

# ***Imagination and the Cinematic Experience***

Enrico Terrone & Daniela Tagliafico\*

*University of Turin*

ABSTRACT. This paper concerns the role of the imagination in the experience of fictional movies. In the philosophy of cinema we can find two main and opposing theses: the Imagined Seeing Thesis (IST), which claims that the moviegoer imagines perceiving the fictional world in a first-personal way, and the Impersonal Imagining Thesis (IIT), which claims that the moviegoer uses the pictures and sounds of the film as prompts for the imaginative construction of a fictional world. We argue that these theses are both flawed, and we propose a different account, namely: the Imagined Causation Thesis (ICT), which can solve the problems of both IST and IIT.

## ***1. The Imagined Seeing Thesis (IST) and the Impersonal Imagining Thesis (IIT)***

A screened movie can be generally considered as a surface of our environment  $E$  that allows us to recognize things in another environment  $E'$ . The ontological status of the environment  $E'$  depends on the movie's subject. If the movie was intended to be the documental recording of an event, then we must suppose that the environment  $E'$  has different spatial and temporal coordinates with respect to  $E$ ; if the movie was intended to be a fiction, then we must suppose that the environment  $E'$  is in a different world with respect to  $E$ .

In the first case, the depicted environment must contain a filming device that is linked whereby a causal chain to the movie located in the viewer's environment, whereas in the second case there is no such requirement. Therefore in the first case, in order to have access to another environment in the real world, the viewer relies on her belief in a causal chain connecting this environment to hers, whereas in the second case, in order to have access to an environment in a fictional world, she has to employ

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\* Corresponding author's email: enriterr@gmail.com

her imagination. Most philosophers of cinema agree about this point. The disagreement concerns how the imagination is employed.

For the purpose of better explaining this disagreement, we need to clarify what a fictional world exactly is. On one side the fictional world, *qua* world, has its own space and time, and its own individuals contained in such a space-time. On the other side, the fictional world, *qua* fictional, is intentionally created by one or more makers by means of public signs, and can be known by beholders who apply their imagination to those signs. The main metaphysical problem with the fictional world is the following: *qua* world with its own space-time, it must be causally disconnected from our world, but *qua* fictional, it must be causally connected to our world in order to be created by the makers and especially to be known by the beholders.

In the literary fiction case, this problem can be solved by appealing to the cooperation between imagination and language: the maker has the power to describe a possible, imagined world by means of words, and the readers have the power to imagine about it by understanding these very words. In short, imagination and language give us a way of representing a possible world without causally interacting with it. Yet, in the cinematic fiction case, this solution does not work, since it seems that the moviegoers do not just imagine the fictional world, but they see it, and seeing requires a causal connection.

There are two main solutions philosophers of cinema have tried to give to this problem. On one hand, Gregory Currie (1995), Dominique Lopes (1998), Berys Gaut (2004), and Noel Carroll (2009) argue that the spectator uses the pictures and sounds of the film almost in the same way the reader uses the words of a novel: as prompts for the imaginative construction of a fictional world; this is called the “Impersonal Imagining Thesis” (IIT). On the other hand, Kendall Walton (1990; 1997), Jerrold Levinson (1996) and George Wilson (1997) argue that the film spectator imagines to perceive the fictional events in a first-personal way; this is called the “Imagined Seeing Thesis” (IST).

## ***2. Problems for the Imagined Seeing Thesis (IST)***

The use of the expression “imagined seeing”, instead of simply “seeing”,

comes from the consideration that a spectator in the real world is unable to perceive the events that happen in the fictional world: she can only imagine perceiving them. Yet, in order to do this, the spectator must first imagine being in the fictional world.

Because of this constraint, the supporters of IST are faced with two alternatives: either the spectator imagines being in the fictional world, face to face with the fictional events (this is the “face-to-face hypothesis”), or she imagines attending the recordings of the fictional events, still inside the fictional world (this is the “fictional recordings hypothesis”).

As argued by Gregory Currie (2005), but also admitted by George Wilson (1997) in his defense of the IST, the first alternative is not theoretically viable because of its paradoxical consequences. The spectator would be forced to imagine him or herself in a continuous displacement within the fictional world, often in absurd positions, and moreover she should be able to see also the fictional events that the narration explicitly presents as unseen (for instance, the end of the world in Lars Von Trier’s *Melancholia*). However, for the “imagined seeing thesis” an alternative is still available: it could be argued that the spectator does not directly perceive the fictional events, but only the recordings of them, that is to say, he or she imagines him or herself as a fictional spectator of fictional records of fictional events. This solution solves the problem of the fictional spectator’s excessive mobility and inappropriate presence, but raises a new question: who has created these fictional records? Since these are fictional artifacts, they may have been created only by a fictional maker, an “image-maker” who corresponds to the role of the narrator: “the fictional person, in the world of the story, who reports the events of the story” (Gaut, 2004, p.236).

While the “face-to-face hypothesis” allows us to choose whether to dismiss the narrator or to consider it as a fictional guide showing the fictional events to the fictional spectator, the “fictional recordings hypothesis” forces us to postulate the existence of the narrator as a fictional filmmaker. Yet, in this way, the problems of the excessive mobility and inappropriate presence afflicting the “face-to-face hypothesis” are now afflicting the fictional filmmaker. Wilson’s answer to this objection is that it is a “silly question”, an excess of pedantry and intransigence: according to Wilson, the spectator imagines attending the fictional records without worrying about the way in which these records were made – without won-

dering how the fictional filmmakers could be located on the ceiling at one time, and, at the other, could be on a desert island together with the lone castaway. The spectator neglects these positional absurdities as she neglects many other contradictions that can be found in fictions. But this issue is unconvincing, as observed by Berys Gaut (2004, p.245): although in engaging with a fiction the spectator usually has a certain quantity of absurdities to imagine, this is not a good reason to force her to imagine other avoidable absurdities.

### **3. Problems for the Impersonal Imagining Thesis (IIT)**

Taking seriously the “silly questions” raised by IST, the supporters of IIT (cf. Currie, 1995; Lopes, 1998; Carroll, 2009; Gaut, 2010) have tried to solve the problem of the causal interaction between worlds by assimilating the cinematic case to the literary case. So they have claimed that the spectator uses the pictures and the sounds of the film almost in the same way the reader uses the words of a novel: as prompts for the imaginative construction of a fictional world. In this case the imagination is impersonal since the spectator does not imagine her own personal act of seeing the fictional world, but she simply sees the pictures on the screen and then imagines the fictional world prompted by these contents.

Yet, in so doing, IIS does not fully take into account a distinctive feature of the cinematic experience, that is, in Jerrold Levinson’s words (1993, p.78): “the immediacy of our involvement in, and our extraordinary capacity to be affected, cognitively and emotionally, by cinema viewing”. Moreover, IIT forces the spectator of fiction films to accomplish a cognitive performance that seems to be radically different from the one she usually accomplishes while seeing a documentary or a live broadcast. In this sense, IIT does not fit well with the phenomenological effects of photographic transparency that characterize the cinematic experience (cf. Cavell, 1979; Walton, 1984; Hopkins, 2008).

In particular, IIT does not fit well with some intuitions about our experience of fictional films, as for example the viewer’s disturbing feeling of being observed by the fictional character if the actor has looked into the camera during the filming. Filmmakers such as Jean Renoir, Ingmar

Bergman, Jean-Luc Godard and Woody Allen have exploited this phenomenon for their own expressive purposes, but normally, on a film set, looking to the camera is forbidden to the actors, in order to avoid that the spectator, while observing a character, has the feeling that he or she is observed by the character. According to Currie's account, this prohibition would have no reason to be: if the spectator uses the sights and sounds of the film as prompts in order to imagine a fictional world, then the look to the camera should not interfere with her imagination; yet it does. The supporter of IIT can not reply that "it is fictional that the character looks into the camera", since the camera is not in the fictional world, but in the real world.

The spectator's disturbing feeling elicited by the look to the camera can only be explained by assuming that the spectator imagines to see the fictional events without being seen in her turn, and so the character's look interferes with her imagination, just as the unexpected gaze of somebody we are spying on interferes with our spying. In similar cases, as well as in front of certain point-of-view shots, also the sustainers of the impersonal imaging must admit that "The default mode of the spectator's engagement with traditional film is impersonal visual imagining, but there can be suitably cued episodes of make-believe seeing" (Gaut, 2010, p.217). Yet, by so arguing, IIT supporters explain these phenomena only at the high price of postulating a radical change in the cognitive attitude of the viewer.

Furthermore, IIT has difficulties in explaining what form of imagination is employed by the viewer in order to represent the fictional world while watching a movie. Certainly it cannot be visual imagination, since this latter involves the same brain areas that are activated by vision. As known, the brain areas activated by vision and visual imagery, or motion and motor imagery, are significantly overlapping. On the functional level this means that the same cognitive mechanisms are recruited both to see and to visually imagine something. The consequence, as shown by several empirical data (for a review cf. Currie and Ravenscroft, 1997), is that, if a mechanism is recruited by vision it cannot be contemporarily recruited in order to visually imagine, and vice versa. To be able to imagine in this way (that is, perceptually), the viewers should then periodically close their eyes, in order to block the perception of real images and imagine the fictional states of affairs – but this 'intermittent vision' is not the way in which

ordinary moviegoers see movies.

The imagination involved in the experience of fictional cinema thus seems to be of the propositional kind. However, we must state precisely what is meant by 'propositional'. A too narrow interpretation of this term, in fact, would lead us to think that the viewer spends the whole time of the showing at re-describing, by means of propositions, what she is already seeing with her own eyes. This would mean that, while watching a scene of a movie, the viewer should list in her mind, in a few seconds, at least some thousands of propositions ("it is fictional that  $p_1$ , and it is fictional that  $p_2$ , and..."), in order to account for all the details concerning the fictional event that are provided by the images. Also in this case, then, the cognitive performance required from the viewer would be exaggerated.

In proposing IIT, Currie thus opts for a different solution. He argues that there is a special form of propositional imagination that he calls *impersonal perceptual imagining*, which consists in a simulated perceptual belief. According to Currie, a belief is simulated when it is off-line, that is, when it is disconnected from its perceptual causes and its behavioural effects. Moreover, a belief is perceptual in the sense that it counterfactually depends on the visual properties of its object and it has a "bunched, content-specific character" (1995, p.183).

We have beliefs that are directly grafted on perception, without any need to re-describe them linguistically: I see an apple with a certain form, a certain colour and certain other visual features, and I believe that there is an apple of *that* form, *that* colour, and with *those* other visual features. Much the same way, we can suppose to have imaginings grafted on perception as well: I see the moving pictures of a certain scene and I imagine that in the fictional world it exists precisely *that* state of affairs, with exactly *those* perceptual properties. The only difference is that in the belief case the mental states involved are on-line (I set the apple in the real world and I act accordingly), whereas in the imagination case they are off-line (I set the state of affairs in a fictional world that is causally disconnected from my actions and perceptions).

The main problem for this version of IIT is that Currie conceives the viewer's imagination as an off-line belief. That being the case, her high-order cognitive systems are disconnected from perception and so we must draw the conclusion that the experience of a moviegoer should consist

in a continuous alternation of on-line moments (in which she catches the perceptual prompts) and off-line moments (in which she impersonally perceptually imagines). Then again, as in the visual-imagery interpretation of IIT, we are faced with an anomalous 'intermittent' working of the viewer's cognitive system.

At best, Currie's hypothesis may work in the cases of painting and sculpture, where there is only one, fixed image, after whose perception the viewer can make the simulation running off-line, thus giving rise to the impersonal perceptual imagining. In the cases of theatre and cinema, however, since the perceptual inputs are constantly changing, the viewer's perception has to be continuously active, and this makes it hard that the required act of imagination periodically drives perception off-line.

In a later work, Currie seems to have abandoned such an account in favor of an alternative between a pair of hypotheses: "We can think of the kind of imagining we undertake when our visual system is engaged by the source of the imagining (as with watching film) as either perception-penetrated-by-imagination, or as a non perceptual form of imagining that is, nonetheless, strongly connected to perception. While the first of these views raises awkward questions about the evolution of vision, we prefer to leave the decision between them open" (Currie and Ravenscroft, 2002, p.30). In this case there is no more a commitment with off-line mental states, but still, we have the problem of explaining what "perception-penetrated-by-imagination" and "a non-perceptual form of imagining strongly connected to perception" exactly are, and showing that they are something more than mere ad hoc formulas.

#### **4. Fiction and Depiction**

Both IIT and IST try to solve the problem of explaining how a causally disconnected fictional world can be known by the viewer. IIT succeeds in taking into account the causal gap between our world and the fictional world, but it fails to account for the distinctive phenomenology of the cinematic experience. Conversely, IST succeeds in taking into account this distinctive phenomenology but fails to account for the causal gap. At this point, it is worth noting that IST and IIT seem to rely on different

perceptual approaches to cinematic depiction: the former relies on the seeing-in approach, the latter on the recognitional approach.

IST's supporters like Walton, Levinson and Wilson endorse a version of the seeing-in theory according to which, in the case of the depiction of a fictional state of affairs, seeing-in has a distinctive twofoldness. More precisely, it consists of a configurational fold, constituted by the real experience of the screened surface, and a recognitional fold, constituted by the imagined experience of the recognized fictional subject. Likewise, Hopkins' theory of seeing-in leads him to a theory of the fictional movies' experience that he calls "collapsed seeing-in" and that can be considered as a variant of IST for the specific case of live-action movies.

On the other side, among IIT's supporters, Lopes develops its own recognitional approach while Currie, Gaut, and Carroll endorse Schier's recognitional theory of depiction and they all assume that a movie represents a given subject by triggering the same recognitional abilities that would be triggered by a face-to-face experience of this very subject. That being the case, IIT can be formulated by claiming that first the moviegoer's recognitional abilities are triggered by the content of the movie, and then she imagines that the recognized subject belongs to a fictional world.

In other words, the seeing-in approach seems to entail IST, since the recognitional fold involves a first-person experience of the depicted fictional subject, whereas the recognitional approach seems to entail IIT, since the triggering of the appropriate recognitional abilities does not involve a first-person experience of the depicted fictional subject, but simply a recognition of a perceptual content that can be subsequently used as an imaginative content.

Despite their differences regarding the role of the imagination, the seeing-in approach and the recognitional approach agree in considering movies as objects that represent subjects that have to be recognized by the viewers. The disagreement only concerns the relation that subsists between the recognition and the imagination: the seeing-in approach leads to claim that the picture directly triggers an imagined recognition (IST), while the recognitional approach leads to claim that the picture triggers the recognition that, in its turn, triggers the imagination about the fictional world (IIT).

Yet, the seeing-in approach and the recognitional approach are not the

only theoretical possibilities in order to explain cinematic depiction. So, we can try to solve the antinomy between IST and IIT by endorsing a different account of cinematic depiction that, unlike the seeing-in- and the recognitional approach, does not necessarily conceive the movie as the representation of a recognizable subject. In particular, we can start from Haugeland's claim: "that all the photos 'strictly' represent is certain variations of incident light with respect to direction" (1991, p.189), and we can try to apply it to the case of movies by claiming that all the movies 'strictly' represent are the spatial *and temporal* variations of incident light with respect to direction. That being the case, we can individuate a basic level of cinematic depiction that does not require the recognition of depicted subjects, since it simply conceives the movie as a representation of the light-energy distribution in a given environment and from a given "point of view" (in Haugeland terms: it simply represents a "bare bones content", not necessarily "fleshed out" by recognition). Since our visual system is causally affected by the spatial and temporal variations of incident light in the environment, and the movie represents these variations, we can infer that the movie emulates the input of our visual system and gives us perceptual access to an environment different from ours.

### **5. *The Imagined Causation Thesis (ICT)***

If movies emulate the visual structure by means of which our environment *causally* affects our visual system, then cinematic depiction has essentially to do with causality. If the movie truthfully depicts a real environment, then there should be a genuine causal chain that connects such an environment to our visual system through the movie's visual structure. But if the movie is fictional, the lack of a genuine causal chain could be compensated by an act of its maker that mandates the viewer to imagine that the visual structure that triggers her experience is caused by a fictional environment. In this sense the experience of fictional movies does not rely on the viewer's capacity to apply imagination to the visual recognition (unlike what IST claims) or to the recognized subject (unlike what IIT claims), but rather it relies on the viewer's capacity to apply his or her imagination to the causal connection between the visual recognition and the recognized subject.

In other words, it is an unquestionable fact taking place in the real world that there is a causal connection ( $M \rightarrow V$ ) between the visual structure of the screened movie ( $M$ ) and the viewer's visual system ( $V$ ). The viewer experiences this visual structure as a special area of her environment that, by emulating an input of the visual system, allows her to recognize things in another environment. Now the question is: what caused the visual structure  $M$ ? What is the  $X$  that originates the causal chain  $X \rightarrow M \rightarrow V$ ?

The simplest and more general answer is: the screening mechanism (e.g. the projector, the dvd-player, the computer...), but this mechanism seems to be only the last link of a longer chain. Both in the case of broadcasts and documentaries and in that of fictional movies this chain typically starts with a real event that is recorded by a filming device. So a viewer is typically aware that the causal chain that is triggering her experience is the following:  $Y \rightarrow X \rightarrow M \rightarrow V$ , where  $Y$  is the making of the movie,  $X$  the screening mechanism,  $M$  the screened movie, and  $V$  the viewer's visual system.

Yet, in order to fully enjoy a fictional movie, we argue, the viewer has to "break" the chain's link connecting the screening  $M$  and the mechanism  $X$ , and "doubling" it with an imagined link directly connecting the screening  $M$  and the fictional world  $F$ . In short, the viewer has to imagine that the screening is directly caused by a certain light-energy distribution belonging to a fictional world. The real causal chain  $Y \rightarrow X \rightarrow M \rightarrow V$  is thus substituted by the causal chain  $F \rightarrow M \rightarrow V$ , that is partly fictional ( $F \rightarrow M$ ) and partly real ( $M \rightarrow V$ ).

So, unlike IIS, the viewer does not have to imagine being in the fictional world, since the causal link between the screened movie and the visual system ( $MV$ ) is firmly grounded in the real world. But, unlike IIT, the viewer has a real first-person experience of the fictional events, since the visual structure of the movie, which is imagined to be the light-energy distribution of the fictional environment, causally works as an input for the visual system. In this way the "Imagined Causation Thesis" (ICT) seems to solve the antinomy between IST and IIT, by avoiding the problems that afflict these approaches. Yet, ICT has to face two problems in its turn.

### **6. Problems for the Imagined Causation Thesis (ICT)**

The first problem is to explain exactly in which sense we can imagine a fictional causation without imagining being in a fictional world. The solution is to consider the imagined causation as a causal story that works as a possible explanation of a real state of affairs. Let us consider for instance the police officers on the crime scene. They have to do with a real state of affairs (a man is dead, his corpse is on the floor...), and they try to imagine some causal stories that can explain this state of affairs (maybe the man was killed by his wife, maybe by a robber, maybe he committed suicide...). The police officers imagine these stories and nevertheless they do not imagine to be in a fictional world. They simply connect in their imagination a real state of affairs (the fact that there is a corpse on the floor) with some imagined causal stories. That is the way in which most explanatory hypotheses work, and we claim that also the viewer's experience of fictional movies relies on an explanatory causal story of this sort.

At this point, however, we have to face the following objection. The police officers imagine possible causal stories, whereas the moviegoer has to imagine an impossible causal story, which concerns a causal link connecting the fictional world and the real world. But the case of a moviegoer differs from that of a police officer precisely for the fact that the causal story imagined by the moviegoer need not be reliable. In other words, the causal story imagined by the moviegoer need not be physically possible, but only metaphysically possible.

This kind of metaphysical possibility is at the core of films like *Minority Report* or *Déjà vu*, in which there are characters who see events in a possible future that will not take place. According to the fiction, these characters are in the actual world and see environments in (i.e. causally interact with) a non-existing world. The fact that the audience can enjoy films like *Minority Report* or *Déjà vu* proves that the causal interaction between the actual world and a non-existing world is at least psychologically conceivable. Our point is that the moviegoer makes use of the same sort of imagination that she attributes to the characters of *Minority Report* or *Déjà vu*: an imaginative act concerning the possibility of perceiving a non-existing world while staying in the actual world.

Finally, it remains to explain in which way the moviegoer imagines that

the non-existing world causally affects the actual world. According to fictions such as *Minority Report* or *Déjà vu*, this happens by means of extraordinary powers or high tech devices. But what about the real world? In this case our answer is simply: cinema. Our culture has accustomed the moviegoers to imagine the screen as a sort of metaphysical interface between the real world and the fictional world. The standard situation of watching films requires that this interface is asymmetric, in the sense that the viewers in the real world use it while the characters in the fictional world are unaware of its existence. In this sense, the interfaces function as barriers, as Stanley Cavell points out: “A screen is a barrier. What does the silver screen screen? It screens me from the world it holds – that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me – that is, screens its existence from me. That the projected world does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality” (1979, p.24).

However, in the case of the “look to the camera” – and especially in the “Pirandellian” or “Brechtian” situations that it can entail (e.g. in some films of Jean-Luc Godard, Woody Allen, Michael Haneke) – the character has exceptionally access to these interfaces through which she can turn her gaze from the fictional world to the real world. Neither IST nor IIT can explain what exactly happens in these sequences, since they do not take into account the possibility of an imagined causal interaction between the real world and the fictional world. ICT does, and that is ultimately why we think it offers a better account of the cinematic experience.

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