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Modes of Gaslighting Narratives in Three Genres: Stage Play, Film and Novel

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Abstract

Derived from Hamilton's stage play *Gas Light* (1938), "gaslighting" has become the colloquial term for the strategy of insidiously deranging a person's mental health: a victimizer systematically undermines an unsuspecting victim's sense of reality and self-confidence. Such a strategy can be employed as a narrative schema to structure the plot in a drama, a film or a novel. The presentation of the gaslighting narrative will first be analysed in Hamilton's play and in its two film versions by Dickinson (1940) and Cukor (1944). In all three cases the gaslighting plot can directly be witnessed by the spectator in its practical enactment. These examples are then compared with the rendering of the same plot structure, within different settings and with different characters, in Boileau and Narcejac's mystery novel Celle qui n'état plus (1952) and its film version Les Diaboliques (1955) by Clouzot. Here the gaslighting strategy is presented from the victim's perspective, especially in the novel, but also in the film, making for a more disturbing experience on the part of reader and spectator. Differences in the impact on the recipient are connected with the differing roles detectives play in the final resolution of the gaslighting plots. The analyses will concentrate on motivation and design in the gaslighting strategy as well as on mode and perspective of presenting the plot development. Special attention is devoted to the impact of the disturbing gaslighting strategy on viewers and readers.

Keywords

Gaslighting, plot, narrative schema, script, perspective, narratology, narrative presentation

1 Introduction

Since Derived from the title of the British stage play *Gas Light* by Patrick Hamilton (1938), "gaslighting" has become the colloquial term for the strategy of covertly manipulating a person or persons to disrupt their orientational system, confuse their sense of reality, unsettle their habits of memory and judgement and seriously undermine their self-confidence. The character constellation underlying this strategy is the opposition and interaction between an unsuspecting victim and a malicious victimizer[1], who stealthily strives to intimidate, destabilize and destroy the victim's sanity for some particular – selfish – purpose[2]. Such a strategy can be employed as a basic narrative schema or script to structure the plot in a drama, a film or a novel. In what follows the differences in the employment of the gaslighting script will be analysed in examples from these three genres with respect to the various modes of its narrative presentation.

(1) The stage play *Gas Light*, of 1938, by Patrick Hamilton is set in an old house in London in the late Victorian period, home of Mr (Jack) and Mrs (Bella) Manningham. The play begins with Jack Manningham methodically disorienting and unsettling his wife and driving her mad: misplacing things and accusing her of hiding them, doubting her memory, insinuating that she is going mad and purposefully undermining her self-confidence. As a consequence, she is deranged, feels intimidated and profoundly insecure. Since she loves her husband, she is deeply hurt by his contemptuous, brutal treatment of her and by being humiliated in front of their pretty maid. He then goes out, as is his habit every evening, ordering her to stay in her room and not visit the upper floor. She always hears movements up there and sees the gaslight go down, indication that somewhere in the house a lamp has been turned on. This frightens her even more. She is clearly going out of her mind.

Then, after Manningham has left, suddenly Rough, a retired detective, appears and explains the real situation to Bella Manningham: Twenty years ago, the owner of this house, a rich woman named Alice Barlow, was murdered for her valuable rubies. The murderer was never found nor were the rubies ever discovered. Detective Rough had been involved in the case at the time, questioning a cousin of the victim, whom he had suspected of being the culprit but whose guilt he had not been able to prove. Recently, he had recognized this man in Jack Manningham, acquired information about the situation in the house from the maid and is now privately investigating the case again. He starts to help Bella Manningham regain her self-confident reliance on reason, explaining the background to what is going on and disclosing her husband's malicious intentions. Manningham had bought the house to search the attic for the rubies, making his wife go mad to prevent her from disturbing him in his search. Detective Rough then forces the lock of the drawer in Manningham's desk and finds the rubies hidden in a cheap brooch.

When Manningham discovers the interference and threatens to attack his wife physically, Rough re-appears with the police and arrests him. In a scene under four eyes, Bella Manningham is given the opportunity to revile her husband and accuse him of his crimes thereby mentally freeing herself from his power over her and thus curing herself from the gaslighting effects. The event, the eventful turn, in this story consists in the uncovering of the gaslighting plot and especially in the concluding arrest of the perpetrator, the victimizer.

The spectators witness the gaslighting procedure from the outside and from a safe distance. They are never themselves affected by it, even though they at first do not understand the exact purpose behind it. Then, early on, the detective, as the agent of reason and clarity, appears and starts clearing things up, explaining to Bella

1
Stern (2007) proposes the terms gaslighter and gaslightee [1, p. 3].

2
Lear and Hale (2020) discuss gaslighting as one specific phenomenon within the broader context of narrative presentations depicting the erosion of a stable sense of reality such as brainwashing and ontological crisis. They analyse fictional treatments of this concept especially in novels by Philip K. Dick, also briefly touching on Cukor's film Gaslight [2].

Manningham (and to the spectators) the underlying structure of the situation. This concluding section is basically a detective narrative which first focuses on the perpetrator as he ill-treats the victim and then shows how he is uncovered and arrested.

(2) The British film version of the play, of 1940, likewise titled *Gaslight*[3], directed by Thorold Dickinson, presents basically the same plot, from a similar perspective, with some additions. The couple are here called Paul and Bella Mallen. The plot line is extended into the past, beginning with the actual murder scene twenty years before, then jumps ahead to the present situation of the Mallens living in an old Victorian house in London. Paul Mallen's strategy and procedure of deranging Bella and making her mad is very similar to the play. His perfidy and inhumane brutality, however, are more blatant[4]. Bella is slowly breaking down. Mallen's flirting with the maid, more extensive than in the play, further undermines Bella's mental stability and emotional resilience. Detective Rough is introduced very early on, deliberately seeking the acquaintance of Bella, recalling the murder case and identifying Paul Mallen as the former suspect, whose guilt he then had been unable to prove. The spectator witnesses how Rough plans and executes the uncovering and arrest of Mallen. In the end Bella discovers the rubies in a brooch which her husband had given her (without realising what it was). Suspense is increased by Rough's clever manoeuvres, Mallen's premature return from the attic and a physical scuffle between him and Rough. Mallen is then tied to a chair by Rough but briefly manages to free himself, grab and gloat over the rubies, revealing his insane greed as the motive for gaslighting his wife. The eventfulness of the story in the film, as in the stage play, is constituted by the unmasking and arrest of the gaslighting victimizer.

The spectator can clearly watch what Paul Mallen is doing and is never in doubt as to what is real and what merely manipulated. Here, too, the gaslighting effect is apparent in Bella's deranged behaviour but the spectators themselves are not *cognitively* affected by it. It is significant for both play and film that the spectators are deliberately protected from mental, cognitive confusion by the early appearance and interference of detective Rough, who represents the counterforce to gaslighting: detection, reason and enlightenment.

(3) The American film version of 1944, equally called *Gaslight*, directed by George Cukor, presents the gaslighting script in much the same manner as the British film, again allowing the spectator to witness and see through the manipulative treatment of the victim by the victimizer, here named Paula and Gregory Anton.[5]

Cukor's film[6] also extends the plot (as presented in the stage play) both into the past and into the future and elaborates on the detective plotline. The presentation begins with Paula, the niece of famous singer Alice Asquith (murdered ten years before), taking singing lessons in Italy, then giving up a singing career because she is in love with Gregory, whom she subsequently marries and with whom she moves to London, into the house of her aunt, which she has inherited. The gaslighting of Paula by Gregory then develops much like in the play and the British film leading to serious disorientation and self-doubts on the part of Paula. The detective plot, with police officer Cameron (as the detective is called here), is introduced more

3
Sarris (1976) when later the play and this film came to America, their titles were both changed to Angel Street, a result from the earlier fight in the 1940s between the British and American producers of the Gaslight films [3, p. 23].

4
Sarris (1976) on both the British and the American film the husband is given a foreign (European or continental) origin, apparently meant to explain their brutality [3, p. 24].

5
Santos (2010) describes the gaslighting plot in this film (without any reference to Hamilton's and Dickinson's previous versions) and compares it with other American films noirs of the 1940s and '50s [4].

6
Cavell (1989) interprets the film in various ways as a kind of philosophical allegory. He describes Paula's final emergence of from confusion and "decreation" as "cogito", i.e. enlightenment, clear rational self-consciousness [5, p. 356].

circumstantially, starting before he eventually appears in the house, talks to Paula and begins to help her. It is indicated from the beginning that Cameron had known the aunt personally and that he is now in love with Paula. In the subsequent development there is one brief (unmotivated) shift of perspective (from the focus on Paula to Gregory): Gregory is shown how he searches the aunt's stowed-away belongings in the attic and how he eventually discovers the jewels hidden on her dress. The shift to this scene corroborates the spectator's superior outside perspective. After the arrest of Gregory there is an indication of growing intimacy between Cameron and Paula, a love story in the making which can be expected to develop after the end of the original plot.

her recovery and while Dickinson's film more symbolically visualises her liberation by having her throw open the window in the end[8], Cukor's film version stages her emergence from the ordeal spectacularly as a curative act of revenge, in which Paula turns the tables on her victimizer. She threatens Gregory, bound to a chair, with a knife telling him:

> "Are you suggesting that this is a knife? I don't see any knife. You must have dreamed you put it there [...]. Are you mad, my husband? Or is it I who am made? Yes, I am mad [...]. If I were not mad I could have helped you [...]. But because I am mad I hate you, and because I am mad I have betrayed you, and because I am mad I am rejoicing in my heart without a shred of pity, with glory in my heart." [9]

The novel renders the plot specifically from the victim's point of view, through his consciousness and perception – aiming at the reader's total immersion.

As for the gaslighting technique: the spectators can directly see that and how Paula is being manipulated – they can observe how Gregory deliberately hides and removes things etc[7]. This is fairly obvious – and his facial expressions and gestures betray his cold, perfidious intentions. The spectators are not at all disoriented in the way the victim is. Rather, they are forced to suffer sympathetically with the victim. Gregory's perfidy and sinister intentions are clearly observable.

The victim's eventual recovery from being gaslighted is indicated to differing degrees in all three versions of the plot. While Hamilton's stage-play does not specifically stress

(4) With the stage play and the two films I will now compare a novel by the French mystery fiction writers Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, *Celle qui n'était plus*,[10] of 1952, translated as *The Woman Who Was No More*. Though not one more adaptation of Hamilton's *Gas Light*, Boileau and Narcejac's *Celle qui n'était plus*, like several others of their books, bears a strong structural resemblance to Hamilton's pre-text and can be read as a novelistic version of the gaslighting plot. The impact of gaslighting on the readers is markedly different here. While in the play and the two films the spectator does view the process only from the outside and cannot look into the characters' minds, the novel renders the plot specifi-

7
Cavell (1989) mistakenly identifies the spectators' perspective with that of Paula: "In viewing the film we know ourselves to be in Paula's condition of victimization, in need of ratification" [5, p. 368]. This is definitely not the case, since we look at Paula from the outside, not with her.

8
Horne and Swaab (2008), [6, p. 153].

9
Cavell (1989), [5, p. 359].

10
Lloyd (2000), [7, pp. 41-45].

cally from the victim's point of view, through his consciousness and perception – aiming at the reader's total immersion.

The novel is told by a covert extra-diegetic narrator mediating the story exclusively through the protagonist's perspective, his internal focalization. The protagonist, Fernand Ravinel, a traveling salesman, is married to Mireille and has an affair with physician Lucienne Mogard. He had taken out a life-insurance policy for himself and also one for his wife. Together with his mistress Lucienne, Ravinel then proceeds to murder his wife, intending to make her death appear as an accident or as suicide and eventually collect the insurance money. With this money he plans to open a practice for Lucienne in Antibes and marry her. Mireille is given an over-dose of sleeping-pills, submerged in a bath tub and afterwards thrown into a dead stream behind his house. When Ravinel later attempts to recover the dead body from the water and report Mireille's death to the police, it has disappeared, which is inexplicable, because the stream actually has no outflow. Ravinel then looks in vain for the corpse in the morgue. There he meets a retired police detective, Désiré Merlin, who offers to help him – but proves totally incompetent and achieves nothing[11]. What then occurs is a chain of confusing and increasingly unsettling happenings: Ravinel receives a letter from Mireille, dated after her murder, in which she announces her imminent return. When he visits her brother he is told that Mireille had been in his flat but had just left. On his return home Ravinel finds another message from her in his letter-box; and when he visits the hotel whose address he had found on the paper of her message, he is told that she had indeed checked in some time ago but had later gone out again. In his panic Ravinel helplessly summons Lucienne from Antibes to his aid, but she is not at all supportive, instead telling him that he is mentally ill and treating him accordingly. He increasingly loses his hold on reality, starting to believe that the dead return to life as spectres threatening the living. Coming home he finds the lights turned on in all rooms and the table set for dinner with another message from Mireille. All this increases Ravinel's cognitive confusion and mental instability, inducing in him forms of schizophrenia, paranoia and wild hallucinations. It becomes increasingly clear that Ravinel has a very unstable personality to begin with – in his memories he recalls his precarious childhood under an oppressive father. Consumed with guilt and in fear of Mireille's vengeful ghost he is unable to bear the threatening and unsettling situation any longer and shoots himself.
In an epilogue, the real situation is then retrospectively disclosed to the reader: Lucienne and Mireille had together conspired to drive Ravinel mad, make him kill himself, collect the insurance money on his death and lead a comfortable life together in Antibes, possibly in a lesbian relationship. However, this positive achievement is considerably qualified: Mireille has caught a severe cold from her faked drowning in the bath tub and in the stream. Though she receives expert medical care from Lucienne, it is indicated that she is in fact seriously ill. And she has doubts about Lucienne's motives – whether love or greed. And there is even a vague implication that Lucienne may now turn her homicidal impulses on Mireille.

The readers of the novel are mentally in exactly the same position as the victim – they know no more than him and they are equally confused.

This is a veritable gaslighting narrative – with Ravinel the victim and the two women the colluding victimizers and manipulators. By contrast to the *Gaslight* drama and films the victim here is not a woman but a man and the victimizers are women. Another important special feature

11
Lloyd (2000), the ineffectiveness and irrelevance of the detective is part of Boileau and Narcejac's concept of mystery fiction [7, p 38].

is that the victim himself had been a perpetrator in the beginning. He is not innocent as are Mrs Manningham, Bella and Paula in the *Gaslight* examples. In Boileau and Narcejac's novel the victim himself thus contributes to his increasingly threatening predicament, which in the end leads to his downfall. In fact, here the gaslighting plot is only made possible *because* the victim himself had originally been guilty of a criminal plot.

The essential difference of the novel from the drama and both films concerns the narrative *mediation* of the gaslighting plot: The readers of the novel are mentally in exactly the same position as the victim – they know no more than him and they are equally confused. The narrative technique consists in the application of internal focalization for the protagonist-cum-victim – everything is mediated as he perceives it: through the extensive use of thought report and of free indirect discourse the reader is immersed in the victim's consciousness – in a condition of total immersion. It is only at the very end, in the epilogue, that the true situation is suddenly revealed by a complete reversal of perspective, switching from the victim's point of view to that of one of the two victimizers, namely Mireille's. It is impossible for readers to see through the true plot beforehand. They are forced to experience the disorientation of the protagonist's mind.

This is a genuine gaslighting plot in that the manipulations are conducted by clandestine agents, victimizers, whose express aim is the victim's progressive derangement and destruction for a particular purpose, namely the collection of life insurance money.

Events occur on two levels. In one respect, from the point of view of the readers, the event consists in the sudden revelation, in the epilogue, of the true state of affairs– a mental event. In a second respect, regarding the characters, the event consists in the successful achievement of the two women to realize their desires as a result of conducting a gaslighting plot against husband / lover. In this respect the novel differs markedly from the play and the two films, where the event is the uncovering and arrest of the culprit.

(5) Interestingly, this novel in its turn was made into a film, directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot, *Les Diaboliques* (1955), translated into English as *The Devils* or *The Fiends*[12], and thus allows for a specific comparison, with respect to the inducement of immersion on the recipient's part with respect to the gaslighting plot. The film roughly preserves the constellation of the novel but transposes it into a different setting, a boarding-school in the Paris area.[13] The protagonist – and "victim" – is Christina, a devoutly religious woman with a heart condition, who is the owner of the school and also works there as a teacher. She is married to Michel Delasalle, who functions as the school's headmaster. Michel has an affair with Nicole Horner, another teacher at the school. Nevertheless, the two women have a close relationship based on their mutual hatred of Michel, who is emotionally and physically abusive to both of them as well as repressive to the pupils. Unwilling to tolerate his abusive and humiliating behaviour any longer, Nicole suggests to Christina an elaborate plan to kill him and thus get rid of him for ever. On account of her Christian belief, Christina is reluctant at first, but finally agrees. They lure Michel to Nicole's apartment in another town, sedate him, drown him in a bath tub and throw his dead body into the disused swimming pool of the school. The intention is to present his death as an accident. But when the pool is drained, his body is not found. Later, Nicole reads in the paper that the police have discovered a dead body. However, when Christina goes to the morgue to identify it, it turns out not to be Michel's body after all. There she meets Alfred Fichet, a retired police detective, who offers to help her find the corpse. Mysterious things start to happen. A boy, Moinet, claims to have been punished by Michel for breaking a window with a slingshot. When a

12
There is a later American remake of Clouzot's film: Diabolique, directed by Jeremiah Chechik (1996).

13
Moon (2012) analyses the intertextual relations between Clouzot's film and Boileau and Narcejac's novel on the one hand and the story "Le Bonheur dans le crime" by the nineteenth-century writer Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly (from his collection Les Diaboliques) on the other, without touching on the gaslighting plot at all [9].

school photograph is taken, the print shows Michel's face at a window behind the group. Christina is increasingly overcome by fear and tells Fichet about the murder plot, but he does not believe her. The following night she hears noises when walking through the house and has the impression that someone is following her. She flees to her flat, where she discovers Michel submerged in her bath tub. When he rises from the water, she has a heart attack and dies.

It is now disclosed that Michel and Nicole had colluded from the beginning to fake Michel's drowning in order to scare Christina to death. But Fichet overhears them celebrating the successful achievement of their plan, unravels their plot and tells them that they will be punished for their crime.

Some time later the boy Moinet, who had earlier broken a window, breaks another. When asked where he got his slingshot, he claims that Christina gave it to him. In contrast to the novel on which the film is based the gaslighting manoeuvres are not strictly perceived from the victim's, i.e. Christina's, mental point of view, her consciousness. As in the two gaslight films the spectator sees (and hears) everything and everyone from the outside. The victim's thoughts are not (and cannot be) presented directly. What the film does, however, is closely accompany Christina most of the time, suggesting that the spectator is seeing and hearing what Christina sees and hears – more suggestively than in the other two films. The effect is that the spectator is induced to identify with her emotionally and imagine the impact of the happenings on her mind in the form of an unspecified fear. But this technique is not pursued consistently – there are scenes (for instance, in Nicole's apartment in her home town) where only Nicole is present. Thus the spectator sees more than Christina and may gather more information to enable him to see through the manoeuvres. There is no total immersion. The visual impact is, however, so strong that the spectator is also affected by the victim's growing confusion and fear, especially in the night scene in the house towards the end.

In a way this confusion is extended even beyond the final disclosure of Michel and Nicole's plot (as overheard by Fichet), when the boy Moinet claims to have received a new slingshot from Christina, a mystery which is never cleared up at all. However, this mysterious occurrence is not part of any gaslight device but launched as a means of mystifying the spectator.
Again, as in the novel, the victim, Christina, is guilty of wrongdoing, which is the reason why she becomes the victim of a gaslighting plot in the first place. But she is only partly, and only reluctantly, guilty. Her religious attitude, her suffering from Michel's brutal behaviour and from being pressured by Nicole to participate in the plot as well as her kind treatment of the pupils make her appear more of a (partly at least) guiltless victim than a cold-hearted perpetrator.

So, Clouzot's film abandons the high degree of immersion which had been achieved in Boileau and Narcejac's novel. Interestingly, in all these versions of the gaslighting narrative a detective appears and acts as a rational counterforce to confusion and derangement, if with differing degrees of effectiveness. This is a sign of the desire on the part of the authors to contain the disruption of the sense of reality (for the victim but also for the spectators or readers), as a reassurance of the ultimate re-establishment of a reliable view of reality, of finally setting things straight again. In the gaslight stage-play and films this setting things straight goes both for the rational clarification of reality as well as for the rescue of the victim and the punishment of the victimizer. The resulting state of affairs is different in Boileau and Narcejac's novel und in Clouzot's film. In the novel the final clarification is comprehensive but is given only to the reader, for the victim it comes too late (since he has died before) – the victimizers profit from their plot and will never be caught. But there may be a future danger for one of them (as mentioned above). The detective has proved completely ineffective. In the film, too, clarification comes too late for the victim, who has died as a result of the gaslighting plot; but, on account of the detective's interference, the perpetrators will be caught and punished. But

14
Maghit (1996) [10].

though retrospective clarification is achieved, it is not complete – one mystery occurs at the very end and is never cleared up.

To sum up the main difference in the narrative presentation of the gaslighting plot: In all five cases the gaslighting effect, the derangement of orientation und understanding, the inducement of insanity is disclosed at one point. But while in the stage play and the two films this occurs early on, Boileau and Narcejac's novel and Clouzot's film deny clarification to the protagonist-cum-victim altogether and postpone it for the readers and spectators until the very end [11], [12]. Only then can they finally recover from confusion and disorientation, but in Boileau and Narcejac's novel some new danger persists and in Clouzot's film some new mystery occurs.

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