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Multiperspectivity

Marcus Hartner
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1 Definition

In the study of narrative the term ‘multiperspectivity’ is employed in a variety of different and often incongruous ways. Nevertheless, the arguably most common usages of the term refer to multiperspectivity either as a basic aspect of narration or as a mode of storytelling in which multiple and often discrepant viewpoints are employed for the presentation and evaluation of a story and its storyworld. In the contexts of both definitions, the perspectival arrangements in multiperspective narratives may fulfil a variety of different functions; mostly, however, they highlight the perceptually, epistemologically or ideologically restricted nature of individual perspectives and/or draw attention to various kinds of differences and similarities between the points of view presented therein. In this way, multiperspectivity frequently serves to portray the relative character of personal viewpoints or perspectivity in general.

2 Explication

The idea of multiperspectivity, sometimes also called polyperspectivity, is conceptually related to the notion of perspective and point of view (Niederhoff → Perspective – Point of View [1]). Most understandings imply a tacit definition of this underlying concept and consequently inherit the semantic vagueness, metaphoricity, and conceptual plurality generally connected with the notion of perspective. Correspondingly, a variety of different meanings has been assigned to the term multiperspectivity. Scholars who, for instance, discuss point of view as a fundamental condition or intrinsic design principle of storytelling also tend to perceive multiperspectivity as a general, inherent aspect of narration: As the presentation of a narrative invariably implies diverse choices of selection and projection on different levels, each choice potentially activates alternative perspectives; in this light, multiperspectivity is not seen as a mode of narration or presentation, but as a characteristic which is always at least potentially present in a narrative and can be foregrounded in various ways. Alternative definitions of the term, however, are directed at entirely different aspects of analysis. Regarding the

level of narrative transmission in literary prose, for example, the concept can also be used in a narrower sense to refer to texts with multiple narrators (Margolin → Narrator [2]) and/or reflector figures (= narrative perspective). In yet another understanding of multiperspectivity, the term is employed to specifically denote semantic clashes between different characters' (Jannidis → Character [3]) worldviews in drama, film and prose fiction (= character perspective); but it can also designate the overall orchestration of a narrative's complete set of voices (including implied author, narrator etc.; Schmid → Implied Author [4]) and their ideological stance, as discussed in Baxtin's ([1963] 1984, 1981) influential work on the notions of polyphony and heteroglossia (Tjupa → Heteroglossia [5]).

Despite the different understandings of the concept, many narratologists tend to agree that any meaningful notion of the term has to go beyond the mere presence of several viewpoints (cf. Nünning & Nünning eds. 2000: 18 ff.). It is not a sufficient condition for a multiperspective narrative to feature more than one of the aforementioned types of perspectives, because such a definition would apply to most stories. For the notion to make sense pragmatically, its usage has to be restricted to cases where points of view interact in salient and significant ways and thus create multiperspectivity by, for instance, repeatedly portraying the same event from various different angles. In this context, Lindemann (1999: 54) sees the most important aspect in the emergence of semantic friction ("Reibungseffekt") between the points of view employed. Iser ([1972] 1974: 57–80) already shows that such instances of tension draw the reader's interest (Prince → Reader [6]) both to the object presented and to the viewpoint presenting it, thereby implicitly foregrounding their epistemological relativity.

The phenomenon of multiperspectivity thus proves to be conceptually related to the philosophy of perspectivism (e.g. Nietzsche, Ortega y Gasset; cf. Anderson 1998) and seems to be particularly suited to stage perceptual relativism and skepticism towards knowledge and reality. In this context, scholars have attempted to differentiate between basic types of the phenomenon and their differing epistemological and semantic implications. The most widely employed distinction is the one between 'open' vs. 'closed' forms (Pfister [1977] 1988) of multiperspectivity: it serves to differentiate between the presentation of entirely incompatible points of view and the depiction of perspectives which, despite their differences, can still be integrated into a coherent account of the story. Such 'closed' forms seem to be particularly suited to stage the relative or limited nature of individual viewpoints, while at the same time creating a dominant voice that provides an authoritative account of the narrated events. The form thus tends to ultimately support traditional philosophical notions of intersubjective truth, reality, or knowledge. 'Open' forms of multiperspectivity, on the other hand, are marked by

an overall quality of dissonance, contradiction and dialogism (Shepherd → Dialogism [7]). They usually feature discordant, sometimes kaleidoscopic arrangements of conflicting perspectives which cannot be resolved and therefore often possess an implicitly subversive or alienating quality.

Yet, multiperspectivity is not limited to the questioning of truth and knowledge. As with all narrative structures and techniques, there is no single one-to-one mapping of form and function. Although perspectival plurality is indeed primarily associated with forms of aesthetic and epistemological self-reflection, Nünning & Nünning (eds. 2000: 28–31) demonstrate that multiple interacting perspectives can also fulfill a broad range of other functions: inter alia, they can serve as a means of creating suspense, as a self-reflective way of foregrounding the process of narration, or as a method of endorsing a thematic aspect or a moral within the narrative by, for example, presenting it repeatedly from different standpoints.

It is furthermore a general characteristic of multiperspective strategies of narration that they tend to force the reader "into much closer scrutiny of the text" (Hutchinson 1984: 35). Since each new perspective potentially provides a "different view on plot and character" (ibid.), the viewpoints employed have to be continually revised, re-evaluated and re-contextualized. Multiperspective narrative structures are therefore never semantically empty, but always contribute to the overall meaning of the text.

3 Forms of Multiperspectivity and the Study of the Concept

3.1 Forms of Multiperspective Narration

From a historical point of view, multiperspectivity is not a recent phenomenon. Early examples can be found in Plato's *Symposium*, the *Edda* (13th century), or Chaucer's "Parliament of Fowls" (~1382) (cf. Frank ed. 1991). However, pre-modern forms of multiperspective narration remain relatively few and often fulfill primarily rhetorical functions. This situation changes with what Martin Klepper (2011) has called the "discovery of point of view" in the 18th and 19th centuries, i.e. the growing awareness of the problematic "relation between observation and narration" which triggered an increasing interest in the "link between observation, epistemology, power, narrative, perspective and aesthetics-at-large" (5). This concern with the conditions of perception and narration leads to a rising number of multiperspective texts across different genres—a development initiated by the epistolary novel of the 18th century such as Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) or Tieck's *William Lovell* (1795/96). In the 19th century the phenomenon becomes more widespread and

polymorphous as a growing number of writers adopt various strategies of multiperspective narration in their work (e.g. Potocki's *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* [1805–15], Eliot's *Middlemarch* [1871–72]). This trend continues in the 20th century, where various forms of multiperspectivity continue to feature in increasing numbers in the literatures of Modernism (e.g. Woolf's *The Waves* [1931]) and Postmodernism (e.g. Saramago's *Blindness* [1995], Pamuk's *Snow* [2002]). Here they are often combined with other stylistic or artistic innovations, resulting in such literary classics as Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), or Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988).

3.0.1 The Novel

If one attempts to distinguish different types of multiperspectivity, its perhaps most prominent form can be found in the novel narrated by multiple characters. The prototype of this version is the classic epistolary novel: Texts like Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), de Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782), or Smolett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) are composed of a succession of letters from several correspondents and illustrate "how the same event may be viewed differently by different characters" (Mullan 2006: 56). The same strategy of "multiple narration" (Lonoff 1982: 143) is also frequently used in narratives about the investigation of a mystery or crime. In countless stories, from Collins' classic detective fiction *The Moonstone* (1868) to Pamuk's postmodern mystery novel *My Name is Red* (1998), the solution has to be pieced together from different witness accounts—a structure that implicitly suggests that "the only authentic approach to the problem of reality is one which allows multiple perspectives to be heard in debate with each other" (Schonfield 2009: 140).

The usage of multiple narrators, however, is not the only way to portray an event from the vantage point of different fictional agents. Numerous techniques for presenting consciousness in narrative (cf. Herman ed. 2011; Cohn 1978) enable texts to stage individual points of view for different reflector figures. In this way, tension between the perspectives of these characters and/or the narrator(s) can be created (e.g. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* [1995]). Similarly, framing devices and multiple narrative levels (Pier → Narrative Levels [8]), as for instance in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), may also lead to multiperspectivity by establishing an array of differing points of view on the subject and the story presented (cf. Wolf 2000). Another strategy is the employment of montage- or collage-like structures. Novels like Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) or Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) interrupt and supplement their plot-lines with quotations, newspaper articles, posters, songs, or speeches. By enriching their narratives with such information, they succeed, among other effects, in creating a more

multifaceted account of the figures, objects, or events portrayed.

3.0.2 Poetry, Drama, and Film

Multiperspectivity is not only to be found in literary prose writing. A famous example is Browning's narrative poem *The Ring and the Book*, which dramatizes a murder trial in a series of dramatic monologues. Lyric poetry, on the other hand, is seldom associated with the presentation of multiple perspectives. Nevertheless, the concept can also be applied to poems such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Coleridge's "Kubla Kahn" (1797–98) or Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818) in which different images of an ancient tyrant are contrasted (cf. Menhard 2009: 30f.).

Like poetry, dramatic texts are also rarely discussed with reference to the term multiperspectivity. Yet drama is intrinsically based on the audience's reconstruction of the individual viewpoints of the dramatic figures on stage. Plays such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* unfold as each character in turn acts according to his/her plans, beliefs, and states of knowledge. Pfister ([1977] 1988) therefore defines the dramatic text as a "perspectival" and network-like "pattern of contrasting and corresponding figure-perspectives" (59), which he terms the text's "perspective structure" (56, passim).

The necessity of inferring and tracing characters' mental states in order to make sense of their behavior also applies to the reception of film (cf. Eder 2008). Here, however, the notion of perspective is "not only a metaphor but often also a concrete perceptual fact, linked to the camera position" (Grodal 2005: 168). The analysis of point of view with respect to narration in film (Kuhn & Schmidt → Narration in Film [9]) is thus largely concerned with the arrangement of camera angles and the range of "focusing strategies which select and control our perception as well as our emotional involvement" (Kuhn & Schmidt → Narration in Film [9], § 28). Most motion pictures commonly considered as multiperspective (e.g. Kurosawa's *Rashomon* [1950], Travis' *Vantage Point* [2008], or Singer's *The Usual Suspects* [1995]) use such audiovisual strategies of presentation in order to align the filmic action with the differing or shifting viewpoints of several characters in some form (cf. Griem 2000). This is particularly interesting in a film like *Rashomon*, in which the story of a crime is presented in four mutually incompatible testimonies, enabling the movie to question the presumably objective nature of the camera's visual gaze (cf. Menhard 2009: 31).

3.1 Theoretical Approaches to Multiperspectivity

Despite the ubiquity of multiperspectivity, there are still comparatively few narratological studies devoted to its research. One reason might lie in a skepticism

towards the concept itself on grounds of its semantic vagueness. As Bode (2011: 199) points out, it is “necessary to ask whether the catch-all phrase ‘multiperspectivity’ does not in fact summarize very different phenomena in a dangerously sweeping way.” Another explanation could be that “the phenomena gathered under [this] umbrella term” have simply been studied under different labels, such as ‘character constellations’ or ‘narrative frames’ (ibid.). A final pragmatic reason may have to do with preference for the term ‘point of view’ over ‘perspective’ by narratologists in the English-speaking world. Here, unlike in the German academic context, the term multiperspectivity is rather unusual in academic discourse. As a result, multiperspective text structures are often either subsumed under the discussion of point of view or analyzed with reference to related theories like those of Mixail Baxtin (e.g. Townsend 2003).

Historically, Baxtin’s (1929) work in fact constitutes one of the first scholarly discussions of the phenomenon. Although he does not use the label multiperspectivity, he assigns individual viewpoints to all entities involved in the act of narration: Narrator, protagonist, addressee and author, in his opinion, all possess a personal point of view which is determined by their social and ideological background and position. Baxtin’s ideas of ‘polyphony’ and ‘heteroglossia’ have been highly influential in the study of literature and narrative, as they take the discussion of perspective beyond questions of narrative transmission and structure and reveal narratives to be orchestrated compositions of numerous ‘voices’. Despite this general influence, however, his concepts have only peripherally influenced early studies which explicitly address the notion of ‘multiperspectivity’. The first (and for three decades virtually only) monograph investigating this term is Neuhaus (1971), who identifies the phenomenon vaguely with multiple narration. Buschmann (1996) criticizes this definition for ignoring the potential of multiple focalization (Niederhoff → Focalization [10]) to create distinct viewpoints. Furthermore, he suggests speaking of a multiperspective text only if a central “point of attention” is being portrayed from different vantage points (260). Taking up this discussion, Lindemann (1999) emphasizes that the epistemological relevance of the phenomenon hinges on the degree of dissonance between the employed perspectives. He thus changes the focus from the number of viewpoints to their semantic relationship—an idea that Vera and Ansgar Nünning (cf. eds. 2000; Nünning 2001) develop further.

In their work, they turn the vague notion of multiperspectivity into a more precise narratological tool by drawing on the distinction between story and discourse and on Pfister’s ([1977] 1988) concept of ‘perspective structures’, which they employ as the conceptual basis for their discussion of multiperspectivity. Arguing that adequate terminology for the analysis of point of view on the level of narrative transmission already exists, their approach exclusively focuses on the semantic relationship

between the perspectives of a text's fictional entities, i.e. characters and overt narrators. In their view, multiperspectivity is the result of the arrangement of discrepant figural standpoints—a perspective structure which is prototypically produced by successive portrayals of the same event from various points of view.

Although scholars have noted that this is not the only way of creating multiperspective discrepancy (cf. Bode 2011: 198f.), most recent studies have similarly focused on fictional agents and the various kinds of differences (psychological, ideological, perceptual, etc.) between their individual viewpoints. Surkamp (2003), for example, combines the concept of perspective structures with the theory of possible worlds (Ryan → Possible Worlds [11]). Menhard (2009) analyses the relationship between multiperspectivity and narratorial unreliability (Shen → Unreliability [12]), and demonstrates that both phenomena are often combined in literary texts, while Hartner (2012) draws on blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) to study the interaction of character perspectives from the vantage point of cognitive narratology (Herman → Cognitive Narratology [13]). He suggests that there is no definable set of multiperspective text structures and that the phenomenon should be perceived as a readerly effect that can be triggered by a variety of narrative strategies.

Despite the recent trend in narratology to investigate multiperspectivity by drawing on the concept of perspective structures, this approach has not remained without criticism (cf. Schmid 2011; Niederhoff → Perspective – Point of View [1]). One of the major disadvantages of the focus on figural perspectives and their mutual differences is that this research strategy implies "a strong shift in the direction of the viewing subject" (Niederhoff → Perspective – Point of View [1], § 28) and largely neglects the traditional analysis of point of view as a structural and relational phenomenon. As Schmid (2011) points out, perspectives are fundamentally determined by the way they are represented; consequently, he argues that the notion of figural viewpoints is incomplete as long as it is not related to the classic, relational study of narrative perspective (cf. 139). His own approach to the study of point of view (2010) is influenced by the work of Uspenskij ([1970] 1973), who argues that the phenomenon of perspective simultaneously exists on multiple levels ("planes"). Drawing on this idea, Schmid (2010) develops a more elaborated model which is based on the understanding of point of view as a complex of multiple conditions necessary for the comprehension and representation of narrative events (cf. 99). By distinguishing between five parameters of perspective (perception, ideology, space, time, and language) and combining them with the categories of narratorial and figural point of view, his model points to the intrinsic multiperspectivity of narration per se and thus provides an alternative angle of approach to the analysis of the phenomenon.

4 Topics for Further Investigation

Most recent works on multiperspectivity emphasize that reception processes must play a crucial role in any attempt to understand the phenomenon. Although preliminary steps in this direction have been taken, many questions remain. In particular, the mechanisms of evaluation and the establishment of hierarchies among a text's perspectives require further study. Similarly, the relevance and construction of potential individual perspectives for fictive or implied readers as well as implied authors has not been sufficiently addressed to date.

Another important aspect concerns the intermedial dimension of multiperspectivity. So far, there have been no comparative analyses between multiperspective strategies of narration in different genres and media. Furthermore, research needs to be extended to study of the phenomenon in new media products (e.g. computer games). The same applies to the interplay of multiperspectivity with other modes, aspects, or functions of storytelling. Although some research has been conducted in this direction, there is yet no comprehensive account of the specific conditions for different types or facets of the phenomenon, or its impact on other stylistic devices and/or narrative strategies and functions.

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