, she engages with an "increased concentration on past thought and feeling"[22] as she so often looks to the past and thus the audience cannot expect subjectivity with so much time having elapsed and strewn with analysis.

The mental condition of a character, the mind[23], as put forth by Brannigan, is another element of representation that can help determine subjectivity. Notably, trauma influences how Eva sees the past and it influences what she selects to remember.[24] She meticulously combs through her memories of Kevin in what seems to be an attempt to make sense of the series of events that could somehow provide an explanation for the crimes enacted by her son. Recognising the passage of time as an influencing factor of Eva's unreliability is not enough as the audience must examine Eva's perception of her son, particularly in the wake of her son's heinous act. Eva, inescapable of her knowledge of this act, looks back to times when this pattern of behaviour in Kevin is more explicit.

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[20] Ibid. Pg.60
[21] Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers*. University Of California Press, 1988. Pg.98
[22] Bray, Joe. *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2003. Pg. 62
[23] Branigan, Edward. *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film*, De Gruyter, Inc., 1984.
[24] Mairi Louw, Bronwen. *Trauma, Healing, Mourning and Narrative Voice in The Epistolary Mode*, Stellenbosch University, 2015.

Eva looks back on events that she believes to give a glimpse of her son's true nature, events that could potentially flag the inherent badness in her son and the inevitable villainy of his deed. Eva recounts Kevin's behaviour towards her growing up in the form of a personal vendetta against her, almost as though his delinquency was motivated by his seeming hatred for his mother.

She recalls a memory of Kevin in his childhood where he questions his mother why she has so many maps of different countries pinned up on the wall of her study. Eva, before becoming a stay-at-home mother, was a travel journalist by occupation and regarded this room and her maps with great fondness and they were one of few sources of reverie for her. Eva also regarded this room as a kind of memorial she comes to, to mourn her past life, pre-Kevin. Kevin's interest in why this room seems to provide his mother with a few moments of joy proves detrimental. When Eva returns next to this room, after what she thought to be a genuine moment of interest and curiosity, she realises Kevin's deceit and the true intentions of his questions and sees every map destroyed in paint.

(Fig.2)

Another memory she looks back on once again shows Eva to be the direct target of his wrongdoings when she looks back on the time Celia's hamster was missing. While Celia is distraught to find her hamster missing from its cage, it becomes clear that Kevin's motivating factor was not to enjoy his sister's distress but to incriminate his mother. Kevin hides the hamster in the garbage disposal, unharmed and unbeknownst to Eva, she gives up the search in favour of cleaning up and switches on the disposal. It is only then, after seeing the evidence and exchanging a knowing glance with her son

does Eva piece together the organised set-up for her to pull the trigger on the hamster's death so that fault and responsibility land on her. It is not enough for his mother to kill the hamster; it is essential for Kevin that she understands she was the real target of his torment, not his sister, Celia.

(Fig.3)

"Such a voice's relation of events will be clouded by the effect of the events itself. Since Eva is writing this after Thursday, all her recollections are tainted with the knowledge of what she knows Kevin will become. Shrieking baby Kevin, for instance, is thus no mere difficult baby but the spiteful baby who will become a killer. This slanted perspective infuses every episode and adds to the inevitable untrustworthiness of Eva's retelling"[25]

These memories could potentially be corrupted by Eva's desperation to explain her son's crimes.[26] How she interpreted the memories of Kevin's childhood and the memory of her relationship with Kevin, could conceivably be a direct result of the trauma she experienced from Kevin's shooting. However, Eva is validated in her experiences with her son through the act of the shooting and murder of her family as it becomes undeniable that her son was capable of these atrocities and the lesser offences, he subjected his mother to growing up. Kevin's conviction provides the viewer with the certain knowledge that Kevin committed these acts and this gives an objective frame in which

[25] Mairi Louw, Bronwen. *Trauma, Healing, Mourning and Narrative Voice in The Epistolary Mode*, Stellenbosch University, 2015. Pg.77
[26] Ibid. Pg. 76

the audience is invited to form their own opinions about the veracity of Eva's accounts of his childhood and can measure their opinion against this objective frame.

Eva can never capture the whole truth of what happened on the night her husband and her daughter are killed by Kevin with his bow and arrow and is thus left to hypothesize and piece together what potentially went down during their murder. Eva is left to speculate, which also leaves the audience in the dark and the viewer is left to draw their own opinions off Eva's imagined account of the event which leaves the viewer without any form of objectivity. As mentioned previously, our narrator cannot be omniscient if the audience is to believe them to be the true teller of the story; as Eva was not present at the event, the audience cannot expect an objective account of the murders.

Eva does not divulge the information that her husband and daughter are dead until the penultimate scene near the end of the film. The audience knows that they are not around because we follow Eva, present day, as she struggles post-shooting. The audience is left to consider the possibilities of where they may be, possibly assuming Eva and her husband may be estranged and separated in the wake of the event and Celia in living with her father. When Eva reveals the truth of their deaths, the viewer may wonder what other knowledge Eva is omitting, therefore creating distrust in the relationship between the narrator, Eva, and the viewer, about whether the viewer can trust what is being recounted at all and, as a result, informing the audience about the subjectivity of Eva's narration. Phelan suggests that the crux of unreliability in storytelling is that "unreliability is not so much a character trait of a narrator as it is an interpretive strategy of the reader."[27]

Eva being the sole narrator controls the audience's perception of Kevin, she has full authority of the narrative, and the viewer is left without another voice to inform our image of him, or to perhaps provide external context to these abnormal behaviours that Eva may be blind to. Eva's perspective is clouded by her experiences of her son and therefore, the audience cannot rely on her interpretation of Kevin to be one that is undeniably grounded in truth, devoid of subjectivity as the viewer is not given an objective framework in which to view Kevin. The audience is, however, given the opportunity to see Kevin as a model child in how he interacts with Eva's husband, Franklin. Eva and Franklin have contradictory experiences of their son; Eva endures the cruel and callous character of

[27] *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan, and Peter J. Rabinowitz, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2005. Pg.95

their son while, Franklin's experiences his son to be a lively, happy child. Any time we see Eva try to express concern or discontentment with their son's behaviour she is met with resistance from Franklin who denies any offence and refuses to entertain Eva's claims to be suffering at the hands of their son. However, despite Franklin's contradicting view of their son, this does not provide the viewer with an added observation of Kevin because what the audience is, in fact, being relayed is Eva's own biased perspective of Kevin and Franklin's relationship. The audience cannot assume Franklin's true feelings and perception are known objectively to Eva, we only get a subjective view of their relationship filtered through Eva's predisposition and preconceived idea of their relationship.

Undoubtedly, the framing of the narrative through the perception and point of view of a diegetic character throws bias onto the text, whether purposefully or unwittingly. The passage of time allotted for misremembrance between the narrating and experiencing self and time for reflection corrupts any viable objectivity in the discourse. Finally, the mental process allowing for the narrator to perceive an event incorrectly due to outside influence, or perhaps their own difficulty in contextualising their experience all amounts to an inherent subjectivity in first-person narration. These factors, when present in a narrative, render the film or story to be interpretively rich and up to the individual viewer's own reading of the narrative. How a viewer interprets a work is just as valid as what the author intended.

CHAPTER 3:

The Image's Role of Objectivity in Film.

On a more overt level, we can see how a homodiegetic narrator is much more susceptible to becoming unreliable or limited, in the eyes of the audience, to provide them with an objective narrative when we compare and contrast their narration to the images presented on screen. There is a convention in film that images tell the truth, that images on-screen provide an objective frame in which to judge a narrator's account against. The belief in this idea can be strengthened when we consider the likelihood of distrusting a narrator's word to be true when the images directly linked with their account show the opposite, compared to the unlikelihood of distrusting the scenic presentation in favour of believing a homodiegetic narrator.[28] By exploring this suggestion, we can begin to understand how images influence the viewer's sense of object reality in film.

Our narrator, Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale), in the film American Psycho, is one such narrator that completely taints the narrative with subjectivity as we see everything through his eyes and the workings of his mind. Bateman is a young, affluent Wall Street banker who is completely immersed in corporate America and yuppie culture which can be characterised by youth, wealth, and corporate success. He is obsessive in all aspects of life; where he eats, what he eats, what the company he's keeping eats, and he has a meticulous and rigorous hygiene and workout routine to maintain his idea of an immaculate physical appearance. He is incredibly fastidious when it comes to pleasing himself and others pleasing him. The audience follows Bateman through his everyday routine involving his career and social life but also we, the viewer, are privy to another side of Bateman's life, secret to all those who know him, in which he engages with his homicidal behaviour.

(Fig.4)

[28] Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers*. University Of California Press, 1988. Pg.115

As the audience, we do not fully grasp that we are seeing the world as Bateman sees it in his head as and as through his eyes until near the end. While the viewer may consider this earlier and indeed throughout the film it is not until Bateman's further descent into his derangement does it become much clearer. The filmmaker and director, Mary Harron, plays with the audience's sense of objectivity throughout the film. She always leaves room for an alternate interpretation or solution to the question of subjectivity when it arises, particularly, early in the film. This kind of potential explanation that Harron offers the audience is notably evident in the mystery of Paul Allen.

There are two mysteries that surround Paul Allen, the first being the disappearance of Paul Allen and the subsequent investigation. The second being the actual identity of Allen being shrouded in doubt and confusion. Regarding the first, the audience follows our protagonist and narrator, Patrick Bateman, as he joins Allen (Jared Leto) for dinner and then as he invites him up to his apartment. It is here that Bateman brutally murders Allen and wraps up his body. In the scenes that follow we see Bateman transporting the body for disposal and then buys himself some time by setting a false message on Allen's answering machine claiming he's gone to London for a while. As the viewers, we have no reason to believe this to be in any way a fabrication, we believe in the images presented to us that Bateman did, in fact, kill Paul Allen.

Concerning the second, there is a common theme of mistaken identity throughout this narrative, it is a constant reality that the men in this film are continually incorrectly addressed by their co-workers, their peers, their staff etc. Due to this invariable truth that these men have consistently misidentified each other, it leaves room for reasonable doubt that the Paul Allen that Bateman had dinner with and killed is not in actuality Paul Allen but a man by a different name entirely. This provides an alternative explanation than just simply believing the murder was a product of Bateman's delusion. This idea can be sustained by the fact that Bateman himself has been called Paul Allen, amongst others, and mistaken for a Markus Halberstam by Allen. Later, the detective investigating our narrator relays that the Allen that Bateman went to dinner with was actually a Herbert Ainsworth and that Allen had been spotted in London. Another way Harron supports this as a way of inviting subjectivity surrounding Allen's identity is when, gathered around a table, showing off their new business cards, Allen's face is the only one not shown in tandem with the presentation of his card; it is hidden behind the card, blurred and out of focus. This is no doubt a way the filmmaker ensures the audience is influenced only by Bateman's own understanding and gives us no objective view of Allen's identity.

"It is thus unclear whether unreliability is primarily a matter of misrepresenting the events or facts of the story or whether it results from the narrator's deficient understanding, dubious judgments, or flawed interpretations."[29]

(Fig.5)

Harron exploits the trust the viewer has in images to be a truth-telling device as a way to invite even more subjectivity into the film. In the penultimate scene the audience follows Bateman as he spirals further into his delusion, this arguably marks the point where the viewer begins to question our narrator and what has been shown to us on screen. Booth describes a narrator to be reliable if they "act within the norms of the work"[30] meaning that, even if the external viewer is engaging with a suspension of disbelief, if the character or indeed the images on-screen are deemed by the viewer to be outside the norms of the work- to not befitting with the rules and systems established by the prose- we question the reliability of the narrator telling us the story. When we see Bateman interacting with the ATM, the question of his delusion is finally asked in a more demanding way. We see the ATM's screen instruct Bateman to "feed (it) a stray cat," followed by his attempt to do as such. The audience understands that what we see displayed on the ATM is not true to reality, there

[29] *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan, and Peter J. Rabinowitz, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2005. Pg.96
[30] Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. University Of Chicago Press, 1974.

is no indication that ATMs work differently in this world than that of our own and because of this, it is acting outside the norms of the work as a whole and therefore, we understand that what we are seeing is a product of his delusion. “Unreliability is an effect that most readers intuitively recognise.”[31]

(Fig.6)

It makes accessible to the audience the idea that they have the licence to question what they have been told when presented in this obvious, observable way on screen. The question of subjectivity rises somewhat closer to the surface of the narrative and becomes less of a philosophical study and more of a call to action in understanding the unreliability of our narrator and to question our trust in the overall narrative. “if he is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed”[32] While his erratic behaviour is enough to break our trust in him, Harron further emphasises this breach in trust by using images as a narrative strategy to compromise her narrator. Harron breaks the barrier of immersion in this film in order to reveal her narrator’s lack of objectivity. We see Bateman involved in a shoot-out with two policemen and when his small gun results in a major explosion, we are to understand that a gun that size could not possibly cause an

[31] *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan, and Peter J. Rabinowitz, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2005. Pg.91
[32] Booth, Wayne C. *A rhetoric of irony*. University of Chicago Press, 1974. Pg.158

explosion that large. Bateman himself takes the time to regard the gun with a look of confusion and disbelief. By choosing the images on screen to corroborate with the inner workings of Bateman's mind and his perception of events it has served as a clever exposé of his subjectivity. "We know that we cannot accept the narrator's statements at face value, and yet we do not know where to set our feet… the audience becomes acutely aware that someone else, someone wiser— the image-maker— is actually presenting both the story and the purported storyteller."[33]

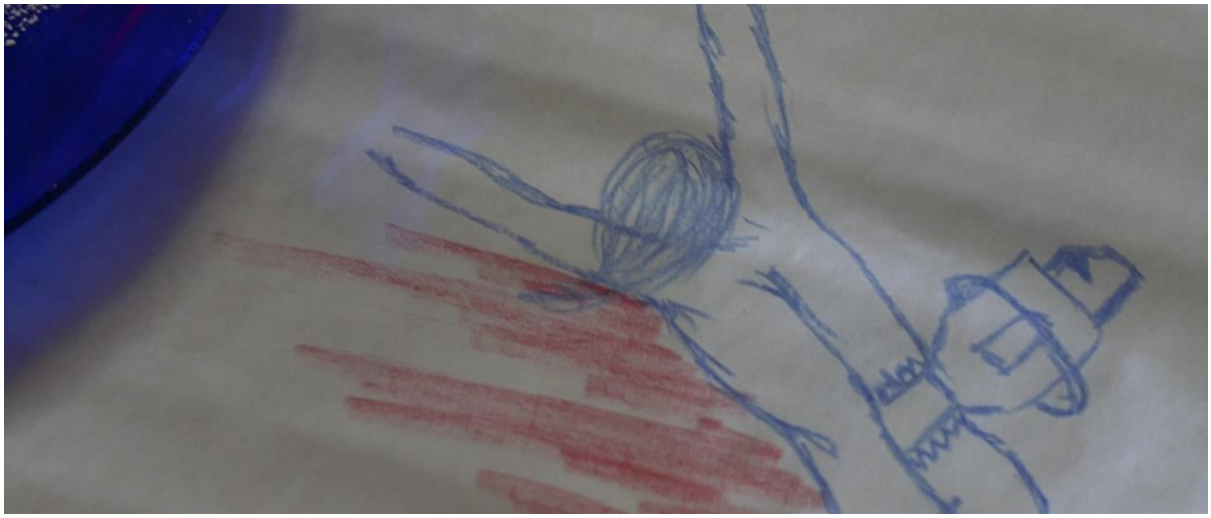
(Fig.7)

This can be seen as a divergence from the tactic that can be employed by a filmmaker when intending to play with their narrator's fallibility and their audience's trust in the narrator to provide an objective account. By creating a disparity between the narrator's accounts and the images presented on screen, the filmmaker creates a credibility gap wherein lies the audience "We, as an audience, are more likely to question the integrity or neutrality of narrators when we compare their retelling against the images presented on screen by the filmmaker."[34] However, the alternate approach of images endorsing the narrator results in the same desired outcome, to reveal the narrator's subjectivity. It challenges the view that "film narratives required a constant return to

[33] Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers*. University Of California Press, 1988. Pg.117
[34] Ibid. Pg.47

objective presentation for a better understanding of internal gazes that occur in the text"[35] and that this can be achieved with greater nuance.

"The first-person narrator, as a (fictional) character or subject, invites the question whether he/she is subjective and hence unreliable, whether the data and views conveyed by him/her… are to be credited."[36] Throughout American Psycho, the audience never gets a clear answer to the question of subjectivity. We can never truly separate what is Bateman's fantasy/delusion or what is based in truth. Even the question of murder is clouded with ambiguity. While the viewer sees Bateman engage in the act of killing women and we see images of the aftermath: bodies in the closet, head in the fridge etc. we do not tend to question the reality of this. However, there is room to speculate the reality of these murders. Bateman pursues one victim through the halls of his apartment complex with a chainsaw, we see her scream in fear, pounding on neighbouring apartments, coupled with the loud roar of the chainsaw, which eventually ends resulting in her death. Why this may be seen as purely fantasy and based in Bateman's head is the following scene which shows him at lunch engrossed in drawing the picture of his victim's death on a napkin. While it's wholly possible this was Bateman's way of reliving the night before, one may argue he was engaged in a daydream or fantasy involving this image he may have conjured up which could be supported by the fact that during the chase sequence no other person in the entire complex appeared to have heard the noise of the chainsaw or screams of the woman, nor did anyone come across this scene unfolding.



(Fig.8)

[35] Onega, Susana, and José Angel García Landa. *Narratology: an introduction*. Routledge, 2014. Pg.225
[36] *The Dynamics of Narrative Form: Studies in Anglo-American Narratology*, edited by John Pier, De Gruyter, Inc., 2005. Pg.67

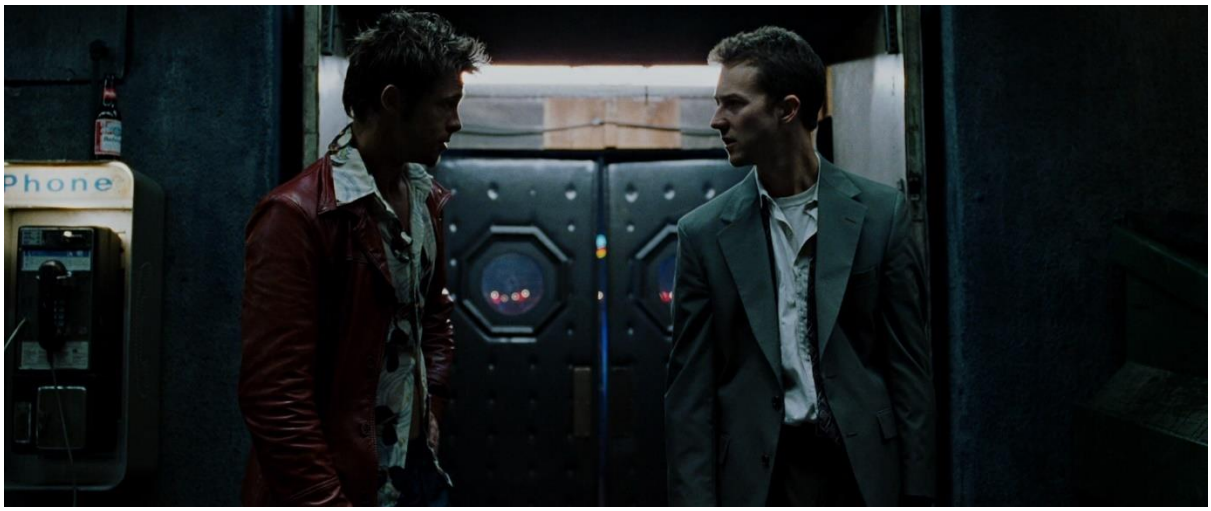
Furthermore, this idea can be defended in the final scenes of the film. After Bateman's hasty confession on the phone to his lawyer, amidst the peak of his derangement, he meets with him the next day just to discover that not only does his lawyer not believe the confession, citing how "hilarious" the message was, but he also provides reasoning as to how Bateman's confession is "impossible." His narration remains uncredited and unsupported by both the scenic presentation and indeed the other diegetic characters in this film. "Sometimes it is almost impossible to infer whether or to what degree a narrator is fallible; sometimes explicit corroborating or conflicting testimony makes the inference easy."[37] Bateman does not ever, at any given point, receive any outside confirmation or rebuttal of his lived reality.

In comparison, the film *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) houses a similar first-person narrator, one who loses his grasp on reality as explored by the filmmaker through the narrator's mental instability. The viewer follows the narrator (Edward Norton) as he finds his outlook and life in total upheaval after the discovery of his burnt-out apartment and follows the new relationship formed between the narrator and acquaintance, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt.) It is revealed in a "twist" near the end of the film that the narrator was suffering from a dissociative delusion, and it is uncovered by the narrator that Tyler was, in fact, the narrator himself and not a separate body.

The filmmaker employs a narrative strategy to fool the audience into trusting in the narrator's accounts by exploiting the trust the viewer has with onscreen images to be objective truth-tellers. Fincher consistently validates the narrator's accounts through the scenic presentation in order to convince the audience of the narrator's integrity and reliability. This is unlike the approach in American Psycho, while the images on-screen match Bateman's perception of reality, the viewer is invited to question the objectivity through subtle hints through the filmmaker's interference in the narrator's account. "The effects we turn to now require a secret communion of the author and reader behind the narrator's back."[38] Where Fight Club diverges from this is Fincher ensures that the external viewer is just as much in the dark as his narrator. He protects the illusion of the narrator's reliability and objectivity by ensuring both the narrator and the viewer share the same reality. How Fincher facilitated this was by presenting images on-screen as through the eyes of the narrator. There was never a moment before the reveal in which the narrator and Tyler connected or merged into one, they never shared the same experiences that would give a reason for the audience to

[37] Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. University Of Chicago Press, 1974. Pg.160
[38] Ibid. Pg.300

question their separate autonomy. The narrator was always experiencing Tyler in a physical, tangible way, never communicating with him in a way that would suggest he was a product of his own mind. This deliberate distortion of the truth by the filmmaker coupled with the unintentional deception from our narrator equals a double effect in the narrative that establishes the spectator's faith in being presented an objective account.



(Fig.9)

While both films' unreliable narration stems from their respective narrator's deteriorating psyches, unlike Fight Club, American Psycho offers its audience no objective frame throughout the entire narrative. The audience never finds reprieve from Bateman's subjectivity simply because Bateman himself never grasps a sense of objectivity; he never experiences that catharsis. The spectator, experiencing the story through a first-person homodiegetic narrator, can only ever truly understand reality as the narrator does. However, objectivity is offered to the viewer of Fight Club as the narrator eventually experiences lucidity when the filmmaker reveals the aforementioned twist of Tyler Durden to both the narrator and the external viewer simultaneously. Fight Club achieves its twist by "restricting the narration so that the spectator shares the limited (and pathological) perspective of the narrator."[39]

[39] Campora, Matthew. *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception*, Berghahn Books, Incorporated, 2014. Pg.61

In Fight Club, what is true and what is a product of delusion is readily explainable through the images on-screen. After the revelation of Tyler Durden, the film quickly cycles through a replay of earlier scenes, only this time they are corrected to reflect the true happenings of the accounts, removing the narrator's perspective, and giving a visual objective frame from a removed image-maker. This leaves the audience with no doubt as to what is reality and what had been tainted with subjectivity. American Psycho denies such an overt explanation, leaving it up to the individual viewer to glean their own understanding which reveals how influential the image's role in objectivity is to the viewer's understanding of the text.

"The idea of blissful communication between the viewer and some untouched, untainted reality presented by a completely neutral mechanism is an illusion."[40]

[40] Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers*. University Of California Press, 1988. Pg.14

CONCLUSION

"Perception depends on so many factors that striving for objectivity is pointless."[41]

The study was designed to determine the effect of first-person, homodiegetic narrators on subjectivity in film and the audience's subsequent perception of object reality as a result.

The investigation into subjectivity in film has shown that subjectivity is inevitable when encountering a first-person narrator. The human consciousness exists in these perceiving characters and the audience can ever only truly understand what the character understands unless surreptitiously shown otherwise by an omniscient filmmaker. The study contributes to our understanding of images, as seen and trusted by external viewers to represent a certain truth, and to provide an object frame in which to constantly refer back to; as tools to be used at the disposal of a filmmaker to either engage in a secret commune with audiences or to deceive them into believing in a false reality.

The major limitation of this study is that it lacks the defining parameters of what makes a text objective and of course, what makes a character reliable. Booth defines a narrator to be reliable when acting within the norms of the work, but this is something that is not easily determined and lacks clarity overall. Pier suggests that an objective frame can be found within third-person narration, arguing it lacks a narrating character and "the reader, knowing that s/he is dealing with fiction, basically takes that what (the narrated world) for granted: s/he does not wonder about the veracity of what is narrated, but approaches it directly as a meaningful construct." [42]

In spite of its limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the influence our first-person homodiegetic narrators have on our understanding of the text and just how intrinsic they are to our perception of the discourse. In understanding the biases, perceptions, and delusions of these characters to be integral to the intended reading of the film, we understand these characters to be a

[41] Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to The Theory Of Narrative*. University Of Toronto Press, 2009. Pg.100
[42] *The Dynamics of Narrative Form: Studies in Anglo-American Narratology*, edited by John Pier, De Gruyter, Inc., 2005. Pg.66

fundamental component that these stories would ultimately be lacking if their biases and predispositions were to be removed.

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