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Unreliable and Discordant Film Narration

The article aims to clarify literary and film-theoretic notions of unreliable narration by detaching a narrow, rhetorically specific subcategory, *discordant narration* (DN), from the wide range of mimetic and normative narrative anomalies the term ›unreliable‹ has come to cover in the course of its conceptual history. While a frequent if not the paradigmatic form of literary unreliability, DN occurs only rarely in a film-specific way because its complex rhetorical layout does not easily merge with the medial peculiarities of film. Since the few cases where it nonetheless does are not considered unreliable in film studies, one has to conclude that film-theory has only adopted certain areas within the wide literary notion, excluding what is at least one of its most characteristic and most prevalent materializations in literature. Comparing their rhetorical structures, however, DN and what is considered unreliable in film studies, appear to be almost completely distinct. Hence it seems questionable in how far film-theoretic notions of unreliability can be based on literary theory, or if the two notions should better be treated

separately. By answering the latter question positively the article also calls for a precision of the wide literary notion of unreliability.

Section 2 introduces a newly defined notion of discordant narration in contrast to the general literary notion of unreliability. DN conforms to what is called an ironic *sermocinatio* viz. *conceptual irony* in rhetoric. Whereas mere irony is marked, simply speaking, by a contradiction between what is said and what is meant, DN involves two contrarian notions of what is *meant* in uttering one and the same discourse. An illustrative case of this is Forrest Gump's verbal narration in the film named after him. Forrest Gump sincerely means what he says (and no more) but in the mouth of the extra-fictional producer, responsible for the composition of the film's fictional content and hence also for what Gump narrates, these words create another incompatible meaning and let the recipient in on aspects of the story that go unnoticed by Gump.

The specific requirement of such a DN is that the discourse deemed discordant can be ascribed to different utterers or, more generally speaking, producers. This requirement is fulfilled by the verbal narration in *Forrest Gump* but not by the film as a whole. Section 3 states the difference between discordant (verbal) narration *in* film and discordant film narration and briefly refers to the fictitious propagandistic TV-programmes inserted in Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* as an example for the latter. These programmes not only display objectionable events but display them in an objectionable way that can be traced back to the fictitious producers of a fictitious television report. Hence we can find the same ironical distance between fictitious and real producers of these TV-programmes that characterizes the discordant verbal narration in *Forrest Gump*.

In section 4 the prerequisite for such an ironical distance is set forth in more general terms as a *production fiction*. Applying Peirce's type/token distinction to filmic discourses, one can theoretically account for the fact that the moving images of an actual film, playing in a cinema or on our DVD-players, are sometimes considered as being produced within the fiction, either by a fictitious film crew – as shown in section 5 – or within the perception, memory or imagination of a character – as is argued in section 6. Although the first option provides ideal conditions for DN, according constructions are rare and apparently completely neglected by film-theoretic studies to unreliability. Such studies mostly concentrate on the second option, attributing unreliability most commonly to films that feature sequences which later turn out to arise from a more or less troubled mind. However, as shown with a classic example of such films, Ron Howard's *A Beautiful Mind*, the sequences in question do not essentially refute themselves, due to the rhetoric double-structure specific of DN, but mainly through correction on a superior level of narration. Judging the narrative conduct on this level requires some adjustments however, which are discussed in section 7. When not applied to a fictitious entity but an extra-fictional producer, everyday notions of narrative normalcy have to be replaced by fiction- and art-specific constraints, making it very hard to distinguish

violations of such norms and hence unreliability from regular genre-specific narrative strategies, e.g. the suspenseful structures of thrillers and criminal stories. The article concludes that in the transfer from literary to film theory the notion of unreliability suffered a loss of its already low accuracy that can and should be compensated for by reverting to a more finely tuned typology including, besides unreliability and DN, such notions as *false plants*, *false alarms*, *red herrings*, *hanging ends*, *blind motives*, *fakes* and *hoaxes*.

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- A Beautiful Mind*, US 2001, dir. Ron Howard
- The Big Lebowski*, US/UK 1998, dir. Joel Coen
- The Blair Witch Project*, US 1999, dir. Daniel Myrick/Eduardo Sanchez
- Carnival of Souls*, US 1962, dir. Herk Harvey
- Cloverfield*, US 2008, dir. Matt Reeves
- David Holzman's Diary*, US 1967, dir. Jim McBride
- Les diaboliques*, FR 1955, dir. Henri-Georges Clouzot
- Dumb & Dumber*, US 1994, dir. Peter Farelly
- Forrest Gump*, US 1994, dir. Robert Zemeckis
- From Dusk Till Dawn*, US 1996, dir. Robert Rodriguez
- Goldrush*, US 1925, dir. Charles Chaplin
- Inland Empire*, FR/PL/US 2006, dir. David Lynch
- Keine Lieder über Liebe*, DE 2005, dir. Lars Kraume
- The Lady in the Lake*, US 1947, dir. Robert Montgomery
- Le locataire*, FR 1976, dir. Roman Polanski
- Lord of War*, FR/US 2005, dir. Andrew Niccol
- The Machinist*, ES 2004, dir. Brad Anderson
- The Man Who Wasn't There*, US/UK 2001, dir. Joel Coen
- Matchstick Men*, US 2003, dir. Ridley Scott
- La mort en direct*, FR/BRD/UK 1980, dir. Bertrand Tavernier
- La nuit américaine*, FR/IT 1973, dir. François Truffaut
- The Others*, US/ES/FR/IT 2001, dir. Alejandro Amenábar
- Psycho*, US 1960, dir. Alfred Hitchcock
- Secret Window*, US 2004, dir. David Koepp
- The Shining*, UK/US 1980, dir. Stanley Kubrick

The Sixth Sense, US 1999, dir. M. Night Shyamalan
Spider, CA/UK 2002, dir. David Cronenberg
Stage Fright, UK 1950, dir. Alfred Hitchcock
Starship Troopers, US 1997, dir. Paul Verhoeven
Thank You for Smoking, US 2005, dir. Jason Reitman
Trois couleurs: Rouge, FR/CH/PL 1994, dir. Krzysztof Kieślowski
The Usual Suspects, US 1995, dir. Bryan Singer
Vanilla Sky, US 2001, dir. Cameron Crowe
The Village, US 2004, dir. M. Night Shyamalan
[●REC], ES 2007, dir. Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza

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