



Dementia, Cognitive Narratology, and Unreliable Narration in Florian Zeller's *The Father*

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Abstract

Florian Zeller's *The Father* is a film about dementia as a narrative disorder. The film tells a fragmented story through the eyes of Anthony, who is living with late-onset dementia. In it, the spectator is asked to witness Anthony's encounters with his environment, which always result in a cognitive blankness—a lack of recognition that is the symptom of his condition. The film both represents and enacts this blankness by asking the spectator to witness and misunderstand a series of scenes strung together by nothing more than that lack of recognition. *The Father* thus constitutes not only a narrative of dementia but also a narrative about narrative—about its grammars, processes, and agents; about the questions of narratability and cognition attendant to any act of storytelling, and about how the answers to those questions might change when they are posed in the cinematic.

Keywords: dementia; cognitive narratology; unreliable narrator; point of view; film structure



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Slavica Srbinovska

Illness is the night side of life, more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later, each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (Sontag 3)

ANTHONY: I feel as if... I feel like I'm losing all my leaves, one after another.

WOMAN: Your leaves? What are you talking about? (Zeller 86)

Introduction: *The Father*, (Cognitive) Narratology, and the Cinema

In the last sentences in Florian Zeller's *The Father* (2020), the character of Anthony expresses to his nursing home caretaker that he feels as though he is losing his leaves. For the caretaker, this statement has no meaning; she remains in the realm of the literal. Anthony, a patient living with dementia, lives elsewhere. In a seemingly naïve simile—of a man who is like a tree losing its leaves—he articulates a vision of his cognitive decline and perhaps also of the narrative of the film that we have been watching.

The Father stands in a long line of films that represent and thematize the lives of characters who suffer cognitive decline. Indeed, cinema is frequently concerned with the representation of characters suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's disease.¹ However, I argue, *The Father* is not only a film that represents dementia as a disorder of cognition. It is a

film about dementia as a disorder of narrative. Another way to say this is to say that it is a film that simultaneously represents and enacts the cognitive dimensions of dementia that are the predicate of its story. Zeller's screenplay, cowritten with Christopher Hampton, follows his 2012 eponymous play. The play is part of a trilogy that also includes the dramas *The Son* and *The Mother*. The particularity of this work, which is the analytic subject of this article, stems from the author's focus on a character whose ability is undermined by his late-onset dementia. The film's critical challenge here is to tell a story from the point of view of a character whose illness affects his ability to communicate with people, his capacities to situate meaning in language, and his ability to remember. These elements influence not only the content but also the structure of a story which has a limited spatial setting and an indefinite time frame. All the events portray situations of forgetting, of the inability to remember recent information, of fear, and sometimes also early childhood memories, in which the mother figure is central. The way they are arranged, however, suggests that the film is not only telling the story of dementia but also trying to perform and transmit to the spectator the subject's cognitive experience of it.

Edward Branigan explains that the narrative perception of the world is closely related to our ways of arranging knowledge (into patterns), with our skills of causality and reasoning, and hence, with our judgments about the sequence of time and events. In *The Father*, all aspects of narration, according to Branigan's theory, could be explained based on narratology and the

concepts of diegesis, focalization or planes of narration, then based on cognitive psychology and the concepts of schema, of relations of difference between above and below, procedures of bottom-up processing, declarative/procedural acquisition of knowledge and based on linguistics through which the logic of time is analyzed (Branigan, 1992, p. xiii). Branigan explains how the spectator, during the reception of a scene from the beginning of the film's narration, is already implicitly directed to the fact that the story is worth watching until the end, that is, that it has meaning and sense. The complexity of the differences in the events that play out before our eyes, which are actions that happened in the past and the present, is explained by the fact that the spectator is in a situation to understand the complex relationship of tenses and causality of events based on the procedural reasoning that allows him to establish and recognize the connections that are an integral part of schemes, as events represented through procedures that show they are independent of real-time. However, all information appears on the screen (Branigan, 1992, p. 3). According to Branigan's theory, the character of Anthony might be interpreted as a sum of physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual forms. The character is the bigger picture of everything that happens around him. The film permits other characters' reactions to coexist with Anthony's consciousness so that the spectator can see what Anthony cannot see; namely, that he has a cognitively impaired understanding of himself. Indeed, Branigan points out that the film can promote the idea that certain mysteries cannot be solved

in the narrative by the spectator, and hence, neither can Anthony be judged for his inability to solve them (1992, p. 181).

The film's narration is structured like a series of mystery stories with no resolution. In the supposed safety of his home, Anthony repeatedly encounters the same characters—his daughter, his son-in-law, and his caregiver—whom he cannot recognize. Zeller achieves this effect by changing the actors who play these characters. Sometimes, different actors appear in the same role; other times, the same actor plays multiple different roles. Each of Anthony's encounters with the same character is another confrontation with a fear and lack of safety, which set in as he realizes that the other character knows him, but he does not know the character. In each scene, the film disperses a set of information, which it then undermines in the next scene. The film undermines that information because the meaning that the spectator makes of one scene conflicts with the meaning that the spectator makes in the next scene.

The film both represents and enacts this lack of resolution. First, it represents the lack of resolution as Anthony's lack of recognition. Second, it also confronts the spectator with the experiences of fear, restlessness, and anger that, the film posits, are a daily part of the life of a person living with dementia. Strung together in a series and connected to each other by this blankness, these scenes come to constitute not only the diegetic time of the film but also the

film's theory of narration as such. In this sense, *The Father* becomes not only a narrative of dementia but also a narrative about narrative—about its grammars, processes, and agents; about the questions of narratability and cognition attendant to any act of storytelling; and, about how the answers to those questions may change when they are posed in the genre of the cinematic.

A specific method that requires a narrative model, like narrative schema, is fundamental to much of cognitive psychology. In turn, this method enables us to understand how *The Father* is trying to enact and recreate the cognitive experience of dementia. A schema is an arrangement of knowledge possessed by a spectator. It is used for predictions and classifications of new data that the senses acquire. In changing the actors who play given characters, the film recreates the experience of prosopagnosia, also known as face blindness. The big mirror in the bedroom close to the window is a metaphor for Anthony's disease connected with perceptions. While other aspects of visual processing and cognitive functioning remain intact, people experience functional sensation but incomplete perception. Patients can perceive familiar faces but are unable to recognize them. This inability to recognize faces—narrated in the story of Anthony and recreated in the viewer—speaks of the structural nature of cognition, which is never just a list of unrelated facts, but a coherence derived in different ways. A schema provides probabilities of events or fragments of actions; it is a hierarchy of expectations connected with

experiences. In this context, the concept of perception, which refers to different mental activities, is also significant. This term can denote a preconscious assumption about reality and knowledge of an accepted and acknowledged fact about reality; it refers to intuition and the conclusion reached by the one who uses the senses and the reasoning process. This notion indicates how narrative theories integrate various operations of human consciousness into their conceptions of narrative (Branigan, 1992, pp. 12-14).

As a study of the “mental processes by which the producers and recipients of narratives process them *qua* narrative,” cognitive narratology is a branch of narrative theory that is especially concerned with an analysis of the mind-narrative relationships in storytelling. (Liveley, 2019, pp. 236-237; Jahn, 1997, p. 241). Because it focuses on the cognitive status of language, knowledge, memory, and the world, it suggests a method of self-reflexive reading embedded in the relationship between phenomena and cognition—what Monika Fludernik calls “the quasi-mimetic evocation of ‘real-life experience.’” (Fludernik, 1996, pp. 12-13). Because it is a narratology, it must also ask about how cognizable phenomena are situated in narrative, and how those narratives reflect, channel, and transform various social, cultural, and historical discourses. *The Father* is the right film for cognitive narratology because it is a story about end-of-life dementia and loneliness. Operating under the tacit assumption that the existence of narrative depends on the existence of at least two consciousnesses, one that communicates and

one that understands, *The Father* asks what it would mean for a story to be told by an unreliable narration which depends on the point of view of a person whose abilities to communicate and understand are complicated, undermined—and in some sense constituted—by his dementia.

The instant reading of *The Father* foregrounds not only the potential importance of cognitive narratology for the study of narrative more generally, but also the value that it brings to the study of film. Zeller's narrative practices—the multiple and disordered pairings of actors and characters in representation of the prosopagnosia, the manipulation of the time image, the spatial arrangements—enable a theory of dementia that is as quintessentially cognitive as it is cinematic. As a result, Zeller has achieved much more than an approximation between camera view and character consciousness; at such moments as those described, the camera almost attains an actual consciousness itself. In effect, between character and camera “behavior” amount to this: the camera is personified to the degree that it acts in unison with, and often as a substitute for, the character consciousness which controls it. Moreover, for Zeller, it is not just the camera which embodies Anthony's consciousness but also the mise-en-scene, shot composition, editing, and sound.

Visual cues like furniture arrangements and specific dialogue lines help us understand the order of events. As we watch, we try to fit Anthony's experiences into an implied background

of the wider temporal and spatial environment to create a sense of the universe that he inhabits. The seemingly simple episodes focus on Anthony's miscommunication with the daughter or son-in-law and miscommunication with the nursing home staff. The amount of information arising from these dialogues depends on the characteristics of dementia and the way it affects the narration transmitted at two levels. The first is the level of the neutral perspective of the camera and the second amounts to the consciousness of the protagonist (Eder et al., 2011, p. 52). In contrast to various activities of investigating cognitive processes through states of depression or stress, of exploring deductive drawing of conclusions, this article seeks to indicate how this film's model of narration hews closer to the research and measurements of sensitive and complex life experiences that problematize the mental composition of reactions and their quality (Fludernik, 1996, p. 9).

This argument unfolds in two parts. First, I articulate a relationship between cognitive narratology and *The Father*. Rather than apply the methods of cognitive narratology to the narrative of *The Father*, I show that the film itself might be as much a narrative as a *theory* of narrative, a text that intimates certain forms of knowledge about what it means to tell a story, and to have someone else understand it. Second, I ask what it is about *The Father* that is essentially cinematic and find the answer in the film's formal and narrative practices. This film reveals a few similarities between the cognitive experience of watching a film and the cognitive

experience of dementia.

Cognitive Narratology as Method; *The Father* as Theory

This reading of *The Father* seeks to connect the film's narrative text, the mental reactions that it generates, and the events that it narrates (Ortony et al., 1988, p. 127). It draws on the reader reception and response theories of Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Jane P. Tompkins, Meir Sternberg, and Nell Victor (Iser, 2000, p. 4; Jauss, 1982, p. 15; Tompkins, 1980, p. 13; Sternberg, 1978, p. 3; Nell, 1988, p. 6). Taken together, these theories name a problem: the dynamism of the time of narration with the time of events. This dynamism permits Zeller to use the divergence of events that happened earlier, but which are discursively presented at a different time, usually later in the storyline, and not simultaneously with the time of their occurrence. It also permits him to tell the story's events in reverse; some components of the narrative occur later and are presented earlier in the discourse.

The cognitive perspective of the film narrative provides the cognitive framework in which thinking and perception, understanding and meaning-making, depend on the structure of dementia. Cognition refers to the states and processes involved in the acquisition of knowledge. It includes all conscious and unconscious methods of knowledge accumulation, such as perception, recognition, memorization, and reasoning. *The Father* focuses on the limited mental processes involved in acquiring knowledge and understanding. In different scenes, different

forms of limited cognitive functions such as thinking, knowing, remembering, judging, solving problems are shown to be disturbed due to Anthony's dementia. The decision of the author of the film to narrate the life situation through the perspective of a sick man with impaired cognitive abilities means using the objective angle of perception of the camera, which, until the end of the narration, remains glued to the discerning, cognitive perspective of the older man.

The spectator and the interpreter of the narrative experience the dynamic relationship between the story time and the narration time. In the spirit of this reader's approach and meaning of interpretation, in the early research of Roman Ingarden, heteronomy, and not the autonomy of the texts, is actualized, which implies the involvement of the readers/ spectators and their understanding of the structure of the text, but also of the sense depending on the cultural context and reality with which they identified with (Ingarden, 1973, p. 199).

In *The Father*, the spectator and Anthony are both involved in various interpretive processes; the first tries to understand and make sense of the narrative in his reality of reading; and Anthony, with his senses and mental potential, tries to fit into the reality of the surrounding world presented in the story. The cognitive processes of sense-making through the understanding of the narration of the film text and projections of the spectators into the character is a base of interpretations of both levels of affection in the story and the cognitive approaches

to the text of reading. In contrast, the cognitive abilities of the character in the story are the center whose perception and power are problematic due to memory problems and other mental abilities active in understanding the world in which he lives.

In literature, film, and theatre, there are characters who, according to Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*, qualify as unreliable narrators, as characters who speak, but what they say has subjective and doubtful credibility. Individuals living with dementia have a specific mental dysfunction that leads them to loss of their sense of identity. By repeatedly struggling and failing to articulate meaning, Anthony shows that his dementia makes him suffer not only from a medical condition but also from a discursive loss. In this sense, the narrative of *The Father* is not so much a medical narrative of dementia as it is a narrative about the conditions of possibility of articulating meaning, and thus also of making narrative (Kitwood, 1997, p. 37).

In line with David Bordwell's explanations regarding the spectator's role and interpretations, this study focuses on "unreliable narration" as a critical aspect. The theory of the spectator is mainly based on perception and knowledge. Given that the narrative structure of an unreliably told story like *The Father* is of a broken chronological line, the spectator's efforts are tied to rearranging the sequence of events according to a pattern. They are confused, so given that it is not possible to reread them as in the case of prose, it is necessary to interpret

their stretch by involving memory and interpreting the interference of events (Bordwell, 1985, p. 99).

In *The Father*, the unpredictable ordering of events causes a loss of certainty. A straight shot of a woman entering a building is aurally supported by the sounds of an orchestra and the melody of classical music as she moves towards the building she is entering. The classical music follows her ascent to the spiral staircase, but is suddenly interrupted the moment she enters the room, where an adult man takes off his headphones and starts a conversation with her, just as this part of the narration refers to the attachment of the camera to the consciousness of the adult man's character. At the same time, the spiral staircase visually alludes to Alfred Hitchcock *Vertigo* and his work on disoriented and, therefore, untrustworthy mind, which the spectator will later interpret.

The dialogue begins when the woman reveals the relationships between the characters, namely a conversation between a daughter and a father, and the content refers to his last confrontation with the woman who takes care of him during his daily activities and her departure. The spectator is limited to the information of the character of the adult man Anthony, who in the first dialogue is accused by the daughter because of the brutal treatment of the nursing woman and the verbal insults directed at her. At the same time, Anthony insists he can

care for himself. In the dialogue, he charges her with stealing his watch, and his daughter directs him to the place in the bathroom where he hides his belongings. As he appears with his watch, his daughter announces that she intends to move to Paris to live with the man she loves. The dialogue is filled with tension about the fact that Anthony does not need a caretaker, and then with transfers because the daughter announces her departure to another country. She concludes her efforts to persuade him an unfinished line that if he does not accept the caretakers, she will have to find another solution. She then refuses to respond to her father's questions about what that solution might be. The daughter then leaves the apartment; Anthony's character is constantly in the camera's focus.

The impression of the narrative's relative reliability will be completely shaken by the second sequence. If in the first sequence Anthony's character insists on an independent life, and then complains that his daughter always burdened him with her care, unlike her sister whom he has not seen for a long time, and whom he considers better than her. The naive content, the aggression due to the possible theft of a watch, the presence of a woman who bothers him and whom he therefore verbally attacks, declaring her a thief, then the dialogue that resembles a dialogue between a child and an adult is actualized already in the first scene. And here the symptoms are announced which the spectator associates with the narrator's untrustworthiness

due to sickness and medications that he needs.

According to Bordwell's theory, the spectator tries to find an explanation for the place and time of the event and then for the reasons for every other event in the close and claustrophobic place. These insights allow the spectator to determine the meaning of the narrative film as a text (Bordwell, 1989, p. 64). In the first sequence, the spectator of the movie *The Father* is limited to the information exchanged between the daughter and the father. Spatially, focusing the camera on Anthony's character throughout the film's narrative—his movement in an enclosed space where we do not know where he is, whether it is his or his daughter's apartment or a home for the demented—means limited information for the spectator who, based on the changes in the mise-en-scene, activates his hypotheses about both the space and the time of the action. Attempts to determine the time of the scene until the end remains relative and open. The narration, which is limited to several encounters of Anthony's character with characters whose identity he cannot determine, i.e., the spectator is left to adhere to what the other character in the space with Anthony tells him. It brings the spectator into a situation of active relationship and the need for constant returns to the film to establish the differences between the scenes and the space of action, and because of broken processes of perception to verify the identities of the characters Anthony encounters. The incomplete information available to the spectator through the dialogues of Anthony and other characters, although they

are information about the same topic, namely the daughter's marriage, her divorce, meeting another man with whom she is in love, going to Paris, and among them the mention of the other daughter become for the spectator as confusing and intractable as this information is an integral part of Anthony's repetitive scenes of dialogue with his daughter, with the doctor, and with the caregiver. Anthony's cognition constitutes and then partially erases his memory, which is comprised of only fragments of facts acquired in some dialogues, followed by experiences, sometimes fear, and other times a feeling of anger.

Anthony's statements are repeatedly denied by the interlocutor in each different scene. From the first scene, the spectator, as well as the character, is exposed to unclear and for him shocking scenes of dialogues that subsequently inform about conversations that take place between Anthony and the daughter in one way, and then deny exactly what the daughter is saying. The narration, which is realized as a series of encounter that Anthony has with various character, without the element of a narrative voiceover, is a composition of contradictory contents that are confusing for him as well as for the spectator. The unreliability is projected as much in the insights derived from the director's decisions to convey the limited and wrong understandings of Anthony's character about who he is communicating with, even when his interlocutor is his daughter, since he inserts two characters in the role of the daughter.

The spectator is confronted with changes that disorient him in the same way that the character is disoriented. The spectator is unable to know the film's truths until the final scene, The spectator builds his own assumptions about which of the two actresses is Anthony's real daughter, while his knowledge is completely uncertain that if he designates one as his daughter, then he doesn't know what the other actress's role is. This kind of construction of the scenes and the insertion of different characters, as well as the reactions of the characters in the form of corrections or denials, but also confirmations of the identifications that Anthony performs, keep the spectator in a state of tension, as he is confronted with problems for which there is no answer, namely that he has only the wrong perceptions and knowledge confirmed by the two characters in which he sees a daughter with the absence of the comment of the one who is not his daughter.

We call this kind of structure of situations unreliable narration; that is, the camera records the dialogue in the two sequences that we see and hear with the confirmation and transmission of the information that Anthony understands. The spectator only knows that the character presented as a daughter in the second scene is not his daughter, but he does not know what the role of that character is. The untrustworthy narration is essentially the result of the camera's attachment to the information being transmitted, in which Anthony constantly participates and misnames, forgets, or attempts to activate the scattered fragments of information available to

his mental world as they appear in the moment from the baggage of information and are activated by corrections from the interlocutors or by approval.

If, in the first sequence, the daughter asks him if he has taken his medicine, Anthony nervously answers in the affirmative mode, then we know that he is sick. The problem arises for the spectator when Anthony's daughter is in a situation, like the first in which she announces to him that she is moving to Paris to live with a loved man, and in another sequence further in the action, she denies it, the spectator does not know what is true. "Unreliable narration" thus becomes a specific genre of film narration, or a psychological drama of communication and reception. In every scene, Anthony updates the same information, the need of his watch to know what time is it, the presence of daughter, the question of a new career, his daughter's move to Paris, the property of the apartment, and the contact with the son in law. The questions are interpreted differently from the point of view of his interlocutors, and in turn those questions produce different answers and open different possibilities for reading and knowledge.

Hastie Amelie writes that the need to determine the course of the narrative is associated with "template schemes," which imply a predictable or hypothetical determination of the scene of events (Hastie 2007, p. 199). It is essentially a master scheme where, according to Bordwell, the linking of events and their classification is carried out according to certain typical

expectations. The non-linear and disoriented narration in the film *The Father* encourages the spectator to accept this pattern as a framework for interpreting and understanding the narration, and for synthesizing the film's events. It seeks to determine the events' location, causality, and temporal order (1985, p. 147). The pattern in canon form is composed of an introduction in the middle of action and among the characters, of the chronological flow of sequences of events, of the exit and the end. However, *The Father* distorts understanding because the narration is at best ambivalent about, and at most hostile to the canonical scheme. Comprehension of the narration is much more apparent when the purpose is clear, but when the purpose must be determined at the very end, then it is a muffled purpose. When the goal is set at the end, interpretation can be poor, but it is more limited when the goal is not defined at all when the end is completely open. Suppose the goal is evident from the beginning. In that case, the spectator quickly understands the canonically designed composition. Still, *The Father* does not work according to such an approach in which we are introduced to a particular environment, characters, and goal, then understanding the events as a way out of them (Bordwell 1985, pp. 34-35) because the impasse is the end with which the author of the narration decides to close the series of scenes and in the last one to present the "conscious" momentary confrontation of the demented character with the fact that he is in a nursing home, and that his daughter leaves for Paris, which he would soon forget. The tension of the dramatic situations in which this adult

man is confused is transmitted to the spectator. He needs to determine the truth in the openness and ambiguity of the situations. He ties his assumptions to the realization that the problems with information arise from the character's illness. As a result, the second scene is a combination of hallucinatory reactions and unconfirmed and opposite information whether his daughter is divorced or not, whether she is going to Paris or not, and so on.

On the level of composition, *The Father* is a film in which scenes change with repeated meetings of Anthony with his daughter and then with his son-in-law. After the second scene, in which an entirely new actress is included in the role of his daughter, the spectator becomes aware of the motivation behind the film's composition; that is, of the realistic approach of consistent and justified development of the idea of maintaining the focus in Anthony's consciousness and linking the images for his perceptions of others, as well as for extracting knowledge about what is happening followed by indications that much of the information is—as other characters' dialogue intimates—wrong. The motivation of the characters from the people of his surrounding who deny what he says is a basis for presenting demented conditions followed by hallucinations. However, the artistic procedures of composing the film narrative are confirmed as successful considering the inventive procedures of replacing the actors and expressing and denying the information that the spectator receives from the demented character

whom the camera constantly follows and from the people who are his interlocutor. He analyzes with extra effort the dynamic of damaged mental reactions that manifest through a range of experiences of anger, irony, sarcasm, insults, and sometimes fear and suffering.

In the third scene, the actress from the first scene with which the first shot opens returns. In this episode, Anthony faces the new caretaker, Lori. Suppose the second scene completely shakes the stability of rational knowledge, we have to say that the spectator is confronted with radically ambivalent information in the third scene. In that case, the search for solutions for taking care of Anthony, who is already concluded to be a character living with dementia, continues. In the dialogue with the new woman who is supposed to care for him, he shows a deviant attitude ranging from seductiveness and affection to insulting and sarcastic behavior. The changing moods and attitudes towards both the daughter and the new caregiver are a motivated depiction of the the character's unstable world, whose reactions correspond to the conditions manifested by people living with dementia through the various stages of the disease.

Memory plays a crucial role in determining the sequence of events according to the canonical scheme form and the point of view of the author. But in the narrative of the movie composition like *The Father*, the channel through which memory flows is very narrow. Anthony's mental activities as a point of view of narration (and information) obstruct that flow

and produce a dispersion of the time sequences. Memory helps to the spectator to check what they have perceived and learned during the narration.

A narrative divided into scenes or episodes that are not chronological prompts a set of assumptions that, throughout its course, problematize the film's facts and facticity. As Bordwell explains, the spectators, for whom the film's composition serves to connect the cores or nodes of cognition, experience changes, and with those changes, a tension that arises from the differences between the meaning of various events (1989, p. 195). But in this film, every sequence of the film narrative is full of gaps, which induces a form of stress. This stress, as confirmed by the second scene in Zeller's film, is not increased by the confirmation of hypotheses but by the differences that increase to the point of confusion equivalent to the mental situations in which Anthony finds himself. Confusion creates the spectator's need to direct his gaze forward rather than backward. He is more inclined to solve the mystery and needs to find out what is happening to Anthony.

The fourth sequence is a complex composition with several encounter. All parts belong in different time stages of the real-time experience of Anthony's development of the disease. The first action is related to the preparation of dinner; the daughter (this time is Olivia Colman, who appears in the first sequence) returns to the apartment after buying chicken, which

corresponds to the second scene of the narration of the film (then played by Olivia Williams). Analogous to the situation of the scene, she returns from outside with a bag of purchased chicken, which is taken by her husband, Paul. The second sequence features Mark Gatiss as Anne's husband. In contrast, in the fourth sequence, with the opening announcement of the chicken being prepared for dinner and comments about the new assistant, Laura, the camera follows Anthony and his activities around the home, so we move through the character's fragmented and scattered perceptions that convey his insights and mental images. The constant end of his movement is his bedroom's window the last exit in the external world. The scene begins with the daughter, who, after an interview during the day with Laura, the new helper, is standing in the kitchen next to the dishes. It is the evening hours, and she is leaning on the kitchen table and, out of carelessness and anxiety, breaks the coffee cup, and then heads to the room where Anthony is sleeping, hovers over his head, caresses his cheek and then begins to strangle him. This episode is interrupted by the voice of the man who enters the frame, namely her husband Paul. The action is returned in time and starts with the preparation of dinner. The new actor in the role of Ann's husband is Rufus Sewell.

The time action, according to the explicit clues, namely the dinner conversation that the new caregiver starts to work the next day and that she thinks Anthony "is charming," takes place in the evening of the day the first meeting with the new assistant Laura is finished, and

Anne and her husband have a dinner with Anthony. After dinner, Anne sings and lulls her father to sleep with a caress in his bedroom. The spectator, after two exits from the main line of events related to the arrival of the new caregiver, is informed about the strained relationship between Anne and her husband, who insists on her taking Anthony into a nursing home; and, although she forbids him to mention that design in front of her father, she telephones the doctor. The spectator witnesses the consequences that Anthony's illness causes in his daughter's marriage, as his son-in-law insists on "real" and an "honest" answer from his father-in-law, and he asks, with a tacit and unjustified assumption that he is not speaking with a person living with dementia, when Anthony will stop messing around at their house (Zeller, 2020, p. 36).

The spectator is constantly informed of different content in the sequence of scenes by reliable and rational characters, above all his daughter and the character who is her substitute in the mental world of Anthony, the domestic helper. In this context, we do not exclude the implicit information that subsequently speaks of changes in the environment in which Anthony lives. However, he is mainly confined to the bedroom, to the CD player and to classical music; then, in each scene, he looks out the window.

The film's narrative is as confusing as Anthony's mental world, and so the spectator's efforts are pushed to the limit of understanding. Chaotic bits of information flow through the

individual sequences as Anthony remembers or dreams them, allowing for the display of dementia through concrete reactions. This presentation, without predictable stages in the development of the plot, allows the spectator to experience the way of dysfunctional living with scattered fragments of memory and hallucinatory perceptions of identities that are interchangeable because they result from the brain's inability to maintain information.

The film's subjective narration of states—associated with fragmentary content, and extracted from the consciousness that excludes the meaning of those fragments—is made to be arranged as a fable with a chronology that the spectator can tell after following the plot through several scenes. Knowledge about how dementia works in this world is developed in more and more distinct forms, and Anthony's character is vital to them. His fragmentary information and changing moods create the aesthetic and not only the realistic dimension of the narration, namely with shocking scenes of perception and reaction of the character, the recipient is right before the author's inventiveness to select the essential aspects of the manifestation of the disease. The spectator's experience with this type of illness can help with the way he will understand the film text. In doing so, he will question the scenes in which two actors appear one after the other in the role of son-in-law through the prism of Anthony's perceptions, while both are aggressive and impatient towards him, which leads him to states where he trembles with fear and restlessness and cries (Bordwell, 1985, p. 47)

Zeller's narrative practices enable him to represent and enact the vicissitudes of dementia. The film's narration mirrors the cognitive structures of thinking, memorization, and logical reasoning because it shows the character's power for causal inference. To a certain extent, the film reveals Anthony's challenges in actualizing these cognitive activities by representing him as he fails to think, remember, or reason. Because of his impaired short-term memory, Anthony constantly finds himself discovering the identities of the people around him. He forgets his daughter, Anne, who cares for him and for a time houses him, and his other daughter, Lucy, who has died in an accident. His dementia renders him helpless due to hallucinations that cause him not to recognize Anne, or to replace her identity with the essence of a nursing home caretaker. Sometimes his long-term memory intervenes in the narrative, and he finds himself witnessing Lucy lying in a hospital room with blood all over her face. The film casts this visual blankness—indexed by fear, confusion, and anger—that results from these encounters with people that he knows but does not recognize, against the backdrop of his intense focus on, and aptitude for, musical recognition, as evidenced by his attentive listening to George Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles*. In juxtaposing the chaos of the visual with the harmony of the sonic, both for the spectator and for Anthony, Zeller produces a narrative dissonance that mirrors the cognitive dissonance of a mind faced with dementia. He suggests, and perhaps even requires, that the spectator sit in the fear, confusion, and anger all too familiar to Anthony's character.

Furthermore, in altering the power of immediate, conscious remembrance, dementia challenges the notion of direct causation, because the subject cannot know that he has caused the event that he is experiencing. I would also suggest that other forms of narration beyond the first person are an avenue in which to consider the problems that dementia poses for cinema and narratology. In breaking up the structure of the linear flow of events, Zeller *necessarily eliminates the causal course of events*. Anthony's inability to self-identify or communicate with others puts him in a position of being ignored, marginalized, and abused. The fact that he does not know why these things are happening to him—why, for example, he is to be institutionalized—undermines the idea that unproductive agents of the social order are punished because they are knowingly unproductive. In so doing, he seemingly suggests that the contractual logic that governs his world might also be on its way out.

Narration is essential in art and as a critical rational cause-and-effect sequence encompassing all established relationships, feelings, and organizational principles in human cognition and phenomenology. It is therefore not surprising that there would be intense resonances between narrative as a mechanism of ego formation and the narrator as a mechanism of the structure of fiction. The narrator, after all, is also a subject—however fictionalized—who seeks to integrate the composition of “scattered” and transient scenes of life experience and bind them; namely, to reduce all the changing identities created at different time stages to a

single “I.” Jerome Bruner explains the tendencies for narration through the prisms of neurobiology and psychology. In his telling, narration is an omnipresent process that puts a person in a plot and a story as a way to enable them to explain their own life experience. It gives shape to a person’s being in the world. It frames and organizes event by putting them in a pattern. It structures communicative processes and consolidates the self as an entity (Bruner, 1990, p. 99).

The creation of the story of the individual’s self depends on a series of aspects, including history, culture, profession, family, and other social elements that define a person’s understanding of that story. While the interpretation of a fictionalized narrative like a film differs meaningfully from interpretations of narrative in the context of integrating the self, it is nonetheless helpful to look at those theoretical positions that emphasize the lived experience in which people with dementia find themselves because they cannot develop a story from episodes. McAdams and McLean, who analyze this way of telling stories, primarily highlight their nonlinear narration, repetition, and return to the same or different episodes from the past. They point out their attempts to express this with language, with the help of memory so that by repeating the exact phrases, that is, through the struggle with memories, they can present contents that are factual or invented but are part of the efforts for representation, identification,

and integration (McAdams and McLean, 2013, pp. 233-238).

The Father, a film enacted through the prism of the consciousness of a character living with dementia, brings into question the notions of normative behavior, narration, and memory. People who live with these conditions have a concept of time that does not fit into any shared chronology. This is what dementia as a disorder of narrative means: in disrupting Anthony's short-term memory, dementia traps him in the distant past and makes him forget his immediate temporal surroundings. This combination of remembering and forgetting erases a part of his life experiences by severing the connection between the past and the present. The problem thus becomes the construction or the representation of an identity that stands both within and without time.

As narrative units, the elements of the unresolved episodes in *The Father* also allow for a limited understanding of the past, present, and future. Narrative units, as they are described by Roland Barthes, serve various functions, including “the implication of a strong correlation” between the foreshadowing and its revelation (1975, p. 245). Zeller's film shows how the focalizing subject has constituted itself through a set of dispersed episodes and how, in different sequences, lines of dialogue change depending on contexts and the relationships established with other elements of the story. Another way to imagine this narrative unit is as prolepsis; in

foreshadowing a certain event or realization, and only sometimes fulfilling it, the film not only represents but also enacts one cognitive state that sits under the banner of dementia.

As we have seen, cognitive narratology is both enabled and challenged by the narrative of *The Father*. Rather than apply a set of theoretical precepts to the text of the film, I have tried to articulate ways in which the text might intimate its own theory of reading, cognition, and perhaps also narrative. I have also tried to show how that theory might both enable and challenge the work of cognitive narratology. In simultaneously representing and enacting the challenges of cognition that attend to the film's vision of dementia, *The Father* suggests a view of cognition that is not only impaired but also constituted by dementia. What does it mean, the film asks, to tell a story made up of incomplete narrative units—one which continually promises that certain meanings will be actualized, and which rarely delivers on that promise? The film, as we have seen, strings together the various episodes of the film through a narrative blankness. In this stringing-together, it creates a disjointed but cognizable diegetic timeline. At the same time, and with the same mechanism, it offers a theory of filmic narration. It is a theory of the grammars, processes, and agents that make up any story where temporal sequencing comes into question—which is to say, almost any story in the world. In turning to this issue, I offer a formal reading of Anthony's character as the main character in the text produced by using his limited

point of view and thus realized as unreliable narration.

Unreliable Narration

Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* teaches that the narrator is unreliable because he is at a distance from the norms advocated by the implied author; that is, he is reliable when he acts by his norms (1983, pp. 158–159). However, Booth cautions that introducing the concept of reliability is, to a great extent, complex; that is, the problematic category “reliability” when it comes to narrative texts is inadequately defined and has unintended consequences. The notion of an implied author, and then the distance or norms that the narrator advocates and is therefore called “unreliable,” is primarily related to the text, as much as to the empirical author, and mainly to the reader. He is the one who, based on the interpretive processes, determines the unreliability resulting from the inconsistency in the film text. The problem of unreliability which affects both aspects of fiction, aesthetics and ethics which are in collide. Issues of unreliable narration are actualized both in the epoch of modernism and the postmodern era, as well as among the works realized in different media.

The debate about unreliable narration actualizes the relationship between rhetoric and cognitive narratology. The textual clues and the frames of reference that are involved in projections of the unreliable narration, and in all of which very important is the questioning of the role of the reader/spectator, the concepts of the text and the implied author. In film, where

the narration is not relevant to the common sense, the author's idea is to create a narration through the point of view of a character to whose perceptions and norms the camera is tied. Unreliable narration in film is therefore based on the fact that, according to the criteria of value, ethical norms, and rational behaviors, the character does not act by the norms espoused by the implicit author. The category of the implicit author introduced by Wayne Booth and labelled by him as the second self of the author, in the approach focused on the text, it is analyzed as an instance that is textual and which, although it silently "transmits" meanings, its evaluation depends on the reception of the reader. Referring to the reflections of Shlomith Rimmon Kenan, we can establish that, on the one hand, are the meanings implicitly inscribed in the film text, and on the other hand, are the reactions of the recipients who extract the text constructions and interpret them (Kenan, 2002, p. 87).

By this differentiation of the meaning of the category of implicit author, but also the meaning of the category of untrustworthiness, *The Father* permits us to extract insights related to the author's intention to make a story that represents the marginalized and most often invisible people. This ethical component is integrated and realized in a text whose aesthetic qualities are appropriate to the magnitude of the intention. Suppose we do not connect this category with Zeller's ethical intentions but with the procedures through which he structures

the text, which communicate with the presumed implicit reader who decodes them (Nünning, 2015, p. 77). In that case, this dimension of meaning of the implicit author applied to the film narrative characterized by a complex and fragmented narrative flow because the contents that are part of the action are divided by the perceptions derived through the prism of the consciousness of the character Anthony. As an external silent authority of representation, camera follows what Anthony does and the dialogues with the characters he is surrounded by. The spectator independently interprets the implicit intentions of conveying dementia disorders through the fragments of non-linear narration. Suppose we accept V. Nünning's insight (2015, p. 59) that unreliability is based on the way events are presented and based on their factual content. In that case, we can exclude the metaphors of the implied author and the implied reader in which these instances are identified as "reading between the lines" (Chatman, 1978, p. 233). Rejecting the instances of the implicit author and implicit reader and accepting the ways of presenting the events and their factual content as a criterion for revealing the reliability or unreliability of the narration points to the fact that the narration in *The Father*, which is focused on a character living with dementia and his interlocutors, flows by showing fragments. Still, those fragments are presented with an arbitrariness tied to the demented consciousness. Susan S. Lanser actualizes the unreliability question by thematizing again the implied author's ethical aspect and the factual contents exposed in the presentation, for which rational judgment

is the measure of reliability (1981, pp. 170–171). The unreliability in the presentation of the story *The Father* lies in the character's illness, which is associated with the limited possibility of controlled and common-sense perceptions and not in the need for deliberate action and understanding of the phenomena due to deception or perversion of the character. The character does not choose his sickness. Based on the facts at Antony's disposal, the narration is an unsolvable puzzle of scenes interwoven with parts of reality and the character's hallucinations that make understanding difficult. In the scattershot narration there is no common sense of identifications of other characters. The narration which is full of fragmented information based on limited memory makes the influence on the spectators' doubts and the judgments of each scene.

The ethical dimension is woven into the theme of untrustworthiness by showing that the character is vulnerable in every way. He is adult and disoriented, thus becoming the subject of brutal verbal and physical attacks by the characters who show impatience and aggression towards him. The ethics norms of the implicit author are a textual projection and the embodiment of a set of social norms related to the care of persons living with dementia whose common sense judgments are impaired and whose rational control in the situations in which they are participants disturbed in contradiction with the behaviours current in the depicted

events with the force of brutality. The implicit ethics of the author are current within the interpretations of the spectators who react to the scenes of violence against these marginal figures with impaired health. Sarcastic comments about the daughter's greed are an integral part of the father's changing ethical reactions, who quickly knows how to thank her for her care without remembering the insults. Finally, the daughter's decision, following the doctor's advice, that she should leave the father in a home for demented people and not keep him at home is an integral part of the impasse to which both the demented father and the daughter are exposed.

The marginalized man, the one with an empty being or an annihilated subject who is limited to the elementary functions of existence, is a character whose emotional and physical turbulences and transformations exclude him from all active forms of life and turn him into a passive, closed living. As Agamben would say, to be in a position of a "bare life" means not to have possibility for progress or a way out of the situation. He lives disconnected from all events, isolated in his world (Agamben, 1998, p. 1). Its status is dependent on the standards and norms of the culture. It incorporates the bodies of those who can live that way or opposed to them because they do not live according to the given criteria, and thus do not function in the culture as "normal" individuals (Krüger-Fürhoff, 2022, pp. 25-27).

The disintegrated subject, the erased self, the lost status of a “normal person,” and the great confusion of information in which this character lives, in whose mind the erasure of memories and knowledge, of words, of language, constitutes Anthony as an unreliable narrator. If narration implies memory, communication and action, this character fails to confirm it; he lives with fragments in a consciousness that is in the process of being extinguished. The narrative focuses on the presence of the character’s body in the closed space of an apartment or a room of a care home for demented people. The story does not develop the representation of an individual developing or discovering new properties but rather the entrapment of a body suffering from disorders related to the nervous system in spaces where it is only protected.

But if the film’s scenes change, so does its perspective. The first level is external, determined by representing the apartment as a space where an adult man lives; he leaves the apartment only once, when he goes to the doctor with his daughter. On the second level, i.e., within the framework of using the internal perspective, which implies combining the “eye of the camera” with the eye and the cognitive powers of the character suffering from dementia, several characters are subjectively perceived and differently identified. As spectators and interpreters, we could understand the situations because different actors play them, and the source of the problems is Anthony’s ability for perception and understanding. His dialogues

with other persons throughout the action produce ambiguous information appropriate to limited mental abilities and memory (Cohen, 2016, pp. 17-19).

The Father is a drama tied to the mystery arising from the fragility of the mental world of the main character. The audience is active throughout the action; their goal is to reconstruct the confusion arising from the forgetting. All this information is a burden for Anthony. Still, the main preoccupation of the drama of a sick and older man is how well he manages his illness. Fragments of communication with other characters in the closed space of Anthony's apartment, his daughter's apartment, and then in the home for the elderly and demented represent the limited world of the character who in the last scene feels, as he says, that "he is losing his leaves." Parallel to the question of who he is, which refers to the complex drama that takes place in the mental world of a man who loses himself, the reactions followed by convulsions and tears are activated, and the behavior of an adult man reminiscent of the behavior of a child. He returns to childhood and seeks his mother. In the narration, the perspective is dynamic, meaning that the focus of constantly viewing shifts from the external to the internal. Through the character's consciousness, we perceive the event, the meeting, and the conversation with the Other.

Conclusion

In *The Father*, memory and narrative are filtered through the mind afflicted with dementia. Anthony is the bearer of the focus in this film, and through his mind, the spectator

receives the images of those Anthony knows and identifies. The end product of this mediation raises questions about the status of narration, cognition, and perception. The destruction of the canonical schema (Bordwell, 1985) is the product of the cognitive skills of the character whose world of demented perception is at the center. The character tries to identify faces and fails. He needs help completing them, and the effort at completing them usually fails. The spectator is exposed to these problems in following the events and summarizing them by building a chronology that is necessarily incomplete. In the narration, Anthony's confusion complements the spectator's confusion, although the spectator knows more than Anthony. However, these twin failures—of the character and of the spectator—do not mean that there is no sense to be made in the film. The limited composition of information whose filter is the mind of Anthony is connected with various assumptions and ends with fragmentary options for solving the scenes. Leaving these processes to the spectator concludes with a confrontation analogous to that in which Anthony is hopelessly marked by increasing powerlessness, and the spectator's need to find an ethical way out for the lonely, trapped and abused man cannot be satisfied.

In the end, *The Father* does not merely depict a character suffering from dementia; it challenges the viewer to experience the very narrative disorientation that defines Anthony's world. Through its manipulation of mise-en-scène, casting, time, and perspective, the film not

only represents dementia but also enacts its cognitive and narrative logic, placing the spectator in a position of uncertainty that mirrors Anthony's own. *The Father* thus becomes more than a cinematic portrayal of illness—it becomes a cinematic cognition of illness, or a narrative that thinks.

By aligning its storytelling techniques with the principles of cognitive narratology, Zeller's film renders visible the fragile architecture of memory, perception, and identity. It dramatizes the breakdown of narrative coherence not simply as a formal innovation, but as a phenomenological truth—a way of knowing and not knowing that is as much about epistemology as it is about empathy. In so doing, *The Father* extends an invitation to consider what it means to understand a story when the narrator cannot fully tell it, when memory falters, and when language fails. What emerges is a deeply reflexive film that does not just ask *what happened*, but rather *what does it mean to tell a story at all* when the storyteller is losing his leaves.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ See, for example, *The Leisure Seeker* (2017) by Paolo Virzì, *What They Had* (2018) by Elizabeth Chomko, *Remember* (2015) by Atom Egoyan, *Elizabeth Is Missing* (2019) by Aisling Walsh, *Aphasia* (2010) by Jim Gloster, *Still Alice* (2014) by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, *Away from Her* (2006) by Sarah Polley, *Lovely, Still* (2008) by Nik Fackler, *The Savages* (2007) by Tamara Jenkins, *Aurora Borealis* (2005) by James C.E. Burke, *A Song for*

Martin (2001) by Bille August, *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch* (2001) by John Bayley, *Firefly Dreams* (2001) by John Williams, *Age Old Friends* (1989) by Allan Kroeker, which represent characters that find themselves in various states of cognitive decline, and in so doing, thematize those very states.