

Telling vs. Showing

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1 Definition

The telling vs. showing distinction captures two different modes of presenting events in a narrative. In a first approximation, the distinction can be taken quite literally: in the showing mode, the narrative evokes in readers the impression that they are shown the events of the story or that they somehow witness them, while in the telling mode, the narrative evokes in readers the impression that they are told about the events. Using a spatial metaphor, the showing mode is also called a narrative with “small distance,” presumably because readers get the impression that they are somehow near the events of the story, while the telling mode correspondingly evokes the impression of a “large distance” between readers and the events.

2 Explication

In current narratology, the labels ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ are widely used, but there appears to be little consensus as to the exact distinction they are supposed to cover. Thus narratologists do not always agree on the classification of examples, or even about the grounds for the classification. This can be seen when considering an example which has been proposed to illustrate the distinction. Compare the sentences “John was angry with his wife” and “John looked at his wife, his eyebrows pursed, his lips contracted, his fists clenched. Then he got up, banged the door and left the house” (Rimmon-Kenan [1983] 2002: 109). The first sentence is introduced by Rimmon-Kenan as an example of telling and the latter as an example of showing. However, whether one thinks that these two sentences differ with respect to the telling vs. showing distinction depends on what criteria are taken to be decisive (for references, see section 3 below):

If the presence or absence of a narrator is taken to be the decisive criterion, then both sentences may be on a par. The same is true if the presence or absence of dialogue is considered crucial, or, arguably, if the ‘partiality’ or ‘objectivity’ of the

narration are regarded as lying at the heart of the distinction.

A difference between the modes of presentation emerges if it is taken for granted that both example sentences feature a narrator; hence, if one compares the relations of a narrator to the events told, including the narrator's spatial, temporal or general epistemic position, then the first sentence ("John was angry with his wife") may count as an instance of telling and the second as an instance of showing. Similarly, the first sentence is explicit about at least one of John's traits ("John was angry with his wife") and hence is in the telling mode, while the second leaves any facts about John's traits to be inferred by the reader. What is more, the first sentence exhibits a higher degree of narrative speed, and it conveys a comparatively less detailed description of the event (or events) than the second; hence the first sentence may count as telling and the second as showing. Similarly, the first sentence may invoke the impression on the reader's side that the events of the story are being reported (telling), while the second may invoke the impression of somehow witnessing the events, which constitutes showing. Finally, the first sentence might be taken to draw the implied reader's attention to the storyteller, while the second sentence draws the implied reader's attention to the story.

It is not clear whether the different interpretations of the telling vs. showing distinction share a common denominator. Also, while some accounts can be easily combined, others cannot. Most notably, several of the accounts take the fictional narrator to be important in one way or the other. But this need not mean that the accounts basically establish the same distinction. For instance, a clearly perceptible narrator, whose presence constitutes 'telling' according to some interpretations, may, but need not be explicit about the traits of the characters, which constitutes 'showing' according to other interpretations of the distinction. Moreover, two different accounts of 'showing' can be mutually exclusive. For instance, if the *absence* of a narrator from the narration is taken to constitute showing, as is the case in passages of pure dialogue, then this is incompatible with the claim that showing is constituted by the narrator's particularly close temporal or spatial position relative to the events of the story, as another account has it. Note also that the presence or absence of dialogue suggests that neither 'telling' nor 'showing' are gradable predicates, while accounts relying on e.g. the amount of narrative information, or the 'speed' of the narration, suggest that telling and showing allow of degrees.

Finally, there are a number of different labels attached to the distinctions in question. Amongst them are 'mimetic mode,' 'objectivity,' 'impersonal mode,' 'scenic mode,' 'dramatic mode,' 'rendering' or 'small distance' as (more or less) synonymous for 'showing,' and 'diegetic mode,' 'partiality' or 'large distance' as

(more or less) synonymous for 'telling' (cf. e.g. Booth [1961] 1983: 8; Rabinowitz 2005: 530; Wiesenfarth 1963; Genette [1972] 1980: 162-89; Stanzel [1979] 2008: 190-92).

3 Aspects and History of the Concept

Some variants of the telling vs. showing distinctions have been traced back to the diegesis/mimesis-distinctions known from the writings of Plato (Halliwell → Diegesis – Mimesis [1]; Willems 1989).

An early modern treatment of distinguishing between commentary ("Reflection"), on the one hand, and a detailed description of characters, events, and actions, on the other, can be found in Spielhagen ([1883] 1967). Spielhagen maintains that only the latter is in accordance with the "laws of the epic" ("epische Gesetze"), and hence must be rated superior to the former (ibid.: 67-69). This verdict is criticized by Friedemann (1910), who argues that the "essence" of narrative fiction consists precisely in the foregrounding of the narrator ("das *Wesen* der epischen Form [besteht] gerade in dem Sichgeltendmachen eines Erzählenden", ibid.: 3). Both Spielhagen and Friedemann thus deal with the question to what extent the author (resp. a narrator) may intrude in the narration, e.g. by commenting on the events, filling in narrative gaps or taking a subjective stance. Friedemann (1910: 26) holds that by commenting on the events a narrator need not disturb the "epic illusion"; rather, the narrator may become an "organic" part of the composition. Moreover, Friedemann in effect shifts the theoretical focus from the presence or absence of narratorial commentary to the *effect* such commentary may have on the reader; thus for her, the real question is whether, upon reading, our "illusion suffers damage" ("leidet unsere Illusion Schaden", ibid.: 27).

The modern popularity of distinguishing 'telling' and 'showing' is usually said to be due to Lubbock. Lubbock underscores some normative implications of the distinction. Thus he holds that "the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself" (Lubbock [1922] 1954: 62). He also compares Flaubert's novels with a "picture" or "drama" and states that a "writer like Flaubert—or any other novelist whose work supports criticism at all—is so far from telling a story as it might be told in an official report, that we cease to regard him as reporting in any sense. He is making an effect and an impression, by some more or less skilful method" (ibid.: 63).

Lubbock was able to base his account of the distinction on the comments of several authors of fiction. Henry James and Ford Madox Ford likewise held that "showing" is clearly superior to "telling." James claims that "Processes, periods, intervals, stages,

degrees, connexions, may be easily enough and barely enough named, may be unconvincingly stated, in fiction, to the deep discredit of the writer, but it remains the very deuce to represent them [...]" (James [1884] 1957: 94; see also Wiesenfarth 1963, esp. ch. 1, for elaboration). Ford claims that the novelist "has to render and not to tell." And he explains: "If I say 'The wicked Mr. Blank shot nice Blanche's dear cat!' that is telling. If I say: 'Blank raised his rifle and aimed it at the quivering, black-burdened topmost bough of the cherry-tree. After the report a spattered bunch of scarlet and black quivering dropped from branch to branch to pancake itself on the orchard grass!' that is rather bad rendering, but is still rendering" (Ford [1930] 1983 : 122). Neither of these authors really contributes to the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. Their treatment, however, underscores the importance the distinction had in the authors' discourse *about* fiction, and this in turn explains why it has been taken up by an evolving narratology.

Booth ([1961] 1983: 16, 154-55) criticizes clear-cut versions of the showing vs. telling distinction. What he seems to be primarily interested in is the question of how an author manages to combine authorial (or narratorial) comments and 'showing'. Thus, Booth in effect tried to correct the view that the distinction hinges on the presence of explicit commentary, be it the author's or a narrator's.

Genette introduces an influential new term into the debate, namely "distance." He explains that "the narrative can furnish the reader with more or fewer details, and in a more or less direct way, and can thus seem (to adopt a common and convenient spatial metaphor, which is not to be taken literally) to keep at a greater or lesser distance from what it tells" (Genette [1972] 1980: 162). Genette further maintains that one needs to distinguish the 'narrative of events' from a 'narrative of words,' for only the latter is said to be 'mimetic' in the full sense of the word: "The truth is that mimesis in words can only be mimesis of words. Other than that, all we have and can have is degrees of diegesis" (ibid.: 164).

In sum, and as indicated in section (2) above, current narratology shows a broad diversity of possible meanings of the telling vs. showing distinction. The label 'telling vs. showing' is taken to refer to the following distinctions:

First, the very presence of a narrator (telling) vs. the absence of a narrator (showing) in the story is taken to be decisive (cf. Chatman 1978: 32, 146; Nünning & Sommer 2008: 341).

Second, the relations of a narrator to the events told, including his or her spatial, temporal or general epistemic position, which can be remote (telling) or close (showing), are said to constitute the distinction. Thus Toolan explains that "[m]imesis [i.e. *showing*] presents 'everything that happened' in one sense, but

really only everything as it would be revealed to a witness within the scene,” while “[d]iegesis [i.e. *telling*] presents ‘everything that happened’ in another sense, but only everything that a detached external reporter decides is worth telling” (Toolan [1988] 2001: 134, cf. also Linhares-Dias 2006: 7).

Third, the presence (showing) or absence (telling) of dialogue in the narrative are said to be involved in the telling vs. showing distinction (cf. Fludernik [2006] 2009: 36 and 161; cf. already Chatman 1978: 32; Genette [1983] 1988: 45). The reason for this is that only dialogue is taken to constitute an ‘unmediated’ presentation, and hence ‘showing’, of what happens in the story world.

Fourth, the explicitness (telling) or implicitness (showing) of e.g. a character’s traits or dispositions as well as the themes, meanings or morals of the story are taken to be decisive (cf. Friedman 1955: 1169–70, *passim*; Lubbock [1922] 1954: 67–68; Rimmon-Kenan [1983] 2002: 108). Again, one can argue that these features of a narrative indicate the presence of a narrating subject whose presence in turn accounts for a ‘mediated’ presentation of what happens in the story world.

The same holds true for, fifth, the ‘partiality’ (telling) or ‘objectivity’ (showing) of the narration (cf. Rabinowitz 2005: 530), since a ‘partial’ rendering of the story that includes commentary and evaluation also indicates the presence of a narrator. As a consequence, the direction of the implied reader’s attention either to the story (showing) or to the storyteller (telling) may be affected (cf. *ibid.*).

Sixth, the ‘speed’ of the narration, which can be comparatively fast (telling) or slow (showing), and which can convey more (showing) or less detailed (telling) information, is taken to be decisive (cf. Genette [1972] 1980: 166).

Seventh, the impression on the reader’s side that he or she is being told about the events of the story (telling) or rather somehow witnesses them (showing) is taken to lie at the core of the telling vs. showing distinction (cf., amongst others, Martínez & Scheffel [1999] 2012: 50; Stanzel 1964: 13; Stanzel [1979] 2008: 192; Linhares-Dias 2006; Wiesenfarth 1963: 2).

It remains an open question whether, or to what extent, these accounts allow for unification. A promising candidate for a unified account might be the idea that the telling vs. showing distinction captures different impressions a reader may have upon reading the text. This idea finds its predecessors, *inter alia*, in Socrates (Halliwell → Diegesis – Mimesis [1] [§ 7]), Friedemann (1910: 26–27, 89, 91), Lubbock ([1922] 1954: 63), or Stanzel (1964: 13), to name but a few. What is more, this way of setting up the distinction between telling and showing allows for taking some, if not all, of the other items on the list to constitute *evidence* for either ‘telling’ or

‘showing’ (rather than being *identical* with it). Hence, for instance, the speed of the narration or explicit commentary may be taken to be evidence for the presence of a fictional narrator, whose presence can be taken to evoke the impression on the reader’s side of being told about the events which, in turn, constitutes telling. Finally, in this account, the distinction between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ is by no means superfluous (cf. Genette [1983] 1988: 44), for it does not reduce to any of the narrative phenomena (presence or properties of narrator, speed of narration, objectivity, dialogue, amount of detail, etc.) that help establish it.

4 Related Terms

Which terms one takes to be related to the telling vs. showing distinction of course depends on what one takes the distinction to be in the first place. Accordingly, possible candidates for related terms include: Margolin → Narrator [2]; Alber & Fludernik → Mediacy and Narrative Mediation [3]; McHale → Speech Representation [4]. Proponents of the view that ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ refer to the impression on the part of the reader of witnessing the events of the story (as opposed to having the impression of being told about the events) may want to explore connections to the concepts of ‘immersion,’ ‘transportation,’ or ‘aesthetic illusion’ (cf. Gerrig 1993; Green & Brock 2000; Giovanelli 2008; Wolf → Illusion (Aesthetic) [5]).

5 Topics for Further Investigation

To date, there is no systematic study that explores connections as well as distinctions between the major current accounts of the telling vs. showing distinction. The same holds true for a comprehensive study of the history of the concepts. It seems that such studies are needed, not least in order to evaluate the importance of the distinction(s). Some narratologists feel that the telling vs. showing distinction is superfluous, mainly because they take it to refer to other narrative phenomena, such as the speed of the narration or the presence or absence of a narrator, which can be dealt with directly (cf. Rimmon-Kenan [1983] 2002: 109; Bal 1983: 238–40; Genette [1983] 1988: 44). Others maintain that the distinction lies at the very heart of narrative, showing in particular being regarded as a mode of presentation that is most peculiar and in need of close scrutiny (cf. Linhares-Dias 2006).

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6.1 Further Reading

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