

AN ASYMMETRY OF IMPLICIT FICTIONAL NARRATORS IN LITERATURE AND FILM

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I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the debate on the ubiquity of fictional narrators – whether every fictional narrative has a fictional narrator – has spread from film to literature. George Wilson reacted to Noël Carroll’s and Andrew Kania’s claims that no fictional narrators but explicit ones such as Ishmael from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* exist.¹ Wilson took a near-ubiquity position claiming that almost every fictional novel, except those consisting exclusively of dialogue, has at least a minimal narrating agency or a fictional narrator. Yet, he disassociated himself from the usual ontological-gap argument made to support such claims. In other words, he denied the main tenet of an argument made by Jerrold Levinson; the claim that only fictional entities are able of presenting fictional events to the reader or viewer.²

In the first section of this paper I will present Wilson’s near-ubiquity theory and argue against it on the basis of its inconsistencies in the treatment of the text. In the second section I will draw attention to deficiencies in Levinson’s argument but will put forward a novel version of the ontological-gap argument for near-ubiquity in literary fiction – the linguistic version. The near-ubiquity argued for will in scope be the same as Wilson’s but instead of actual authors as narrators it will posit implicit fictional narrators. In the last section I will argue Wilson’s ubiquity theory for fiction film completely lacks any textual grounding. I will conclude that nothing akin to the

¹ The texts include Wilson (2007), Carroll (2006) and Kania (2005)

² Levinson (1996).

linguistic version of the ontological-gap argument is applicable to film and that although there is a possibility for implicit fictional narrators almost none of the existing movies have implemented it. Therefore there exists an asymmetry between film and literature with regard to the presence of implicit fictional narrators.

II. WILSON'S NEAR-UBIQUITY THEORY FOR LITERARY FICTION

Wilson recently claimed that Jerrold Levinson's ontological-gap argument for the existence of the implicit fictional narrator is inconclusive because it hinges upon a choice of preferred phenomenological accounts of our imaginative engagement with fictional texts.³ According to Wilson, Levinson's preferred phenomenological description is that no actual author ever fictionally narrates and that this is the exclusive domain of the fictional narrator. The actual author produces fictional texts (literary or filmic ones) from which fictional stories fictionally told as actual by fictional narrators can be reconstructed through imaginative engagement.⁴ According to Wilson, by contrast, the reader of a fictional novel engages the book in a game of make-believe in which, if there is no explicit fictional narrator and if there are at least some non-dialogue passages, the book's real author fictionally recounts the depicted events as actual.⁵ In the case of fiction films the viewer imagines she is being fictionally shown 'motion-picture-like shots' derived in a fictionally indeterminate manner from the fictional world.⁶ Thus, Wilson argues for near-ubiquity in literary fiction and ubiquity in film.

Wilson is puzzled as to what could count as undeniable evidence for either of the phenomenological descriptions. Yet this confusion is merely a consequence of his inconsistent understanding of the object of imaginative engagement. Only once this object is consistently identified as the text, understood in Seymour Chatman's sense of any type of "communication that *temporally* controls its reception by the audience",⁷ and clearly delimited from the author-text complex, can we make some headway in providing the evidence Wilson talks about. As I will argue, if we keep this understanding of text firmly in place, we can establish that there is *prima facie* evidence for the existence of controlling fictional narrators in most, though not all,

³ Wilson (2007).

⁴ Levinson (1996).

⁵ Wilson (2007).

⁶ Wilson (1997).

⁷ Chatman (1990), p.8.

novelistic texts and that there is no evidence for such narrators in most, though not all filmic texts.⁸

The crucial mistake Wilson makes is to model the phenomenological description of narration in transparent novelistic narratives such as Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* on a description of oral narration. Wilson describes a father telling his child a made-up bedtime story as a case of oral narration in which the father and the child play a game of make-believe in which the father fictionally reports fictional events as actual. Yet Kania provides an equally legitimate but incompatible description of this act. For Kania, the father is simply narrating the events as fictional without fictionally narrating them in the strict sense.⁹ The reason why there are two legitimate phenomenological accounts is that there are two legitimate understandings of the text of oral narration, both in line with Chatman's understanding.

Wilson understands oral narration much like a fictional monodrama with the oral narrator as its sole character. Her whole performance is seen as fictional and she is but a fictional character in a play staged for the child. Kania, in contrast, sees no relevant difference between the bedtime story *transcribed* and Greene's novel. The text for him is merely what is said as fiction by the father and not the actual act of narrating as well. When Wilson models his understanding of written narration on his understanding of the bedtime story he misses Kania's remark that similarity holds between the novel and the transcribed story and not between the novel and the act of oral narration. This leads Wilson to claim that "Greene fictionally recounts as actual the depicted events of *The Heart of the Matter*".¹⁰ But, if the text in the case of Greene's novel is nothing but the novel itself, and this is indeed the only correct understanding of the text in this case, then Wilson cannot legitimately claim that the actual author fictionally recounts the events in the novel.

III. LINGUISTIC VERSION OF THE ONTOLOGICAL-GAP ARGUMENT

This point is reaffirmed if we consider the significance of a particular class of words – deictics – for the parallel line of inquiry in the existence of controlling narrators. The

⁸ Controlling narrators are understood in Gregory Currie's (1995) sense as narrators whose narrating coincides with the whole of the text and not merely a part of it: pp.265-270. The implicit, and not the explicit ones, are in question.

⁹ Kania (2005), p.50.

¹⁰ Wilson (2007), p.79. Not to complicate things further I assume Wilson means the implied author and not the actual author when he talks about Graham Greene. In any case, his possible imprecision is orthogonal to my argument.

question has been whether there are fictional assertions being made in the text, which would imply that there is a controlling narrator doing the asserting, or whether merely propositional content is being expressed which would imply nothing of the sort. In the case of literary texts Wilson has argued for the former, whereas Carroll and Kania have claimed the latter.¹¹ Although undecided, the argument tilts in Wilson's favor. As it stands now, the argument establishes a crucial qualitative property of the controlling narrator, namely its epistemological access to the fictional world, as a property not exclusive to fictional characters or narrators.¹² Kania and Wilson, in their criticism of Levinson's epistemological version of the ontological-gap argument, have clearly demonstrated that Greene can be in command of all the necessary facts of the fictional world as much as any fictional character or narrator can.¹³ Thus, Wilson has another way for saying Greene indeed fictionally narrates his novel.

My addition to the debate is an argument of the following form: if fictional assertions are being made in the narrative text, then another set of properties pertaining to the controlling narrator of that text and exclusive to fictional entities becomes readily available. Moreover, if a controlling narrator possesses two properties, one of which can belong to both actual and fictional entities and the other exclusively to fictional ones, then the controlling narrator is fictional. I call this the linguistic version of the ontological-gap argument. It rests, as I explain below, on deictic properties of particular classes of words.

According to Gérard Genette, an inadequate understanding of deictics – words such as 'here', 'now' and 'I' – explains the frequent confusion of actual authors with fictional narrators in discussions of the classical novel. As Émile Benveniste demonstrated, these words acquire meaning in non-fictional narratives only in connection with the present instance of discourse which produced them.¹⁴ As such they are markers of subjectivity in language use whose reference cannot be determined without recourse to the (spatio-temporal) position of the agent who uttered them. Thus, 'I' is "the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*"; 'here' and 'now' "delimit the spatial and

¹¹ The texts include Wilson (2007), Carroll (2006, 2008) and Kania (2005).

¹² I use 'it' for the narrator because it is clear it need not be human or sexed.

¹³ See Kania (2005) and Wilson (2007). Indeed, Currie (1995) gives an account of how the implied author alone, without any recourse to the implicit fictional narrator, is sufficient for analysis of unreliable narratives: pp.270-282.

¹⁴ Benveniste (1971).

temporal instance coextensive and contemporary with the present instance of discourse containing *I*".¹⁵

I take my cue for the linguistic version of the ontological-gap argument from Genette, for whom deictics within the fictional text do not refer to authorial time-space of writing but to discursive time-space of narration.¹⁶ Of course, fictional literary narrative texts need not include any of the standard deictics noted above but they will invariably include at least one verb and that verb will be tensed. The tense of the verb is itself a deictic property because no matter how a particular language's tense system is organized the line of separation between the tenses is always a reference to the 'present'.¹⁷ And 'present' is nothing but "the coincidence of the event described with the instance of discourse that describes it".¹⁸ In other words, the present of a given event, "the time at which one *is*" is nothing but "the time at which one *is speaking*".¹⁹ Deictic properties then not only highlight the existence of the discourse producing agent, as they necessarily entail a speaking *I*, but also provide temporal information about her.

Consider the sentence from Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* both Kania and Wilson quote as an example of self-effaced narrative: "Wilson sat on the balcony of the Bedford Hotel with his bald pink knees thrust against the ironwork." Contrary to what Kania and Wilson think, this supposedly transparent sentence does provide temporal information about the narrator responsible for the sentence. By virtue of its deictic properties the word 'sat' implies that the fictional event preceded its narrative description. The question is: can an actual author have a temporal position with regard to a fictional event? I see no way how she can and am thus obliged to posit an agent within the fictional world making this fictional assertion.²⁰ Moreover, none of the fictional characters in the novel are making this assertion and thus the agent can be none other than the controlling fictional narrator. Finally, so as not to unnecessarily multiply various narrating agents, this controlling fictional narrator, inhabiting a

¹⁵ Ibid, pp.218-19.

¹⁶ Genette (1980), p.214.

¹⁷ Benveniste (1971), pp.226-27.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.227.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.227.

²⁰ In a footnote, with only a cursory remark about his skepticism towards counterpart theory in fiction, Wilson dismisses the possibility that Richard Nixon from Rober Coover's *The Public Burning* is a fictional character based on the actual one (2007), fn.9. I find this remark insufficient to disqualify Lubomir Doležel's postulate of ontological homogeneity of fictional worlds (1998) or to resolve problems stemming from the "mixed-bag" conception of actual people inhabiting fictional worlds pointed out by D. E. B. Pollard (1973), p.61 and Jerzy Pelc (1977), p.266.

particular fictional temporal position is the very same one who has a particular epistemological access to the fictional world. Of course, there are novels, such as Charlotte Brontë's, which consist exclusively of direct speech. Because deictic properties of words found in those utterances refer exclusively to fictional characters uttering them I see no reason to posit a controlling fictional narrator for this class of narrative texts.

I believe it is possible to construct an even stronger version of my argument. As noted earlier, Carroll and Kania could claim that the sentence quoted above is not a fictional assertion but merely a container of propositional content. Yet, propositional content in analytic philosophy is usually discussed in the form "X does Y" or "X is Y". The present simple in these sentences is not used for an action occurring at the moment of speaking but for expressing a fact, a state of affairs or a generalization. These sentences are easily understood without any recourse to temporality. Literary narratives on the other hand, regularly employ verb tenses to express the time, however imprecisely, of a particular event. Thus, and this is the crucial moment in the stronger version of my argument, we cannot simply translate past simple sentences of the type quoted above into propositional content of the form "at one point in time X does/is Y" without losing relevant information. The propositional content must keep a reference to past tense. But then, how can we fully understand fictional propositional content P such as "X was Y" without recourse to a 'present' temporal position at which X might no longer be Y? This 'present' temporal position, as Benveniste elaborates, can be understood only as the moment of speaking about the event contained in P. Speaking necessarily entails a speaker, and the weaker linguistic version of the ontological-gap argument establishes that the speaker of a fictional event contained in P is fictional. Thus, to imagine literary narrative sentences to merely contain propositional content, if the chain of reasoning is followed through, establishes a controlling fictional narrator no different than the one established by imagining sentences as fictional assertions.

I assume this stronger version of the argument could be warded off with an appeal to indeterminacy of a sort. However, Berys Gaut has rightfully identified that indeterminacy is invoked only to resolve paradoxical situations or to suspend the chain of reasoning by implication.²¹ There is nothing paradoxical in any of the

²¹ Gaut (2004). For a list of paradoxical situations see Wilson (1997), p.193.

versions of my argument so no appeal to anything of the sort of the ‘basic prescription of stipulated omniscience’ Wilson proposes in order to ward off Carroll’s and Gaut’s criticism of the supposed paradox of omniscient narrator is needed.²² On the other hand, in the stronger version of the argument, the chain of reasoning indeed might be too long. It could be said that the reader imagines a ‘present’ temporal position and that she imagines it to be fictional but, not being familiar with Benveniste’s work, she needn’t possess a fully developed concept of what ‘present’ exactly means. Thus she postulates no fictional narrator. But note that if such an argument were to be made, it would have to be made by those who oppose indeterminate explanations (e.g. Carroll and Gaut). Furthermore, in the weaker version of the argument, it is assumed fictional assertions are being made. What remains is to settle questions of fictional asserter’s temporal and epistemic position to its assertions. The latter question, despite it being no less complex than the former, is regularly tackled so any claim to indeterminacy in resolving matters of time but not epistemology as well would be illegitimate.

IV. AGAINST UBIQUITY IN FICTION FILM

Let us finally turn to film. Note that in the case of literature I agree with Wilson that there is a controlling fictional narrator although I base my claim on different grounds. Whereas he shifts in the understanding of the text and puts forward phenomenological arguments, I am consistent in the understanding of the text and insist on existential-qualitative information derived from deictic properties found solely within the text. Moreover, Wilson is sometimes ready to identify the actual author with the fictional narrator whereas I am not. Interestingly, Wilson’s analysis of filmic texts is not compromised by the shift that undermines his analysis of literary texts. This suggests that he consistently understands filmic texts in Chatman’s sense. Yet, his overall argumentative strategy in regard to film differs from the one employed in the discussion of literary texts. In the case of film he criticizes the earlier face-to-face version of the fictional showing hypothesis (FSH henceforth), advocated by Chatman and Levinson, for confusing showing the fictional with fictional showing. He invokes the example of a shadow play to demonstrate how a fictional story of a hawk attacking a mole can be told in shadows by an actual person using her hands without

²² Criticisms can be found in Carroll (2006) and Gaut (2004).

there being any fictional showing from within the fictional world.²³ Indeed, it is sufficient to actually present a series of images in which it is fictional that the envisaged events take place in order to show those events as fictional. Wilson's next step is to construct a more complex variant of the FSH in order to establish a way in which a viewer could coherently imagine a fictional film as being fictionally narrated. The mediated FSH states that fictional showing in filmic texts boils down to "the fictional exhibition and sequential arrangement, by means of editing, of *motion picture shots* of the occurrences that constitute the story".²⁴ Here, motion picture shots should be understood as naturally iconic images (NIIs henceforth) which like photographs exhibit natural counterfactual dependence on the array of elements and features present in the photographed situation, but unlike them are not produced by the camera. Their crucial characteristic is that although they are produced from within the fiction, the exact manner of their production is left indeterminate in our imaginative engagement with them.²⁵ In other words, Wilson holds that when watching a movie we regularly imagine that we are fictionally shown fictionally edited fictional images of fictional events by a controlling fictional narrator.

Note two crucial steps in Wilson's argument for the existence of the filmic controlling fictional narrator: 1) the images constituting the filmic text are fictional, and 2) there is an agent who arranges and shows them who is fictional as well. It seems to me that step 2 can rest solely on what I dub "the material" version of the ontological-gap argument. NIIs are fictionally material artifacts and these can indeed be handled exclusively by fictional entities. Thus, according to Wilson, it is safe to assume a fictional agent is doing the handling.²⁶ This, however, is problematic. If Wilson goes to such pains to construct an indeterminate conception of the production of NIIs, wouldn't it also make sense to claim that their arrangement and exhibition are indeterminate as well? Why do we have to posit a sort of a grand imager doing the editing if we do not have to imagine her producing the shots as well? Even if Wilson

²³ Here, interestingly, Wilson chooses not to understand the whole performance as fictional as he does in the case of the bedtime story and only focuses on the shadow. One could legitimately argue that shadow play is a game of make-believe in which it is fictional the person is fictionally showing the shadow events as actual.

²⁴ Wilson (1997), p.194.

²⁵ This characteristic is included in order to ward off numerous criticisms put forward by Carroll (2006).

²⁶ Note that in his later paper about the implicit controlling fictional narrator Wilson explicitly states his argument for its existence does not rest on any version of the ontological-gap argument. As no novel argument for the narrator in the filmic text is given I assume this is still the version of the argument Wilson subscribes to.

resolved this issue, the crucial problem of the argument is step 1. There is no reason to suppose that what we are shown in the filmic text are NIIs to begin with. As Carroll argues, given the ontological and technological complexity of NIIs, it is unlikely that regular audiences entertain these concepts at all.²⁷ In addition, there are no textual clues to engender such concepts. There is nothing in the visuals of almost any fictional movie that would suggest the postulation of NII.

There are movies in which a somewhat similar effect is achieved, but what they imply is not NIIs but either motion picture shots through found footage device (*The Blair Witch Project*, 1999) or subjective shots of fictional characters through continuous insistence on the POV shot (*Lady of the Lake*, 1947 and *Blue*, 1993). Thus, with some modifications of the movies, such as stipulation that *The Blair Witch Project* is fictional or the elimination of the extra-diegetic music in *Lady of the Lake* and *Blue*, one could imagine a film with genuine controlling fictional narrators. Moreover, I could imagine a film, say of a bank robbery, in which all of the shots are identified as belonging to one of the cameras of an intelligent surveillance system. But all of these controlling fictional narrators would be explicit. The more general problem then is not what could count as conclusive evidence for claiming that we imagine NIIs when watching fictional films, but rather what could count as conclusive evidence for the existence of an *implicit* controlling narrator. Wilson admits none is likely to be found.²⁸ Even Christian Metz, who argues that film is a language system, acknowledge that nothing exactly akin to deictics exists in film.²⁹

Human beings can imagine almost anything. They can surely imagine that it is the actual author who is narrating fictional events (in fact, as Genette points out, they often did and still do) or that the film is presented through NIIs. But it is one thing to imagine something at will and another to imagine something according to parameters set by the text. Wilson's mediated FSH is devised to show that imaginings of NIIs are at least minimally coherent. The problem is he provides no textual grounding for such imaginings. If Wilson is ready to admit, as I am, the absence of controlling fictional narrators in novels containing exclusively direct speech, I fail to see why he insists on their existence in fiction films. Carroll's and Currie's suggestion that instead of seeing

²⁷ Carroll (2006).

²⁸ Wilson (2007).

²⁹ Metz (1991). In an unpublished paper *Problem of Voice in Fiction Film* I elaborate how various enunciation theorists are metaphorical at best in their claims that they have identified true visual analogues to deictics in filmic texts.

imaginarily we just see images which we use to imagine what is fictionally the case seems to offer a more sensible account of what we readily imagine in watching fiction films.³⁰ Paisley Livingston correctly points out the burden of proof remains on the ubiquity theorist.³¹

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³⁰ See Carroll (2006) and Currie (1995).

³¹ Livingston (2001).

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