

Studies in Voice-Over Narration: "Fight Club"

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Part 3 of a five-part series on movies where voice-over narration works.



Narrator (V.O.): "I'd flip through catalogues and wonder, 'what type of dining set defines me as a person?'"

I set this discussion into motion [here](#) and [here](#). To wit: Hollywood conventional wisdom is that voice-over narration and flashbacks are a no-no, yet some of the greatest movies ever produced use these narrative devices including *Fight Club*, *Goodfellas*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Rashomon*.

My conclusion: Voice-over narration and flashbacks are not inherently bad, rather they are tainted by how poorly they get executed by inexperienced writers.

Goal: Find five movies in which each is used well, then analyze those movies to come up with — hopefully — guidelines on how best to handle this pair of narrative devices.

Today the third of five movies using voice-over narration: *Fight Club*, the 1999 drama written by Jim Uhls adapting a Chuck Palahniuk novel. In the movie, the lead character [played by Edward Norton] is known as The Narrator. Here he talks about the nature of his day-to-day life:

This character uses voice-over narration throughout to convey the journey of his involvement with Tyler Durden, leader of the Fight Club. Apart from the value of being able to delve into the character's innermost thoughts and feelings, as well as using the V.O. to create a seamless narrative through multiple time jumps and ellipses [ideas we have discussed in previous posts], we see a new potential for this device, what is known as the [unreliable narrator](#). Why is this the case in *Fight Club*? Because as it turns out Tyler Durden is a phantom, a delusion, a projection of the Narrator's own psyche, what we might call 'multiple personality disorder.'

Check out this video to see Tyler Durden flashes that occur in four moments in the story:

These flashes are instances in which Narrator's unconscious nature as exhibited by Tyler Durden attempts to reach up into his conscious state. Eventually, Narrator

doesn't know what to believe even when he confronts the cold, hard truth:

Takeaway: If we have a story which cries out for us to trick the reader, we have the capability and right to use voice-over narration as an unreliable narrator because it can be a great way to accomplish that goal.

For the entire 5-part series, go [here](#).

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