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The Implied Fictional Narrator (Abstract)

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The role of the narrator in fiction has recently received renewed interest from scholars in philosophical aesthetics and narratology. Many of the contributions criticise how the term is used – both outside of narrative literature as well as within the field of fictional narrative literature. The central part of the attacks has been the ubiquity of fictional narrators, see e.g. Kania (2005), and pan-narrator theories have been dismissed, e.g. by Köppe and Stühling (2011). Yet, the fictional narrator has been a decisive tool within literary narratology for many years, in particular during the heyday of classical literary narratology. For scholars like Genette (1988) and Cohn (1999), the category of the fictional narrator was at the centre of theoretical debates about the demarcation of fiction and non-fiction. Arguably, theorising about the fictional narrator necessitates theorising about fiction in general. From this, it follows that any account on which the fictional narrator is built ideally would be a theory of fiction compatible with all types of fictional narrative media – not just narrative fiction like novels and short stories.

In this vein, this paper applies a transmedial approach to the question of fictional narrators in different media based on the transmedial theory of fiction in terms of make-believe by Kendall Walton (1990). Although the article shares roughly the same theoretical point of departure as Köppe and Stühling, that is, an analytical-philosophical theory of fiction as make-believe, it offers a diametrically different solution. Building on the distinction between direct and indirect fictional truths as developed by Kendall Walton in his seminal theory of fiction as make-believe (1990), this paper proposes the fictional presence of a narrator in all fictional narratives. Importantly, ›presence‹ in terms of being part of a work of fiction needs to be understood as exactly that: *fictional* presence, meaning that the question of what counts as a fictional truth is of great importance. Here, the distinction between direct and indirect fictional truths is crucial since not every fictional narrative – not even every literary fictional narrative – makes it directly fictionally true that it is narrated. To exemplify: not every novel begins with words like »Call me Ishmael«, i.e., stating direct fictional truths about its narrator. Indirect, implied fictional truths can also be part of the generation of the fictional truth of a fictional narrator. Therefore, the paper argues that every fictional narrative makes it (at least indirectly) fictionally true that it is narrated.

More specifically, the argument is made that any theory of fictional narrative that accepts fictional narrators in some cases (as e.g. suggested by proponents of the so-called optional narrator theory, such as Currie [2010]), has to accept fictional narrators in all cases of fictional narratives. The only other option is to remove the category of fictional narrators altogether. Since the category of the fictional narrator has proved to be extremely useful in the history of narratology, such removal would be unfortunate, however. Instead, a solution is suggested that emphasizes the active role of recipients in the generation of fictional truths, and in particular in the generation of implied fictional truths.

Once the narratological category of the fictional narrator is understood in terms of fictional truth, the methodological consequences can be fully grasped: without the generation of fictional

truths in a game of make-believe, there are no fictional narratives – and no fictional narrators. The fictionality of narratives depends entirely on the fact that they are used as props in a game of make-believe. If they are not used in this manner, they are nothing but black dots on paper, the oxidation of silver through light, or any other technical description of artefacts containing representations. Fictional narrators are always based on fictional truths, they are the result of a game of make-believe, and hence the only evidence for a fictional narrator is always merely fictional. If it is impossible to imagine that the fictional work is narrated, then the work is not a narrative.

In the first part of the paper, common arguments for and against the fictional narrator are discussed, such as the analytical, realist, transmedial, and the so-called evidence argument; in addition, unreliable narration in fictional film will be an important part in the defence of the ubiquitous fictional narrator in fictional narrative. If the category of unreliable narration relies on the interplay of both author, narration, and reader, the question of unreliable narration within narrative fiction that is not traditionally verbal, such as fiction films, becomes highly problematic. Based on Walton's theory of make-believe, part two of the paper presents a number of reasons why at least implied fictional narrators are necessary for the definition of fictional narrative in different media and discusses the methodological consequences of this theoretical choice.

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