

**Expressing character's point of view in the present-tense narrative:
The case of Ali Smith's *How to Be Both***

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Abstract

Present-tense narration has become one of the prevalent narrative styles in English literature since the late twentieth century. However, the effects of using narrative present tense do not seem to have been explored enough. As a case study, this paper examines the ways in which narrative point of view is handled in Ali Smith's present-tense novel, *How to Be Both* (2014). As in the traditional past-tense narrative, in the present-tense narrative, character's point of view is technically shown by the use of narrative devices such as *free indirect thought* and *narrated perception* in the context of internal focalization (Genette, 1980), or figural narrative situation (Stanzel, 1984). The present-tense narrative, however, often features not only the reflector-character's thoughts and perceptions but also his/her vague awareness of actions in order to foreground the character's point of view. Damsteegt (2004, 2005) identified a type of internal focalization expressing the reflector-character's vague awareness of his/her own actions, and call it *Internal Focalization of Awareness* (IFA). As for the representation of action in fiction, Palmer (2004) suggests that it can be discussed in terms of fictional consciousness. This paper illustrates how action can be regarded as one of the important parts of fictional consciousness in the present-tense narrative. It will consequently show that present-tense narration opens up more possibility of weaving character's point of view in narrative than past-tense narration, as it can make what may seem to be a narratorial report of action the representation of character's point of view.

Keywords: present-tense narration, narrative point of view, internal focalization of awareness (IFA), fictional consciousness, Ali Smith

1 Introduction

The use of the present tense for narration proper, that is, for narrating events at what is traditionally called ‘story’ level of narrative, has become more and more common in contemporary novels. Nearly 30% of the titles shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize between 2000 and 2018 are narrated in the present tense. In the present-tense narrative, the present tense is employed ‘as a tense of narration proper not only as one of commentary or report’ (Huber 2016: 13), and thus the main focus of the narrative is the moments which the present tense signifies. These moments can be any time as the basic meaning of the present tense is ‘timelessness’: it is used to refer not only to contemporaneity but also ‘to the past, to the future, and to temporally unmarked or atemporal events’ (Huber 2016: 7). On the other hand, the past tense signifies ‘pastness’ in relation to the speaker’s deictic center. In a narrative, this pastness implies that there is narrative distance between the time of narration and the narrated time. As Casparis defines, narrative distance is ‘[the narrator’s] degree of having understood the existential and causal implications of [his/her] past’ (1975: 103). Whenever the past tense is used, therefore, it is understood that the narrated experiences are digested by the narrator, and they are, as a rule, presented as causally linked events in a narrative. On the contrary, the present tense implies a lack of narrative distance, which implies that the present-tense narration ‘is deprived by definition of [any] privileged and superior narratorial perspective’ (Margolin 1999: 160), and tends to express and exploit the character’s point of view. Consequently, the narrated experiences are presented as undigested and causally unlinked material (Casparis 1975: 69, 151).

In terms of story-telling schema, past-tense narration is based on ‘live now, tell later’ (Margolin 1999: 161, see also Cohn 1999), a story-telling schema that is taken for granted in a natural and real narrative situation, while present-tense narration underlies the schema of ‘tell as you live’ (Margolin 1999: 161), which surely exists in natural discourse in the real world, such as breaking news story, but is unnatural when applied to narration. This unnatural narrative situation creates one important feature of present-tense narration, namely, the deconstruction of *story* and *discourse*. Post-modern, contemporary novels are sometimes discussed in this light. For example, Fonioková, in discussing Kazuo Ishiguro and Max Frisch’s novels, states that these unreliable and unnatural narration ‘render an unmistakable distinction between story and discourse impossible’ by merging ‘what is normally conveyed on the level of the discourse’ with ‘what actually happens’ on the story

level (2015: 20-21).

This applies to present-tense narration, because from a realist point of view, present-tense narration is unnatural. As Fludernik argues, ‘the story vs. discourse opposition seems to repose on a realist understanding of narration in which the concept of “live now and tell later” inevitably splits experiential and narrational processes’ (1996: 334). Narrative distance which is conducive to the story/discourse dichotomy is lacking in this type of narration. As a consequence, we cannot easily see if a narrative sentence is actually a ‘narration’ from the point of view of the narrator or a subjective representation which evokes the character’s point of view. As Jauss points out, in order to work exposition, the narrator hands over this task to his/her character(s) by ‘having them *think* the background information’ (2011: 114, italics added). Any reader tends to have the impression that what is traditionally labelled as ‘narration’ is embedded into the character’s thoughts, and the narrator’s point of view is backgrounded in the present-tense narrative. This paper will explain why the reader feels this way when reading the present-tense narrative. It will take Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both* (2014) as an example, and discuss the ways in which the narrator extensively expresses the reflector-character’s subjective point of view in the present-tense narrative.

2 Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both* (2014)

Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*, published in 2014, is a novel that has two parts, and both are titled ‘one’ as in Figure 1. Both parts are narrated in the present tense, but their narrative situation is different. The camera part, the left side one in Figure 1, is the third-person narrative in the reflector mode, which features a teenage girl George who recently lost her mother. The eyes part, the right side one in Figure 1, is an interior monologue of Francescho del Cossa, an Italian renaissance artist, who is disembodied and comes back from ground to contemporary Britain, and watches George while remembering the past in which she lived. This paper focuses on the camera part, in which the narrator turns the work of narrating events over to the reflector-character George, not only by having her think them as in interior monologue, but also by narrating through her consciousness.

The camera part portrays George struggling to come to terms with the sudden death of her mother in the present tense, which is presented as George’s NOW. Her NOW in the story begins when it is about to become the first new year since the death of her mother.

Her experiences before the midnight of the new year's eve are presented as her PAST, and at a certain point in the story, her NOW leads to her anticipated or wished FUTURE. In the camera part, George's recalled experiences in her PAST are described in the past tense, except for her visit to Italy with her mother before she passed away, which is narrated in the present tense though it belongs to her PAST, and things that are about to or supposed to happen are rendered by the use of 'will' as it belongs to her FUTURE (see Figure 2).

The present tense used to render George's NOW, which begins at the midnight of the new year's eve, is deictic present in relation to her figural deictic centre, which I call 'figural deictic present', following Huber (2016: 30). On the other hand, the present tense used to render what the past George experienced is called 'retrospective present'. In this paper, I refer to the passages written in the figural deictic present tense, since the fact that the central focus of the story is not what George did in the past but how she is handling herself now contributes to the deconstruction of story and discourse in this narrative. The following sections illustrate how actorial point of view, that is, the reflector-character's point of view, is effectively evoked by the figural deictic present.

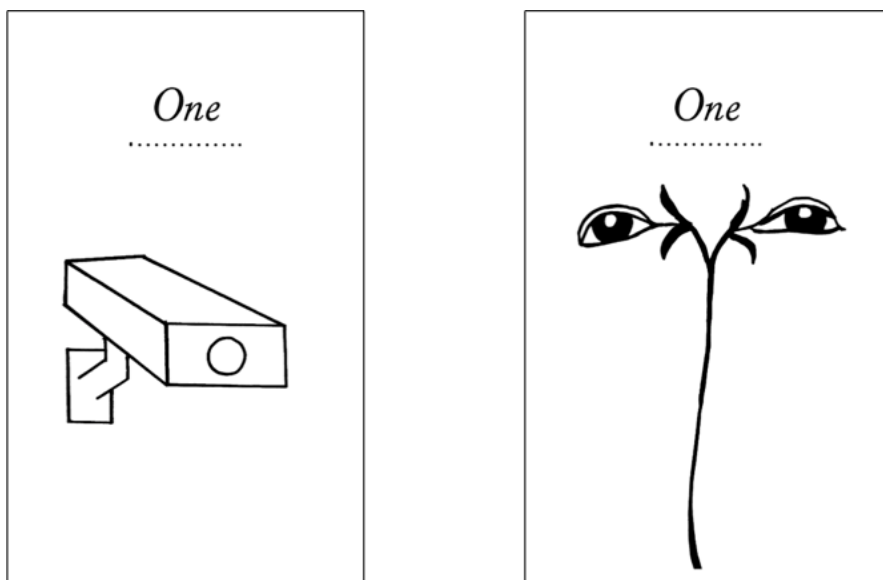


Figure 1 Images of the title pages in *How to Be Both*

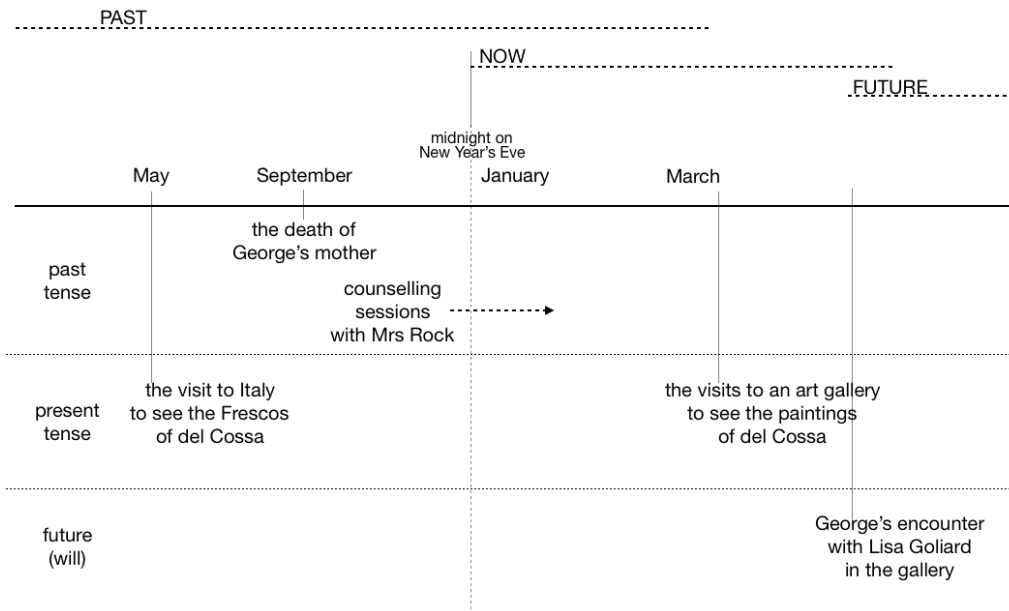


Figure 2 Time structure and tense use in *How to Be Both*

3 Representation of thought and narrative point of view

In the present-tense narrative, a character's subjective point of view is expressed through mimetic representations of thought as in the past-tense narrative. It is a noted fact that the direct and free-indirect modes of thought representation are evocative of the character's subjectivity. The consonant type of psycho-narration is also conducive to evoking the character's point of view (see Figure 3).

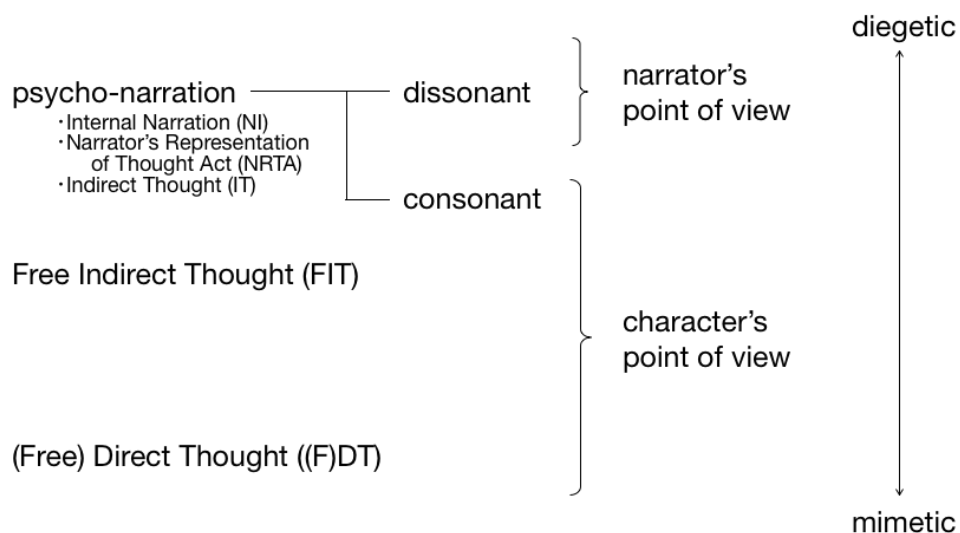


Figure 3 The continuum of thought representation categories

For example, in the following passage, George's subjective point of view is extensively evoked by the representations of her thoughts through mimetic categories:

The perfect irony of it [the leak from the roof in George's room] is that right now her father has a job with a roofing company. His job involves going into people's houses with a tiny rotating camera that's got a light attached to it which he fastens to the end of the rods more usually used to sweep chimneys. He connects the camera to the portable screen and pushes it all the way up inside the chimney. Then anyone who wants to know, and has £120 to spare, can see what the inside of his or her chimney looks like. If the person who wants to know has an extra £150, her father can provide a recorded file of the visuals so he or she can look at the inside of the chimney owned by him or her any time he or she chooses.

They. Everybody else says they. Why shouldn't George?

Anytime they choose. (Smith 2014: 11-12)

In this passage, it has just become a new year and George is spending her time in her room, thinking. Although the first paragraph of the passage may seem to be the narrator's description of what her father does for living, not only the context but also the expressions such as 'his or her', 'he or she' and 'him or her' suggest that it is represented through George's consciousness, as she is a kind of person who is very obsessive about grammatical correctness. This is also expressed in the following sentences, 'They. Everybody else says they. Why shouldn't George? Anytime they choose.', which are the representations of George's thought through free indirect thought and free direct thought. The deictic expression 'right now' also displays George's subjectivity, as it clearly refers not to the narrator's NOW but George's NOW. In other words, what seems to be narration is represented not from the dissonant point of view of the narrator, but from the point of view of George, and this displays consonance in narration. Narration seems to be embedded in George's thought as the narrator is in the background, having George think the background information. The following section discusses other ways of expressing actorial point of view in narrative, focusing on the representation of consciousness through perception.

4 Present tense and representation of consciousness through perception

Narrative point of view can also be discussed in relation to the representation of perception, as it is an important part of consciousness. It is pointed out that perception is based on ‘thoughtlike mental processes as description, inference, and problem-solving, although these processes are rapid-fire, unconscious, and nonverbal’ (Rock 1984: 234, quoted in Searle 1992: 231). Casparis similarly points out that ‘[e]pistemologically we cannot know in real life if someone [sees or hears], as little as we can know what anyone thinks or feels’ (1975: 122).

The importance of perception has been discussed by Banfield (1981), Brinton (1980), Fehr (1938), Pallarés-García (2012) and Rundquist (2014) to name some. These studies discuss the subjective power of what seems to be a narratorial report of experiences, or in other words, the so-called ‘free-indirect’ quality of a narrative sentence. Such a technique is called ‘narrated perception’ (see Figure 4). Other than narrated perception, perception can be reported diegetically from the point of view of the narrator with the explicit use of a perception verb such as ‘see’ or ‘hear’, and in my view, it can display dissonance and consonance like psycho-narration. A more mimetic way of representing perception than narrated perception is here called ‘replicated perception’. In this technique, the present tense helps to replicate the character’s perceptions, almost entirely from that character’s point of view, even though there are no other linguistic indicators that tell us so.

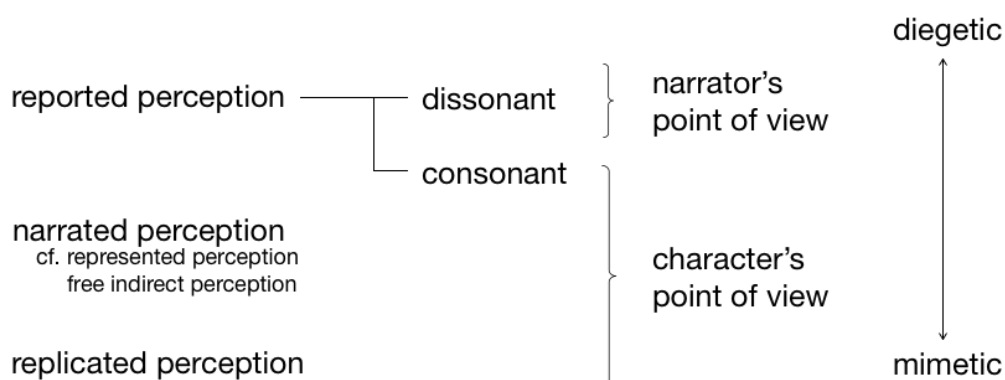


Figure 4 The continuum of perception representation categories

The present tense is compatible with perception because, as Casparis says, it has the quality of evoking ‘*perception reproduced with a minimum of cognitive analysis, or simply, perception before cognition*’ (1975: 10). By using the present tense, ‘experience

is mediated through perception as cognitively “undigested” raw material’ (Casparis 1975: 151). The words used to represent the character’s perception always belong to the narrator as it is by nature nonverbal, but the mimetic categories in Figure 4 render the perceptions filtered through the consciousness of the character.

In the passage below, for example, the narrator has George think background information, and since it is given through her consciousness, it goes in tandem with her perception:

George’s room is in the loft bit of the house and since they had the roof redone last summer it’s had a leak in it at the slant at the far end. A little runnel of water comes in every time it rains, it’s coming in right now, happy New Year George! Happy New Year to you too, rain, and running in a beaded line straight down the place where the plaster meets the plasterboard then dripping down on to the books piled on top of the bookcase. Over the weeks since it’s been happening the posters have started to peel off it because the Blu-tack won’t hold to some of the wall. Under them a light brown set of stains, like the map of a tree-root network, or a set of country lanes, or a thousand-times magnified mould, or the veins that get visible in the whites of your eyes when you’re tired - no, not like any of these things, because thinking these things is just a stupid game. Damp is coming in and staining the wall and that’s all there is to it. (Smith 2014: 11)

The underlined sentences are connected to George’s perceptions, and other parts are linked to her knowledge or cognition. Perception functions as cognitively undigested raw material which eventually leads to digested understanding of that raw material. Other than the use of the present tense and some expressive use of language, such as adverb preposing and the ellipsis of verb, only the context tells us these are the perceptions of George at the very moment they are being perceived. The narrator displays actorial point of view by representing the reflector-character’s external perceptions mimetically through replicated perception, and the present tense is conducive to this effect.

However, as Casparis says, the present tense can evoke perception before cognition, ‘be it transmitted through the outward or the inward eye’ (1975: 70). In this sense, the character’s own action can be the object of perception through the inward eye, which means that the reflector-character can focalize him- or herself. While the modernists

‘limited their use of present tense to their characters’ thoughts, reporting all actions in past tense’, contemporary novelists ‘have extended the use of present tense to actions as well as thoughts’ (Jauss 2011: 94). This extended use, especially in the reflector-mode of narrative, has an impact on the interpretation of what is regarded as a narratorial report of action, because it becomes no longer a pure narration but the representation of perception filtered through figural consciousness.

The importance of action is noted by some critics. Palmer (2004), for example, regards action as part of fictional consciousness, because its constructions are ‘inextricably bound up with presentations of action’ (2004: 211), but he does not mention the present tense in his discussion. Damsteegt (2004; 2005) focuses on the relationship between the representation of a focalizer’s own actions and the present tense. According to him, present-tense internal focalization is clearly linked with ‘a character’s mind at the time the character perceives and mentally digests the perception’ (2005: 53). The description of one’s own actions in the present tense, therefore, ‘indicate[s] an awareness on the character’s part of his or her actions at the very moment they are being performed’ (2005: 42). He calls such a phenomenon ‘Internal Focalization of Awareness (IFA)’. In IFA, ‘it is the narrator who informs the reader about a character’s past emotions and actions, while at the same time that character’s own awareness of these feelings and actions is expressed, which is vague in comparison with an awareness expressed through directly quoted thought (with or without inquit) or FIT’ (Damsteegt 2004: 33). I will discuss this phenomenon in the following examples, but I regard action not as the reflector-character’s awareness but as his/her perception.

The use of the present tense in the third-person figural narration for representing one’s own action should be understood as being in between narrated perception and replicated perception, in that while the present tense is always linked with the reflector-character’s external or internal perception, the third-person reference to him or her reminds us of the presence of the narrator. In the following examples, I will analyse the present-tense used to render George’s actions as her perceptions of internal happenings.

^(a)Anyway George is spending the first minutes of the new year looking up the lyrics of an old song. ^(b)Let’s Twist Again. ^(c)Lyrics by Kal Mann. ^(d)The words are pretty bad. ^(e)Let’s twist again like we did last summer. ^(f)Let’s twist again like we did last year. ^(g)Then there’s a really bad rhyme, a rhyme that isn’t, properly speaking,

even a rhyme. (Smith 2014: 4)

In this passage, George is in her room, thinking about her dead mother, when it just turns to the new year. Sentence (a) is about what George is doing, that is, it renders her action. Sentences (b) to (g) are associated with George's thoughts and some of them also with her visual perceptions. The lyrics (sentences (b), (c), (e) and (f)) are read by George, so she has these words in her mind while looking at them, and she gives evaluations of them as in (d) and (g). The first half of (g) ('Then there's a really bad rhyme') reflects both her thought and perception, in that she gives her evaluation about the rhyme while she is looking at the bad-rhyme part of the lyrics. The latter part ('a rhyme that isn't, properly speaking, even a rhyme') is her thought, and not a narratorial comment about the rhyme, which is implied by the phrase 'properly speaking', as it reflects George's fastidious language use. In this context, it does not seem quite appropriate to regard Sentence (a) as a pure narratorial report of George's action. Rather, it is her reflective perception of her own action. This feeling is also suggested by the word 'anyway', which implies that George was thinking about other things but now changes the topic of her thought, and by the use of the progressive aspect, because it gives a sense that 'a character is perceiving that event while it occurs' (Pallarés-García 2012: 171, cf. Banfield 1981: 67; Brinton 1980: 373–374; Fehr 1938: 101).

Since the present tense used in this passage is figural deictic, it is always linked with the figural deictic centre, that is, the reflector-character George's here and now. Taken as the figural deictic present tense, the present tense in (a) renders George's perception as undigested raw material on the part of George, and not on that of the narrator, and therefore it is evocative of actorial point of view. If it were written in the past tense, this reading would be unlikely because the description of the reflector-character's action in the past tense is more closely associated with narratorial point of view. Instead of reporting what George does, the narrator represents it through her consciousness, from her figural deictic centre, having her think and perceive. Consequently, the passage is evocative of her point of view without overtly saying that it represents her thoughts and perceptions. I will look at some other passages that convey such an effect.

^(a)A minute later she [H] is not in the room any more.

^(b)A moment after that George hears the front door of the house closing.

- (c)George lies back down flat on the carpet again.
- (d)She is not a girl. She is a block of stone.
- (e)She is a piece of wall.
- (f)She is something against which other things impact without her permission or understanding. (Smith 2014: 101)

The context of this passage is that George and her friend H are lying in her mother's study, hanging out, but her father asks them to leave the room because he does not want his wife's stuff to be messed up. He asks H to stay for supper, but H excuses herself, gets up and says goodbye, and as in (a) in the passage, she instantly leaves the room.

The sentence-initial temporal adverbial phrases in (a) and (b) suggest that it is George who is perceiving situations changing rapidly. As Fludernik says, 'the order of words traces the order of perception on the part of the character' (1993: 306). In these sentences, George is the subject of consciousness that perceives this rapid flow of time, though it is the narrator who puts it into words. In other words, Sentence (a) is George's perception of external happenings, and (b) her perception of her own action represented through consonant reported perception. Consonant, because it renders her auditory perception with the explicit use of a perception verb ('hear'), but the perception is closely linked with her consciousness. The next sentence (c) is then contextually read as George's reflective perception of her own action. This reading is further supported by the following sentences from (d) to (f), which are all evidently linked with her cognitions and sensations when she 'lies back down flat on the carpet again'.

Similarly, in the short passage below, George's reflective perception is expressed from her point of view in the present tense. The context is that George and her little brother Henry are woken up by a noise coming from the front door, and she is about to go downstairs to see if it is their father. Here, after George says to her brother some soothing words, she goes down stairs, thinking about the reason why her father is banging on the door:

- (a)It's okay, she [George] says. (b)It's just dad. (c)Go back to sleep.
- (d)George goes down the first flight then the next flight of stairs. (e)He will have lost his keys or they will be in a pocket he is too pissed to put his hand in or remember he even has. (Smith 2014: 73)

George's action is represented in (d). The expression 'the first flight then the next flight of stairs' seems to reflect her perceptions of her own action, otherwise her action would be simply described as 'George goes down stairs' without hinting at actorial point of view in the sentence. This reading is also supported by the surrounding context. She is thinking about the possible reasons why her father cannot come in at the very moment she is going down the stairs, and this is represented through FIT in (e), suggesting that the preceding sentence is also conducive to expressing actorial point of view.

The last example below shows how the demarcation between story and discourse is blurred by using the figural deictic present:

(a)George opens her notebook. (b)It's nearly noon.

(c)This is the point in this story at which, according to its structure so far, a friend enters or a door opens or some kind of plot surfaces (but which kind? the one that means the place where a dead person's buried? the one that means the place where a building's to be built? the one that means a secret stratagem?); this is the place in this book where a spirit of twist in the tale has tended, in the past, to provide a friendly nudge forward to whatever's coming next.

(d)George is ready and waiting.

(e)She plans to count the people and how long and how little time they spend looking or not looking at a random picture in a gallery. (Smith 2014: 182)

George is in the gallery where the art works of Francesco del Cossa are exhibited. She spends her time, sitting in front of an old painting and trying to think of the words for it, and opens her notebook. This is the beginning of the last bit of the camera part, and after this passage, the auxiliary verb 'will' is used to imply what happens in George's future. The use of 'will' is ambiguous in that it can be read as the narrator's apparent presence or George's wishes. These possibilities are hinted in the long sentence (c) in the passage. On the one hand, the phrases such as 'in this story', 'in this book' and 'in the tale' and the explanatory atmosphere seem to be associated with the extra-diegetic narrator who has been in the background up until this point. On the other hand, George's character suggests that she may be conscious of her own story, as the explanatory note about the meaning of the word 'plot' is inserted in the parenthesis in the middle of (c). In fact, the eyes part is an interior monologue of Del Cossa in its appearance, but it is written

in contemporary English which sounds much like teenager. This suggests that it might be George who is creating the other part and she is about to write it down in the notebook she opens, although it is uncertain. Such interpretation is possible because the narrator in the camera part turns his/her power to narrate to the reflector-character George, making the distinction between story and discourse impossible by using the figural deictic present tense. Read in this way, Sentences (a), (d) and (e) may be the representation of George's perception of her phenomenal and mental actions. Sentences (b) and (e) are ambiguous between her cognition and perception, but they are closely linked with her consciousness. Actorial point of view is thus effectively evoked by blurring the story/discourse dichotomy with the figural deictic present tense.

5 Summary

This paper has illustrated that the use of the present tense for narration proper makes the ways in which actorial point of view is woven into narrative complex and subtle, as the relationship between story and discourse is blurred and deconstructed in present-tense narration. In present-tense narration, actorial point of view is expressed by the use of mimetic thought representation categories as in past-tense narration. What is different from past-tense narration is that what is usually expressed in narration tends to be filtered through the reflector-character's consciousness in present-tense narration, and this contributes to displaying actorial point of view. Representation of perception is also conducive to expressing actorial point of view. Perception representation has at least three categories, and the present tense functions as a linguistic marker for rendering a character's perception in a mimetic way, but it is difficult to give precise linguistic forms for each category. Perception representation categories have a close affinity with narration in terms of their forms. They are also similar in that both function as giving information about what happens in the character's world. In this sense, it can also be said that what is traditionally called 'narration' may display consonance and suggest actorial point of view in the present-tense narrative. Perception is not always external but it can be internal. Not only the reflector-character's perceptions of his/her surroundings (external perception) but also his/her perceptions of his/her own actions (internal perception) can be rendered from the point of view of that character. In this case, the interpretation of a description of the reflector-character's own action in present-tense narration becomes quite different

from that in past-tense narration. Using the present-tense is, as a rule, conducive to actorial point of view, because it means a lack of narrative distance between the narrating time and the narrated time. It suggests undigested raw material, perception before cognition on the part of the reflector-character. Therefore, even a description of one's own action tends to be a subjective representation of reflective perception of that character, which often implies that the distinction between story and discourse is impossible in present-tense figural narration. Note, however, that the use of the present tense is not always conducive to actorial point of view, because its effect depends on the narrative situation in which it is used. This paper focuses on the third-person figural narrative situation, but further research would be necessary to understand the effect of using the present tense in narrative in relation to varieties of narrative situations in the novel.

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