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The Imagined Seeing Thesis

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Introduction

Wilson deliberates at length over the merits and demerits of what he calls the Face-to-Face, Modest, and Mediated versions of the Imagined Seeing Thesis. He ends up somewhat tentatively advocating one of several distinct variants of the Mediated Version. Very briefly, the Face-to-Face Version has it that when watching a cinematic fiction, we imagine ourselves to be in the presence of the events in the story. The Modest Version suggests that our imaginings are indeterminate or blank with regard to the question of how it is that we are seeing the fictional items when we experience a film. The Mediated Version holds that viewers imagine seeing and hearing items in the fictional world, and that spectators should also imagine that this seeing and this hearing are mediated or indirect.

By what means is this indirect presentation achieved in the story? In the variant on the Mediated Version that Wilson says he accepts, “the means or mechanism that constitutes the mediation is, in general, fictionally indeterminate” (79, fn.).

A key assumption here is that the fictional content of a work is partly determinate, but is also “gappy” or has “spots of indeterminacy” (as Roman Ingarden put it). I have long found Wilson’s mobilization of this idea with regard to aspects of fictional narration highly insightful, since good film appreciators do not get entangled in the sorts of issues that Kendall L. Walton evoked in the “silly questions” section of *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990: 174–182). I do wonder, however, whether Wilson has provided sufficient grounds for his preferred thesis concerning which imaginings about fictional mediation are and are not warranted.

Warrant and justification are terms that Wilson does not hesitate to apply to some of the imaginings occasioned by works of fiction. To begin to understand the rationale behind the recourse to these epistemological terms in this context, we need only consider Wilson’s example of Flannery, who watches moving pictures depicting a black Porsche, but somehow ends up with the wonky impression that it is as if she were seeing a werewolf. As Wilson puts it, Flannery’s response lacks warrant or justification because it is not attuned to “the actual contents of the film images” (2010: 70). Imaginings like Flannery’s are insufficiently grounded in or guided by the relevant evidence. Wilson delineates what he calls a “veridicality condition” on the spectator’s son

delineates what he calls a “veridicality condition” on the spectator’s experience (70–71), linking this to Walton’s idea of authorized games of make-believe. Wilson’s veridicality condition basically restates the distinction between warranted and unwarranted spectatorial impressions, without specifying what it is in general that provides such warrant. A few pages later Wilson describes the situation with regard to the status of Flannery’s impressions: “It is an impression whose specific content is validated or not depending on what she sees more narrowly on screen” (74). I am not sure what is and is not embraced by this idea of a more narrow seeing. Is this expression simply meant to be synonymous with seeing “the actual contents” of the image, or what the image actually depicts, or what can be “perceived” in the image? And more generally, what are the assumptions about warrant, justification, or even truth (“the veridical”) underwriting this sort of judgment about a viewer’s imaginings?

Suppose, now, that in some odd fictional context, it is true in the story that a magician is in cahoots with a werewolf and uses awesome magical powers to make the werewolf temporarily look and move just like a black Porsche. In such a context a spectator could see the same moving pictures that Flannery saw, yet, unlike Flannery, be warranted to imagine that it is true in the story that he “sees” a werewolf moving along the road, even though what he actually sees in that part of the film is a moving image depicting a black Porsche. That he would in such a case imagine seeing a black Porsche, and not a werewolf, makes it clear that we must follow Wilson in distinguishing between the fictional content of the work and what the spectator is prescribed to imagine seeing. In other words, some of what we are warranted to imagine or make-believe as part of the story is not part of what we are warranted to imagine seeing, and vice versa. It is important to recognize that this distinction is not only motivated by arcane philosophical examples. In watching films, we often see such things as lap dissolves, in which one shot fades out while another shot fades in. Such visible cinematic devices involve uptake of content and may be indicative of fictional goings on (sometimes they suggest a temporal ellipsis, for example), but even in such cases, what is perceived (one view progressively getting lighter superimposed onto another view getting darker) does not correspond precisely to what is happening in the story.

The application of a broad yet crucial distinction between warranted imagined seeing and prescribed story content is sometimes straightforward, but often not. It is especially problematic when it comes to that part of a work’s content that pertains to the “internal” or fictional presentation of story events (or what Wilson generally calls the “narration”). How much of this sort of thing do we appropriately imagine seeing, as opposed to appropriately imagining “more broadly”? Just how much imagining should spectators engage in when it comes to the presentation or narration, within the story itself, of what happens in the story? Is there a principled link between imagining narration and adequate appreciation of the film as a work of art?

With these very broad and difficult questions in mind, consider some different ways spectators might respond to a particular case. Buster Keaton's black and white film, *Go West* (1925), includes a scene in which a bull chases the Keaton character because he waves a red bandana.



Figure 1. *Go West: Friendless* (Buster Keaton) chased by a bull



Figure 2. The bulls see red in *Go West*

Later in the film, *Friendless* puts on a devil costume in order to get some bulls to chase him. For these scenes to have a “verisimilar” motivation along conventional “the bulls saw red” lines, we must imagine that the bandana and devil costume are red. I believe Wilson would agree that we should make believe or imagine that these items are red even though we do not imagine seeing them as red. And what should we imagine with regard to the presentation of such scenes? With regard to black and white films in general, Wilson writes that “The black and white presentation is simply grasped as the result of a mediation between me [the spectator] and the ‘objective’ fictional world” (90). According to the favored “weak elaboration” of the Mediated Version, the spectator should imagine that there was some kind of fictional mediation that filtered out the colors while visually presenting the events, but the viewer should not imagine anything more about how this filtering and presenting took place. With regard to the aforementioned scenes from *Go West*, this would mean that we should not try to answer silly questions about the point of view shot taken from a position “astride” a charging bull, such as “Whose perspective is this?” or “How can we be seeing *Friendless* as if we were moving towards him on the back of a charging bull?”

g towards him on the back of a charging bull?” Compare, then, the following concocted sample reports from spectators who have watched the relevant bits from *Go West*:

- (1) The bulls chased the man because he was wearing red. Somehow in the world of the story the chase was presented by black and white moving images.
- (2) The bulls chased the man because he was wearing red. L’imagier ou l’équipe d’imagiers in the story presented the chase with black and white movie-like images. Working against the constraint of using only black and white images, l’imagier or collaborating imagiers cleverly

warranted an inference to the redness of the man's devil costume.

Response (1) squares with Wilson's favored "weak" variant on the Mediated Version, whereas response (2) is in line with a more robust variant. Both (1) and (2) stand in contrast to a more sparse report that would be more in keeping with what Wilson calls the Modest Version of Imagined Seeing (3):

(3) The bulls chased the man because he was wearing red.

The key argument against (3) is that it is silent on some of the evidence, such as the fact that the presentation was in black and white, which is something that ought to figure within the spectator's warranted, comprehensive imaginings, at least, that is, if we accept the proposition that a spectator could be expected to reason that the absence of a normal perceptual experience of colors implies that the seeing was somehow mediated.

If that much is correct (and I am not here asserting that it is), on what grounds could we reasonably be expected to settle on either (1) or (2)? What, more generally, is our evidence for reasoning about this part of the work's content? Part of the evidence for any such claim is what we literally see and hear in the audio-visual display, but that cannot be all there is to it, since the fictional content of a cinematic work (including the story and its narration) is not equivalent to, or uniquely based on, what is literally seen and heard in an audio-visual display. From the fact that the spectator has "narrowly" seen a sequence of black and white moving pictures it does not follow that the spectator should imaginatively reason that it is true in the story that the events were presented by black and white moving pictures. It could be true in the story, for example, that an experience just like that of watching some black and white moving pictures was caused by means of some wizardry or advanced technology

In the absence of a better overall account of the determination of fictional content, it is hard to see how the choice between (1), (2), (3) or other kindred imaginings could be settled decisively. Consider now another option, illustrated by a fourth report:

(4) The bulls chased the man because he was wearing red. The filmmakers have worked against the constraints of black and white film stock and cleverly prompted an inference to the redness of the man's devil costume.

The absence of colors is for the competent and informed spectator a familiar feature of black and white photography in the actual world, and not necessarily to be reasoned about as the vestige of some obscure story-internal mediation. Good appreciators of movies pay attention to attributes of the audio-visual presentation such as color, grain, focus, aspect ratio, depth of field, and editing, and they are warranted to think of these features in terms of the filmmaking strategies of the actual

filmmakers who have been operating within the constraints of available cinematic technology. This warrant derives in part from their justified interest in the cinematic artistry manifested in a given sequence, that is what the filmmakers managed to achieve given the constraints within which they were operating. So the audio-visual evidence that could seem to support a report of type (1) or (2) transfers readily to reports of type (4).

With regard to (2), we do not normally have any good reason to engage in an autonomous or separate appreciation of the feats of imagined storytellers. Of course there are cases, such as *All About Eve* (1950) and Nabokov's book, *Lolita*, where we are duly prompted to imagine something about an internal storyteller's performance, but such imaginings are also meant to be carried over finally to the overarching authorial ledger, since it is the actual author or authors who should be praised or blamed for having devised and presented this fictional storytelling to us, with or without ironic intent.

In drawing attention to the appeal of a response along the lines of (4), I remain aware that a standard objection would have it that (4) is incompatible with the thought that in the world of the story, the internal narration or narrator presents the story events as actual or true. This thought is sometimes deemed (a) indispensable, and (b) incompatible with thoughts about how actual world filmmakers have cleverly arranged or presented things, since such filmmakers, unlike *les grands imagiers*, know that it is just make-believe.

In response to that anticipated objection, I confess to having failed to grasp the reason why the "told as true" operator has to be attached to our warranted imaginings about a narration, and indeed, it strikes me that artistically relevant aspects of some fiction films are incompatible with it. We can certainly make believe or imagine something without having to imagine that there is someone who believes it or someone or something that presents it "as true." Instead, it could be sufficient to hold, based on the audio-visual and other evidence, that the actual filmmakers have effectively designed a film to prompt or invite us to imagine such-and-such. Such a condition is especially well suited to the meta-fictional and impossible imaginings that are clearly warranted in experiencing some cinematic works. A recent example is *One Day* (2011), in which the characters seem to interact causally with titles that are obviously designed to blur the diegetic/no-diegetic distinction. Some titles are meant to be outside the story world while giving us information about when the events in the story occur; other titles having this same function are clearly situated within the story world (e.g. they are visible on the screen of a laptop in the world of the story); still others are, impossibly, both within and outside that world, as when the young woman seems to strike and destroy some lettering that is otherwise diegetically unanchored and wholly out of place in the room where she is standing.

Figure 3. *One Day:*
Emma (Anne
Hathaway) rises
and stretches



Figure 4. *One Day:*
Impossibly
destroying the
titles



In short, I think response (4) is the way to go, and that if we are looking for a viable version of the Imagined Seeing Thesis, we have good grounds to prefer some “Film Appreciator’s Version” that would be attuned to such a response. With this in mind, I turn now to one of Wilson’s arguments against the Moderate Version and in favor of the Mediated Version. If I follow him correctly, the key thought here is that the Moderate Version can be rejected because it does not support a requisite contrast between diegetic and nondiegetic narrational items, where the titles in shots from *Psycho* (1960) are adduced as telling instances of the latter. The inscription “Phoenix, Arizona” is not visible in the story world, but is presented to us as part of the content of the mediating image and so apparently should be counted as part of the fiction-internal narration. Wilson suggests that the right thing to imagine is that these words have been “inscribed by some agency onto the imagined transparency of the film image to the dramatized situations” (93–94). The problem with the Modest Version is supposed to be that it cannot say how we draw a distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic items within “our imaginative apprehension of the shot” (94).

In response to this contention, I find it highly dubious that anyone should be warranted or

required to imagine that words have been inscribed by some agency onto the imagined transparency of the film image. This is, it strikes me, a highly theory-laden proposition, and the choice of such a theory is underdetermined by the available evidence. Of course it is right to say that spectators should not think the words “Phoenix, Arizona” were hovering in the sky in the world of the story, but it is a leap from this negative condition to the idea that they should have the thought that some fictional agency wrote something on an imagined transparency of the film image.

There is a far more plausible alternative to Wilson’s claim about these inscriptions, which is to say that the inscription is not part of any warranted imagining. It is, instead, something to be seen and understood in all correct tokens of the audio-visual display type of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. The inscription’s meaning and import are recognized as part of the ordinary competent uptake of the perceptible features of the actual audio-visual display (just as we understand credits, subtitles, and titles in documentaries). Once understood, these indications can still serve as premises in thinking about the story content, just as scads of other background information about conventions, genres, authorial intentions and attitudes, and the ways of the world are used in competent reasoning about the contents of a fiction. This is the case, for example, in Wilson’s chapter on *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, as he refers to actual world interview statements with the Coen brothers, as well as to attributes of their other works, the idea being, I should think, that the thoughts and oeuvre of these filmmakers have something to do with the attributes of this particular work, including its fictional status, generic affiliation (as pastiche), and fictional contents. There is, then, a sense in which we imagine story events as “true in the story” and as existing independently of actual world storytellers and audiences, but this is only part of our relevant imagining and thinking, and it cannot provide a sufficient basis for the competent spectator’s thoughts and reasoning about works and their contents. Imaginative response to the fictional content of a film should be attuned not only to the internal story and narrational rationale, but to the appreciator’s awareness of the work’s effective design.

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