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Narration from beyond: Mary Alice and the justified viewer

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Whether we flaunt our addiction to television series or conceal it from our peers and betters, serial watching is likely to cause some feeling of guilt in an academic's conscience. As for devoting valuable research time to such objects, it still seems to require some justification if not apology, as the following observations, gleaned from serious academic work on the subject, indicate. Jennifer Hayward, in *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*, before developing her own approach to serial fiction, finds it necessary to remind her reader of the traditional attitude of intellectuals: "soap operas have been derided as a mindless and archetypal 'female' narrative form".[1] She goes on to suggest that "One way to escape the need, so central to the habitus of academics, to evaluate and then canonize particular texts is to focus on function rather than 'quality'."[2] In his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, "Film and television narrative", Jason Mittell is more explicitly apologetic in his vindication of television series:

> It might appear that popular film and television, as mainstream mass media, require little effort to comprehend the stories they tell; after all, they are typically designed for millions of viewers as an entertaining diversion.[3]

Yet, he concludes,

> at their most complex, television narratives […] counter the stereotype of the television audience as passive couch potatoes. Instead, such narratives help create highly engaged, participatory viewers.

Of course, the critical prejudices against which Hayward or Mittell react are nothing new: Dickens's serial novels came under heavy fire from highbrow critics who saw their popular appeal and mass consumption as proof of their low aesthetic value.

My contribution is not intended as another refutation of strictures against serial viewing, but merely seeks to reflect, from the perspective of narrative theory, on the subjective pleasures experienced while watching the first four seasons of *Desperate Housewives* as a rank-and-file consumer of series. Of these pleasures, the most enduring I have found to be provided by the voice-over narration as heard on the original version.

The first voice we hear in the pilot episode is that of the female narrator, Mary Alice Young, played by actress Brenda Strong:

> My name is Mary Alice Young. When you read this morning's paper,[4] you may come across an article about the unusual day I had last week. Normally, there is never anything noteworthy about my life, but that all changed last Thursday. Of course everything seemed quite normal at first. I made breakfast for my family. I performed my chores. I completed my projects. I ran my errands. In truth, I spent the day as I spent every other day, quietly polishing the routine of my life until it gleamed with perfection. That's why it was so astonishing when I

> decided to go to my hallway closet and retrieve a revolver that had never been used.
>
> My body was discovered by my neighbour, Mrs Martha Huber, who had been startled by a strange popping sound.

I shall return later to the effects of the metaleptic address to the audience, which playfully abolishes the boundary between the diegetic world to which the character of Mary Alice belongs and the real world of the viewers/listeners.[5] At this stage, I only wish to stress that this device, combined with the conceit of narration from beyond the grave, acts as an emphatic marker of fictionality, similar in its function to the "Once upon a time" of fairy tales. We therefore willingly suspend our disbelief to follow Mary Alice through the looking glass into the fictional world.

With one notable exception in Season Three Episode Sixteen when, also from beyond the grave, Rex Van de Kamp takes over,[6] her voice will frame each episode and shape our viewing throughout, even though, after the first instalments, Mary Alice's vocal presence is mostly confined to the recaps, teasers, and endings. Voice-over narration in *Desperate Housewives* performs obvious unifying and structural functions, and Rex's brief temping as narrator follows the same principles while confirming that, on *Desperate Housewives*, death is a prerequisite for characters to qualify as narrators,[7] a situation which may drive classical narratologists to terminological confusion if not desperation.

The best of both worlds

Before her death, Mary Alice was a character—the most desperate of all—inhabiting the diegetic world to which her friends still belong. When she uses the pronoun 'I', it can refer either to herself as character, or as narrator. She therefore fulfils the basic conditions for being regarded as a character-narrator, or homodiegetic narrator. Besides, her suicide makes her central to the main plot line of the first season, since her fatal pulling of the trigger is precisely what triggers the dynamics of investigation and gradual revelations about her past.

Yet, death endows the narrating 'I' with powers normally granted only to omniscient narrative agencies. Mary Alice thus enjoys the best of both worlds: as a former participant in the story world, she can relate her past emotional engagement with the other characters, her first-hand experience of life on Wisteria Lane, in a way that a non-character narrator could not. As an omniscient narrator, she is ubiquitous, neither here nor there but everywhere at all times, and plays havoc with deictics. In this respect, her literally disembodied voice epitomizes the characteristics of voice-over, which, in the words of Sarah Kozloff, "comes from another time and space, the time and space of the discourse."[8] Mary Alice's omniscience manifests itself in various ways, most of them familiar to novel readers. In particular, she has direct access to the characters' thoughts, motives, secret plans and actions. She knows everything about their past, including details unlikely to have been disclosed to her when alive, and this she puts to full use in her humorous summaries of characters' lives. Naturally, she does not share all her knowledge with the audience, especially where her own secrets are concerned, but then, this is manipulation of the most conventional kind, practised by homodiegetic as well as heterodiegetic narrators in fiction, who hold back essential information, the better to excite the audience's curiosity.[9] In serial fiction, whether of the printed or visual kind, this device is vital to the continuing existence of the work or the show.

Mary Alice also knows about the future, about which she discloses just enough to make us wriggle in anticipation of the next instalments or season, a proleptic power she shares with other omniscient narrators. Her use of the past tense to narrate the characters' present dramatized on screen should be understood as a marker of fictionality, not of temporality, as Käte Hamburger convincingly demonstrated in her analysis of the "epic preterite".[10] Besides, the grammar signals the ontological disjunction between the narrator—whose existence is purely verbal—and the diegetic world where characters anthropomorphically experience the irreversible passing of time together with their own spatial limitations.

In many ways, Mary Alice's story-telling relies on techniques routinely used in written narratives. Her status as dead character-narrator is not medium specific either. However, it could be said of voice-over narration in general that it, too, enjoys

the best of both worlds: the discursive and the visual. As Sarah Kozloff observes, "'narrated' films are hybrids" combining oral story-telling, one of the oldest modes of narration, and "cinematic story-telling, one of the youngest, most technologically dependent".[11] Whereas in the case of written narratives, the term 'voice' is used metaphorically, in voice-over narration, as in traditional oral story-telling, the narrator's voice has a genuine existence and presence as sound. In the debates on the vexed question of who really narrates in fiction films, one of the views often stated, among others by Sarah Kozloff, André Gaudrault and François Jost,[12] is that, even in voice-over narration, the story is, in fact, communicated by an image-maker. I have neither the wish nor the competence to join the theoretical fray on this subject. Obviously, the story world and events in *Desperate Housewives* are communicated to the audience through a complex combination of spoken words, moving pictures and music, the finished product being the result of various operations and of collective work. However if we leave aside the actual making of and remain at the level of the series as narrative fiction, we are explicitly invited to accept the conceit that the images on screen are conjured up by Mary Alice's own unrestricted sight, so that there is no discrepancy between what is shown to the audience and what she is able to see from beyond the grave, a principle she states in the teaser of Season One Episode Two: "Of course, what is visible to the dead could also be seen by the living if they'd only take the time to look." This is precisely what we viewers do, week after week, episode after episode, but the framing conceit and the permanence of the narrator's voice imply that our activity as audience is mediated and shaped by our actual listening to Mary Alice's story telling and our *let's pretend* game of watching with her. In his work on the voice in cinema, Michel Chion reminds us that,

> [s]ince the very dawn of time, voices have presented images […]. The very first image presenter is the mother […]. In every master of ceremonies and storyteller as well as every movie voiceover, an aspect of this original function remains.[13]

Thus we simultaneously surrender to the regressive pleasure of bed-time stories and to addictive serial viewing, while enjoying gratification of a more sophisticated sort, itself partly dependent on voice-over narration.

My central contention here is that, though different viewers may be affected to varying degrees, voice-over narration in *Desperate Housewives* operates as an effective rhetorical instrument persuading us to watch and to go on watching with Mary Alice.

A powerful rhetorical instrument

Voice-over is both a musical instrument and a communication tool. Mary Alice's voice first works through our sense of hearing: with its intimate presence experienced by millions of viewers, the clarity of its diction, the strategic insertion of pauses, the rising intonation often expressing amusement, it acts as a weapon of mass seduction, a finely tuned instrument registering Mary Alice's reactions to the spectacle of life on Wisteria Lane, and reverberating them in our own consciousness.

This aural intimacy is compounded with direct addresses to the audience, as in the opening words of the pilot, and later, in standard phatic phrases such as "you see"—here revivified by the superimposition of its literal meaning. Since each episode, except Season Three Episode Sixteen, ends with Mary Alice's comments, we are gently but regularly recalled from the world of dramatic illusion. Thus, the intimate presence of the voice, narrating in the past tense, fulfils the function of distancing us from the moving pictures on screen. So does the interaction of words and images which provides a source of humour and irony, through various rhetorical means, among which the mismatching of register and images. Here, for instance, in Season Two Episode Four, is Mary Alice's summary of the reasons for David Bradley's success as a lawyer:

The irony originates not in a straightforward contradiction between words and images, but in a double contrast: first, between the understatements used by the narrator, and the crudeness of Bradley's actions shown on screen; second, between the appropriateness of Mary Alice's expressions to the professional context, and the lawyer's improper behaviour and abuse of his professional position. The humorous effect of understatement carries a satirical sting and induces a cynical vision which we adopt, since sharing the ironist's amused detachment gives a gratifying sense of superiority.

Sometimes, the mismatching of register and subject is borrowed from the mock-heroic tradition: hence Mary Alice's use of military terms and metaphors to comment on domestic conflicts or sexual competition on Wisteria Lane, as she does in the teaser of Season Two Episode Thirteen, "There's Something About a War", when Edie Britt's enjoyment of a black and white war film is brutally interrupted by Carl changing channels to watch a football game. With a promise of erotic games, Edie induces Carl to follow her to the bedroom, ties him firmly to the bed, and returns to her war film while her lover screams upstairs:

> If there was one thing Edie Britt understood, it was the nature of war. After two failed marriages and countless rocky romances, she had learnt that love was a battlefield and the easiest way to survive the carnage was total surrender. But the day comes for every soldier when she must take a stand and fight. You see, when it came to men, Edie had a battle

> plan all her own. Yes, Edie Britt understood the nature of war. She also knew that to the victor go the spoils.

Another recurring device consists in the interplay of literal and figurative meanings. Usually, in such cases, what we see on screen literalizes the narration. A case in point can be found in the teaser of the opening episode of Season Four, which works on various levels—rhetorical, narrative and reflexive. While Edie's careful staging of her fake suicide is followed by her horrified realization that Carlos will come too late to save her, Mary Alice comments in her ironic tone:

> The first thing you should know is that Edie Britt never intended to die […]. You see, to hold on to her man, Edie knew she had to find the perfect moment to let go. Sadly for Edie, her timing was fatally flawed […].

When Carlos realizes what has happened and rushes to untie Edie from the ceiling, the narrator delivers this parting shot:

> And this is how Carlos Solis arrived just in the nick of time to save the life of Edie Britt. Of course, had he known what he was about to do to his life, he would have let her hang there.

The teaser offers a near-literal visualization of a cliff-hanger continued from the last image of the previous season, a comic manipulation of fictional time and real time, as, in terms of the viewer's temporal experience, Edie Britt has been left with her feet dangling for weeks. Mary Alice's exploitation of the discrepancy between the figurative meaning of "hold on", "let go", "fatally", "let her hang there" and their literalization on screen manifests a black humour apparent from the start of the series, and offers a parodic double of her own suicide. As in previous examples, word and image do not contradict each other or compete with each other, but work in combination to produce their humorous and rhetorical effects. The only discursive effects which could exist independently of the filmic medium are the paradox expressed in the oxymoron "to hold on" "she had to let go"—though much of the black humour would be lost—and the proleptic narratorial warning "had he known

what he was about to do to his life". It should also be stressed that the discrepancies work both ways: Mary Alice's comments and politely amused voice keep emotion or identification at bay and alter our interpretation of the images, while these, in turn, heighten our sense of fun. Besides, irony arising from the interaction of discourse and on-screen scenes echoes, at the rhetorical level, the central diegetic/dramatic theme of misleading appearances.

Reflections, reflexivity, and the exposure of illusion

The term 'reflection' in relation to *Desperate Housewives* has two meanings: one, abstract, relates to Mary Alice's introductory and concluding gnomic pronouncements; the other refers to the specular effects induced by symmetry, doubles, repetitions and mise-en-abyme. Reflections of the first type are reminiscent of the moral justification offered by novelists at a time when fiction was considered, if not downright sinful, at least responsible for encouraging futile pleasures and immorality. Mary Alice's generalisations also hark back to ancient traditions of tales, fables, and moral allegories (she explicitly introduces Episode Ten of Season One as a morality play with its cast of characters), though it is doubtful that her maxims are meant to be taken seriously. Death, it would appear, has endowed her with a wisdom that she fatally lacked when alive, and with an ability to unveil truth—albeit selectively—which, in turn, validate her story-telling: in other words, as viewers/listeners, we tend to accept her presentation of the diegetic world, characters and events as true.

As for the second type of reflections, it will by now have been made apparent that the narrative conceit and Mary Alice's persuasive rhetoric assign to the viewers a position which mirrors that of the narrator: as already mentioned, we see what she sees, which is more than any character can see. For instance, in the scene of Season One Episode Two when John narrowly manages to escape through a window before Carlos finds him in bed with Gabrielle, only the top part of John's body, dressed in a shirt, is visible to Carlos, whereas we get a full view of the young gardener's back naked from the waist down, with Mary Alice observing that Gabrielle—who can't see either but knows—"was quickly reminded that what Carlos couldn't see couldn't

hurt her". An obvious consequence of Mary Alice's omniscience is that, with no transgression of the initial perceptual principle, we are privy to the characters' thoughts, facial expressions unseen by others, and secret undertakings preferably conducted in darkness. Our knowledge, however, does not amount to Mary Alice's all-embracing knowledge. If it did, the series would die a premature death. Thus, just as it is vital to keep a balance between narration and dramatization, it is also necessary that, at crucial stages, our reactions and perceptions should mirror the characters'. A particularly memorable case occurs with the close-up on the sandwich oozing cheese, in the hotel scene of Season One Episode Six. By magnifying the object on which Bree's gaze focuses, the camera induces in the viewer a similar disgusted fascination. From a technical angle, these perceptual and emotional mirror effects are achieved via shifts in focalization, which enable us to share a character's perspective. Our position in relation to the story-world oscillates, therefore, between temporary immersion in the scenes on screen and ironic distance from the characters and events controlled jointly by the narrative voice and the camera.

A basic motivation for serial watching or reading, namely the harmless prying into others' secrets, is repeatedly foregrounded in *Desperate Housewives*. Sometimes, this is done visually, as in the shot of Gabrielle reading a magazine entitled *Soap Opera Secrets* (Season One Episode Eight). Often, however, it is Mary Alice who draws our attention to the parallel between our motivation as viewers and the characters' love of gossip and scandal. For instance, her closing remarks to Season One Episode Sixteen—an episode centred on Maisy Gibbons's arrest for prostitution—apply to viewers of the series as well as to the series' characters, and, in case the audience had missed the metafictional nature of her comments, Mary Alice once more leaps over the boundary between fiction and reality in her promise of more and, possibly, juicier scandalous revelations to come:

> Every one loves a scandal, no matter how big or small. After all, what could be more entertaining than watching the downfall of the high and mighty? What could be more amusing than the public exposure of hypocritical sinners? Yes, everyone loves a scandal and if, for some reason, you're not enjoying the latest one, well, the next one is always around the corner.

The medium too is the object of reflexive observations by the narrator, who, in one of her aphorisms, states: "Yes, cameras are tools designed to capture images. But in truth, they can capture so much more."(Season Two Episode Seven).

Reflexivity becomes a source of pleasure as we are humorously encouraged to scrutinize our own serial viewing while actually watching the series: the narrator's irony is exercised at the viewers' expense though our recognition of this sophisticated form of irony atones for whatever intellectual or moral degradation may be jokingly implied. The fact that, with the advent of VCR and DVD, we have, for some time now, been able to watch series at our own pace, going forward and backward at will, replaying scenes or episodes as often as we wish, allows watching practices to become increasingly analogous to reading practices. It also means that the writers and producers of recent series have had to take the consequences of this technological development into account. From an academic perspective, it makes it easier to indulge in the serious pleasures of analyzing and theorizing.

In the present case, concentrated watching of *Desperate Housewives* has not only clarified the reasons for its attractiveness to myself as viewer: it has also operated as an instrument magnifying—often in a literally visual sense—theoretical issues regarding the nature of illusion in narrative fiction, the interactions of word and image, the respective positions of narrator and audiences. Academic research shares with serial television fictions a resistance to closure, hence the provisional nature of my conclusions. In keeping with the structural principles of the series, I would now like to return to the opening metalepsis—"When you read this morning's paper, you may come across an article about the unusual day I had last week"—Mary Alice's way of inviting us to enter the diegetic world. The temporal markers, "this morning's paper", "last week" and, later, "last Thursday", function as operators of illusion by erasing the frontier between fictional and real time and space. It should also be noted that, at this introductory stage, the narration is presented as taking place in linear time, with the present as reference point for the narrator, viewers, and characters alike. However, the illusion is soon undermined: whatever reality effect might have been achieved by Mary Alice's address to the audience is shattered by the revelation

that she is narrating from beyond the grave. This transgression of realistic boundaries amplifies and draws attention to the ontological nature of the inaugural narrative metalepsis.[14] At this point, fantastic conventions interfere with and destabilize the initial generic signals of domestic realism. As for the narrator's temporal position, it ceases to be related to the present fictionally experienced by the characters, when she states, later in the pilot episode "I was laid to rest on a Monday", instead of "on Monday". Posthumous narration does not only literalize the disjunction between image and discourse in voice-over film as we have seen: it also magnifies the disjunction between character and narrator functions in homodiegetic narratives. The difference in levels of existence could hardly be more clearly manifested. At the receiving end, our "vacation from the real world", to paraphrase Gabrielle Solis, implies our own metaphorical death as we break free—in imagination—from our mooring in time and space, and focus our perceptions and attention on the illusionistic world on screen. I would contend firstly that metalepses counteract the naturalisation of moving pictures and highlight the trompe-l'oeil nature of film, a medium which produces the illusion of a three-dimensional world and of continuous movement. Secondly, I would suggest that narration from beyond serves as an allegory of communication between fictional narrators in general and flesh-and-blood audiences who agree to play the role of narrative audience, a term defined by Peter Rabinowitz as "an imaginary audience that takes the narrator as 'real'".[15] Like the little girls and their pretend fancy dress tea-party in the bookends of Season Two Episode Three,[16] we self-consciously engage in a game of make-believe. If manipulation there is, it is fully accepted by consenting adults who know that the handcuffs are just for fun: unlike Rex whose SM role-games meet with retribution in the form of a stroke, we can happily go on indulging our serial viewing addiction at no great risk to anyone.

The only danger, in the case of *Desperate Housewives*, a rather harmless one for the spectator, is that of overdosing on the melodramatic plots, the extravagant revelations and repetitive family secrets which increasingly fill the episodes without the relief and distancing of Mary Alice's ironic voice, relegated to its mere framing function. I do not know if the writers and producers themselves became aware of the

risk. What is certain, however, is that, suddenly, in the teaser of Season Four Episode Fifteen, there was Mary Alice once more in great story-telling form. The keen pleasure experienced at this unexpected return of her full-blown vocal presence, and revival of her narrative skills, adding high value to the banal scene on screen, confirmed that her voice-over narration may well be the main reason why some viewers at least stay tuned:

> The incident, as it would come to be known, happened late on a Tuesday afternoon. Witnesses included an old woman, a blind man, and a young boy.
>
> The old woman, whose hearing was not what it used to be, saw Bree Hodge emerge from her house in a way that told her she was upset about something.
>
> The blind man, whose hearing had become more acute, heard Edie say "Hi, Bree, what's up?" in a way that suggested that Edie wasn't expecting trouble.
>
> The young boy, who is not yet eleven, heard Bree Hodge say "I saw you kissing my husband" but he couldn't understand why someone would be angry about kisses which he thought grown-ups liked.
>
> As the old woman pretended to clip hedges she'd already clipped, she saw the body language of her neighbour change.
>
> As the blind man listened in, he heard Bree say "What are you thinking, Edie! We're supposed to be friends." "We are friends. I am not interested in Orson." The young boy then heard Edie add "So stop acting like such a bitch", which included a word he was not allowed to use.
>
> The old woman then saw Bree Hodge clench her fist.
>
> A second later, the blind man heard a slap and the young boy saw Edie grab her cheek.
>
> As the two parted company, a thought occurred to all those who had witnessed the incident, that right there, on peaceful Wisteria Lane, the battle lines and been drawn and someone was going to get hurt.

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NOTES

[1] Jennifer Hayward, p. 9.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[3] Jason Mittell, p. 167.
[4] This is what the narrator actually says. The subtitle is shorter, and loses some of the force of the metalepsis.
[5] In its rhetorical sense, metalepsis refers to a figure akin to metonymy which substitutes the effect for the cause or the cause for the effect. As used in narrative theory, at least since Gérard Genette's *Figures III*, the term refers to a transgression of the separation between narrative levels, especially between the level of narration—the extra-diegetic level—and the level(s) of narrated events—the diegetic/intradiegetic levels.
[6] Season Three Episode Sixteen: "My name is Rex Van de Kamp. I always hated cemeteries when I was alive. Now that I'm dead, I like them even less. Here's where I used to live. A whole lot nicer, don't you think?"
[7] I have not yet watched Season Five, but I understand that my remark is further validated by Edie becoming a narrator after her death.
[8] Sarah Kozloff, p. 2.
[9] Gérard Genette uses the rhetorical term "paralipsis" to label such deliberate holding back of information. See *Figures III*, p. 93-94 and p. 211-212.
[10] Käte Hamburger stresses the a-temporality of the "epic preterite" which she regards as characteristic of fictional narration: "*The change in meaning* […] *consists in that the preterite loses its grammatical function of designating what is past*" (emphasis in the original), p. 66. She further observes "That the events […] are not experienced as past does not imply that they are experienced—by us—as present. For the experience of past-ness is as such only meaningful in relation to an experience of present and future – and this implies nothing other than that the experience of the present, as well as that of past and future, is the experience of reality. […] the a-temporal 'was' of fictional narration does not mean 'is', which itself is temporal", p. 92-93. Käte Hamburger's remarks concern written narrative of the heterodiegetic kind, and therefore require some qualification if they are to be applied to the case of narration in *Desperate Housewives*. However, I think they offer a convincing account for the dissociation between the perceptual present in which we see the images on screen and the temporality of the fictional world.
[11] Kozloff, p. 1.
[12] See Kozloff, p. 48-49: "a homodiegetic voice-over narrator is always subsumed by and thus subordinate to a more powerful narrating agent, the image-maker who dramatizes the story on screen"; as well as Gaudrault and Jost's notion of a "'grand filmic image-maker' (implicit, extradiegetic, and invisible) manipulating [the] audiovisual network", p. 51-52.
[13] Michel Chion, p. 49.
[14] Marie-Laure Ryan clearly distinguishes between narrative metalepses of a rhetorical type and those which she regards as ontological metalepses : "La métalepse ontologique est plus

qu'un clin d'oeil furtif qui perce les niveaux, c'est un passage logiquement interdit, une transgression qui permet l'interpénétration de deux domaines censés rester distincts. Cette opération remet radicalement en question la frontière entre l'imaginaire et le réel.", "Logique culturelle de la métalepse, ou la métalepse dans tous ses états", p. 207. Marie-Laure Ryan observes, however, that the metaleptic operation is meant to be perceived, and that, as a narrative device, metalepsis paradoxically reasserts the very boundaries it transgresses (p. 222).

[15] Peter Rabinowitz, "Audience" entry in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, p. 30.

[16] "Everyone enjoys a game of make-believe every now and then", Mary Alice observes at the end of the episode, while, on screen, the little girls go on with their fancy-dress tea-party.