

**BRANIGAN, Edward. *Narrative Comprehension and Film*.
London/New York : Routledge, 1992, 325 pp.**

Wayne Rothschild

Volume 4, Number 3, Spring 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1001045ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1001045ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Cinémas

ISSN

1181-6945 (print)

1705-6500 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rothschild, W. (1994). Review of [BRANIGAN, Edward. *Narrative Comprehension and Film*. London/New York : Routledge, 1992, 325 pp.] *Cinémas*, 4(3), 177–182. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1001045ar>

BRANIGAN, Edward. *Narrative Comprehension and Film*. London/New York: Routledge, 1992, 325 pp.

Edward Branigan's *Narrative Comprehension and Film* is a serious and thoughtful book that will play an important and complex role in various debates in film theory and beyond. This is a many sided work and I will provide a multi-layered reading in order to situate it within and against contemporary intellectual battles. My goal is to take what I regard as the main argument of the work — that narrative is a fundamental way in which we relate to the world — and use it as a way of understanding and intervening in what I see as a three sided debate for the soul of our field.

My reference to three positions is not immediately obvious, but I believe it can be justified in relation to the formal structure of the debate over the meaning of cinema itself. Each of the three positions provides an account of representation which is organized to exclude or marginalize the other positions. All of this centers around the role of representation in the world and, of course, in relation to human subjects (individuals). Before contemporary theory entered the scene (of the crime) writing largely (not wholly, Eisenstein and Bazin had explicit or implicit theories of the Subject) took the films and their relation to a viewer at face value. In the early seventies a series of disparate works, following either Marxism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis or a post-structuralism, posed the problem of the political effect of representation itself on the spectator. All of this is well known, but it is essential to remember that all of these "allies" argued, in one way or another, that the various aspects of the apparatus, narrative or fiction were political fields that inscribed certain conflicts onto the viewer.

Two parallel responses to these approaches emerged in the eighties. One approach, traditionalist in nature, sought to preserve film from over over-determination by arguing that purely formal and film historical analysis could provide a relatively "scientific" analysis of film and its spectator without recourse to too much theory or politics. In this way the film would be preserved from outside interference, either for empirical analysis or faithful interpretation. This kind of approach allies the formal and the empirical in a methodology that reflects a theoretical liberalism in its formalism (all texts are equal in the face of a universal method) and its elision of politics from all but the most explicitly political texts.

A second approach emerged under the guise of the postmodern. Here the fictional character of fiction actually made cinema paradigmatic for changes going on in the world that rendered the modern (read variously: Marxism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Modernism, industrial society or the Enlightenment) obsolete. In other words, the fictional / narrative / discursive nature of the world, has sucked the world up into itself, excluding both the real and contradiction. It is as if the critique of representation had been eaten by representation itself. The various "postes" practice a kind of discursive reductivism that moves beyond the discovery of the effects of representation to a reduction of everything back into representation itself. It is a kind of essentialism of anti-essentialism. Parenthetically, I prefer to call this tendency in theory "fictivist" in order to suggest that it belongs to a complex tradition in the history of culture to treat politics and truth as a fiction or a game.

Back to Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* intervenes in this debate in surprising and contradictory ways. In effect, the question of narrative / fiction / discourse is the site of parallel debates in the Anglo-american and Continental traditions of philosophy. Branigan provides a good point of entry for those of us in film or literary criticism who are not well acquainted with current Anglo-american philosophical positions, however much ideological disputation in intellectual circles that derive from French and German traditions revolves precisely on this problem of narrative / fiction / discourse (and writing for the

Derrideans.) The power of representation is agreed upon by all the disputants, it is only the site, force and nature of that power that is in question. Branigan persuasively argues, from a formalist perspective, that the mind is a largely narrative process and this may shift current debates in unforeseen ways.

Translated back into everyday language, narrative is simply the telling of a story. This is quickly complicated given the way a linguistically informed analysis breaks down the process of story telling into a hierarchy of interlinking processes. Central to the way Branigan defines narrative is the intersection of subject and process. It is a method for organizing data, and by somebody. Two key aspects of his definition are data and perception. It seems plausible that the organization of data is a largely narrative process, but it is less clear that the movement of narrative is essentially data processing. Further, if I may pose a structuralist sounding question: what is the status of data? Is it a signifier or a signified or both (a sign?)

This ambiguity extends to causality which is at the heart of the problematic that defines this work. Branigan, in a Humean mode, argues that narrative is essentially the fictive attribution of cause, and that causality itself is largely the application of narrative thinking to the world. This is a sticky business and I would like to pose some questions, without a hidden agenda of answers, but with some alternative points of reference. Is causality something of the real? If causality is largely a narrative method of thinking, is it of the mind — a projection of the subject? Or does causality pertain to the level of discourse or text, in other words, is it not the narratives themselves that account for the subject in its (largely imaginary) relation to things?

Two points are essential here. First, I argue (following the line of thought defined by Althusser and Lacan) that it is the narrative / fictional processes that explain the relation of a subject to its body and its world. In this approach the world is real, and narrative is a real process with a real product. It is, I think, a more effective position because it does not rest on the circular argument or ambiguity suggested above: it uses narrative to account for the subject; it does not use the subject to account for narrative. Second, if causality is a montage effect, then let's say

so and align narrative to montage and Eisenstein. If causality is a montage then we must also remember something Lacan once said: "There is no cause save something jarring." The reality of the signification does not efface the brute reality of things; it only makes their interaction complicated, differential.

What kind of connection is a narrative connection? Much of what I miss in this account of narrative is what might be called its fictionalizing character. There are good reasons to follow Branigan in distinguishing narrative and fiction, but isn't there something about narrative that frames whatever it touches? Isn't there something circular or teleological about narrative structure (even if it is the goal of some narratives to evade it?) If narrative is in some sense logical, it is a logic that is always in touch with its a-logical assumptions or conclusions. Again if narrative is a process of exchange, it is a process of uneven exchange. If there is no violence (difference or contradiction) at the heart of narrative, what have all those stories (and theories) been about? Even if all this theory is wrong, its intervention in our field has been thoroughly established and a foundation (even a true one) in cognitive psychology only postpones the debate between them. The narrative effect cannot be pinned down by rooting it in the external field of the physical, since that is where it begins.

But the story does not end here. The first sections of Branigan's book provide a powerful formalist analysis of "narrative comprehension" that displays the centrality of narrative to human thought and interaction. This argument is powerful and persuasive, however, the effectivity of this idea is diminished by linking it to the natural / transcendental field of cognitive psychology that places it above both society and signification. The top down / bottom up model of the mind borrowed from cognitive psychology seems to me to close off the field of narrative rather than explain it. This model appears to make the process too easy, losing the dissonance between words and things. I think the gap of representation is effaced by the workings of a machinery that appears to be the natural work of the body. Although this is not explicitly stated, mind and brain come together in a computer model of the mind as processor of perceptual data. I doubt that this is, in fact, the viewpoint of the author, but it is

suggested by the book's own narrative. The arguments derived from cognitive psychology are not essential to the main point of the book, they simply depoliticize the question.

Cut to the chase. In the second part of the book (and in examples from the first part, especially his reading of Griffith's *The Girl and Her Trust*), Branigan uses formal analysis for close readings that are impressively detailed and attuned to ideological issues. I believe that when this formal apparatus is actually applied to texts, the formalism of the approach to narrative in general is undercut with a special sensitivity to the gendered character of point of view. Branigan mobilizes his conceptual schemas to show in the case of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* how narrative and narration work to emit a patriarchal point of view. If the arguments in this section were applied to narrative as a whole, they would impact some intellectual dilemmas of our field and show that narrative is a field that is in itself politicized.

Narrative comprehension? It sounds almost postmodernist, or at least post-structuralist. This is not the case, but there are many points of contact. There should be some Foucauldian and Derridean sympathy for the narrativization of comprehension. Both the sense of the mind as embodied and multiple, a kind of heterogeneous narrativiser, although explicitly Humean seem well suited to a Deleuzean perspective. It is refreshing for a fellow American intellectual to remember that philosophy has a long and interesting history, although it should be added there is a difference between this kind of multiplicity and the divided subject of Lacanian Psychoanalysis (both positions have merit). There is, however, something jarring in the fusion of narrative and comprehension. Specifically, there may be something essentially narrative about comprehension, but is there not something inherently uncomprehending about narrative?

This thoughtful work is better conceived from a different intellectual framework (one influenced by Althusser and Lacan.) In a classic discrepancy between the texts own explicit positions (intentions) and what it in fact argues, there is much that is useful in Branigan's work, as long as it is properly contextualized. Branigan's strength is the argument that the mind works through

narrative and fiction. His weakness is that he relies on an Imaginary explanation to explain precisely what it needs to prove: that narrative structures, and the general relation of the subject to fiction, explain, in part, the complex and difficult tie between humans.

An after-thought: the beating of Reginald Deny, at the beginning of last years rebellion in Los Angeles, must be understood as an act of narrative comprehension. Some African-American men wanted to show white America what it is like to be young, Black and male. This act was political precisely in its narrative logic. It is unlikely that the message was received. Again, what is the meaning of causality? And, again, "there is no cause save something jarring."

WAYNE ROTHSCHILD

University of Southern California