

Film Narration, Imaginative Seeing and Seeing-In

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In *Seeing Fictions in Films*, George Wilson argues that the chief and most immediate way in which we engage with fictional narratives in main stream films is by *imagining seeing* the characters, events, and situations represented by the images on screen. Call this the *general imagined seeing thesis*. Further, we typically don't imagine directly seeing these fictional entities, but do so in a mediated way. Just as we are actually seeing moving images which represent fictional things, it is fictional for a viewer of a film that he or she is seeing moving images that constitute a documentary record of events, though there is usually no assumption about how this record came to be or of its ontological type. This is the *mediated version* of the imagined seeing thesis. Hence, viewers imagine that they are actually being shown items and events that populate the world of the film (the *fictional showing hypothesis*), and that there is some agent, even if it is one about whom they know little or nothing, responsible for showing them these fictionally actual things (the *effaced narrator thesis*).

Arguing that these four claims are true is the main burden of *Seeing Fiction in Films*. Despite my admiration, and my conviction that Wilson deals effectively with many extant objections, I'm not completely convinced of the truth of any of the four theses. I think the real action is with the first two: the general and mediated imagined seeing theses. If we accept them the others are hard to resist. So my focus will be whether we standardly imagine seeing at the movies and imagine doing this in a mediated way.

1. The General Imagined Seeing Thesis vs The Seeing-In Thesis

The idea that we imagine seeing fictional characters and their doings is plausible because it explains two indubitable truths. First, a natural way

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to report the phenomenology of watching a movie is to say that we see the characters and their doings. Second, when we are dealing with fictional movies, it is impossible that we do see fictional characters and their doings since they have never existed (or if characters do exist, we would not be able to see them). To say that we imagine seeing the characters holds the promise of explaining the phenomenology without committing us to the proposition that we actually see the characters.

However, just because a claim gives us an explanation we are looking for does not mean it is true. There may be another explanation that is just as good or better. It is just such an alternative explanation that I will explore now. Moving pictures, like other pictures, are depictive representations. When we look at a still picture – a painting, drawing or even a photograph – if the picture contains fictional content, then the same two facts mentioned in the preceding paragraph will hold. Some (Walton 1990: 293-352) give the same explanation, but many find this implausible because it seems to them that seeing a warrior in a picture doesn't require imagining something. What many think it does require is what Richard Wollheim (1980) called seeing-in. In fact, that we see a warrior in a picture of a warrior is common ground among those who think we imagine seeing a warrior (Walton) and many of those who think we don't imagine seeing a warrior. Unfortunately, there is not common ground concerning the exact nature of seeing-in. So what is seeing-in? Can it account for our cognition of narrative in film? If it can, does it provide an alternative to the imagined seeing account?

Seeing-in stands in contrast with ordinary seeing. Of course, when I look at a painting I do see it in the ordinary sense. I see a canvas covered by paint that has certain properties: a rectangular shape, a colored surface, and a visible design on that surface. If I truly see all of these things then it follows that there exists a painting that has the various properties mentioned so far. Call this property of ordinary seeing "existence." However, if the painting is representational, then in some sense I see more. For example, in the case of Vermeer's *A Woman with a Balance*, I see "in" the painting a room containing a woman before a balance standing underneath a painting of the Last Judgement. However, in seeing these things *in* the painting it does *not* follow that there is a room containing a woman, a balance, and so on. Further, while I am seeing these various things in the painting, I

am typically still aware that I am looking at a painting with certain surface design features.

So two typical features of seeing-in are, first, that I can see something that is F in something else P, without it following that there is something F that I am seeing, and second that I am also aware of seeing P and some of its features. Call the first feature “nonexistence” and the second “two-foldness”.

How should these two features figure in an explication of seeing-in?

Wollheim first introduced the notion of seeing-in in *Art and its Objects* (2nd ed.), and the account offered there could be interpreted to make the nonexistence property a feature of seeing-in. He subsequently came to place all the emphasis on two-foldness. In his later writings on this subject (1987, 1998), seeing-in simply is visual experience characterized by two-foldness. One criticism of this account is that our experience of depictions is more varied than Wollheim allows. He does acknowledge that “one aspect of the complex experience” might be emphasized “at the expense of the other” (1987: 47). However, this does not go far enough. It seems that sometimes one of these aspects can simply be absent. Trompe l’oeil is the standard counter-example here, since under the right conditions one cannot see the surface or design properties of such paintings. Cinema is another plausible counter-example. People often don’t notice anything other than pictorial content while they are caught up in a movie. It should be noted that both of these examples are controversial since there are people (see especially Scruton 1986) who deny that these are examples of pictorial representation.

I am inclined to allow that it is wrong to suppose that seeing-in requires rather than merely permits and is often accompanied by two-foldness. If this is right, then seeing-in should be reconceived as follows. It is an experience *as of* seeing an object or state of affairs that is F (non-existence), that allows for but does not always require being visually aware of the object through which one is having the experience as of seeing something that is F (potential for seeing-in).¹

In explicating seeing-in in these terms, I am departing from Wollheim’s

¹ Jerrold Levinson makes a similar proposal in his (1998). Wilson (2011: 68) also characterizes the experience of ‘seeing fiction’ using the ‘as of’ (or ‘as if’) terminology and notes that the imagined seeing thesis is but one way of construing it.

account in two ways. First, he explains seeing-in exclusively in terms of two-foldness, whereas I explain it in terms of two properties: two-foldness and nonexistence. Second, for Wollheim, the former property is the one constant feature of seeing-in, while for me it is at best a typical feature. For me, there are two constant features: nonexistence and *the potential for* two-foldness.

I now turn to the question whether seeing-in applies to our experience of films, and whether it solves some of the same problems that are solved by supposing that we imagine seeing the contents of fictional films. First, is there any reason to think that we don't *see* characters *in* films in the way that we do see people and states of affairs in paintings? One reason could be that moving pictures projected onto a screen do not even have a potential for two-foldness. They do not exhibit the kind of worked surface that paintings have in virtue of possessing visible brush strokes (Wollheim 1984: 47) However, there are several other aspects of the moving image that create plenty of room for a two-foldness experience. First, there are technical and formal aspects of a shot or sequence of shots to which film aficionados are often very attuned, e.g. the kind of shot and lens being used (close-up, wide angle), camera movement (pan, tilt, etc.), editing (short or long shots), other formal features of the shot (black and white film vs color, grain, depth of field, focus, lighting, aspect ratio, and so on. In addition, in the case of live action films, one can take notice of the actors (the acting) as well as the character (their actions). In short, at one and the same time or in alternation, one can attend to a whole array of things one is literally seeing, while also attending to what one sees-in the images (or, not beg any questions, imagines seeing).

One could argue that photographic images (still or moving) are potentially visually more complex than other pictures in the following way. We literally see images and we see-in those images fictional characters (when characters are depicted.) But what of the actors who are playing the characters? If the transparency thesis is true, we literally see them too. But if they are depicted by the images, we see-in the images those same actors. Both in fact can be true, and this is what Walton thinks. One may wonder how one can explain the difference between our experience of actors acting out a scene and our experience of the fictional scene on the seeing-in view. A thorough answer is too complex spell out here for reasons of

space, but on the view I have just ascribed to Walton, the difference is that one literally sees the actors as well as seeing them in the images, while one only sees the characters in the images.

One might also try to put the seeing-in hypothesis in doubt by expanding the question to issues regarding hearing fictional characters and fictional activity. It is relatively unproblematic to speak of imagining hearing a fictional character, but is there such a thing as hearing-in that has features parallel to seeing-in? There is nothing like a literature on hearing-in comparable to discussions of seeing-in, but hearing-in does have its proponents. Levinson (1996: 90-125) has argued that it is essential for understanding expressiveness in music. It does not seem particularly problematic to claim that we hear the voices of the characters in the soundtrack. So if there are reasons to prefer the seeing-in hypothesis to the imagined seeing hypothesis, we could extend this to the realm of sound as well.

This is a good time to point out that the seeing-in thesis completely escapes the chief objection to the imagined seeing thesis viz. that if viewers imagine seeing a certain fictional situation from a determinate perspective, then the viewer imagines themselves being located within the fiction in a spatial position implied by the perspective. If this were true, it would have numerous counter-intuitive consequences that have been developed by Gregory Currie (1995) and Noël Carroll (2009), among others. Wilson exerts significant effort to refute this objection, and, my own assessment is that he makes a very strong case against it. But the objection does not even arise for the seeing-in thesis. There is no temptation at all to suppose that if one sees a gun fight in moving images, one imagines oneself located in the fiction where the gunfight occurs.

I now want to argue that the seeing-in thesis offers a solution to many of the same problems that the imagined seeing thesis addresses. First it seems to offer an equally good explanation of the indubitable truth with which we began. It explains why we tend to report that we see fictional film characters and their actions. Second it explains why this is not literally true if we take the seeing in question to be ordinary seeing.

Seeing-in can also account for the appropriateness of other distinctions that Wilson appeals to in arguing for the imagined seeing thesis. At one point, he distinguishes between two different ways we come to know that an event has occurred in the world of the film. In *M* (Fritz Lang, 1930)

we come to imagine (or believe that it is true in the fiction) that one Hans Beckert buys a balloon for a little girl and later murders her. But one seems to acquire these imaginings (beliefs) in different ways. The movie explicitly 'shows' the balloon buying episode, but does not 'show' the murder, which is inferred from what is 'shown:' the balloon floating free among power lines. One way of explaining the difference here is to say that we imagine seeing the balloon buying, and the balloon floating free, but not the murder. But we can equally well say that we see-in the moving image the balloon buying and the balloon floating free, but not the murder which we only infer.

Let me mention in passing that Wilson seems to be wrong in claiming that a different proposal by Noël Carroll cannot explain the difference in the way we gain access to the fictional truths of *M* just rehearsed. In explaining our cognition of the fictional content of movies, Carroll appeals primarily to what we see in the ordinary sense – the moving image – and, guided in addition by context and convention, what we propositionally imagine as a result of seeing the image. Since we propositionally imagine both that Hans buys a balloon for the girl and murders her, Wilson concludes that Carroll cannot explain the different way we access these fictional truths. In fact, he can; Carroll could say that we imagine that Hans buys the girl a balloon directly (non-inferentially) as a result of seeing images representing a man buying a girl a balloon, but we imagine that Hans murders the girl only by inferring it from the image of the floating balloon that we see. Perhaps what is missing from Carroll's claims is an account of what it is to see a depictive representation. For unless we become aware of the depictive content carried by the image, it cannot guide our propositional imaginings. When this is spelled out, we might be led back to imagined seeing or, alternatively, seeing-in.

One might argue that the seeing-in thesis so closely tracks the successes of the imagined seeing thesis because they are really the same thesis. Seeing-in just is the relevant kind of imagined seeing. This is the view of Kendall Walton (2002). According to Walton, seeing-in consists of imagining of one's visual experience that it is the seeing of an object or event. If this is right, seeing-in collapses into imagined seeing.

However, a lot of people doubt that seeing depictive content requires imagination or make believe. So they would doubt that if seeing-in is im-

plicated in grasping depictive content, imagination would be implicated in seeing-in. One reason they doubt that imagination is needed to see such content is that much imaginative activity is voluntary and active, whereas, if you look at many a pictorial representation, you can't help seeing what is depicted, and you are quite passive in having this experience.

Walton (2002: 31) replies that there are passive rather minimal imaginings and that is what is happening in the visual experience of depictions. I think that it is a nice question whether the intuition (not shared by the critics of the make-believe view) that we are always engaged in some sort of imagining with depictions derives from the nonexistence condition on seeing-in or whether the (purported) fact that we imagine seeing depictive content explains non-existence. For any picture, even a photograph, there is no entailment from the fact that we see-in it something that is F to the conclusion that there is something that is F we are seeing or to which the picture refers. (There may be other properties of photographs that secure such reference.) One way of explaining this fact is to say that there is always an imaginative element to seeing a depiction. However, given the resistance Walton's view has met especially in the realm of still pictures, it is far from clear that the imagined seeing view elucidates seeing-in. It may instead derive its plausibility from what I have claimed to be a central condition of seeing-in: nonexistence. The conclusion to be drawn is that the seeing-in view is not obviously made more comprehensible by the imagined seeing view. If so, the former view does not necessarily collapse into the latter.

2. The Mediated Imagined Seeing Thesis

Wilson offers a number of textually distinct statements of the mediated version of the imagined seeing thesis. For present purposes, I shall choose one that captures both the thesis, and makes perspicuous what some, including me, find problematic about it: "It is fictional in our imaginative engagement with [mainstream] narrative films that they consist of 'motion picture-like shots' that have been derived in a fictionally indeterminate manner from pertinent segments of the fictional narrative worlds" (2011: 88). Here are three objections to the thesis, though I don't claim

that they are individually or even jointly decisive. First, viewers of films plausibly have some sort of experience as of seeing the characters, etc., but so far this leaves open whether they 'imagine' seeing the characters in an unmediated way or through the mediation indicated in the quoted passage. What do viewers *actually* do? This is, or seems to be, an empirical question, but no empirical evidence is offered by Wilson. Second, the mediation thesis seems to indicate that the action 'viewed' is always something that has already happened since viewers are imagining seeing a record of it, yet it seems to me that we often experience the action as occurring in the present. Third, the general imagined seeing thesis (viewers imagine seeing characters) and mediated versions (viewers imagine seeing motion picture-like shots of characters) are only consistent if we actually imagine that we see the character in imagining seeing the motion picture-like shots of them. Although it may be true that if we saw the shots, we would see the characters (if a Walton-like transparency thesis is true), 1. It is controversial whether the thesis is true, and 2. It is far from clear that ordinary viewers who are plausibly innocent of a belief for or against transparency, would, in imagining one, imagine the other.

These objections express my own unease with the mediated imagined seeing thesis, an unease that is not overcome by Wilson's chief argument for the thesis. This argument is based on a distinction between elements we encounter in films. There are some that we see or have the experience as of seeing which are not imagined to indicate properties of the fictional world of the work. These are non-diegetic features and examples would be captions that give information about the time or place of a scene, or formal features of shots such as being made with black and white film, being in soft focus, etc. There are other elements, the diegetic ones, that are imagined to be elements of the fictional world of the work, such as a murder. Wilson argues that the only imagined seeing thesis that can capture this distinction adequately is the mediated one. The most plausible alternative version is the moderate version, which is simply non-committal about the nature of the imagined seeing. According to Wilson, its very non-committal nature disqualifies it from characterizing the difference in our experience of diegetic and non-diegetic elements. I do not have space to explore whether this charge is justified. What I can do is point out that the seeing-in thesis is able to explain the difference in experience with no

appeal to mediation. We *see* a murder *in* the moving images because a murder is part of their depictive content. We don't (necessarily) see a black and white world in the images if we recognize that there is no intention to represent such a world. Rather we see in *the ordinary sense* the black and white images. This would be an example of an experience of two-foldness that seeing-in always has the potential to create. Similarly we see the captions in the ordinary sense of 'seeing' and understand them as providing information about the fictional world, but not as being part of that world. The seeing-in thesis does not preclude mediation, but does not commit one to it. I think that this is another advantage of the view.²

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