

Invisible Storytellers

VOICE-OVER NARRATION IN AMERICAN FICTION FILM

SARAH KOZLOFF



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**Voice-Over Narration in
American Fiction Film**

Sarah Kozloff

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*To my brother, Daniel Kozloff,
who used to read me stories
and take me to movies*

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Introduction

“Let me tell you a story,” each narrative film seems to offer silently as its opening frames hit the screen: “It all started this way . . .”

Behind every film we sense a narrating “voice,” a master-of-ceremonies figure that presents and controls the text. But in many cases we also hear from off-screen a human voice—a man, woman, or child who explicitly narrates all or part of the story we are about to witness. In Howard Hawks’s *Red River* (1948), an unseen voice (Walter Brennan) remarks:

You see, the story of the Red River D. started this way. Along about August of 1851 Tom Dunson and me left St. Louie and joined a wagon train headed for Californy. After about three weeks on the trail we was to the northern border of Texas . . .

This prototypical “old-timer” speaks to us as if we were huddled around a campfire on a lonely prairie, not a flickering screen in our neighborhood theater.

Cinematic storytelling is one of the youngest, most technologically dependent, and most expensive modes of narration; oral storytelling, the most ancient, fundamental, and widely accessible. In films with voice-over narration the older form has been superimposed on top of the newer. “Narrated” films are hybrids—almost implying a mixture of centuries and cultures—half-retrograde, half-pathbreaking, half-dissembling, half-forthright, they call upon the viewer to assume complex, if not contradictory, positions. Adding voice-over narration to a film creates a fascinating dance between pose and actuality, word and image, narration and drama, voice and “voice.”

Voice-over narration has been a major element of cinema since the thirties; it is so very common that it probably passes the average moviegoer unnoticed. In keeping with the neglect and abhorrence of film sound in general, for too long scholars and critics have also either overlooked the technique or, influenced by various prejudices, dismissed it out of hand. This study seeks to prove that these prejudices are ill-founded and endeavors to remedy this long neglect by tracing the technique's historical development and by analyzing its subtleties, especially its capacity for creating intimacy and sophisticated irony.

In the course of this analysis I draw on the paradigms of recent narrative theorists such as Wayne Booth, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, Roland Barthes, and Gérard Genette, syncretically applying whichever concepts are most relevant to filmic narration in general and voice-over in particular. For the most part, film scholars have heretofore made rather limited use of narrative theory;¹ by the same token, although narrative theorists often make broad claims about the applicability of their discoveries to narrative as a trans-media phenomenon, they habitually and almost exclusively draw their examples from literary texts.² By applying "literary" narrative theory to film, I hope both to further our understanding of cinematic narrative's specific characteristics and to test the universality of several key tenets of contemporary critical lore.

I have focused my research on American and British narrative feature films, primarily Hollywood products. Since this field extends over nearly sixty years of sound-film history and encompasses thousands of movies, it is already impractically large, yet even these boundaries exclude important texts from direct consideration. Thus, although documentaries both preceded fiction films in their use of voice-over and influenced fictional practices, I shall only touch upon a few; documentaries deserve a full-length study of their own, a study that would take full cognizance of their fluid intermixture of narration with exposition, argumentation, instruction, and poetry. Similarly, while I refer to particularly ground-breaking films by foreign directors, it was patently impossible to cover the use of narration by every national cinema. Besides, the French New Wave and Latin American (or avant-garde) filmmakers often use narration to comment upon or subvert Hollywood patterns, and my priority has been to delineate the dominant American tradition. One of the things we shall see is that although certain formats do recur, far from creating some monolithic "classic" mold, Hollywood films themselves reveal an infinite variety of uses of narration, from the staid to the downright quirky.

Before we can look at any film, however, we need a precise definition of voice-over narration. The term has often been used quite loosely; such casualness can lead to confusion and inaccuracy.

Bascially, in "voice-over narration" all three words are fully operative. *Voice* determines the medium: we must hear someone speaking. Obviously,

instances of narration via printed titles or captions do not count; less obviously, one must also separate out all those cases where a text dives directly into a flashback or dream sequence without a framework of overlapping oral statements. Although voice-over narration is often used to couch flashbacks as a character's memory, the question of subjectivity in film—what Bruce Kawin calls “mindscreen”³—is a larger and somewhat separate issue.

Over pertains to the relationship between the source of the sound and the images on the screen: the viewer does not see the person who is speaking at the time of hearing his or her voice. Narrating asides to the camera (as in John Huston's *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* [1972]), and those cases when a character does all of his or her narrating on-screen (as in Max Ophuls' *La Ronde* [1950]), certainly count as oral narration, but not as voice-over. “Over” actually implies more than mere screen-absence; one must distinguish voice-over from voice-off in terms of the space from which the voice is presumed to originate. In the latter, the speaker is merely temporarily off-camera, the camera could pan around the same scene and capture the speaker. Contrarily, voice-over is distinguishable by the fact that one could not display the speaker by adjusting the camera's position in the pictured story space; instead the voice comes from another time and space, the time and space of the discourse.

Narration relates to the content of the speech: someone is in the act of communicating a narrative—that is, recounting a series of events to an audience. But a difficulty appears here: in narrated films, instead of hearing a story from start to finish, we may only hear a few sentences. On the basis, sometimes, of just a fragment—a sentence or two in which, perhaps, the invisible speaker never actually recounts a past event—how does one know that the voice is *narrating* and not just conversing or thinking out loud? To put it simply, how does one know that a sentence like “I am going to go to the grocery store today even if it rains” is probably not a fragment of narration, while “It was a dark and stormy night, yet I decided to go to the grocery store” probably is?

Verb tense provides a crucial, though not conclusive, clue. In *Language in the Inner City*, the linguist William Labov notes that “narrative clauses” are clauses with a simple past tense verb (or, in some styles, a verb in the simple present). However, as Labov discovered during his research on “natural” narratives—that is, oral, unrehearsed stories recounting a personal experience—a complete narrative is made up of much more than just narrative clauses. In fact, he finds, complete narratives break down into six elements: the abstract (a short summary of the story that is about to be provided); the orientation (identification of time, place, characters, and activities); the complicating action (the unfolding of the story's events); the resolution (the climax); the evaluation (commentary elucidating the point of the story); and the coda (an epilogue, often bridging the gap between story time and the time of narrating). Thus, while the complicating action and the resolution generally use simple

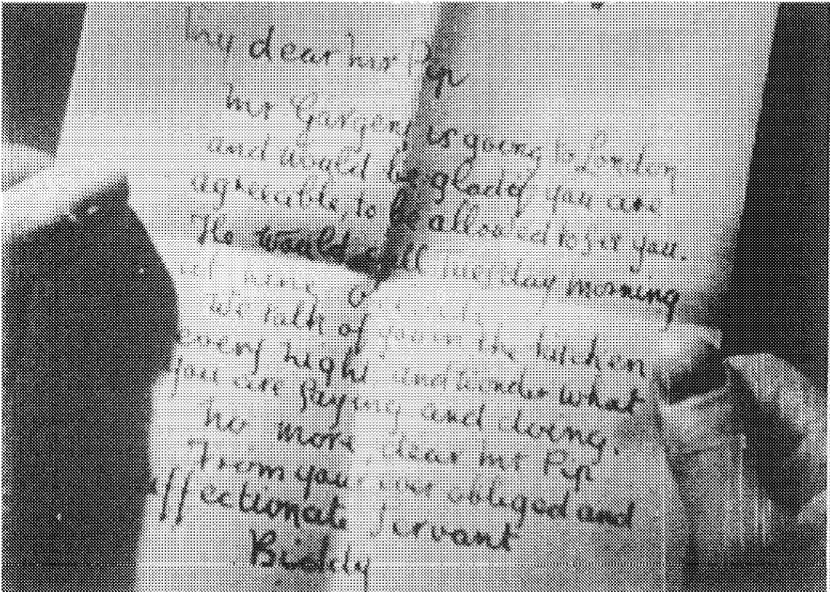
past tense constructions, orientations, for instance, often contain past progressive verbs.⁴

Accordingly, in considering my two little examples, we may run through a more complicated—though still instantaneous—program, testing to see whether these sentences could fit into any of the six familiar categories. “*I am going to go* to the grocery today even if it rains,” with its future tense construction, may be a promise, a threat, or a bid for martyrdom, but does not immediately fulfill any of the functions that Labov details. On the other hand, “*It was a dark and stormy night, yet I decided to go* to the grocery store” not only contains a narrative clause, the beginning of the complicating action, but also presents a mini-orientation by describing the weather.

Mary Louise Pratt has demonstrated the general applicability of Labov’s work and shown how well his six-part schema can be applied to refined, literary narratives.⁵ Because voice-over narrators are often supposed to be recounting oral, unrehearsed stories of personal experience, Labov’s findings are even more obviously pertinent here. Note that of the sentences quoted earlier from *Red River*, “You see, the story of the Red River D. started this way” clearly amounts to an “abstract,” while the next sentence, “Along about August of 1851 . . . ,” provides orientating information. With the beginning of the complicating action, the narration fades out, and the ball is passed to the images and dramatic performances. In this film the invisible speaker returns later, sometimes with evaluation, sometimes with narrative clauses, but even if he had never spoken again, we would have identified him as a narrator on the basis of the opening sentences. Regardless of how much the narrator speaks, and regardless of whether he or she ever actually recounts the action of the story, we are so familiar with the structure of narratives that the speech act as a whole is implied by the presence of any one of the six elements.

Which brings us to the point, made by Pratt through her use of speech-act theory and by Jonathan Culler in structuralist terms when he talks about a “code” of narration,⁶ that as viewers, readers, listeners, and narrators, we have all not only unconsciously learned narrative structure, but also the rules and conditions *surrounding* storytelling. My grocery store examples were offered in a vacuum, yet with *Red River* a host of surrounding circumstances come into play: we already know that this is a narrative film; we match the voice’s promise to tell us the story of the Red River D. with the film’s title “Red River,” and we recognize such genre considerations as the fact that this is a Western, Walter Brennan a common Western character actor, and his words, pronunciation, and tone appropriate for a Hollywood cowboy. In sum, one recognizes voice-over speech—fragmentary though it may be—as *narration* on the basis of: first, certain linguistic clues; secondly, our intuitive knowledge of narrative structure; and finally, the entire context in which the speech arises.

Hence, in talking about voice-over *narration*, we can and should bracket



Great Expectations. Biddy [voice-over]: My dear Mr. Pip, Mr. Gargery is going to London and would be glad if you are agreeable to be allowed to see you. He would call Tuesday morning at nine o'clock. . . .

out other types of speech by invisible speakers.⁷ Commercials, of course, use voice-over not to narrate, but to persuade, and school filmstrips use it to demonstrate and instruct. As for fiction films, they often use asynchronous speech to signal eavesdropping on a character's private reveries. In "interior monologue," we hear the rush of a character's thoughts or feelings in his or her own voice (Laurence Olivier uses interior monologue for Henry's soliloquies in *Henry V* [1944]); in "subjective" or "delusional" sound, we hear what the character "hears" echoing in his or her mind (frightened little Pip in David Lean's *Great Expectations* [1946] "hears" cows accusing him, "A boy with somebody else's pork pie!"). In addition, as is the case with *Great Expectations*, many films reveal the contents of a plot-turning letter or telegram by laying in the voice of author or recipient reading it out loud. On rare occasions, such as the opening of Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), one even finds voice-over "conversations." We can separate these and other techniques from voice-over *narration* by considering their context and content.

Accordingly, "voice-over narration" can be formally defined as "oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen." In practice, however, one finds that distinctions

blur: films may include a progressive slide from on-screen, to voice-off, to voice-over narration (e.g., *Murder, My Sweet* [Dmytryk, 1944]); interior monologue may be so interlaced with narration that the blend is undefinable (e.g., *Raw Deal* [Mann, 1948]); written titles may accompany or alternate with oral narration (e.g., *Jane Eyre* [Stevenson, 1944]), a read-aloud letter may itself relate a story (e.g., *Journey into Fear* [Foster, 1942]). I have no intention of searching for “pure” voice-over narration; so long as at some point a film does use the technique, I consider that text within this study’s purview.

And then there are different types of voice-over narrators. Roughly speaking, a major division exists between “third-person,” or “authorial,” narrators and “first-person,” or “character,” narrators.* Previous critical discussions have often been skewed by treating only one of these types as representative of the technique as a whole. Worse yet, in the course of schematizing sound/image relationships, Daniel Percheron has labeled the first type “commentary” and the latter “voice-over-on-flashback.”⁸ His categories are inconsistent (one refers to a style of discourse prevalent in documentaries, while the other specifies a particular temporal relationship), and misleading (not all third-person narrators imitate documentaries, and not all first-person narrators recount events from their pasts). I suggest that Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*⁹ provides a more precise and useful method of classifying narrators. Subsequent chapters will illustrate how Genette’s breakdown of narrators in terms of their narrative levels and their relationships to the stories they relate can help us separate and analyze the myriad of invisible storytellers.

“Fine. Now we understand the bounds of this study and exactly what you mean by voice-over narration. But why bother? Everyone knows that it is just a cheap shortcut, the last resort of the incompetent.”

I hear this delusional voice in my mind because this attitude is extremely common both in conversation and in film literature. An examination of the ideological and theoretical underpinnings of the prejudices against the technique is the goal of chapter I. Here let me merely admit that I have indeed seen many films with ill-conceived narration—films such as Lean’s *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), where a narrator is introduced only to be ignored most of the time and then abruptly and illogically jerked in to patch up a transition; films such as Hugh Hudson’s *Chariots of Fire* (1981), which set up a complicated

*As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3, narrative theorists have concluded that the terms *third person* and *first person* are imprecise and misleading. However, common substitutes such as *authorial narrators* versus *character narrators* or *undramatized narrators* versus *dramatized narrators* merely foster different misconceptions. Unfortunately, the more accurate technical terms *heterodiegetic* and *homodiegetic* strike most readers as obscure or pedantic. Because *third person* and *first person* are the most common and instantly recognizable terms, I shall use them throughout this study as a shorthand method for referring to the two different relationships a narrator may have with the story he or she relates.

narrative structure that adds nothing; films such as Leslie Martinson's *P.T. 109* (1963) and Richard Benjamin's *My Favorite Year* (1982), in which the voices and their statements are pompous or banal.

However, I have seen many more films where the narration serves its purposes well and inoffensively, where it efficiently conveys important information or creates a special, intimate relationship with the viewer.

Although narration fascinates me on formal and theoretical grounds even at its clumsiest (it is precisely the defiant illogic of the narration in Otto Preminger's *Laura* [1944] that is so captivating), or even in inferior films, the technique would not have been used so often and would not be so worthy of our attention if it never soared. In scores of highly regarded films by our most competent directors the narration is so integral and adds so much that if you took it away the film would be gutted. In the course of this study I shall glance at many such films; films such as *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), *Great Expectations* (Lean, 1946), *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1948), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Ophuls, 1948), *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), *Tom Jones* (Richardson, 1963), *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971), *Annie Hall* (Allen, 1977), and *Days of Heaven* (Malick, 1978). I shall examine four—Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950), Dassin's *The Naked City* (1948), and Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975)—in close detail. My (no longer) secret agenda is for my readers to hear such films with my ears.

1

The Prejudices against Voice-Over Narration

It is past time for a reevaluation of voice-over narration. In half a century, only a few have found any kind words for the technique,¹ while scores have criticized it; no matter how many filmmakers have used it and no matter what they have actually done with it, a series of interrelated prejudices has kept us from either taking it very seriously or hearing it clearly. Upon examining these objections, however, I have discovered that both those raised many years ago and those in circulation today rest on premises that recent developments in film, narrative, and literary scholarship call into question. This chapter hopes to demonstrate that several long-cherished critical myths have clouded the subject for too long.

Images versus Words

For sound films to be true to the basic aesthetic principle, their significant communications must originate with their pictures. . . . All the successful attempts at an integration of the spoken word have one characteristic in common: they play down dialogue with a view to reinstating the visuals.

Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

For fifty years, a chorus of film theorists has answered “IMAGES!” As we all know, when sound was integrated with the silent film in the late 1920s, audiences were ecstatic, but certain filmmakers and almost all critics put up stiff resistance. As the years went by, the technical problems attending sound recording were swiftly remedied,² directors such as Mamoulian and Hitchcock began using sound creatively, and an explosion of new subject matter, styles, and characterizations made possible by dialogue hit the screen, yet the theoretical revulsion against talkies persisted. Here and there one can find a grudging acceptance of asynchronous sound or of sound effects, but the underlying tenor of the attitude towards dialogue is illustrated by Rudolf Arnheim’s 1938 essay, “A New Laocoön”: “Patches of speech are of little theoretical importance as long as they represent merely the minimum concession of a film director who has to meet the demands for dialogue on the part of producers and distributors. For in that case the film maker thinks of his work as a silent film, that is, as a film in the true meaning of the term, adulterated by a hostile principle.”³ More time elapsed, more technical advances were made, musicals flourished, the screwball comedies came and went, yet the critical line never swerved: if speech could not be outlawed, then it must be kept in its (lowly) place. In the past twenty years, the critical biases have softened (film historians have admitted that their predecessors went slightly overboard in outlawing dialogue); but as Rick Altman noted in 1980, “Today the primacy of the image continues to be taken as a given, even by practitioners of advanced methodologies.”⁴ Only in the past five years can one detect the beginnings of an unqualified acceptance of film sound and speech.

What was—or is—so very threatening about words in movies? Altman argues that the condemnation of dialogue stems from the need to divorce film from the theater, its parent and competitor, and his explanation is supported by the omnipresent expressions of fear that if speech is given free rein, film will regress to “canned theater.” Advocates of a new art whose prestige was insecure were obsessed with the issue of “purity”; then and now they have sought to uncover the medium’s secret, unique essence—thus the borrowing of Lessing’s belief in the unique properties of each art form, and the continued search by ciné-structuralists for codes specific to the cinema. Thus, too, the chanting, over and over, like a charm to ward off evil, “Film is essentially a visual medium.”

But neither the need to keep the cinema distinct from the theater, nor, more basically, the extreme anxiety over its ontology, adequately explains the near unanimity, vehemence, and persistence of the crusade to suppress film dialogue. What does “the theater” symbolize to the anti-sound critics? What else may be involved?

First, I suggest that the hatred of sound stems from dearly held notions about film’s political role. Film, we read over and over again, is supposed to