George M. Wilson
Seeing Fictions in Film: The Epistemology of Movies.
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Some movies have a character whose job it is to communicate a story to us. One example is "The Criminologist" who relays the particular and peculiar story of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. We know this because he addresses the viewers directly – he "speaks to the camera" – and explains the details of Brad's and Janet's encounter with aliens. He is a kind of narrator. Of course, most films do not have such a character. Nevertheless the audience does receive a story (quite frequently at least). How does this happen? What does the filmmaker do with images and sound in order to serve us the fictional story, and what do we do in order to "get" it?

These are perhaps familiar questions from thinking about literature. In George M. Wilson's *Seeing Fictions in Film: The Epistemology of Movies* the author is concerned to address how *(fiction) film* in particular relates to these concerns. So in some sense, he is interested in what might be special about film as compared with other art forms.

There are a few clusters of concerns treated by Wilson, which one may indicate by means of questions. First, how should we characterize the experience of viewing fiction films? Second, what can we say about the viewer's relationship(s) to the film, to its characters, to the actors, and to the production crew/director? Third, why are these concerns worth addressing? That is, why try to answer these questions?

In what follows, I will present an overview of the argumentative structure of the book while keeping these general concerns in mind. I should say that this book is not an easy read: its diction has a certain density that requires more attentive reading than it might. There is also a fair bit of repetition of points, both within chapters and from chapter to chapter. (It is sometimes not clear whether it is merely repetition or if a claim is being augmented in some way.) All this being said, I certainly found the book worth the effort in the end, and I'd think it would be of interest to anyone thinking carefully about film, regardless of what their primary interests in film might be.

The book's introduction is helpful. In most cases, Wilson says, a film's images and sounds induce us to imagine seeing characters and their actions. This is where the "narration" comes from (9). It is a further question whether we ought to say that there is also a narrator who provides this narration. The qualification "in most cases" is important. Wilson is trying to account for the typical experience of watching fiction films instead of trying to offer a theory that would accommodate all (possible) fictional cinema.

Wilson begins the book with an overview of narratology, generally keeping his own views more to the side at this point. He believes, though, that "narration" in fiction remains conceptually unclear and that there is room for clarification (22). Part of the lack of clarity comes from what Wilson mentions more than a few times in the book as "conflicting intuitions"

about narration in film. I think it is appropriate and important for Wilson to acknowledge these; conflicting intuitions often lead him to restrain the extent of his conclusions.

The first part of his account emerges straightaway. Always situating his work with respect to that done by others (e.g., Jerrold Levinson, Noel Carrol, Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie *et al.*), Wilson starts with what he calls the "Fictional Showing Hypothesis." This is the idea that in a film, we assume that there is a "presenter" who enables us to "see" the characters and their actions in a film (importantly: in distinction from the actors and their actions). The presenter gives us access to the fictional world of the film. Wilson rejects what he calls the "Face-to-Face Version" of the Hypothesis, which would require a commitment to the claim that we actually see a movie's fictions. On this account, the presenter would be providing us with a direct view, in some way: but Wilson finds the Face-to-Face Version implausible. His alternative then is what he calls the "Mediated Version." The Mediated Version does not say how it is that we come to "see" the fictions of the film, just that we are presented with shots of the film and use our imagination to "see" the fictions. (Wilson is taking cues from Kendall Walton for the imagination required here.) It is thus left open whether a narrator is part of what we're induced to imagine.

Wilson's "Imagined Seeing Thesis" is the viewer-focused counterpart to the Fictional Showing Hypothesis. He describes it early on as the view that "viewers normally do imagine seeing… and hearing… the objects and events depicted in the movie" (55). So the Hypothesis and the Thesis are "conceptual flipsides" of each other. In the course of his defense of this thesis, Wilson addresses a common puzzle about a sentence such as "Flannery sees the werewolf of London" when Flannery is watching a movie. We have good reason to say that this sentence must be false, and yet, if watching the right film, there's something that seems right about saying it. (Indeed, we say things like this about our movie-watching experiences all the time.) Wilson's solution is that the context of viewing a film supplies us with the justification for maintaining the truth of sentences like this, where imagination makes it seem as though we are seeing the film's fictions. What's right about sentences of this type is that they capture something about what we do when watching movies (most of the time). Wilson also highlights that his account permits us to make sense of the difference between what we say about what we imaginatively-see in watching a film and what we say about what we're simply led to believe or to conclude on the basis of what we imaginatively-see. ("Imaginatively-see" is my term; I find "imagines seeing"—Wilson's locution—to be at times misleading.) Consider a discussion about the ear-cutting scene in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. Wilson's subtlety allows us to make sense of various kinds of things that spectators might say about what they *see in* and what they *know about* the fictional world of the film.

In Chapter Four, Wilson clarifies the Mediated Version of the Imagined Seeing Thesis in by contrasting it with what he calls the "Modest Version." The Modest version carries no commitment as to how it is that we imaginatively-see a film's fictions. In contrast, the Mediated Version holds that there is mediation, that is, that there is some way in which the shots of the movie are "transparently derived" (94) from the fictions. What is left open, however, according to the Mediated Version, is just how this mediation has happened. The viewer simply receives a presentation of the results. The cash value here is that mediation helps explain the difference between things we see when viewing the movie that are meant to be imaginatively-seen as part

of the fictional world and things we see that are not (for example, title cards indicating a location: we aren't intended to imagine words floating in the sky). The distinction seems mysterious without invoking mediation.

At this point it is natural to ask whether the mediation comes from a narrator in some sense. Though Wilson does show that a narrator is not a conceptually *necessary* component of the Mediated Version, he does argue for the view that "minimal narrating agents in fiction films are… *almost* ubiquitous" (129). Such agents needn't be (and often are not) characters in the fiction. They are, however, a party to the imagining in which the viewer is engaged.

Wilson admits that the question about the existence and nature of a narrator in a fiction film is not terribly important. I'm inclined to agree. Wilson devotes a fair amount of discussion to the narrator, however, to support the quite-reasonable idea that a movie's shots aren't sufficient for us to understand the film; rather, we also need to know something about why we're presented with those particular shots. A practical suggestion Wilson makes, which seems sound, is that critics ought not to make assumptions about a film's narration in advance of a particular film.

In this pragmatic spirit of applying the results of his analyses, Wilson turns to examine several films in the last part of the book. This is certainly laudable: for if there's no payoff when it comes to our understanding of actual movies, then what is the point of the analysis in the first place? Wilson is sympathetic to this pragmatic attitude, I believe, and yet I still often worried, for example, about postulating entities and about speculating about what we imagine, and how. Nonetheless, I'm inclined to think that if these devices work "heuristically," as it were, to help us sort through the meanings of what we're watching, then they are indeed worthwhile. Theorizing about film must remain tied to actual films, it seems to me, lest it become "innocent but useless trifling."

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