

The Cool Media of an Unreliable Narrator

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A first person narration of a person who has escaped from an institution. At first, we do not know what type of institution it is. A prison? A mental institution? All we know at first is that the narrator has recently escaped from being held captive within some institution.

Written in a questionable, unreliable voice of a first person narrator such as Billy Collins (“Collie”) in Jim Thompson’s 1955 noir classic, *After Dark My Sweet*. Our story opens much like the opening of Thompson’s story as the narrator has arrived at a bar after his escape from a mental institution. Only in our story, we do not know what type of institution it is.

This narrative form of unreliable narrator forces more reader participation in deciphering the meaning of the story. There are competing “personalities” for ownership of telling the story. Such is the case with most of the Jim Thompson novels I’ve read. The main character has some mental condition that holds two or more viewpoints of the world in perpetual holding patterns so that one viewpoint never is able to dominate for very long. They constantly battle each other in relating the narrative of the story.

The different narratives pull the reader into the story and ask he or she chose which narrative to believe. The reader is required to participate more in depth in cobbling their own narrative from the different voices. I am reminded here of a quote from Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* about Sir Francis Bacon, someone he gave much thought and study to:

Francis Bacon never tired of contrasting hot and cool prose. Writing in ‘methods’ or complete packages, he contrasted with writing in aphorisms, or single observations such as ‘Revenge is a kind of wild justice.’ The passive consumer wants packages, but those, he suggested, who are concerned in pursuing knowledge and in seeking causes will resort to aphorisms, just because they are incomplete and require participation in depth.

The idea of a complete packages and passive consumers is contrasted with incomplete packages requiring participation in depth. The two dichotomies serve as the basis for McLuhan’s distinction between “hot” and “cool” media. The media participant fills hot media with more information requiring less participation while cool media has less information requiring more participation.

For example, a hot medium would be a photograph or the radio while a cool medium

would be a cartoon or a telephone. One can say in general that broadcast, one-way media such as television, newspapers and radios are hot media while interactive, two-way communication are cool media.

Yet one of the theories branching off from the idea of hot and cool media is that there also exist hot and cool devices within particular media. As an example, McLuhan defines print media of books as a hot media. But within this media, there are certain literary devices such as aphorisms that require participation when inserted within hot media. In effect, there can exist other cool literary devices such as paradox, metaphor and analogy within print narratives.

In addition to various literary devices employed within a narrative, the overall narrative voice can also be a device. One of the least explored types of narrative voice is the “unreliable narrator” developed by the crime writer Jim Thompson. It opened up a new narrative perspective and a new cool, participatory device within the hot media of books and print.

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So, from the very beginning of this story, the reader is faced with two or more first person characters who compete for us to believe which one is the most reliable relator of the story. Who tells the true story?

Our unreliable narrator tells a particular mystery story set in the present within a suburb of a major American city. The first part of the story mirrors closely the first pages of *After Dark My Sweet*. Only now, all we know is that a person who has escaped from some institution has arrived in some suburb and is about to get people involved in his life and destiny. We do not know where he has escaped. Only it is some institution. Is he crazy? Is he a BSer? Why should he want to tell us the truth? Why should he trust us?

The story opens with the narrator on some form of ground transportation. A train. A car. A truck. The song *Spartacus* by Lalo Schifrin. He gets off the transportation form and walks into the small suburb of New Liberty in the country a few miles beyond the outer belt of a large Midwestern American city.

He goes into a fancy bistro bar in the suburb called IZIES. There is an art museum attached to it and people looking at art holding wine glasses. Tonight, early evening on a night in June, the world is dimming down and lightning bugs fill the air. He sits down at an expensive black marble bar and orders an \$11 glass of Sonoma wine. The wine list is extensive. Someone has left one of those small community newspapers on the bar and he picks it up and browses through it as he sips his wine.

The paper is called the *New Liberty Times*. Any suburb dwellers have probably seen them. A number of headlines and articles about standout teenagers in the local high school or issues in front of the town council. Classified ads for babysitters. Dog sitters. A suspicious person has seen near the high school last week. The headline on the front page

notes “Prospects look good for our varsity football team this fall.” There is a team photo and a short article. Below this, another article “Fundraising Event for _____” at Collingwood Corner. A photo with the article of a distinguished older couple.

“How’s that glass of wine?” asks the young woman bartender. She has that fresh-scrubbed face of a country girl.

He raises it in a toast to her.

“Great,” he says. He is a good-looking, carefree type of guy and has a face you want to like. But he looks very different from that famous political prisoner as the network has helped him with a new disguise before setting him on his way. His face is too recognizable by too many people.

The bartender smiles at him and give him a thumbs up.

“Haven’t seen you before,” she says.

“Just passing through,” he tells her. “Think I’ll start looking for a place to stay tonight.”

“We got a new Holiday Express just north of the 150. And of course there’s the Liberty House downtown if you want something old and historical.”

“Thanks,” he says.

He finishes his wine tosses a twenty on the table.

“Keep the change,” he says as he leaves.

The young woman studies him as he goes out. That’s what they teach you these days. Be suspicious of anyone. Dissidents are all over and look like everyone else. She went to pick up her cell phone and call the number they had given her. She starts to poke the government number on it but then stops. You can’t be suspicious of everyone, she says to herself.

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He walked out of the fancy bar and down the main street of New Liberty. There were a few restaurants and people sat outside having dinner and enjoying the warm early summer night. Expensive SUVs lined the street. The town looked like something stuck somewhere back in the nostalgia of an older America distant from all the riots in the cities, the great battles being fought between the government and the various militias around the nation.

The Liberty House hotel was a three-story brick affair with a sign in front that said “Established 1873.” He thought of walking out to the Holiday Express but he was tired

and it looked as safe here as anywhere else.

He went in and got the one remaining room, paying with cash and writing a phone name into the register. He gave a phony license number for a car he didn't have. Having no car was too suspicious.

He takes out the special encrypted phone the people in the militia network had given him and lays it on his bedside table and then falls into bed and asleep in a few minutes. No one knows where he is. This was the way it was planned, the way it had to be. Just go somewhere and wait for us to contact you was all they told him. If they knew where he was going the government could beat it out of them. He had to be on his own and go somewhere and wait for them to contact him.

He fell into a deep sleep. It is the first sleep he has had in twenty-hours.

The next morning he awakes with the morning June sun coming through the thin drapes of the room.

There is a text message on the cell phone.

“Welcome to freedom,” it said. “We'll be in touch.”

That was all.

He got up and pushed the curtains away and looked out on the peaceful little downtown area of New Liberty. There was a Starbucks across the street and two women in seat clothes were sitting at a table outside with coffee, their two dogs tied to the table chairs. Some young boys went by on bikes. A guy went into the Liberty Bank next to the Starbucks.

He wondered who were dissenters and who government. The nation had divided into two battling groups but you could never be sure you knew exactly who particular members of the groups were. They were like those pod people in the movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. They looked like they could be a Dissident or a Government Drone, as they called them. It was impossible to tell these days.

Things had changed so much since the President's election eight years ago. The government camps at first just dismissed as more conspiracy theories prompted by radicals and late night talk show hosts. But of course everyone learned they were for real.

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Later in the story we discover the institution the narrator has escaped from is not a mental institution but one of the government's new types of “correction” prisons where political dissidents have been increasingly sent. It is an important time right now, only a few months before the next presidential election that many feel is the most important in the

history of the nation.

We learn that he has been held as a key government prisoner. He is a whistleblower threatening to expose much corruption in DC. Particularly, before the coming election in a few months. He has the goods on the government's candidate. He is the government's Number One prisoner in their new "secret" prison camps. (He's a combination Edward Snowden / Julian Assange character). Few know about these camps. The government continues to deny they exist. Of course the media goes along with the government narrative. It was something the government had not even shared with the media.

He has a thousand dollars on him. It was given to him by that strange, modern form of a secret "underground railroad" network of dissidents around the nation who helped him escape from the prison and have been behind his cause all along. That secret network that had given him his new disguise and sent him on his way after his escape from the government prison. The network that gave him the encrypted cellphone. One thing the dissidents had were great hackers within their ranks. Much better than those the government had.

NOTES

Hot Medium

- extends single sense in high definition
- low in audience participation
- engenders specialization/fragmentation
- detribalizes
- excludes
- uniform, mechanical
- extends space
- horizontally repetitive

Cool Medium

- low definition (less data)
 - high in audience participation
 - engenders holistic patterns
 - tribalizes
 - includes
 - organic
 - collapses space
- creates vertical associations

Hot Medium

- photograph
- radio
- phonetic alphabet
- print
- lecture
- film
- books

Cool Medium

- cartoon
- telephone
- ideographic/pictographic writing
- speech (orality)
- seminar, discussion
- television
- comics

Hot media is that which engages one sense completely. It demands little [interaction](#) from the user because it 'spoon-feeds' the content. Typically the content of hot media is restricted to what the source offers at that specific time. Examples of hot media include radio and film because they engage one sense of the user to an extent that although the user's attention is focused on the content, their participation is minimal.

Cool media generally uses low-definition media that engages several senses less completely in that it demands a great deal of interaction on the part of the audience. Audiences then participate more because they are required to perceive the gaps in the content themselves. The user must be familiar with genre conventions in order to fully understand the medium. Examples: TV, phone conversations, [comic books](#).

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Some media, like the movies, were "hot" —that is, they enhance one single [sense](#), in this case [vision](#), in such a manner that a person does not need to exert much effort in filling in the details of a movie image. McLuhan contrasted this with "cool" TV, which he claimed requires more effort on the part of the viewer to determine meaning, and [comics](#), which due to their minimal presentation of visual detail require a high degree of effort to fill in details that the cartoonist may have intended to portray. A movie is thus said by McLuhan to be "hot", intensifying one single sense "high definition", demanding a viewer's attention, and a comic book to be "cool" and "low definition", requiring much more conscious participation by the reader to extract value.^[56]

"Any hot medium allows of less participation than a cool one, as a lecture makes for less participation than a seminar, and a book for less than a dialogue."^[57]

Hot media usually, but not always, provide complete involvement without considerable stimulus. For example, print occupies visual space, uses visual senses, but can immerse its reader. Hot media favour analytical precision, quantitative analysis and sequential ordering, as they are usually sequential, linear and logical. They emphasize one sense (for example, of sight or sound) over the others. For this reason, hot media also include [radio](#), as well as [film](#), the [lecture](#) and [photography](#).

Cool media, on the other hand, are usually, but not always, those that provide little involvement with substantial stimulus. They require more active participation on the part of the user, including the perception of abstract patterning and simultaneous comprehension of all parts. Therefore, according to McLuhan cool media include [television](#), as well as the [seminar](#) and [cartoons](#). McLuhan describes the term "cool media" as emerging from jazz and popular music and, in this context, is used to mean "detached."^[58]