

Tiến Phát Nguyễn

Cinematic and Theatrical Narrators as Optional Agencies in *All About Eve* by Ivo van Hove (2019): An Intermedial Approach to Multimodal Narrative on Stage

Grounded in intermedial theory, this paper examines the role of the narrator in multimodal narratives through Ivo van Hove's 2019 stage adaptation of *All About Eve*. In this production, the narratorial presence manifests via live on-stage cinematographers and hidden cameras, projecting real-time footage that extends narrative space beyond traditional theatrical boundaries. This paper thus advocates for a more inclusive approach to the coexistence of intermedial narrators within a single narrative work, particularly about theater and cinema, two mediums traditionally perceived as devoid of narrators. It questions the longstanding debate regarding the legitimacy of the narrator in these art forms, given the increasing fluidity and convergence of expressive media. How can narrators across literature, theater, and cinema be meaningfully compared and conceptualized to inform the creation of new intermedial works? The paper discusses the limits within and between narrative art forms, highlights how the hybridization of narratorial functions in *All About Eve* exemplifies the evolving nature of multimodal storytelling, urging a reevaluation of traditional narratological frameworks and paving the way towards more inclusive approaches in contemporary narrative theories to keep up with the fast-paced developments of technologies in the twenty-first century.

1. Setting the Intermedial Stage

In the context of the explosion of digital media in the first three decades of the twenty-first century, expressive tools have become increasingly diverse, constantly improved, and simultaneously intersected and combined in the process of development and refinement. This intersection and combination always faces many prejudices as the boundaries of each media type, especially those that have formed their own art forms, are constantly being broken down, creating hybrid art forms to meet the increasingly diverse expressive needs of humanity. This article focuses on analyzing the shift of narrator, one of the most core concepts of narrative studies, which has been constructed, debated, and improved based on biases associated with the three basic art forms throughout the development of narrative art: theater, prose, and film.

The concept of the narrator in narrative studies was constructed in the early days of literary criticism, before being rigorously systematized during classical period of narratology, and then continuously developed throughout the history of narrative studies (Barthes 1975; Genette 1980, 1988; Bal 2017; Stanzel 1984; Prince 2012; Rimmon-Kenan 2002), but it is largely based on literary theory, leading to many partialities only applicable to this art form. As narratology expanded its focus to analyze cinematic storytelling, scholars such as Seymour Chatman (1990) proposed some new perspectives on the narrator, shifting away from the traditional literary perspective, with Genette's demand for the mandatory existence of a narrator in every narrative, or the judgment that theater and cinema are not narratives because they lack a narrator (Genette 1980, 1988). More

recently, Sylvie Patron has persistently pursued a critique of what she calls pan-narrator theory with new works such as *The Death of the Narrator and Other Essays* (2019), *Optional-Narrator Theory* (2021), and *The Narrator. A Problem in Narrative Theory* (2023). Continuing that effort, this paper proposes a cross-media approach to reimagining the phenomenon of narrator(s) in the context of increasingly diverse structural and modal forms of storytelling in the digital age. This is clearly seen in the case of *All about Eve* (2019), the main subject of this paper, directed by Ivo van Hove, which was filmed and released by National Theatre Live in several theaters worldwide in the West, and subsequently streamed on the National Theatre at Home platform as an effort to redirect the theatrical experience during the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cornici 2023).

Applying optional-narrator theory, this study proposes a perspective focused on the intermodal integration and transformation of the narrator in *All about Eve*'s multimodal stage, encompassing the combination of auditorium stage, live cameras, onstage projection screens, and streaming technology, thereby affirming the intermedia transfer potential of narrative art. Questions raised within the intermedia context include: Is the debate about the legitimacy of the narrator in theater and film still relevant? Is the hierarchical classification of narrators based on their level of visibility (overt vs. covert) still useful? How can the narrator across prose, theater, and film be compared and conceptualized? How has the hybrid nature of the narrator in the theatrical version been redefined in the streaming version?

To answer these questions, this paper will apply the theoretical framework of postclassical narratology with a focus on intermediality to scrutinize the use of theatrical and cinematic narrators on stage and their contributions to the construction of meaning in productions. The paper begins with an overview of the limits of the narrator concept, then continues with an analysis of the play *All About Eve* (2019) as a laboratory of intermedial narrators and finally moves toward a proposal for a more inclusive narratology.

2. The Concept of Narrator and Its Limits

The most crucial and essential point that Patron has achieved in her work, in her dialogue with the view of the inherent existence of the narrator, is to point out the limitations of this concept, thereby opening the door to more flexible use, especially in the multimedia context of contemporary narrative art. Sylvie Patron compares two theories, pan-narrator theory and optional-narrator theory, with the former derived from the classical narrative tradition and the latter being the author's proposal for the post-classical context.

From the perspective of pan-narrator theory, spanning from early theorists like Käte Friedemann to classical narratologists like Gérard Genette (Patron 2021, 110-f.), any narrative necessarily requires the presence of a narrator, existing as an essential structural condition of the narrative. Meanwhile, optional-narrator theory views the narrator as a deliberate artistic choice, meaning it is not necessarily mandatory. When experiencing the work, the recipient only makes assumptions about the narrator when necessary or when encountering clear signs: "the theory according to which we can only speak of a fictional narrator in cases where the author creates or constructs this narrator through a process that is assumed to be intentional" (Patron 2021, 1). Comparing these two viewpoints, it can be seen that pan-narrator theory has not created a clear

dividing line between the narrator in the fictional world of the story and the creator in the real world of the experiencer. This limitation makes observing the narrator in hybrid works problematic. For optional-narrator theory, treating the narrator as an optional tool clarifies the technical connection between the creator, who actively employs the storytelling tool, and the narrator, the tool used, thereby creating a clearer perspective on the functional and role relationship between creator and narrator:

Optional-narrator theory has a much clearer concept of the narrator than pan-narrator theory. The former takes the distinction between the author and the narrator seriously, whereas many pan-narrator theorists muddle this fundamental distinction, claiming, for example, that all narratives have a narrator on the grounds that all artifacts are the product of human activity (all novels are the product of a novel writer; all plays, of a playwright; and so on). (Patron 2021, 2)

Recreating this distinction does not mean denying the theoretical legacy of classical narratology; on the contrary, it contributes to a more diverse understanding, acknowledging the creator's ability to use and adjust the narrator to varying degrees. In a narrative work, the presence of either the creator or the narrator is a deliberate artistic choice aimed at creating meaning. Depending on the specific narrative situation, the creator determines the level of narrator presence according to their needs. In the context of increasingly multimodal narratives in contemporary life, this flexibility allows the creator to integrate various types of narrators from different art forms into their hybrid work. The paradox of the pan-narrator theory makes it almost impossible to apply in the contemporary multimedia environment. Originating from literary criticism, pan-narrator theory limits itself to the world of literary texts. Therefore, to study intermediary narrative phenomena, one must almost certainly apply theories that transcend the pan-narrator ideas of classical literary criticism. Returning to the case of plays and films that are considered to lack a narrator, it can be seen in *All about Eve* the presence of a combination of many narrators, which will be analyzed in detail in the following section. The objects referred to as “cinematic narrator” or “theatrical narrator” will be seen as optional agencies during the production, rather than merely improvisational as Marie-Laure Ryan argues (Patron 2021, 11).

In a multimedia environment, the concept of “narrator” can expand to encompass narrators across various narrative media depending on the context of the story, or narrow to a single narrator within a narrative space, depending on the creators' creative intentions. The presence of a narrator is not unnecessary, but it should not be considered a mandatory and integral element of the entire work, as in traditional narrative studies. The proposal of an optional narrator opens up the possibility of using multiple types of narrators within a single multimedia work. Accordingly, the narrator is a tool, not an omniscient subject, a pan-entity, but is essential as a fundamental element to activate the narrative, a role that can simultaneously shift between the author, the creative team in the real world, and the characters in the work, creating the flexible and adaptable nature of a narrative tool. The narrator is not necessarily confined to a single form within a single work, but can exist in the form of various media. This media flexibility leads to the intermingling of theatrical and cinematic narrators in *All About Eve*.

3. *All About Eve* (2019): A Laboratory of Intermedial Narrators

Ivo van Hove used stage camera techniques as a continuation of methods from many earlier theatre-makers. The very presence of cameras and screens in the auditorium is not entirely new, having been experimented with by artists such as Jan Speckenbach (Speckenbach/Irmer, 2022). The key to *All About Eve*'s suitability for analyzing the hybridity of multimedia narrative techniques is the synchronization between form and content. While Joseph L. Mankiewicz's original film (1950) depicts the rivalry between two generations of film actors, Ivo van Hove's adaptation (2019) presents a competition between two main characters from two different art forms: the aging stage actress Margo and her young assistant Eve, who dreams of and admires the filmmaking journey that Margo's husband pursues in Hollywood (Brenton 2022). The director links the transfer of influence between Margo and Eve to a competition for spheres of influence right on the stage, with the viewing space divided in two: the upper half being a large screen and the lower half a traditional proscenium stage.

Adding to this distinctive spatial design is a new technological element that directly intervenes in the narrative strategy of the work: live cameras with cinematographs freely moving on stage, or recording cameras hidden in some strategic places. This is a crucial technical feature that creates a characteristic hybridity, going beyond simply multimodal where one media appears statically alongside another within the same work. Here, the creators of cinematic art have transcended the pre-determined space of the large screen, bringing their core tool into the stage space with a multitude of cameras appearing everywhere along with the cameraman, forming a particularly important narrative agent. Ivo van Hove's storytelling choice has deployed cameras and screens in their true nature as narrative tools, rather than merely as decorative elements or providing basic information like background. Conversely, the very live nature of these cinematic tools preserves the distinctive qualities of the stage within the work. Instead of recording and then playing it back at a later time, as is the traditional method of film distribution, these cameras record all activity on stage in real time and report it directly onto the screen on the stage as a parallel performance. From this, it can be seen that the three core elements, including stage, camera, and screen, constitute an intermedial laboratory of narrative art.

3.1 The Creators, Narrators, and the Layers of Narration

Building on Patron's (2021, 126) perspective that providing a narrator is not always necessary and can lead to redundancy when artistic choices can be attributed to the author, this section will examine the five narrative subjects of *All about Eve* and the shifting roles of narration and narrative control throughout the work. First, among the creators, Ivo van Hove the stage director designed the entire narrative structure of the work, from the adaptation plan to the selection of the media combinations used to ensure unity and consistency between form and content. Next is Nicolas Wickham, the cinematographer for the digital version, responsible for setting up a second set of cameras in the auditorium to record the entire performance for screening in theaters and streaming online.

Next, among the narrators, Addison DeWitt begins the story by leading the camera on a backstage tour of the Sarah Siddons Awards ceremony, an award for the theater world that is “perhaps unknown to you,”¹ for Eve Harrington, then a well-known and famous star. This introduction gradually takes the audience from the present back to the past, to a time when Eve’s mentor, Margo Channing, was still at the height of her fame, unaware that one day Eve would replace her in the role. Addison DeWitt appears as a narrator at the beginning and end of the play, on the same awards night, framing the entire story of *All About Eve*. In the past, Karen Richards, the wife of a talented playwright who has the power of granting crucial roles for any actor or actress’s career, and by that time, it has always been Margo. She is the main narrator who leads the narrative arch of the play. In both the past and present, there has always been a third narrator monitoring the story on stage: live cameras that move, choose angles, and zoom in on the characters’ facial expressions, inner thoughts, and hidden situations on a giant screen in the upper half of the stage. For example, in the scene where Margo Channing confronts herself in the dressing mirror, the fear of being replaced by a younger actress like Eve is visualized as Margo’s own face, captured live by a hidden camera in the middle of the mirror, then special effects are added to make that face age rapidly. This scene is later repeated with Eve Harrington, who also faces the same fear of being replaced as Margo. Eve’s face is then captured by the camera and gradually transforms into Margo’s face, aging just like her predecessor.

The five narrative entities, including the two main creators and the three narrators mentioned above, can be divided into three overlapping layers of narration. The first layer is the theatrical production, with Addison and Karen providing overt narrators, introducing all the characters as they appear on stage at different points in time, and guiding the plot. Alongside these storytelling segments by the two narrators are the more expressive theatrical sequences, including large-scale scenes with many people, such as most of the Margo family party scene, the rehearsal for the upcoming play, or private scenes with few characters, all of which have an unclear narrator. These sequences can be considered typical examples of non-narrator theory (Banfield 2010, 396f.). The second layer includes the production with cameras added on stage. Accordingly, the camera crew represents the cinematic narrator, actively choosing close-ups, perspectives, and moments to be zoomed in on. This is clearly an act of narration. The narrator in this case remains essential due to their specific and effective contribution to the analysis of the work, as a choice desired by the creator. The third layer is the production captured for screening, supervised by a separate camera crew led by director Nicolas Wickham.

3.2 Cinematic and Theatrical Narrators as Optional Agencies at the Disposal of the Creators

The entire action on stage unfolds spontaneously, based on the *mise-en-scène* and blocking designs of the stage director, in this case Ivo van Hove. At this point, we can see a connection between the narrator in the fictional world and the creator using their artistic choices to present the story to the audience. This is the core point from which debates between pan-narrator and optional-narrator schools of thought often arise. Beyond the scenes where characters from the fictional world appear

¹ Original line from the production.

as narrators on stage, the play itself unfolds with the participation of the narrators who had just spoken to the audience moments before. Addison or Karen appear on stage, initiating a conversation to draw the audience into the story, then temporarily disappearing from their role as narrators to join other characters in the narrative, reenacting the events they had just initiated on the story's timeline. In the sections that occupy the majority of the play's running time, it's not that there's no narrator, as Genette defines it, but rather that a shift in the roles between narrator and creator begins to unfold. The role of continuing the narrative is now transferred to the creator, whether it's a group of creating crew or one person in charge, such as Ivo van Hove the director. All conventions regarding the staging of narrative situations on stage are ultimately reduced to the artistic choices of the creators.

If the theatrical narrators on stage are sufficient to demonstrate the narrator's presence, Ivo van Hove's on-stage live cameras add to that narrative capacity by conveying the characters' emotions up close, bringing each facial expression closer to the audience. The camera crew, constantly moving across the stage, can be seen as creators, using live cameras as a storytelling tool in a similar role to a narrator, employing visual language rather than spoken language like Addison or Karen. Many types of camera angles are deployed on stage, from direct shots following the narrator on stage (like Addison) to close-ups of expressions, hidden cameras in concealed spaces or behind mirrors, creating a contrast between the projected images and the stage action. An example is the confrontation between Karen and Eve. The main setting in the previous installment was a luxurious and elegant restaurant where Margo and Karen's husband were having a typical dinner among theater artists. However, in the restaurant's restroom, Karen and Eve uncover the secret behind the curtain, which is recorded by a hidden camera and broadcast live on a large screen above the stage.

These camera angles can be seen as both narrative and interpretive acts of cinematic narrators. Accordingly, the entire camera crew acts as agents selecting moments to present to the audience, thereby opening up more narrative space for the work. With their inherent flexibility, the cameras, acting as narrators, infiltrate every corner of the space without concealing their presence, naturally becoming characters in the world of showbiz stories, which are also full of hidden cameras scrutinizing every human action. In terms of the synchronization between form and content, cameras as narrators in this case have made a significant contribution to the creation of meaning in the work, no less than the two characters Addison and Karen, who act as narrators, mentioned above.

But the skill competition among optional agencies does not stop at the live performance. After being filmed on location, in Nicolas Wickham's version, the story was reborn on a streaming platform with cameras and post-production adding another layer of narration. Nicolas Wickham and his team's task was to choose what to show on screen in the end. For example, if the projector screen in the upper half of the stage was not showing any specific images, the screen on the digital version would focus only on the lower half of the stage where the events were actually taking place, and vice versa. In addition, Wickham also directed his camera team to capture the characters' emotions just like the live camera team on stage, only instead of showing it immediately, they used the captured footage for post-production. The process of adjusting, balancing, and selecting close-ups or wide shots to frame once again demonstrates the close, inseparable relationship between creators and their tools in telling and retelling stories on stage.

3.3 Intermedial Narrators in Relation to the Death and Reborn of Creators

The above analysis reveals the diverse presence of narrators from various media within a single production. The work's choice to integrate multimodal elements created an opportunity for these narrators to meet and combine, forming a shared meaningful structure for the narrative of *All About Eve*. Therefore, when this article describes the production as a laboratory of intermedial narrators, it aims to propose a perspective that transcends the preconceived notions limiting the function of narrative tools within a specific genre, thereby freeing these tools to combine in an intermediary, interartistic environment. Gabriele Rippl (2015, 16) has previously addressed this liberating trend as follows:

If narratology leaves behind concepts such as that of the narrator and the preoccupation with the verbal medium and focuses instead on prototypical and cognitive aspects of narrativity, a transmedial reconceptualization of narrative becomes possible. While narrative, like all cognitive macro-frames, can be realized in more than one medium, it is to a large extent (but never completely) medium-independent and hence a transmedial phenomenon.

By applying an optional point of view to the narrator, which does not necessarily “leaves behind the concepts of narrator,” scholars can still utilize this concept as a useful tool, an intermedial phenomenon existing across various media. Narrative may not necessarily originate from a specific narrator, but a narrator will inevitably be accompanied by a narrative. Therefore, if narrative can be considered a “transmedial phenomenon,” then the narrator can also be seen as such. This narrative tool exists intermedially across all forms of media art and can transmedially shift and adapt from one media to another.

It can be said that all the above uses of “narrators” are relative because they have never been clearly recognized and affirmed as literary narrators in literary criticism. Analysts may consider them as independent narrators, or they may view them as an artistic choice of the director and the collective of creative creators. This dual possibility shows the incompatibility of both creating a unified Narrator entity for works of the multimedia genre and applying Barthes's (1981) “author is dead” statement to the analysis of contemporary narrative art. This inconsistency can be seen from the very beginnings of structuralist theory, where Genette's assertion about the narrator was inherently inappropriate for theater and art, leading him to a premature conclusion, simply to defend his notion of the narrator by absurdly claiming that theater is not narrative because he himself could not find a so-called universal narrator for performing arts. Similarly, the declaration that the author is dead also breaks the explicit communicative model of performing arts and pushes these forms to the margins of narratology in an unnecessarily conservative way. If the author can be isolated from their work and replaced by the narrator, then why should the reader access that work within a communicative model?

It could be argued that, after the death of the author, the text did not become much freer with the formation and development of pan-narrator theory, creating an illusory speaker with a vague power like that of an omniscient narrator. Patron (2021, 18) and the Örebro school were right to argue that this choice blurred the author's responsibility and hindered readers from appreciating the author's artistic structure directly.

The contribution of Barthes to moving the author away from the center of artistic appreciation is undeniable, paving the way for appreciating reader interpretations. However, this does not mean that the creator must passively accept being completely excluded from the analysis and creation of

their work. In the context of modern multimedia art, where a narrative work requires the participation of many creators with various storytelling tools, from intangible tools like prose and dramatic dialogue to tangible tools like cameras and computers, the viewer cannot, during the analysis process, reduce all artistic choices to a single mediating figure: the narrator, lurking somewhere in the unknown atmosphere of the production. Instead, it would be more effective to identify only the narrative subjects who appear clearly within the story world as narrators, while those who perform the act of telling outside the story world are creators, and a close, flexible relationship exists between them to ensure the story being told can be presented to the audience.

Ivo van Hove's use of the film camera on stage, combining cinematic narrators and theatrical narrators on stage, can be seen as a tactic to revive the role of the author, who actively arranges these narrators as a kind of narrative tool, lifting the veil of mystery and ambiguity of artistic creation under the mask of an obligatory narrator of all narratives. With a multimedia work like *All About Eve*, the creators do not need to die for the work's meaning structure to be activated. Sylvie Patron's theory of optional narrators debunks the myth of the obligatory and omniscient Narrator entity, restoring responsibility and equal roles among the trio of author, work, and experience, without any subject truly needing to be at the center.

4. Conclusion

In other words, optional-narrator theory can be seen as a theoretical approach that breaks down genre-specific critical barriers to a more coherent narrative approach for intermedial productions. Returning to the questions raised at the beginning of this article, we can conclude that, firstly, the long-standing debate regarding the legitimacy of the narrator in different art forms remains relevant but has shifted focus. In multimodal contexts, the narrator is no longer judged on legitimacy but on its potential to generate meaning and guide interpretation through flexible deployment. Secondly, traditional hierarchies of "overt" vs. "covert" narrators are insufficient. In contemporary multimodal works, the narrator is better conceived as an optional device, activated or withheld flexibly depending on artistic strategy. Thirdly, narrators in literature, theater, and cinema differ in operation. Comparing them highlights this heterogeneity, enabling experimentation in intermedial creation and intriguing reception rather than imposing a standard model. Finally, the stage version of *All About Eve* by Ivo van Hove already revealed a hybrid narrator. In Nicolas Wickham's streaming version of the production, this hybridity is deepened: the narrator functions less as storyteller than as a flexible intermedial storytelling device.

In general, narrator, as a storytelling device, has its (limited) media-specific features that can be transferred and adapted cross-genre, cross-media. An intermedial point of view towards the mixture of narrative techniques would open a new way to appreciate multimodal narratives in the age of digitalization.

Works Cited

- Bal, Mieke (2017 [1978]): *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto.
- Banfield, Ann (2010): “No-Narrator Theory.” In: David Herman et al. (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London, pp. 396–397.
- Barthes, Roland (1975 [1966]): “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative.” Trans. by Lionel Duisit. In: *New Literary History* 6 (No. 2), pp. 237–272.
- Barthes, Roland (1981 [1966]): “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits.” In: Roland Barthes (ed.), *L’Analyse structurale du récit*. Paris, pp. 7–33.
- Chatman, Seymour (1990): *Coming to Terms. The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, NY.
- Cornici, Antonella (2023): “3. National Theatre Live. The Beginning of a Revolution.” In: *Review of Artistic Education* 25 (No. 1). URL: <https://doi.org/10.2478/rae-2023-0017> (15.04.2026), pp. 120–125.
- Genette, Gérard (1980 [1972]): *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Trans. by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca, NY.
- Genette, Gérard (1988 [1983]): *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Trans. by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca, NY.
- Hove, Ivo von (dir.) (2019): *All About Eve*. National Theatre at Home. URL: <https://www.ntathome.com/all-about-eve> (15.04.2026).
- Mankiewicz, Joseph L. (dir.) (1950): *All About Eve*. 20th Century Fox.
- Patron, Sylvie (2019): *The Death of the Narrator and Other Essays*. Trier.
- Patron, Sylvie (2021): *Optional-Narrator Theory. Principles, Perspectives, Proposals*. Lincoln, NE.
- Patron, Sylvie (2023): *The Narrator. A Problem in Narrative Theory*. Trans. by Catherine Porter. Lincoln, NE.
- Prince, Gerald (2012 [1982]): *Narratology. The Form and Functioning of Narrative*. Berlin.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith (2002 [1983]): *Narrative Fiction. Contemporary Poetics*. London.
- Rippl, Gabriele (2015): *Handbook of Intermediality. Literature – Image – Sound – Music*. Berlin et al. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110311075> (15.04.2026).
- Speckenbach, Jan / Irmer, Thomas (2022): “In Interview. On the Development of Video in the Theatre.” In: *New Theatre Quarterly* 38 (No. 3). URL: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000161> (15.04.2026), pp. 234–241.
- Stanzel, Franz K. (1984): *A Theory of Narrative*. Trans. by Charlotte Goedsche. Cambridge.

Tiến Phát Nguyễn

Gießen Graduate Center of Cultural Studies, Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen

E-mail: phat.nguyen@uni-giessen.de or phasntnt@gmail.com

How to cite this paper manuscript:

Nguyễn, Tiến Phát: “Cinematic and Theatrical Narrators as Optional Agencies in *All About Eve* by Ivo van Hove (2019): An Intermedial Approach to Multimodal Narrative on Stage.” Paper presented at the 8th ENN Conference, September 29–October 1, 2025, University of Wuppertal.