## A Review on Focalization

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## Abstract

In narratology, focalization is defined as the angle via which things are seen in the narrative world; also it is accounted as an element present in all narrative genres. As an independent discipline, focalization starts with Gerard Genette, and it undergoes various modifications from classical narratology to post-classical narratology. In fact, there are two basic domains for the discussions of focalization: 1. Genette's theory, 2. Post-Genettean approaches. Accordingly, this article aims at introducing focalization and the related notions to it, plus reviewing Genette's and post-Genettean approaches, in addition to making a background on focalization in the modernist view.

Key words: focalization, Genette's theory, post-Genettean approaches

## 1 Introduction

Regarding narrative theories, focalization is an element present in all narrative genres. This article tries to review the definitions and different approaches to the term focalization and related concepts. Accordingly, section 1 will provide general background on focalization introducing various attributions to it and associative concepts such as mood, point of view, filter, plus focalized and focalizer. Then, sections 2 will take notice of Genette's approach, and post-Genettean approaches to focalization. Finally, section 3 is a review on the modernist views to focalization regarding roots of focalization.

## 2 General Background on Focalization

## 2.1 Focalization, Mood, Point of View, Filter, etc.

To Jahn (2007), if one aims at dividing narratology into two major parts, narration and focalization appear as two suitable candidates. He defines narration as the telling of a story in a way that simultaneously respects the needs and enlists the co-operation of its audience; focalization as the submission of narrative information to a perspectival filter. Jahn (2005), in addition, claims that "functionally focalization is a means of selecting and restricting narrative information, of seeing events and states of affairs from somebody's point of view, of foregrounding the focalizing agent, and of creating an empathetical or ironical view on the focalizer."

Also, Toolan (2001) reports that focalization is interesting in that it highlights the "bidirectionality" of narrative: the focus on a particular object reveals that object and reveals the perspective or ideology from which that object is seen. Alternatively,

Bortolussi, and Dixon (2003) concede that "a theory of focalization should provide an account of the source of knowledge and perception within the text based on the relationship between the narrator and the characters" (pp. 166-167). To them, the way focalization appears in a text influences readers' understanding and interpretation of that text. Additionally, Simpson (1993) says: "intersecting with the system of narrative positions is Genette's typology of narrative 'mood,' which approximates most closely that dimension of narrative for which the term 'psychological point of view' has been reserved" (p.33). Regarding Simpson, Genette prefers to call this aspect of point of view focalization.

Likewise, on the origin of the concept, Toolan (2001) has noted that focalization is Gerard Genette's term which refers to a view-point from which things are implicitly seen, felt, understood and assessed, reflecting the cognitive, emotive, ideological, and spatiotemporal perspective of the narration. Genette (1972) calls this, "narrative mood", and argues that one can tell more or tell less what one tells, and can tell it according to one point of view or another, and this is the meaning of narrative mood. Later Genette seems to define some functions for what he calls as a participant's "vision" or "point of view": narrative information can furnish the reader with more or fewer details, in a more or less direct way, to keep a greater or lesser distance from what it tells, can regulate the information it delivers according to the capacities of knowledge of one or another participant in the story. Genette (1972) in addition denotes that "distance" and "perspective" are two chief modalities of that regulation of narrative information that is mood.

In addition, Bal (1991) remarks that Genette's focalization is based on two concepts: point of view which is synonymous with vision, and restriction of field:

These two are neither completely different from each other, nor completely identical. Furthermore, 'point of view' is used with two opposite meanings.

Among the definitions in the *Robert* dictionary of 'point of view', these two should be kept in mind: (1) 'set of objects, scene on which one fastens one's gaze,' and (2) 'particular opinion.' In the first definition which is more literal than the second, we are dealing with the object of the gaze; in the second, with the subject who sees or considers.

Bal follows that the term focalization is preferable to the traditional terms because it is more "technical" and can be used in a more restricted and extensive way; it excludes the psychological meanings of point of view; simultaneously it can extend to any object of the "gaze", whether the object be a character, a place, or an event. Bal's statement is problematic in the sense that she does not clarify that how the term focalization can be used in a more extensive way. Furthermore, she does not give any explanation of what the psychological meanings of point of view are to her, and how focalization excludes these meanings.

Nonetheless, Bal refers to internal focalization in Genette's typology, meaning that the characters, places, and events are based on a character, the subject of the presentation. In contrast, she maintains, external focalization is explained by a hypothetical spectator or a point of view in the radical, pictorial sense of the characters, the places, and the events. Finally, she concludes that a restriction of the field takes features from both of these two meanings of point of view: The object of the gaze is *limited* to what a spectator can see, but this spectator is nor hypothetical: it is a character. This idea thus corresponds to internal focalization with respect to the subject of the gaze and to external focalization with respect to its object, which is why the term focalization as Genette uses it is not univocal enough to account for the whole range of narrative possibilities.

Bal, moreover, adds that the concept of focalization includes the "gaze," the vision, plus having the abstract sense of "considering something from a certain angle."

From another angle, Miller (2006) concerns "center of consciousness" or "point of view" as old-fashioned terms, called in recent narratological theory "focalization". Based on Miller, all of these terms deal with the matter of "consciousness". However, it

seems these concepts cannot be used interchangeably; Miller's conceding can just refer to internal focalization, not the whole concept of focalization, because it is internal focalization which deals with consciousness. Beyond it, he later offers another definition:

"the term 'focalization' is drawn from optics. Its figurative base does not differ from 'point of view,' except that it defines 'point of view' not as a matter of looking from a certain position, but as a matter of getting things in focus (...)". (2006: 125)

Fludernik (1993) also indicates the term "point of view" referring to focalization and says: point of view is associated with perception or access to internal consciousness, and the basis for the textual analysis of them can be located in the presence and quality of deictic.

Abbott (2002), in addition, defines focalization as "the lens through which we see characters and events of the narrative" (2002: 66). In contrast, Chatman (1990) prefers the notion "filter" rather than "point of view", "perspective", or "focalization": " 'filter', on the other hand, seems a good term for capturing something of the mediating function of a character's consciousness- perception, cognition, emotion, reverie – as events are experienced from a space within the story world" (1990: 98). Based on him, "filter" "catches the nuance of the *choice* made by the implied author about which among the character's imaginable experience would best enhance the narration-which areas of the story world the implied author wants to illuminate and which to keep obscure" (1990: 98).

## 2.2 Focalizer and Focalized

"Focalizer" and "focalized" are two terms, very related to focalization. Regarding the former one, one may stick to Jahn (2005): "a focalizer is the agent whose point of view orients the narrative text." He, also, indicates that a text is anchored on a focalizer's point of view when it presents the focalizer's thoughts, reflections and knowledge, plus his/her actual and imaginary perceptions, in addition to his/her cultural and ideological orientation. Bal (1991), in addition, speaks of the medium of an agent other than the character who sees and seeing causes to be seen. Bal names this agent as "focalizer" and claims that it is an answer to the question of mood or "who sees?" raised in Genette's theory.

It is interesting to include "agents that function, *hierarchically*, in every narrative" based on Bal (1991) to locate the situation of focalizer and focalized in her approach:

Narrator	focalizer	actor
Narrating	focalizing	acting
The narrated	the focalized	the object of acting

Accordingly, the actor, which to Bal seems to mean the character, uses acting as his/her material to produce the story. In contrast, Bal states that the focalizer selects the actions and chooses the angle to present them; these actions produce the narrative with the help of narrator, whose job is putting the narrative into words. Bal completes her statement that theoretically each agent addresses a receiver, the actor addresses another actor, the focalizer addresses a "spectator"- the indirect object of focalizing-and the narrator addresses a hypothetical reader, sometimes the receivers are referred explicitly, and in other cases remain implied.

Bal also remarks that we should differentiate among these four, and it can resolve the problems in Genette's theory (Genette's theory will be elaborated in the following section):

The narrator: the subject of the narrating The narrated: the object of the narrating The focalizer: the subject of the focalizing The focalized: the object of the focalizing

Nonetheless, she does not go further to define types of focalizers. But considering focalized, she regards two types of perceptible and imperceptible focalized: the distinction is between what a hypothetical spectator can perceive by sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste, and what she cannot, the Genettian distinction between internal and external focalization. Bal furthermore argues that to her, "perceptible" indicates the presentation of an external focalized; "imperceptible" is used for a solely internal focalized like psychological material. She also emphasizes that this distinction has nothing directly to do with the focalizer, but characterizes only the nature of what is focalized.

For Toolan (2001) two types of focalized can be considered: viewing from outside or from within. In this sense, viewing from outside refers to the reporting the external, literally visible phenomena. Whereas, viewing from inside refers to the reporting of facts about feelings, thoughts, and reactions of characters. And regarding the types of focalizers, he argues that focalization may be fixed, tied to a single focalizer as in *What Maisie Knew*, or it may vary between two or more positions, like Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*.

## 3 Genette's Theory and Post-Genettean Approaches to Focalization

After Genette, there are numerous approaches to focalization, what follows is a list of "theoretical accounts" of focalization presented by Jahn (2005): Here is a (rather long) list of theoretical accounts of focalization:

Genette (1980 [1972]: 185-194 [building on Blin's (1954) concept of *restriction de champ*]); Bal (1983: 35-38); Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 71-85); Nünning (1989: 41-60); Vitoux (1982); Cordesse (1988); Toolan (1988: 67-76); Kablitz (1988); Edmiston (1989; 1991: Introduction and Appendix); Füger (1993); O'Neill (1994: ch. 4); Herman (1994); Deleyto (1996 [1991]); Nelles (1997: ch. 3); Jahn (1996, 1999). Focalization concepts have also been put to use in analyses of films (Jost 1989, Deleyto 1996 [1991], Branigan 1992: ch. 4), pictures (Bal 1985: ch. 7; Bal 1990) and comic strips (O'Neill 1994: ch. 4). Controversial issues are discussed in Genette (1988 [1983]: ch. 11-12), Chatman (1986), Bal (1991: ch. 6); Fludernik (1996: 343-347), Jahn (1996, 1999), Toolan (2001).

Generally speaking, theories of focalization can be divided in to two major classes: 1. Genette's theory, 2. post- Genettean theories. This categorization is in accordance with the distinction between classical and post-classical narratology. Herman and Vervaeck (2004) indicate that focalization exemplifies the two main strands in the shifts from classical to postclassical narratology, i.e. rehumanization and representation. The following sections review the concepts of focalization in these two classes.

## 3.1 Genette's Theory

Jahn (2007) refers to Gérard Genette as the one who opened the door for focalization to become an independent module in the narratological system. He points to Genette's two salient questions: who sees? And who speaks? As Jahn asserts, Genette distinguishes between these two and believes that the answer to them cannot be the same. In other words, a narrator and a focal character cannot be the same.

According to Genette (1972) there is a confusion between mood and voice, a confusion between the question who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective/ who sees?, and who is the narrator/ who speaks? To Genette, the latter is a very different question.

Back to Jahn (2007); Genette in *Narrative Discourse Revisited* revises his original formula "who sees?" as "purely visual, and hence overly narrow," and replaces it by the more general "who perceives?" Although this substitution makes a broader scope of vision for the focalizer, again the one who perceives never meets the one who speaks. In other words, the role of perceiver and speaker can never be blended. And this problem remains unsolved in Genette's model in spite of the fact that for a narrator there can be the possibility of giving turns to a focalizer and the focalizer can quit her/his turn to the narrator again. This is what actually happens in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example. In this novel, the narrator has a reflector mind of her/his own, s/he plus other reflector characters make the internal focalizing of the whole narrative.

Further, Genette (1972) claims that it is legitimate to envisage a typology of "narrative situation" to take in to account both mood and voice, but what is not legitimate is to present such a classification under the single category of "point of view". What follows is the "three-term typology" of Genette based on Genette (1972):

- 1. Narrator > character: Todorov's formula: where the narrator says knows more than the character, or more exactly says more than any of the character.
- 2. Narrator = character: the narrator says only what a given character knows); this is the narrative with "point of view" after Lubbock, or with "restricted field" after Blin; Pouillon calls it "vision with".
- 3. Narrator < character: the narrator says less than the character knows; this is the "objective" or "behaviorist" narrative, and Pouillon's term is "vision from without".

Genette asserts that he prefers the term "focalization" rather than *vision*, *field*, and *point of view*, and this notion corresponds Brook's and Warren's "focus of narration".

Nevertheless, the distinction between voice and vision appears not to be so clearcut, plus Genette fails to response that how one can figure out that in a novel of consciousness, which sentences belong to the character and which sentences blend the voices/visions of the character and the narrator.

Regarding types of focalization, Genette (1972) indicates that in the classical narrative, nonfocalized narrative, or narrative with zero focalization, can be situated as the first type of focalization. To him the second type is internal focalization including fixed, variable and multiple focalizations in which the story is perceived from the point of view of a character or characters. To Genette, in internal focalization, the focal character is never described or even referred to from outside, and his thoughts or perceptions are never analyzed objectively by the narrator. Genette also says that in fixed focalization, there is "restriction of field" and one constant point of view as in *The Ambassadors*. He continues that in variable focalization there are shifts among focal characters as in *Madame Bovary*, and in multiple focalization the same event may be evoked several times according to the point of view of several characters as in epistolary novels. His third type is external focalization in which readers are not allowed to know the characters thoughts and feelings like some of Hemingway's novels.

Paraphrasing Genette, Bal (1991) reports that in "non-focalized" narrative the narrator says more than the knowledge of the characters, whereas if the narrator says only what a given character knows, the narrative has "internal focalization", and in "external focalization" the narrator says less than the character knows. Beyond this, she indicates that in Genette's typology internal focalization means that the characters, places, and events are presented based on a character, the subject of the presentation. She points out that external focalization is told from the narrator with a point of view in the radical, pictorial sense based on the characters, the places, and the events, and sees only like a hypothetical spectator.

Jahn (2007), besides, demonstrates Genette's modes of focalization in this way: a). non-focalization or zero-focalization in which events are narrated from a wholly unrestricted or omniscient point of view, b). internal focalization in which the story's events are "focalized through" one or more story-internal reflector characters, and their perception, cognition, and thought, and c). external focalization which restricts itself to "outside views," reporting what would be visible and audible to a virtual camera.

How Genette draws a line between "non-focalization" or "zero-focalization", and "external focalization" is very debatable. To explain this in another way, on what criteria do events narrated by an "omniscient point of view" differ from those, narrated by an agent with "outside views"? It seems that Genette's model fails to answer this problem. However, in "non-focalization" or "zero-focalization", there is an agent of focalization with an omniscient area of vision, so how can it be called "non-focalization" or "zero-focalization" meaning no focalization? It seems these are some shortcomings of Genette's approach to focalization.

Moreover, Genette (1972) claims that the division between variable focalization and non focalization is very difficult, for the nonfocalized narrative can most often be analyzed as a narrative that is multifocalized *ad libitum*, in accordance with the principle "he who can do most can do least" (1972: 245). This seems to be a confusing claim which needs further elaboration and support.

Nonetheless, many narratologists refined and commented on Genette's model which resulted in the appearance of post-Genettean approaches.

## 3.2 Post-Genettean Approaches

Jahn (2007) refers to Bal and Rimmon-Kenan as the two main figures who were very influential on post-Genettean theories of focalization. Fludernik (1993), also argues that based on the discussion of Bal (1991), narratologists established focalization as a perceptional and ideological viewpoint anchored in narratological instances (the narrator or a character), or as camera-like focusing on external and internal sense data and controlling the accessibility of such sense data.

Moreover, regarding Bal (1991), a problem with Genette's formula is that knowledge and speech are mixed, and there is no distinction between mood and voice, or between sight and speech. In addition, she raises questions considering Genette's categorization of focalization. Referring to Jahn (2007), Bal raised an objection against the two concepts of Genette, external focalization and zero-focalization, because the former is vague about who sees, what is seen, and how it is seen, and the latter is problematic in the sense that even typical "non-focalized" passages are rarely entirely free of point of view, attitude, restriction of perceptual field, or emotional stance.

Bal's criticisms generally make sense, but "non-focalized" passages are rarely entirely free of point of view... is a bit questionable. Rarely entirely free should be substituted by never, because every piece of text is written by a human being that certainly reflects the attitude of the writer, her/his perceptions, feelings and the like. It seems it is impossible to find a text without any perception or attitude.

Apart from this, Bal (1991) argues that in the external focalization characters also are focalized, but they are focalized from without, which means that the narrative's center of interest is a character in the same way as internal focalization, but its development is seen from the outside. Bal criticizes Genette's classification of focalization on the ground that the difference between the non-focalized and the internally focalized narrative lies in the agent "who sees?"; in the first, the agent sees more than the character and in the second, the focalized character sees, and in the third, external focalization s/he does not see, s/he is seen. To Bal, the difference between number 2 and 3 is not between "seeing" agents, but between the objects of that seeing.

Further Jahn (2007) says that Bal mixes Genette's external and zero focalization under the single category of "external focalization", external not because things are

seen from the outside, but because they are imaginatively seen by the narrator who is external to the story. To complete Jahn, one may refer to Toolan (2001) who states that to Bal's focalization can be classified in to two main categories, external and internal.

External focalization refers to an orientation outside the story. Accordingly, the narrator/focalizer separation is neutralized, and focalization is independent of narration. In contrast, internal focalization occurs inside the setting of the events, and mostly involves a character-focalizer. However, Toolan (2001) has noted that Bal does not deliver a detailed discrimination of types of focalization, emphasizing rather the levels involved.

On the other hand, after Bal, the most influential figure seems to be Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, who has introduced the terms "perceptual facet", "psychological facet" and the "ideological facet" to focalization.

Toolan (2001) argues that Rimmon-Kenan (1983) indicates "a typology" of "facets of focalization". He, additionally notes that Rimmon-Kenan (1983), under the considerable influence of Uspensky (1973), attempts a typology of what she calls facets of focalization, the major ones being perceptual, psychological and ideological. Jahn (2007), accordingly, says it is the time when the direct impact of psychology, cognition, emotion, and ideology on perception emerges.

Referring to Rimmon-Kenan (1983), the story is presented in the text through the mediation of some "prism", "perspective", "angle of vision", verbalized by the narrator. Like Genette, she suggests the term focalization, but indicates that her reason for choosing it versus Genette's:

"(...) although it resides precisely in his treatment of it as a technical term. Genette's treatment has the great advantage of dispelling the confusion between perspective and narration which often occurs when 'point of view' or similar terms are used" (1983: 71)

Nevertheless, the critical point in Rimmon-Kenan's theory is that she regards the possibility of combination of focalization and narration, and this is against Genette's theory in which focalizers and narrators can never share their jobs.

Rimmon-Kenan (1983) points out facets of focalization. She concedes that the perceptual facet refers to perception (sight, hearing, smell, etc.), dealing with the focalizer's sensory range, determined by two main coordinates: space and time. The psychological facet, on the other hand, she asserts, concerns mind and emotions of the focalizer, with two determining components: the cognitive and the emotive orientation of the focalizer towards the focalized. Rimmon-Kenan (1983) also argues that by the cognitive component she means knowledge, conjecture, belief, memory, and regarding the emotive component, the "external/internal" opposition yields "objective" (neutral, uninvolved) v. "subjective" (coloured, involved) focalization.

However, the perceptual facet is debatable, in the sense that the word "perception" denotes and connotes a deeper understanding, insight, and awareness; it can not be limited to "sensory range". Accordingly, it shares many features with psychological facet which indicates mind and cognitive components. If this facet is the matter of physical senses, it should be renamed in a way which actually reflects the "sensory range".

Finally, Rimmon-Kenan sticks to Uspensky (1973) to suggest that the ideological facet refers to "the norms of the text", and consists of "a general system of viewing the world conceptually", to evaluate the events and characters of the story.

Basically, the 'norms' are presented through a single dominant perspective, that of the narrator-focalizer. If additional ideologies emerge in such texts, they become subordinate to the dominant focalizer, thus transforming the other evaluating subjects into objects of evaluation (Uspensky 1973: 8-9). Put differently, the ideology of the narrator-focalizer is usually taken as authoritative, and all other ideologies in the text are evaluated from this 'higher' position. In more complex cases, the single

authoritative external focalizer gives way to a plurality of ideological positions whose validity is doubtful in principle. Some of these positions may concur in part or in whole, others may be mutually opposed, the interplay among them provoking a non-unitary, 'polyphonic' reading of the text (Bakhtin 1973. Orig. publ. in Russian 1929); (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 81).

This last concept also raises a problem: If it deals with authority of the focalization, the degree of subjectivity/objectivity of the focalizer will also be concerned. Likewise, the emotive component is viewed in this way: "in its emotive transformation, the 'external/internal' opposition yields 'objective' (neutral, uninvolved) v. 'subjective' (coloured, involved) focalization" (p.80). Accordingly, how do these two facets differ from each other? One may say that generally this classification seems vague, and the facets overlap each other too much.

## 4 Focalization in the Modernist View

The twentieth century is the time for the emergence of the narrative with the use of internal focalization to represent the complex perceptions, feelings, moods, desires, and thoughts of the characters. The most famous modernist authors who used internal focalization "to offer inside views of characters" are Henry James, Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virgina Woolf, and so forth. The focus in the modern age is on the "individual perception", on the thoughts and challenges of the human being, on the "SELF", and on the inside of the characters rather than the external world. Therefore, the viewpoint of the stories reflects the consciousness of the characters. Herman et al. (2005) quoting from Lucas, has called this: "modernism's inward focalization". Herman et al. (2005), furthermore, discuss that in the modernist fiction, the world is perceived through the idiosyncratic outlook of an individual perceiver, and this is in contrast to the Victorian narrative in which mostly the omniscient point of view is dominant. Correspondingly, Genette (1972) believes that internal focalization is fully realized in narrations where the central character is limited absolutely to and strictly inferred from his focal position alone, and this is represented in the modern fiction and works of writers such as Woolf, Joyce, etc.

In addition, regarding Jahn (2007), at the beginning of the twentieth century, authors such as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, and many others perfected a style called "psychological realism" or "literary impressionism." He argues that the modernist writers are not interested in realistic representations of external phenomena, but in presenting the world as it appears to characters subject to beliefs, moods, and emotions; they look at a world shaped by individual perceptions, and they are fascinated by what they see.

It appears that Woolf is a very influential figure on the creation of this new perspective. Considering Parsons (2007), although Joyce and Richardson pioneered the new psychological realism, it is Woolf's formulation of this focus and technique in her essays "Modern Novels", and "Modern Fiction" that has mostly influenced modernist fictional methods. On the other side, this is the time in which varieties of narratological and stylistic techniques come out to reveal the "consciousness" or the mind of an individual. The techniques of "stream of consciousness" and "interior monologue" can be exemplified. Likewise, regarding focalization Genette (1972) points out to the modern novel which gives a floor to characters using techniques like "interior monologue", "immediate speech", and "free indirect style". Genette exemplifies Faulkner's novels and Joyce's.

In 1890, Jahn emphasizes the term "stream of consciousness" coined by William James; this is the time of the emergence of the modernist "novel of consciousness", a third-person narrative in which the world of the story is seen through the eyes of a character. Jahn (2007) reports that Henry James calls such perceiving characters "centers," "mirrors," or "reflectors," and narratologists later refer to them as "figural

media" (Stanzel), "focal characters" (Genette), "filters" (Chatman), and "internal focalizers" (Bal). Jahn (2007) goes on that a key feature of the modernist narrative technique is the creation of revelatory reflector characters like Clarisse Dalloway in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* or an advertisement canvasser in Joyce's *Mr. Bloom.* To Jahn modernists focus on a reflector's mind, the figural style tends to avoid exposition of background information, and it may restrict itself to recording a reflector's stream of associative consciousness.

In conclusion, since the term focalization was put forward, the form of internal focalization has opened up a new discussion in narratology; indeed there is a focus on the matter of *mind*, *cognition*, *consciousness*, and the like, and their role in the modern narrations. Also, the recent issues that Fludernik (2001) indicates have meant that focalization has entered a new phase of intensive scholarly debate. This new phase has commenced with Chatman (1990), and most recently Jahn (1996), who have attempted to reconceptualize narrative perspective.

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