

The Fictional World Viewed. The Ontological Foundation of Narrative Cinema

When we see a narrative film, we perceive a series of pictures and sounds that provide us with information about a fictional world. Most philosophers of cinema agree about this point. The disagreement focus on how this information is conveyed.

On one hand, Gregory Currie (1995) and Berys Gaut (2004) argue that the spectator uses the pictures and sounds of the film 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”. On the other hand, Kendall Walton (1990 and 1997), Jerrold Levinson (1996) and George Wilson (1997 and 2006) argue that the film spectator imagines to perceive the fictional events in a first-personal way; this is called the “imagined seeing thesis”. It is worth noting that 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 events that happen in the fictional world: she can only imagine to perceive them. Yet, in order to do this, the spectator must first imagine *being* in the fictional world. Such an imagining, however, has some paradoxical consequences (cf. Currie 1995, Gaut 2004), that are very difficult to defend on a theoretical level.

The “impersonal imagining thesis” must face some important problems, in its turn. In particular, it does not fit well with some intuitions about our experience of 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. This disturbing feeling 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. Moreover, the “impersonal imagining thesis” forces the spectator of fiction films to accomplish a radically different performance from the one she usually accomplishes while seeing a documentary or a live broadcast. In this sense, the “impersonal imagining thesis” does not fit well with the phenomenological effects of photographic transparency (cf. Cavell 1979, Walton 1984, Hopkins 2008).

At this point, we are faced with an antinomy: on one hand, if we adopt the “imagined seeing thesis” we find some paradoxical consequences that only the endorsing of the “impersonal imagining thesis” allows us to explain away. On the other hand, if we endorse the “impersonal seeing thesis” we are unable to account for some phenomenological effects that, conversely, the “imagined seeing thesis” could easily explain.

I claim that this antinomy bears upon an ontological fallacy that both theses share: that of conceiving a fictional world as a possible world, parallel to the real one and therefore causally disconnected from it. Kripke (1980) rightly claimed that we cannot view a possible world through a telescope, but this is not equally true for fictional worlds. In the movie theater it is precisely as if we viewed a fictional world through a telescope, that is, through the film screened.

Usual statements such as “The fictional world of *Taxi Driver* was created by Paul Schrader and Martin Scorsese”, “Travis Bickle is played by Robert De Niro”, “Travis’s sentiments for Iris have truly touched me”, can be explained only by assuming that the fictional world is causally connected to the real world. Starting from the artifactualist account that conceives fictional entities as essentially created (cf. Thomasson 1999), we can conceive the fictional world as essentially created in its turn, and therefore essentially connected to the real world. The fictional world is an artifactual world created by a real filmmaker and perceivable by a real audience.

This account allows us to maintain the benefits of the “imagined seeing thesis” without any ontological commitment on the notions of “fictional spectator” or “fictional image-maker”. That is because this account explains how the spectator can imagine to perceive the fictional events while staying in the real world. For this purpose, the fictional world must include in its ontological structure some access points that allow a spectator of the real world to look inside the fictional world. We define an access point as a spatio-temporal point of the fictional world which is imagined as perceptually accessible from different places and different times in the real world, as well as a window, that overlooks a landscape, matches this *single* landscape with all the *many* circumstances in which it was looked at and it will be looked at. The standard situation of watching films requires that the viewer uses these access points while the character is unaware of their existence. However, in the cases of “look to the camera” – and the “Pirandellian” or “Brechtian” situations that follow (e.g. in some films of Jean-Luc Godard, Woody Allen, Michael Haneke) – the character can exceptionally have access to these points through which she turns her gaze from the fictional world to the real world.

This account of narrative cinema preserves the benefits of the “imagined seeing thesis”, namely its ability to explain the involvement of the spectator in the film, without having to postulate a fictional counterpart of the spectator within the fictional world, with its paradoxical consequences. We can do so, since the access points allow the spectator to perceive the fictional events directly from the real world. That is to say, the cognitive performance of the spectator consists in representing two worlds (the real one in which she is, and the fictional one that she imagines to perceive), and in imagining their connection.