Bleeding Through: 'The Making of'

5. "The Unreliable Narrator"

The kernel of Molly's story in a docufable

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Years ago, I knew a 93-year-old lady named Molly Frankel, who owned a battered Queen Ann Victorian house, about five years older than she was, on what was once a fancy corner lot just north of Carroll Avenue, in Angelino Heights. She had moved in somewhere between 1919 and 1928; had survived two husbands, one a possible suicide. No one knew the details for certain; or at least her relatives who might know wouldn't say. Even Molly didn't seem to have essential facts straight.

"My husband was a sporting man," she used to explain, meaning a smart dresser, a john for prostitutes, or a gambler. "I came to Los Angeles in 1928, right after the war, and got a job as a bookkeeper. His father saw I was a hard worker, running their business. So he more or less forced his son to settle down with me. I wasn't much to look at, but he knew I would help his boy stay at home more."

"Did you?"

Molly laughed, remembering something intimate or embarrassing about her first husband. Then she added: "Now my second husband I kept saying no to. He asked me to marry him five times a week. I exaggerate. He said to me once. He was a lawyer for my business. He says to me: 'We could organize very well together.'"

"So?"

"So he was home continuously."

Molly still ran her shop, located somewhere in the warehouse district on Main, near the flophouses. She sold "inside felt" that was used for the collars on suits. "I get my best sleep there," she said.

One Fourth of July, her grand-niece, who now lives in Vegas, came by to drive her to a party. Molly wore her better wig, had her beaded purse. But she was confused somehow by the entire event.

The next day, a Sunday, I saw Molly ambling down the hill at dusk, toward the bus. Then she realized her mistake, and told me: "I must have overslept. I missed a day somehow."

She was beginning to lose track of the difference between sunrise and sunset. Having just had her driver's license revoked, she would take the Temple Street bus into downtown, then get her store ready, waiting for the sun to come up, until finally it was clear that either there was a solar eclipse or she'd missed a day somehow.

Molly lived on the second floor and rented out the rest to a large Mexican family. They seemed desperate to keep Molly around, because she never raised the rent, and they knew that her family coveted her property. I was invited to visit Molly once at her house, and found her seated in the kitchen, making toast over the stove, using a forties vintage wire toaster that sat on the gas burner. Her built-in cupboards were bulging with depression glass – pink and rose dishes crammed so tight that they were about to spring the lock. Up in her attic – some 1,200 square feet of raw space – I found, hidden behind a lateral support beam, a dusty brown bag tied with rope. I asked her what this was, and she shrugged, but said I could have it if I wanted. Inside were four books from the W.E.B. Du Bois Club – imprints from the early thirties. Was Molly a thirties Socialist?

"Must have been my sister. She was the reader."

"This has been here for fifty years. Was your sister involved in politics?"

"I don't go up here much."

Later I found out that her husband, apparently the organized one, had hanged himself up in the attic. But no one could say for certain.

Across the street, inside a huge Craftsman house, another of the matrons in the neighborhood had died in her late seventies, and left all her clothing stacked neatly, like fossil sediment, one on top of the other, from 1918 as a Temperance activist to 1983. Apparently, the living room was large enough to hold over three hundred people at her niece's

wedding in the early fifties. Now her niece's daughter, a very serious young nurse, had moved in to keep the family interest going – just her and her boyfriend in 7,500 square feet.

The neighbors told her to listen for ghosts. Then after a few weeks, apparently, a rattle developed up in her attic. It would wake her up at night. Finally, out of purely secular desperation for a good night's sleep, she walked up the attic steps and asked her dead aunt for a truce. I'll keep the door closed up here, she offered, if you'll stop waking me up at night. And that was enough apparently.

One early evening I saw Molly on her way to the Temple Street bus again. I stopped her, and insisted that it was sundown. She laughed at me, but agreed to wait long enough to find out. Then, as the sky darkened and the night breezes started, she finally apologized, saying that ever since that Fourth of July party last month she kept getting her days mixed up.

That was about ten years ago. Molly's family took the house, and put her in a senior citizen's home, where she grew enormously fat, and may have been happy for all I know. She died five years later, apparently older than she admitted to, somewhere around a hundred.

It must be strange to live in a world that utterly transforms around you, as if you were an immigrant in your own house. As I explained earlier, from 1928 (or 1919), the area went from mixed Anglo and Jewish bourgeois to prostitutes and drug dealers down the corner in the early seventies. On Sunset Boulevard, there had once been gyms where the young Anthony Quinn trained to be a boxer in the thirties, then thought better of it, and worked on Sundays in the church of Sister Aimee Semple McPherson. Not a whisper of all that remains, except the Jensen center, which had declined into a drug contact by the late fifties, and had long since turned its bowling alleys into discount stores.

There are practically no fragments left of Molly's life, and certainly no memories in the house, which has since been sold and renovated into upscale apartments. I have no idea how I would find out precisely where Molly lied. "I hide a few years," she used to say. I don't even really know if her life was dowdy or melodramatic. Like that of the Vietnamese whom I

interviewed, hers is a history of ways to distract information more than erase it.

That is more or less the spirit of unreliable narrator. It is a story based on how we forget or repress memory.[1] Clearly it has a literary

1 Ways of Lying – a few narrative devices involving an unreliable narrator: a) Announcing the mental weakness of the character within the first paragraph (usually in the first person) as symptomatic of an affliction, or as the moment after unsettling sleep, when the dream cannot be shaken loose yet. For example, Gogol's Poprishchin in "Diary of a Madman" has trouble waking up to get to work, and seems disoriented still as he walks into the dreary Russian cold. In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, in the third person, of course, the symptom is identified in the first line. Or take the opening of the novel *The Blind Owl* by Iranian master Sadegh Hedayat (1903–1951): "There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker." And, of course, the model openings in Poe and from Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. b) When the narrator "writes" unreliable entries directly on the imaginary page. The classic example is Gogol's "Diary of a Madman", where Poprishchin loses control of his diary when he can write 'Spain' only as the word 'China': "China and Spain are really one and the same country… If you don't believe me, then try to write 'Spain,' and you'll end up writing 'China.'" And, of course, the many tricks of misremembering on the page that Sterne performs. c) When the narrator clearly refuses to discuss a crucial event that the reader senses. This is very typical of the caricature of the novel of sociability in eighteenth-century literature. In noir fiction, this device allows the murderer to feel morally justified, while the reader senses that this denial will come home to roost. Deleuze and Guattari identify this hiding of events as "fundamental forgetting," "the nothing that makes us say 'whatever could have happened to make me forget where I put my keys, or whether I have mailed that letter?'" The characters have forgotten something that must be fundamental, because they seem lost without it. See also Deleuze and Guattari's chapter on the novella in *A Thousand Plateaus*: the evacuated pre-history that is essential to the novella (the forgotten diegesis); the events that are a phantom presence, but that no character chooses to remember (narrate to us). Kleist's play *Prince Frederick of Homburg* is an interesting case of whether the fundamental forgetting is willful or involuntary. The director of any performance of the play must decide whether the prince is dreaming or not, because the character is never allowed to know. d) Hurricane in the eye: once the unreliable parameters are established in the story, no matter how outrageous these are, they must exist in a world of absolute verisimilitude, as in Gregor Samsa's household (*Metamorphosis*), or the

tradition behind it: from eighteenth-century fiction in particular (the Münchhausens and Uncle Tobys); in Russian literature after Gogol's short stories[2]; German and Central European fiction after 1880[3]; the Romantic fascination with demolished historic places as unreliable narrators, the absent presence that in Michelet's words are "obscure and dubious witnesses" (1847; see Orr).[4] Virginia Woolf's emptied rooms where the remains of memory are displaced[5]; American tall tales that Mark Twain loved; in Roland Barthes's *S/Z*; in noir fiction by Jim Thompson or David Goodis, where the narrator is a criminal who has to repress what he does, and lie to the reader[6]; in the broad crisis of representation in cinema (see Stam et al. 97–103)[7] that I discuss in the next section [of

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responses to the runaway nose in Gogol's story. e) Interruptions: as if to suggest something too painful to remember but essential to the story; possibly to shift the blame for something the reader cannot know. In that sense, much stream-of-consciousness fiction uses the unreliable narrator: the deliberately erased story that the narrator wants to explain but will omit. f) The matter of degree: obviously these devices appear to some degree in all fiction. In some cases, however, they dominate the structure and the chain of events.

2 Gogol's "Diary of a Madman" and "The Nose" are the classic format – the junction between Romantic irony and modernist collage – repeated in Dostoyevsky's "The Crocodile," in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and in absurdist fiction and theater of the fifties.

3 A particular favorite of mine, gruesome I admit, is the short story "The Autopsy," by Georg Heym (1887–1912), German Expressionist poet, playwright, and novelist. A dead man is losing memory while the doctor does an autopsy.

4 For a critique of historical culture, see Partner.

5 Woolf's "A Haunted House" is among the most abbreviated examples I know.

6 Also in novels about amnesiacs, like Cornell Woolrich's *The Black Curtain*.

7 For the following, see Stam et al., 97–104: Borrowing from the writings of Genette, the unreliable narrator in film is defined usually as one type of voice-over: the "embedded" narrator – one of the characters who is embedded in the action. The embedded narrator then becomes a subset of the "intra-diegetic" narrator: any form of interior voice-over. For the story to "work," the audience must sense that these voices are "unreliable," that the intra (insider) narrator has a stake in lying, may not "see straight" in the heat of the moment. In opposition to this "intra" variant is the "extra-diegetic." "Extra," as in outside: a voice-over from a character not in the scene, who provides exposition primar-

History of Forgetting] (how film about Los Angeles distracts the real space; the unreliability of television as political memory).

"In old apartments," writes Bruno Schulz, speaking through the voice of a father, "there are rooms which are sometimes forgotten. Unvisited for months on end, they wilt between the walls and … close in on themselves" (67–68). The Father went inside one of these collapsed rooms, and found that "slim shoots grow [in the crevices] … filling the gray air with a scintillating filigree lace of leaves." But by nightfall, they are "gone without a trace." "The whole elusive sight was a fata morgana, an example of the strange make-believe of matter which had created a semblance of life."

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ily. Among the films usually cited in this discussion are: Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (the "lying flashback"); Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*; Weir's *Breaker Morant*; Kurosawa's *Rashomon*; Altman's *Fool for Love*; Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire*. When *Laura* is cited, that brings to mind another cache of films altogether, to which I would add *Usual Suspects* (1995) – stories where a suspect's memory of a crime is re-enacted from voice-over, but proves to be a red herring, or a lie. Among film theory cited are: Sarah Kozloff *Invisible Storytellers* (1988); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (1978); Francesco Casetti, *D'un regard l'autre* (1986); and essays on Hitchcock; Guido Fink on *Laura* and *Mildred Pierce*. However, in this project, I found the omissions by voice-over and flashback more appropriate. For example, Barthes in *Image–Music–Text* suggests how props and the gaps between characters imply unreliable memory. Another useful form is how short-term memory operates as montage in experimental cinema – the appropriation or the repetition of familiar texts as loops in films, e.g. Rybczinski's *Tango*. I also would consider Buñuel's "documentary" *Land Without Bread* very much an "unreliable" use of denotation. The extra-diegetic voice-over, usually a manly baritone, is "lying." He contradicts with surgical precision what is undeniably real footage by Buñuel's crew – of a truly miserable cluster of towns known as Las Hurdes in Spain. Finally in this partial list: all forms of "upside-down" animation are unreliable narrators, e.g. the animated cartoon – see my *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*. By upside-down, I mean gravity upside down, spatiality upside down, customs upside down (e.g., Tex Avery), as opposed to barely noticed mattes in live action, or heads inserted digitally on another body.

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