Focalization in Comics as a Cognitive Concept

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Focalization in Comics

Focalization, the subjective filtering of narrative, has persisted as a controversial narratological term ever since it was first proposed. Recent discussion argues that focalization is constructed by the reader rather than being implicit in the narrative. Focalization as a construct of the mind belongs to cognitive narratology, a narrative theory that will ideally be supported by empirical investigations of reader comprehension. Meanwhile, increasing academic interest in graphic narrative has led to its own specific typology, such as distinguishing between verbal and visual focalization. However, research on focalization in graphic narrative has yet to arrive at a cognitive understanding supported by empirical analysis. This paper describes an experiment testing the validity of visual focalization as a cognitive concept for the understanding of graphic narrative. Overall, the results show a gradual distribution of visual focalization for each panel ranging from “external visual focalization” to “internal visual focalization.” Panels with similar formal aspects appear exclusively at either end of the spectrum. These formal aspects are also consistent with filmic shot types and attentional categories as discussed by Cohn, Taylor-Weiner, and Grossman (2012). The results point towards focalization as a valid cognitive concept for the study of graphic narrative.

Method

92 students (English and American Literature)...
- ...read a nine-page excerpt of City of Glass, David Mazzucchelli’s and Paul Karasik’s graphic novel adaptation of Paul Auster’s eponymous novel
- ...then identified 10 panels that, in their opinion, showed a subjective visual point of view (pov)
- ...did the same for 10 panels with an objective pov
- ...then answered questions about their reading habits, adapted from Cohn (2014)

Results

“Interest in Literature” and “Interest in Comics,” ranging from “very uninterested” to “very interested”

Participants selected every panel in the excerpt at least once for both categories: “images that suggest pov” and “images that do not suggest pov”

Selections for each panel were summarized in a ratio and put on a logit (log odds) scale from

\[ x > 0 \] (implying external focalisation) to \[ x < 0 \] (implying internal focalisation).

Some panels with distinct ratios are shown below:

external/internal focalization ratio (logit)

Interpretation

Panels at both ends of the scale share common formal features:

External focalization
- Long shots (−0.78 to −0.49)
- Medium shots (−1.86 to −0.68)
- Adjacent panels that contextualize perspective, for example vantage point of the character:

Internal focalization
- Panels that show character’s hands or other close-ups (+0.73 to +1.86)
- Adjacent panels that contextualize perspective, for example vantage point of the character:

Meanwhile

This paper is part of the research group “Hybrid Narrativity: Digital and Cognitive Approaches to Graphic Literature.” Our research group is dedicated to expanding quantitative literary analysis from textual to graphic literature. We work as a collaborative Digital Humanities group coming from diverse academic fields such as psychology, computer science, and English studies. Visit our blog to learn more about our work:
blogs.upb.de/graphic-literature

References:
Auster, Paul, Paul Karasik, and David Mazzucchelli (2005). adaptation of Paul Auster's eponymous novel
City of Glass, London: Faber and Faber.

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