

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Study

The rise of online streaming services in the previous decade has revolutionized the way audiovisual stories are made and enjoyed all around the globe. The on-demand nature of platforms like Netflix frees viewers from the constraints of conventional television broadcast schedules, allowing them to watch several episodes at their leisure. Consequently, this shift affects the structuring of narrative in modern television shows and changes viewers' behavior. More and more, non-linear storytelling devices including flashbacks, interwoven narratives, and layered narrative structures are being used in 150 Netflix original productions that were published between 2016 and 2022, according to a longitudinal research (Katerynych, Goian, & Goian, 2023). These changes indicate that narratives in the streaming age are becoming more intricate and information is being distributed strategically in order to keep viewers interested. Due to this change, the arrangement and revelation of information inside the narrative now play a larger role than what is portrayed in the tale itself in determining how viewers comprehend narrative events. That is to say, the way a tale is structured greatly influences how the audience understands and accepts the events shown inside.

One notable trend within this streaming ecosystem is the increasing production of series that claim to be based on real-life experiences. The

label *based on a true story* is frequently used to signal a connection between the narrative and real events, creating an impression of authenticity and factual credibility for the audience. Research on real-life-based narratives shows that stories derived from real experiences tend to generate strong emotional engagement and influence how viewers interpret the events represented (Sharma & Mishra, 2023). For instance, studies on Over-the-Top platform audiences reveal that viewers are significantly more interested in watching narratives derived from real events than purely fictional stories, and many viewers perceive such narratives as a means of understanding social issues.

But the enormous allure of stories based on actual life also brings up an important issue about the truth in these kinds of works. Even if a series says it is based on true events, the story that is told to the viewer is still affected by how the story is told. Brien (2009) contends that the primary concern in biographical or real-life storytelling is not just factual accuracy, but rather the audience's interpretation of the narrative as a reflection of reality. Because of this, people may believe that the story is true because they think it is genuine, even if the events have already been chosen, rearranged, and exaggerated via narrative construction.

In audiovisual storytelling, real-life events are seldom shown as they really happened. Instead, events are chosen, rearranged, and put into a dramatic narrative framework to create certain emotional and narrative consequences. Because of this, what the audience understands about an event is strongly influenced by how the story is told. Wayne C. Booth

(1983) says that narrative is a way for the text and its audience to talk to each other in a rhetorical way. Storytelling techniques help readers or viewers understand what happens. via this process, audiences may see narrative representations as direct reflections of reality, even when the information they receive has already been filtered via a particular perspective.

In narratological studies, the link between events and their portrayal is often elucidated via the differentiation between tale and discourse. Story refers to the sequence of events that occur in the narrative world, while discourse refers to the way those events are presented to the audience (Genette, 1980). Discourse enables tales to alter the sequence, length, and dissemination of material, facilitating the audience's progressive construction of their comprehension of the story. Focalization is an important part of this process. It decides whose point of view events are seen from and how much information is available to the audience. Focalization controls how the audience knows things about the characters and how much they know about the story.

This mechanism becomes particularly significant in narratives that rely on subjective experiences. When a story is presented through the perspective of a particular character, the audience's understanding of events is limited to the knowledge, perception, and emotional experience of that character. Consequently, the narrative perspective does not only convey events but also shapes the way those events are interpreted by the audience.

This phenomenon can be observed in the Netflix miniseries *Baby Reindeer* (2024), which is adapted from an autobiographical stage play written by Richard Gadd. The series tells the story of Donny Dunn, a struggling comedian who becomes the target of obsessive stalking by a woman named Martha while simultaneously confronting traumatic experiences from his past. What makes this series particularly interesting is the position of Richard Gadd as the creator, writer, and actor who performs a fictionalized version of his own experience. This situation creates a unique narrative condition where personal experience is transformed into a dramatized narrative representation. Because of this, the series blurs the boundary between lived experience and narrative construction. Although the story is presented as closely connected to real events, the audience can only access the narrative through the perspective of the main character. As a result, the viewer's knowledge of the events is gradually built through Donny's subjective experience, which may emphasize certain aspects of events while delaying or obscuring others.

One of the key reasons why *Baby Reindeer* (2024) is selected as the object of this study lies in its unique narrative configuration, which blurs the boundary between lived experience, authorship, and performance. The series is based on the autobiographical stage play written by Richard Gadd, in which Gadd himself not only serves as the creator and writer but also portrays the fictionalized version of the protagonist, Donny Dunn. This condition creates a distinctive "triple-layered subjectivity," where the roles of narrator, focalizer, and performer are essentially interconnected within a

single individual. From a narratological perspective, this overlapping position strengthens the relevance of focalization analysis, particularly internal focalization. The narrative is predominantly filtered through Donny's consciousness, while simultaneously being constructed and performed by the same real-life subject behind the story. This convergence between author, narrator, and character intensifies the subjectivity of the narrative, making *Baby Reindeer* a compelling object for examining how perspective regulates the distribution of narrative information.

The narrative of *Baby Reindeer* is not presented in a clear chronological sequence despite the fact that it is structured in this manner. The use of flashbacks and fragmented narrative sequences allows for the progressive disclosure of information on Donny's earlier experiences and the pain he has endured. This pattern illustrates that the audience's comprehension of the events is formed in a step-by-step manner via the dissemination of information throughout the story. Furthermore, as a result of this, the series does not only report events; rather, it actively changes how viewers see and interpret those events.

Several previous studies have examined *Baby Reindeer* from different perspectives. Nabilla et al. (2024) analyzed linguistic patterns in Martha's emails, while Hanita and Nirmalawati (2025) explored the representation of sexual identity through a queer theory approach. Other studies have examined the series in terms of trauma narrative (Rajaei & Fadaee Jonaghani, 2026), emotional attachment dynamics (Farashifah et al., 2026), audiovisual translation (Çavuşoğlu, 2024), and television

autobiography (Bisogno, 2025). While these studies contribute important insights into the thematic aspects of the series, most of them primarily focus on issues of trauma, identity, or representation. Because of this tendency, the narrative mechanism through which the story regulates audience knowledge and perspective has received relatively limited attention. In other words, previous studies have largely examined what the series represents, rather than how the narrative technically constructs that representation through the control of perspective and information distribution.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine how the storytelling perspective works in shaping viewer understanding of the events presented in the series *Baby Reindeer*. Specifically, this research focuses on the mechanism of internal focalization which limits the viewer's access to information through the subjective experience of the main character. By examining this mechanism, this research is expected to explain how perspective strategies in narrative do not only convey a story but also direct the way viewers understand the reality represented in the series. In addition to this, the research is relevant to enriching the study of *Baby Reindeer* and is also important for the development of audiovisual narratology especially in understanding how streaming series based on real experience shape the viewer's knowledge and sympathy as well as judgment. There are two main problems that will be examined in this study where the first is how internal focalization is displayed through the main character in the series *Baby Reindeer* and the second is how that

perspective shapes the viewer's understanding of the events in the narrative.

### 1.2. Research Question(s)

The research questions of this study are :

1. How is focalization constructed through the protagonist in the Netflix series *Baby Reindeer* (2024)?
2. How does focalization structure the implied viewer's epistemological understanding of the narrative events?

### 1.3. Purpose(s) of the Study

The purposes of this study are to :

1. To analyze how focalization is constructed through the protagonist in the Netflix series *Baby Reindeer* (2024).
2. To examine how focalization structures the implied viewer's understanding and knowledge access within the narrative.

### 1.4. Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study examines the narrative structure in the Netflix miniseries *Baby Reindeer* (2024), particularly focusing on how the story is presented through the perspective of the main character, Donny Dunn. The study applies Gérard Genette's concept of focalization, to analyze how the narrative perspective regulates the distribution of information and shapes the audience's understanding of the events in the series. Through this approach, the study aims to explore how the story is constructed through

the subjective experience of the main character and how this perspective influences the way viewers interpret the events presented in the narrative.

### 1.5. Significance of the Study

This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how narrative perspective operates in shaping audience interpretation within contemporary streaming series, particularly in *Baby Reindeer* (2024). By applying Gérard Genette's concept of focalization, this research contributes to the discussion of narratological analysis in audiovisual media, especially regarding how perspective influences the audience's knowledge and perception of narrative events. In addition, this study is expected to enrich academic discussions on narrative construction in streaming series and to serve as a reference for future researchers who wish to examine narrative perspective or apply focalization theory in analyzing film and television narratives.

### 1.6. State of the Art

Recent studies on *Baby Reindeer* (2024) demonstrate the growing academic interest in the series as a contemporary audiovisual text that engages with language, identity, trauma, autobiography, and emotional complexity. However, despite the increasing scholarly attention given to the series, significant gaps remain regarding the application of narratological theory, particularly focalization, in examining how the series regulates audience knowledge and shapes narrative interpretation. This section reviews several relevant studies that represent current research

directions on *Baby Reindeer*; focalization, and audiovisual narrative perspective, while also identifying the specific gap that this study aims to address.

Nabilla et al. (2024) examined the linguistic patterns found in Martha's emails in *Baby Reindeer*, particularly the use of misspelled words and their pragmatic implications. Their study productively shows how Martha's written language functions as a marker of characterization and communication within the series. By focusing on the structure and meaning of Martha's emails, the study contributes to the understanding of how language reflects psychological and relational tension between characters. However, the focus of Nabilla et al.'s research remains primarily linguistic. It does not further examine how Martha's emails function as part of the series' broader narrative perspective, especially in relation to how Donny receives, interprets, and emotionally responds to those messages. Therefore, while their study is useful in understanding the language of obsession, it leaves room for a narratological analysis of how those digital signs participate in the construction of focalization.

Hanita and Nirmalawati (2025) analyzed the representation of sexual identity in *Baby Reindeer* through a queer narrative approach. Their study highlights how the series portrays Donny Dunn's bisexual identity and the complexity of self-recognition, shame, and social judgment. This research is important because it shows that *Baby Reindeer* does not only present stalking and trauma, but also explores identity formation and the instability of self-understanding. Nevertheless, their focus is mainly

representational, as the study emphasizes what kind of identity is portrayed rather than how the narrative structure controls the audience's access to that identity. In this regard, their research differs from the present study, which examines not merely the representation of Donny's subjectivity, but the focalization mechanism through which that subjectivity is gradually revealed to the audience.

Rajaei and Fadaee Jonaghani (2026) discussed *Baby Reindeer* as a trauma narrative characterized by fragmentation, subjectivity, and delayed disclosure. Their analysis is closely related to the present study because trauma in *Baby Reindeer* is not presented in a direct or linear manner, but through memory, flashback, hesitation, and emotional disruption. Their study demonstrates that the series constructs trauma as an unstable narrative experience rather than as a completed past event. However, although their research acknowledges the fragmented and subjective quality of Donny's trauma, it does not specifically place focalization as the main theoretical framework. As a result, the study does not fully explain how the audience's limited access to Donny's memory, shame, and delayed confession is technically organized through narrative perspective.

Farashifah et al. (2026) examined the emotional attachment between Donny and Martha by focusing on the affective bond that develops between victim and stalker. Their study helps reveal the complexity of Donny and Martha's relationship, particularly the way pity, attention, dependence, fear, and emotional vulnerability become entangled throughout the series. This perspective is valuable because it challenges a

simplistic victim-villain reading of *Baby Reindeer*. However, the study remains focused on emotional dynamics between characters and does not specifically analyze how the series makes the audience experience those dynamics through Donny's restricted perspective. In contrast, the present study argues that the emotional ambiguity between Donny and Martha becomes narratively powerful because the audience receives the relationship primarily through Donny's internal focalization and the audiovisual signs surrounding his experience.

Çavuşoğlu (2024) studied *Baby Reindeer* from the perspective of audiovisual translation, particularly subtitle translation strategies. This study indicates that the series has also attracted attention in the field of translation and cross-cultural media circulation. While this approach is useful for understanding how the series travels across languages and audiences, its main concern lies in translation practice rather than narrative construction. Thus, it does not address how the original narrative itself regulates audience knowledge, sympathy, doubt, and moral judgment. Similarly, Bisogno (2025) examined *Baby Reindeer* as a form of contemporary television autobiography, emphasizing the relationship between Richard Gadd's personal experience and its audiovisual representation. Bisogno's study is highly relevant because *Baby Reindeer* blurs the boundary between lived experience, authorship, performance, and fictionalization. However, the autobiographical approach still requires further narratological development, particularly in explaining how

Donny's perspective mediates the audience's understanding of events that are presented as closely connected to real experience.

Beyond studies specifically focused on *Baby Reindeer*, research on focalization has also developed across literary and audiovisual objects. Kosasih (2023) applied focalization theory to *Invisible Man*, while Noonari, Khokhar, and Shaheen (2024) used focalization to analyze *The Grapes of Wrath*. Febriana, Rohanda, and Taufiq (2025) examined focalization in the series *AlRawaby School for Girls*, and Khoerunnisa and Juanda (2024) discussed internal and external focalization in narrative texts to explain how perspective influences information distribution. These studies demonstrate that focalization remains a productive theoretical framework for examining the relationship between character perspective, narrative knowledge, and audience interpretation. However, the application of focalization theory to *Baby Reindeer* remains limited, even though the series strongly relies on voice-over narration, delayed information, flashbacks, memory, bodily reaction, and audiovisual signs to construct Donny's point of view.

Studies on subjective perspective in audiovisual media also provide an important foundation for this research. Lucovnicova (2024) shows that first-person filmmaking techniques can strengthen emotional proximity between character and audience, while Li and Gao (2023) argue that streaming-era television series increasingly use gradual information distribution to maintain viewer engagement. Magliano and Zacks (2011) further explain that visual structures in film influence how audiences

organize and understand narrative events. These studies collectively suggest that audiovisual perspective is not built only through dialogue or plot, but also through the arrangement of scenes, camera framing, sound, editing, and visual composition. Nevertheless, these studies discuss audiovisual perspective more generally and have not specifically examined how internal and external focalization operate in *Baby Reindeer* as a series centered on Donny's unstable subjectivity.

These previous studies collectively demonstrate the relevance of *Baby Reindeer* as an object of academic inquiry while also revealing the gap addressed by the present study. First, studies on *Baby Reindeer* have largely focused on language, identity, trauma, emotional relations, translation, and autobiography, but have not sufficiently examined the narratological mechanism that organizes audience knowledge. Second, although focalization has been applied to various literary and audiovisual texts, its specific application to *Baby Reindeer* remains underdeveloped. Third, existing discussions of audiovisual perspective have shown the importance of visual and auditory structures, but they have not yet explained how those structures support Donny Dunn's focalization and influence the audience's sympathy, doubt, and moral judgment.

Therefore, this study contributes to the field by examining *Baby Reindeer* through an integrated narratological framework. By applying Gérard Genette's concept of focalization, Wayne C. Booth's concept of the unreliable narrator, and Roland Barthes' semiotics, this research analyzes how Donny Dunn's perspective is constructed through internal

focalization, external focalization, delayed information, voice-over narration, flashbacks, bodily reactions, and audiovisual signs. Unlike previous studies that mainly examine what the series represents, this study focuses on how the series technically constructs that representation through the control of perspective and information distribution. In this way, the novelty of this research lies in its attempt to explain how focalization in *Baby Reindeer* shapes audience understanding of trauma, stalking, shame, emotional attachment, and ethical ambivalence.

