

KASSAY Réka

## LEVELS OF NARRATION IN COEN BROTHERS' MOVIES

**Abstract.** The present paper does not intend to be a synthesis of narrative techniques and solutions in postmodern film. It rather aims to discuss a few cases that raise interesting questions about the classic narration style, reflected in different ways in postmodern creations. Studying the films of the Coen Brothers, this is one of those motives that consequently appear, apart from the fact that some works are very different from the others. One of the main differences between the Coen Brothers' films comes from the use of various narrative voices, which do not always intend to be the simple parodies of classic narration, with its conventional situations, characters and images.

**Keywords.** Narration, narrative voices, postmodern cinema, Coen Brothers.

### *A few words about the directors and their films*

Ethan and Joel Coen belong to those few filmmakers who are supported by the studios, appreciated by the critics and by the public in the same time. Of course, the opinions about them are different, but they have many fans, even though their films are not commercial and the producers give them a free hand in creation. As long as they are more or less "independent artists", they do not represent a particular school or direction but their opera used to be labeled as part of the American independent cinema (not confoundable with the American underground film, which is indeed independent from the studio system)<sup>1</sup>. Anyway, the "black

---

1 In the '80-s, when the Coen Brothers started their carrier, the studio system tried to get out from the crisis supporting some of the independent directors and this collaboration helped the raising of the so-called independent film. Therefore, the word "independent" doesn't mean "completely out of

comedies of the Coen Brothers" often-used stereotype is much too restricted for the variety of their source of inspiration. They have a very close relation with the classic genres of Hollywood (critics use to say that their films are transcripts of classic genres)<sup>2</sup> but they also inspire from the French new wave. Their films reflect the elements of the American popular culture (for instance, the novels of M. Cain and R. Chandler), the European High Culture (the philosophy of W. Heisenberg) and different subcultures as well<sup>3</sup>. As the postmodern artworks in general, the films of the Coen Brothers present the process of classic elements in a reflexive way (often-creating parody, paraphrase or palimpsest) that can be decoded in a multi-level context.

Their first film, *Blood Simple* (1984), was a low-budget independent work with film noir and gangster-film elements, supported by some executives from their home, Minnesota. This captured the attention of the producers so the next film, *Raising Arizona* (1987), an early version of the family-movies could be made with a higher budget. The Coen Brothers' third

film, *Miller's Crossing* (1990) reconstructs the myth of the gangster-films from the 1930-s in a specific way. During the turning of the film, the brothers had a period of crisis in creation so they took a break and wrote the script of their next film, *Barton Fink* (1991), a completely different work about their attitude to the classic movie of Hollywood. That's why there are some references to their next film in *Miller's Crossing*. After the first three films, the studio-producers discovered the Coen Brothers so they could turn the next two films in studios. In their case this did not mean entering in the production of commercial movies, as it happened to many independent creators discovered by studios (and as it happened to Barton Fink). Contrariwise, they could realize in a studio the film that can be considered a critic of the studio-system. This brought the Coen Brothers the *Palme d'Or* of the Cannes Film Festival. However, neither *Barton Fink*, nor *The Hudsucker Proxy* (a tale with many classic elements from 1994) became profitable, so the brothers returned home from Hollywood and made a completely different, realistic and cheap film, *Fargo* (1996), which won two Oscar prizes. The following film, *The Big Lebowski* (1998) was another expensive production about the shiny world of Los Angeles with a well-known actor in the leading role (Jeff Bridges). This film is specific from the point of view of genre-transcription because of its musical inserts which evoke the visual style of Busby Berkeley<sup>4</sup>

---

the studio system" in this case, writes Varga Balázs in his article "Godard és a Coca-Cola gyermekei" (The Kids of Godard and the Coca-Cola), in *Filmvilág* 6/1995, pp. 8-11.

2 Takács Ferenc, "Szemünk állása – Joel Coen: Az ember, aki ott sem volt" (Our Point of View – Joel Coen: The Man Who Wasn't There), in *Filmvilág* 3/2002, pp. 4-7.

3 This variety of inspiration is also an aspect of common occurrence in many American independent films.

---

4 Busby Berkeley (1895-1976) was a Hollywood movie director and musical chore-

musicals creating a unique atmosphere. After this, the film that inspired from the story of Odyssey and recalls the world of the American comedies *O, Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) resulted the highest profit. In this, the famous actor George Clooney might have had a hand. A new turn in their career was the film *The Man, Who Wasn't There* (2001), a turn to the European culture and philosophy, by reconstructing the classic genre of film noir. This was followed by two other comedies with great names in the credits' list: George Clooney with Catherine Zeta-Jones in the *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) and Tom Hanks in *The Ladykillers* (2004). In 2007, the Coen Brothers came up with their greatest success (until now): the thriller in a western-film's setting *No Country For Old Man* got 4 Oscars: for the script, for the picture, for directing and for the leading actor, Javier Bardem. Their newest two films, *Burn After Reading* (2008) and *A Serious Man* (2009) are black comedies with less extraordinary solutions but more accent on the situations and on the personal relations and problems of the characters. One of the common motives in the Coen Brothers films is the American myth, reconstructed in the popular culture of America. This reconstruction is made in a very conscious way, with references and allusions to the works of different cultures<sup>5</sup>.

---

ographer famous for his elaborate musical production numbers that often involved complex geometric patterns.

5 Lajos Géza, "Azok a csodálatos Coen-fiúk" (Those Wonderful Coen Guys), in *Filmvilág*

There are more interesting aspects regarding the relation of the Coen-films with the traditional cinema of Hollywood that deserve an analysis but I chose to emphasize the question of narration – the levels of narration, the identity of the narrator, the narrative techniques that reflect the classic story-telling way by being different – because this topic contains many interesting examples about the attitude of postmodern film relative to the classic cinema.

### *Conventions of the classic narration in the mirror of postmodern films*

The classic film genres from the golden age of Hollywood were similar from the point of view of narration, of ideology and of the visual way of story telling. This was possible because these conventions stood above the conventions of genres<sup>6</sup>. The rules of classic narration developed from about 1910 and still dominate in American film industry (and not only) but they were the most frequently used between

---

2/1997, pp. 22-27. See also the official site of the Coen Brothers <http://www.coenbrothers.net/coens.html>

6 That's why some of the great film directors realized their films in different genres. For ex., Howard Hawks directed western, comedy, exotic film, gangster-film, war-film, as well as John Ford or Vincente Minelli. Later, those who defined the theory of author's film, identified some constant elements, themes and stylistic motives in their work, which – besides respecting the conventions of classic representation – unified the world of each famous artist.

1910 and 1960 (until the appearance of the new waves in Europe). However, the classic techniques are still a base in filmmaking because they have very well defined rules; they help the viewer to decode the audiovisual elements, to create an interpretation and to enter in the film's world. The style of the classic narration informs in each moment about the relation of scenes in space and time. It accentuates the most important elements with the help of the light. It assures the understanding of dialogues with the good quality of sound. It creates the illusion of a well-constructed space with the help of camera movement, as David Bordwell writes in his book *Narration in the Fiction Film*<sup>7</sup>. In the same time, the classic narrator has a very clear attitude. Whether it is personalized in a voice, or it means simply the dosing of information during the film, it makes the characters' motivation very evident and lets the public know the values accepted by society regarding the behavior of the characters. Besides, the spectator also knows how to "read" a film, because he has learned all the conventions of causal relations. The viewer usually wants to be helped and not inhibited from understanding the film, that's why the classic narration style could survive after the decadence of the classic genres of American film.

The Coen Brothers use the techniques of classic narration but they often play with

these conventions by making conscious reference to this story-telling style. While the classic narration is not going to seem something else that it is, the narration in the Coen Brothers' film is often deceptive: the images, the way of acting and reacting of the characters, the lights, the montage, all the visual elements are suggesting something else, than the story. We can find this aspect in many films, for instance in *Barton Fink*, where every little detail suggests a scary event (the wallpaper that is falling down, the shoes, which are too big, the sound of a mosquito) but after all, everything has a rational explanation. All that downer feeling comes from Barton Fink's mind and not from the story<sup>8</sup>. The words "everything has a rational explanation" are pronounced in the film *O, Brother, Where Art Thou* when the three deserters are saved by a "miracle". In the moment when there are almost executed one of them is praying for a miracle and it arrives. At least it looks like a miracle because it is filmed in a surrealistic way: the objects are flying slowly in front of the camera while we can hear a ritual song of the community. At the end, we find out that they just let the water down in the valley. This scene reminds us to the scene of the accident in *The Man, Who Wasn't There*.

This way of presenting what seems incredible and iconoclastic and then turns

7 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

8 This way of presentation roots in the German expressionism, where all the feelings are projected to the visual elements of the image.

out to be a very well motivated element of the story is a specific solution in the films of the Coen Brothers. Sometimes it is not so evident, like in these examples: sometimes only an element of the story is presented in such an uncommon visual way that it makes us think about different meanings.

### *The identity of the narrator and different narrative solutions*

The narrative voice is another form of classic narration that recalls interesting solutions in the Coen Brothers' films. In the classic movies this can be the voice of the creator who is present at all the places, who possesses all the information about all the characters and reveals it during the film so that the viewer also finds out everything to the end. The other type, the subjective voice of a character is obviously presenting only the thoughts, the feelings of that person, and in this case we can see only scenes where he is present (the viewer cannot know more than the character). The most evident example for this kind of story telling is *The Man, Who Wasn't There*. In this black and white movie, that recalls the world of the film noir and the German expressionism, the narrative voice is the voice of Ed Crane, the main character. The whole story is presented like his memorials from the prison that appeared in a newspaper and this means that the entire story is dominated by his presence. In this context the title, *The Man, Who Wasn't There* is a paradox. Another typical aspect about this narrator is that, as opposed to the classic narrator-character,

which expresses his thoughts and feelings, Ed Crane tells only facts. His narration is perfectly objective, his eyes without any expression, the crime committed without intention. Therefore, despite of the fact of narrating, which usually influences the viewer to identify with the character, we cannot answer the question that Ed puts himself: "what kind of man are you?" At the trial his lawyer makes a speech inspired from the uncertainty principal of Werner Heisenberg and points out to Ed at the end, telling: "Look, a modern man!" In this context the title also gets a new explanation.

The other kind of narrative voice, which represents an exterior identity (usually the voice of the author), raises a couple of interesting questions in the film *The Big Lebowski*. The narrator appears as an exterior voice at the beginning of the film. He starts the story in a classic way but he breaks the illusion very soon: we find out that he is not omniscient: he doesn't know everything about this place, he is thinking loudly, he forgets what he wanted to say and at a moment he starts to repeat himself. Therefore, he is not speaking as a classic narrator at all and because of his unusual way, he gains the viewer's ear. In the same time, the attention turns to the act of narration. Besides, with these little "mistakes" he gives the film a spontaneous feeling, an illusion that it is not an artificial construction, but more imperfect, like everyday life. His personality and his relation with *Lebowski* (the Dude) become more interesting when he appears in the film as a stranger in the

bowling club. At his first appearance, we just see a person who looks like a cowboy, drinks Sarsaparilla and speaks two words with Lebowski. At the end he appears again, he talks to Lebowski and he seems to know many things about him. In the last scene, this mysterious old man turns to the public and finishes the story in the way he began. It is interesting though, that he possesses information that only a superior person could know (for instance that the little Lebowski is already on the way) but in the same time he expresses his hopes about the Dude's bowling team, as he wouldn't know the result of the game. His level of knowledge is not obvious and this is an intentional way of treating the question of narration.

In an analogous way, in the first and last scene of the film *The Hudsucker Proxy* the narrator appears who seems to be more conventional. At the beginning, he presents the place and time of the action, New York in New Years Eve, 1958. The story starts in a classic way, after the image of the city we can see some details and we get closer and closer to the main character. While everybody is celebrating, Norville Barnes is standing in the window of his office preparing to jump from the top of the building of his company. Besides telling all the necessary information, the narrator continues with (a bit ironic) rhetorical questions: "Is he really going to do it? Is Norville really going to jelly up the sidewalk?" After telling the story of the young boy, "how did he get so high and why is he feeling so low", at the end the narrator returns to the beginning

situation. After an unconventional happy end, he finishes his story with a forced laugh, which also breaks the illusion of the classic happy end. We can interpret this laugh together with that synthetic montage<sup>9</sup> in the first part of the film where everybody is laughing. The events of a longer period are presented in a few representative images, but in these every character is laughing: the leaders and the employees of the company, the tailor, Barnes in the front-page of the newspaper, those who read the story, all are unified in laughter which becomes grotesque after a time. This attitude makes the difference of the film from a typical comedy: in a usual case the public laughs, not the storytellers. Here, the laugh of the narrator and the mentioned narration technique expresses an attitude that points out in a conscious way the conventions of classic comedy.

The absolute knowledge of the narrator compared to the knowledge of the spectator is expressed in classic films by a technique of using different media, like photographs, titles in the newspaper or television news<sup>10</sup>. We can meet this technique in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, but also in a reflexive way of accentuating the cliché: these articles and TV-news are not that kind that could ever appear in the media in reality and the film does not expect us to take them seriously. The black and white parts with narration that imitate the TV-news make evident the parodist nature of the scene.

9 This is also a narrative technique of classic cinema for expressing the elapsed time.

10 David Bordwell, *op. cit.*

Reflecting the stereotypes of classic narration, there is another type of narrator in this film. More exactly, two episodic characters' comments narrate an important part of the film. When Norville meets Amy (the man meets the woman in the love story), we can see the whole scene from the point of view of two police officers that eat in the same bar as the characters. The scene of Norville and Amy becomes a silent movie, while the officers are telling what is happening, making direct reference to some of the typical elements of a classic dramaturgy. The ironic intonation of this paraphrasing is evident from the first moment when the officers' dialogue begins: *"I got gas, Benny."* *"Tell me about it."* *"No kidding, Benny. I got gas."* During this scene we can see them in the foreground and Norville at another table in the middle of the scene. In the background of the image enters Amy. *"Enter the dame."* – comment the officers. *"There's one in every story."* *"Ten bucks says she's looking for a handout."* *"Twenty bucks says not here, she don't find one."* The camera gets closer to the bar where Norville is staying until we can only see him with Amy and hear the voice of the officers continuously. *"She's looking for her mark."* *"She finds him."* *"She sits down and orders..."* *"...a light lunch."* *"How will she pay for this lunch?"* *"She looks through her purse."* *"No money."* *"The mark notices."* *"He's not noticing, Benny."* *"Maybe he's wise."* *"He doesn't look wise."* *"Plan two."* *"Here come the waterworks."* Amy starts to cry, the officers mention some other tricks of the woman, like *"There's illness in the family."*

*"Her mother needs an operation. Urgently."* *"Adenoids".* *"No, Benny. Lumbago."* But Norville doesn't react, he is going to leave the place. *"She better think fast".* *"She isn't".* In this moment Amy is passing out and the officers exclaim in the same time: *"She is!"* *"She's good, Benny."* *"She's damn good, Lou."* This little scene does not only say that the stories in classic films are made after the same model but also that these stories are happening in real life all the time. There is a story in the story here, because the woman is playing a role in front of the man and the two witnesses are interpreting this by stereotypical dramaturgic models.

There are a bunch of characters like the officers who are not an integral part of the story, but their role is significant because they represent an extraordinary knowledge compared to the ordinary characters of the film. We could say that they represent the knowledge of the creators. In the film *O, Brother, Where Art Thou* the deserters meet an old man who runs his own vehicle on the railways. This antediluvian with no home, no name, but scary bright eyes predicts all that will happen to the characters but these do not take him seriously. At the happy end of the story he appears again, but without any role, just as a suggestion of the film.

We could also mention the black guard of the tower in *The Hudsucker Proxy* that knows everything about the characters and dominates the time, or the big boss from *Intolerable Cruelty* who seems to be a professional adviser of the lawyer Messey. This character is presented in a

dehumanizing way, he is so old and sick that he cannot exist without his machinery, he can hardly breathe and he looks really disgusting. We can interpret him as existent only in the character's mind as a conscience, or a fear of becoming like him at the end of his career (doubly so as he appears once in Messey's nightmares).

In the Coen Brothers' newest film, *A Serious Man* that takes place in a Jewish community, there is a rabbi called Marshak with more or less the same function. The scene tries to be impressive, maybe scary for the boy who visits the rabbi. Marshak is always very busy "thinking", he tells big general truths about life. He is not intended to be taken seriously but he is not funny either. He just recalls a déjà vu feeling, because the way he is presented in his office, the parallel montage when the boy enters to him reminds us very much about the old lawyer from *Intolerable Cruelty* and about the entrance of Messey into his office.

These characters "out of the action" are always presented as different from others by their appearance in the film. They are often strangers from other parts of the world, out of society, isolated, dehumanized, very old or they belong to different minorities. Anyway, they are not those types that are usually presented in classic movies. Because they also represent an extra knowledge of narration, the classic narration style appears in a misshapen mirror by their existence.

In the classic style of narration the technique is inferior to the action; it is called transparent or invisible, aiming

to help the viewer to identify with the story<sup>11</sup>. In the films of the Coen Brothers, the identification is blocked many times. From one hand, because the style is not always transparent, they reflect to classic movie and to their own work using different techniques. From the other, they do not judge their characters; they do not have a categorical attitude regarding the moral problems of the film. Naturally, it differs from film to film (sometimes the main characters are offenders, sometimes they are honest little fellows, sometimes in between), but the way of telling the story does not make the viewer take any sides. In the Coen Brothers' newest film, *A Serious Man*, not just that the viewer is not taken into the story, but he cannot even understand the significance of the events without an Israelite lexicon. As a matter of fact, the ending, whether it is happy or not for the characters, doesn't have the same effect as it could have in the case of a classic way of presentation.

### *A last word*

In spite of the ironic attitude that sometimes can be discovered – and the fact that this outstanding point of view often becomes a source of humor –, these narrative solutions do not intend to be the simple parodies of classic narration. At least they don't reflect the classic style in a negative way. They are not obviously reflexive but by studying more films of the Coen Brothers, we can discover the purposefulness. Their films contain many

---

<sup>11</sup> David Bordwell, *op. cit.*



allusions to classic genres, conventional situations, characters and images and observing these overall, we can interpret certain processes more easily. Besides, the unusual way of narration – and the unusual solutions in general – always makes us,

even involuntary, think of the usual. So there is no need to any forced explanation to make the connection between the classic style and these particular cases in the Coen Brothers' films.