What Movies Show: Realism, Perception and Truth in Film

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What Movies Show: Realism, Perception and Truth in Film

Abstract
Film-viewing is a unique aesthetic experience, and it seems to possess a unique sort of tension. On the one hand, a film's story seems to just be there before us: we're directly presented with sights and sounds and can perceive the objects, people, and places depicted in the same sort of way we perceive things in the world. On the other hand, there's an important sort of constructedness in film. Film-viewers have to cognize what's represented by a film's perceptual prompts; we have to bring our awareness of convention to understand shot-transitions and montage; and we have to extrapolate from what's shown in order to pick up on what's implied by the shots we see. These two aspects—perceptual immediacy and constructedness—seem opposed. And theorists typically treat them as opposed, with cinematic realists focusing on film's perceptual content, semioticians focusing on how movies communicate, and narrative theorists focusing on how we cognize a film's fiction, and each of them engaging in those analyses independent of the others. In this dissertation, I argue for nuanced ways in which what we see and hear, what we know, and what we imagine interact throughout film-viewing. I argue that film's perceptual content and representational content entwine insofar as we perceive a film's fictional world. I argue that because movies show (in ways that other art forms, like novels, cannot), they have an epistemic directness—they present their fictional truths immediately. I argue that movies communicate, in a roughly Gricean way, and that they do so partly through showing—with their perceptual content helping imply certain fictional truths. My analyses pave the way for a full theory of film meaning that does not treat as separate different, intertwining layers of meaning. I use and apply concepts from philosophy of perception, philosophy of language, and epistemology in order to clarify what precisely goes on when we watch movies and to motivate ties between philosophy of film and other areas of philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

WHAT MOVIES SHOW: REALISM, PERCEPTION AND TRUTH IN FILM

Lindsey Fiorelli
Michael Weisberg

Film-viewing is a unique aesthetic experience, and it seems to possess a unique sort of tension. On the one hand, a film’s story seems to just be there before us: we’re directly presented with sights and sounds and can perceive the objects, people, and places depicted in the same sort of way we perceive things in the world. On the other hand, there’s an important sort of constructedness in film. Film-viewers have to cognize what’s represented by a film’s perceptual prompts; we have to bring our awareness of convention to understand shot-transitions and montage; and we have to extrapolate from what’s shown in order to pick up on what’s implied by the shots we see. These two aspects—perceptual immediacy and constructedness—seem opposed. And theorists typically treat them as opposed, with cinematic realists focusing on film’s perceptual content, semioticians focusing on how movies communicate, and narrative theorists focusing on how we cognize a film’s fiction, and each of them engaging in those analyses independent of the others. In this dissertation, I argue for nuanced ways in which what we see and hear, what we know, and what we imagine interact throughout film-viewing. I argue that film’s perceptual content and representational content entwine insofar as we perceive a film’s fictional world. I argue that because movies show (in ways that other art forms, like novels, cannot), they have an epistemic directness—they present their fictional truths immediately. I argue that movies communicate, in a roughly Gricean way, and that they do so partly through showing—with their perceptual content helping imply certain fictional truths. My analyses pave the way for a full theory of film meaning that does not treat as separate different, intertwining layers of meaning. I use and apply concepts from philosophy of perception, philosophy of language, and epistemology in order to clarify what precisely goes on when we watch movies and to motivate ties between philosophy of film and other areas of philosophy.
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PREFACE

Film-viewing is a unique aesthetic experience. In a movie scene, media that are associated with other art forms individually—sound, language, images, narrative—act together, with their distinctive varieties of meanings informing one another. This richness poses a challenge to philosophers of film: given this complex union, how do we start uncovering what a movie as a whole means? How can we do justice to such an integrated experience? Too often, theorists attend only to one aspect of film—its perceptual presentation or its ability to communicate or its narrative construction—thereby overlooking the extent to which these features (or layers) interact with one another. In this way, theorists typically do not work towards a theory of film meaning that does justice to film’s aesthetic complexity.

Cinematic realists argue that film has an especially strong tie to reality because of (various aspects of) its visual and aural presentation of information. Extreme versions of the view claim that, because of film’s photographic basis, we see objects, people, and places in or through the movie screen.¹ Less extreme versions either point to how our perceptual experiences during film-viewing are very much like our ordinary perceptual experiences,² or they claim that a movie’s realism centers on its ability to comment on or express thoughts about reality.³ While they vary in highly divergent ways, all versions have one thing in common: they prioritize film’s perceptual nature, pointing to the sights and sounds movies actually show us.


At the other end of the spectrum are semiotic theories that prioritize the use of convention in film. For semioticians, film is a coded, sign-based medium much like language. Individual shots in a movie are connected and given meaning via various transitions to form sequences; this gives film (1) a syntactical, or grammatical, structure and (2) conventional meaning, insofar as our familiarity with film conventions is required for our deciphering what those shots (and sequences) mean. According to semiotic theories, when we try to make sense of what a movie means, we move away from the particular perceptual nature of its medium and analyze it as we would any other art form (and any language). In this respect, semioticians prioritize convention and code over perceptual presentation.

Another focus for film theorists and philosophers of film is on what Noël Carroll calls "nominal portrayal:" film’s representation of fictional characters, worlds, and events. This theoretical focus centers on film’s narrative constructedness: its ability to tell stories. Rather than constitute a separate theory—like cinematic realism or semiotics—this ‘representationalist’ approach tends to exist in various accounts of various theories. Cinematic realists acknowledge that fiction films show us real people, objects, and places in order to represent fictional people, objects, and places; and semioticians discuss the ways in which movies use convention and editing techniques in order to build their narratives (and in order to enable us to understand those narratives).

In analyzing film’s narrative construction, theorists generally discuss how we cognitively engage with a film’s narrative: how we either falsely believe (during film-viewing) that narrative events are occurring, or how we imagine that those narrative events are occurring. Thus theorists like Gregory Currie, Noël Carroll, and George Wilson provide accounts of imaginative engagement; theorists like Amy Coplan and Murray Smith flesh out accounts of, more narrowly,
empathetic engagement with characters; and accounts of illusionism maintain that we falsely believe that what’s fictionally depicted is occurring. In each of these cases, theorists generally attend to cognitive engagement in a way that excludes perceptual engagement. They focus on how we imagine or falsely believe or feel when we engage with a movie’s fiction, and they fail to examine how we see throughout that engagement. More specifically: they don’t examine how we perceptually experience the fictional as we cognitively experience it. Even theorists who emphasize film’s perceptual presentation—as cinematic realists do—typically turn towards an analysis of the purely cognitive when they acknowledge nominal portrayal, in precisely the way that imaginative engagement and illusionism theorists do.

Within this discussion of narrative construction and engagement, theorists spell out notions of ‘fictional truth’: what settles the facts of a fictional world. Here, discussion of ‘principles of generation’ is common, with theorists like Kendall Walton and Anthony Everett specifying that whatever is true in a fiction is whatever we’re prescribed to imagine about the fictional world. There isn’t much specific focus, here, on the fictional facts of a movie; and, when there is, theorists generally do not change their commitments or clarify them in light of film’s perceptual nature. The idea that a movie’s perceptual content helps it construct its fictional facts or the idea that our perception of a film’s sights and sounds allows us to pick up, directly, on fictional facts: both are generally overlooked.

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Each of these approaches gets something right about film. Movies do have an important tie to reality, and that tie consists in how they can show us the world in a way that other art forms can’t. In order to analyze movies, and work towards a proper theory of film meaning, we need to acknowledge film’s presentation of sights and sounds, and how that presentation makes it importantly unique. We also need to try to make sense of a concept of film communication, and—all the while—we’d be very mistaken in talking about fiction film without talking about the fiction: without making sense of how movies are narrative art forms that tell stories with their images and sounds and construct facts within those stories.

It isn’t problematic to adopt elements of each of these aforementioned approaches, then. What is problematic is treating each of these aspects separately: with cinematic realists, only focusing on the perceptual; with semioticians, only focusing on the communicative and conventional; with narrative theorists, only focusing on cognitive—and not also perceptual—engagement with the nominal; or focusing on fictional truth independent of filmic ‘showing.’

Not only do these approaches fail in capturing film’s aesthetic complexity; they fail in capturing its aesthetic uniqueness. From the start, we might be wary of any claims of medium specificity—according to which film is somehow distinct from other art forms in virtue of its medium; indeed Noël Carroll has raised important objections against it. But I think we can, and should, maintain a version of medium specificity that avoids Carroll’s objections. The above approaches generally don’t do so. Extreme versions of cinematic realism don’t distinguish movies from photographs, and weaker versions (which appeal to the expression of thought or the ability to comment on reality) don’t distinguish movies from other expressive works of art. Semioticians don’t distinguish film from language or from any other art form; typically for them (e.g., for Nelson Goodman) all art is coded in just the way that film is. And imaginative engagement theorists (who attend to our cognitive engagement with a film’s fiction) don’t distinguish between how we interact with a movie’s fiction and how we interact with a book’s fiction. What this means is that cinematic

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realism isn’t really *cinematic* realism; that semioticians haven’t mapped out a communicative ability peculiar to film; and that imaginative engagement theorists aren’t really talking about our interaction with a *movie’s* fiction.

I remedy these shortcomings in the following four chapters. I provide analyses of film that do justice to its multi-modal, aesthetically complex nature by emphasizing how different layers of meaning interact with one another—so that the perceptual, communicative, representational, and epistemic intertwine—and how those interactions make movies different from other art forms. There are three central threads that run throughout these chapters: (1) how the perceptual and representational intertwine throughout film-viewing; (2) how films are able to ‘show’ in various ways; and (3) how movies are unique compared to other narrative art forms like literature and other perceptual art forms like paintings, photographs, and drawings.

In my first chapter, I defend a novel version of cinematic realism according to which film’s relation to natural meaning—its ability to possess it, and to call on our knowledge of it—gives film a tie to reality that other art forms lack. I argue that, insofar as movies can show us cues of natural meaning—via actors’ facial expressions and gestures, and natural information in real weather and scenery—they can (a) show us ordinary expressive and emotional cues that we encounter in daily life and (b) enable us to employ ordinary perceptual recognition capacities by calling on our knowledge of natural meaning immediately. I argue that, in this way, movies engage in a Gricean form of showing, according to which we pick up on natural meaning automatically and without reference to intention.¹⁰ I also argue for two further conclusions that distinguish my version from unsuccessful theories of cinematic realism: that this makes movies distinct from other art forms, and that a focus on cinematic realism need not come at the expense of a focus on nominal portrayal (i.e., portrayal of fictional characters, events, and worlds). With regards to the former, I claim that nonperceptual art forms like literature cannot employ ordinary recognition capacities to enable us to pick up on cues of natural meaning, and that other perceptual art forms (like photographs and paintings) do not enable us to pick up natural meaning.

as frequently or as immediately as movies do insofar as they lack motion and/or sound. With regards to the latter—i.e., a focus on the fictional alongside of a focus on the ‘realistic’—I argue that the very cues of natural meaning that give film its tie to reality help constitute its fictional level. Actors’ expressions and gestures make up their characters’ expressions and gestures; real weather and scenery is used to depict fictional places and worlds; and cues of natural meaning, like smoke rising out of a building or a dog barking off-screen, inform us about past, current, and future narrative events. In these ways, this paper analyzes the perceptual and representational together while making sense of a strong sort of ‘showing’ in which only films engage.

In my second chapter, I argue for a stronger sense of ‘showing’ and a stronger interaction of the perceptual and representational, by arguing that we perceive the fiction in a fiction film. I argue that there are three seeing-as experiences we engage in during film-viewing, and that noticing them enables us to grasp just how complex our perceptual experience is when we watch movies. We: (1) see the images on the screen as recordings of ordinary objects, people, and properties; (2) see the screen images as recordings of production-level entities like actors, props, and sets; and (3) see the screen images as recordings of fictional characters, events, and worlds. With regards to (3), I argue that imaginative engagement theorists are right to make sense of our engagement with a film’s fiction as imaginative; in particular, I argue that theorists like George Wilson and Kendall Walton are right to specify this engagement as one of imagining seeing—i.e., imagining seeing characters and fictional worlds. Such theories, though, make our engagement with a film’s fiction cognitive and non-perceptual. For them, we imagine that fictional events are happening, and we even imagine seeing those fictional events, but we don’t perceive those fictional events. Wilson seems to exclude the possibility of seeing the fictional, as he deems such talk metaphorical or nonliteral. Similarly, Walton provides an account of seeing-as according to which we see a depictive representation as the nonfictional object it depicts (e.g., seeing a picture of a mill as a mill), but he doesn’t extend his account to our seeing the fictional objects depicted in a work. I argue that we need to move beyond Walton’s and Wilson’s theories in order to do justice to how what we imagine becomes a part of what we perceive when we watch a fiction film.
More specifically, in chapter two, I argue that we see the movie images on the screen as recordings of characters, narrative events, and fictional worlds. In this way, our perceptual experience and cognitive experience are "integrated into a single complex phenomenological whole." This chapter takes two central claims from the first paper and bolsters them. Here, rather than merely being shown things in the world, we’re shown the fictional. And, whereas the first chapter links the perceptual and representational via the concept of portrayal or depiction, this chapter links them by arguing that during imaginative engagement the representational becomes a part of perceptual experience. In making these two central claims, this chapter distinguishes film from other narrative art forms like literature: I argue that the latter engages in telling (via a fictional narrator) rather than showing and thus removes us from the sort of phenomenologically immediate engagement with the fictional that films enable.

The third and fourth chapters build upon the claims of the first two in order to draw epistemic consequences from the previous analyses. I argue that movies are phenomenologically immediate, and that this consists in a combination of (1) their ability to engage in Gricean showing and (2) their ability to show us their fictions. I use this thesis to argue for a notion of epistemic directness, according to which movies show us the truths, the facts, of their fictional worlds directly. The directness stems from film’s perceptual presentation: the fact that we just see narrative events, characters, and fictional worlds by utilizing our ordinary perceptual recognition capacities and our knowledge of natural information. The epistemic nature of that directness consists in how fiction films cannot lie to us about their fictions, and how they cannot mislead us about their fictional truths; I cash this out as a form of reliability. To defend this conclusion, I compare fiction film to nonfiction film. In chapter three, I outline the ways in which documentaries can be unreliable by engaging cognitive processes that tend to produce false beliefs. I argue that documentaries can be unreliable in two chief ways: they can lie and they can mislead.

My chief claim in the fourth chapter is that fiction films are incapable of both types of unreliability and that this, combined with their phenomenological immediacy, makes their fictions

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11 Mimesis as Make-Believe, p. 295.
epistemically direct. I outline accounts of fictional truth which utilize the notion of ‘principles of
generation’ to clarify that fictional truths—i.e., facts about narrative events, people, and places—
consist in the propositions we’re prescribed to imagine. Insofar as they do, I argue that fictional
truths are constructed by the film itself and that a film cannot prescribe us to (fictionally) believe
something (fictionally) false about its fictional world. This holds even for films that mislead us in
order to shock or trick us in their finales—e.g., The Usual Suspects, Fight Club, and Memento.
Fiction films cannot present as true facts (about their fictions) that are false; and they cannot
mislead us by pretending to take on perspectives (toward their fictional worlds) that they are not
actually taking. They are thus incapable of the types of unreliability documentary films are
capable of, and they (generally) engage reliable cognitive processes.

Chapter four, then, turns to an epistemic sense of ‘showing’ and thus argues for an
intertwinement of the epistemic and the perceptual. It also offers the most fully fleshed-out
account of medium specificity. I argue that only perceptual art forms (like paintings, photographs,
and movies) possess phenomenological immediacy, and that literary art forms thus lack the
‘directness’ necessary for ‘epistemic directness.’ I also argue that other perceptual art forms
cannot ‘show us fictional truths’ in quite the same way as movies insofar as they do not engage
ordinary perceptual processes (despite the fact that they do engage ordinary perceptual
 capacities). In concluding, I defend a medium specificity thesis that is descriptive and not
normative and that avoids the pitfalls of other established versions.

These three chapters, thus, carry claims of medium specificity throughout and progress
from a (primarily) perceptual sense of filmic ‘showing’ to an epistemic sense of filmic ‘showing.’
They also bring us closer to understanding how movies communicate. I discuss film
communication explicitly in the third and fourth chapter, where I make sense of documentaries
and fiction films as Gricean communicative utterances: texts that communicate partly through
explicit showing and saying and partly through the interpretive additions of audience members
(who bring conventional and real-world knowledge to pick up on, among other things,
implicature). We can’t, I maintain, deem films full Gricean communicative utterances because of
the extent of showing they engage in—and thus the natural rather than nonnatural meaning they possess. It’s worth it to delve deeper into this analysis, in order to elucidate similarities to and differences from linguistic forms of implication. This comparative analysis, in addition to examining film’s use of editing techniques and convention, can make us more sympathetic to semiotic approaches and enable us to connect the ‘communicative’ and ‘conventional’ level to the perceptual and representational levels in a way that semioticians typically do not—i.e., by elucidating how movies communicate in part by showing, and how their use of convention and implication is intricately bound up with their direct presentation of narrative information. What’s more, looking closely at editing techniques—which, I maintain in chapter three, at times seem to produce a natural as well as nonnatural form of meaning—can further this nuanced analysis.

Taken together, these papers pave the way for a full theory of film meaning. They provide an integrated approach to film analysis: one that is fundamental to our being able to do justice to film’s nuances, to how what we see, what we know, what we cognize, and what we imagine interact throughout film-viewing. Some of the key concepts at work in these papers—e.g., natural meaning, seeing-as, and reliability—also provide us with the conceptual resources we need to (1) connect the philosophy of film to various other philosophical disciplines and (2) analyze the full nature of film’s epistemic and perceptual aspects. Continuing with this integrated and interdisciplinary approach will enable us to understand movies more deeply and to recognize just why they constitute an important and unique art form.
CHAPTER 1

A NEW DEFENSE OF CINEMATIC REALISM

Cinematic realists propose that films can get at—or show—reality in a way that other art forms can't. The strongest versions of cinematic realism prioritize physical reality by making the bold claim that by virtue of the mechanical, photographic process of their creation, films put us in perceptual contact with things in the world. Thus, according to Kendall Walton, when we look at a movie screen, we see objects, people, and places in or through that screen.¹² Weaker versions appeal to something other than physical reality, either by discussing a truth beyond mere appearance¹³ or by endorsing psychological realism, a view according to which films are realistic insofar as they engage our ordinary perceptual processes.¹⁴ While not always explicitly stated, cinematic realists generally propose that film is more realistic than other art forms. That is, they endorse some version of a medium specificity thesis according to which film has something unique about it in virtue of its tie to reality.

This paper presents a novel version of cinematic realism, which focuses on film's relation to what H.P. Grice calls "natural meaning."¹⁵ I will suggest that my view avoids some of the biggest pitfalls of established versions, and in particular that it motivates cinematic realism in a way they do not. My theory focuses on film's relation to natural meaning in two ways: how films trade on our knowledge of natural meaning, and how they themselves have natural meaning.

Natural meaning exists where one thing or property is a reliable indicator or sign of something else: stable correlations between information states allow one state to show something about another. We observe natural meaning everywhere: in facial expressions (smiles mean happiness, frowns mean sadness), in physical symptoms of illnesses (bumps mean measles), in features of nature (rain clouds mean rain), and in things that stem from more culturally specific, or conventional, relations ("the recent budget means that we shall have a hard year").

This idea of "showing" plays a central role in the characterization of natural meaning. Because natural meaning is just there in the world apart from our purposes or aims, we engage with it by seeing or hearing it, or by being shown it. With regards to the latter, someone’s intentions can come into play in pointing natural meaning out to us. For instance, Herod presents Salome with the head of St. John the Baptist to show that he’s dead. Despite Herod’s aim, though, the meaning itself—the information delivered by the head—is independent of it; Herod is merely showing it to Salome.

We can understand the notion of showing more clearly by distinguishing it from how nonnatural meaning is communicated: via telling. Here, we’re picking up on what someone means by the words that she utters or by the actions she partakes in, and this requires attending to her intentions. When we say that x naturally means y, we cannot say "any conclusion to the effect that somebody or other meant" y by x, and this is precisely what we do in grasping nonnatural meaning.

Relatedly, the sort of showing in cases of natural meaning requires stable correlations between what does the showing and what is shown—rain clouds generally are accompanied by rain, and someone who smiles typically is happy; the connection between them is robust enough that the presence of the first "entails," as Grice says, the existence of the other. It’s important to note that, while the meaning is natural, the correlation can arise from convention or custom. This

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Grice (1957, p.377)
Grice (1957, p.382)
Grice (1957, p.377)

As he puts it: "in cases like the above [cases in which we state that x naturally means or naturally meant that p] x meant that p and x means that p entail p." (p.377)
is true in the recent budget example: there, convention creates the initial relation between the budget and the sort of year we’ll have; nonetheless, once the relation exists stably, the meaning is natural; the cue—the budget itself—means what it means independent of convention. The same is true with regards to a cultural norm like putting on a topcoat naturally means that I will go outside—it means this because the relation between the act of putting on the coat and the act of going outside is reliable; generally the former is followed by the latter. Despite the fact that custom created this relation, its meaning is just there, independent of societal purposes.

Natural meaning is much more complicated than all of this. This brief summary, though, highlights the key issues that will be relevant for my purposes here. So let’s turn to how this relates to film. I mentioned that there are two ways in which film is related to natural meaning: that it trades on our knowledge of it and that it can have it. Let’s start by examining the former.

Movies consist in projections, into 2-D format, of things that either are in the 3-D world or would be (if they existed). This projection is perceptual, consisting in an array of images, and we can think of it as an isomorphic projection of scenario and analog content. With respect to analog content, films show us an abundance of specific, fine-grained properties—determinate colors and shapes—and a rich array of specific relations among those properties. As a depictive

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20 In particular, there are issues regarding how to reconcile the idea of entailment with the fact that the relation in question only needs to be reliable in general. Grice doesn’t explicitly state the latter claim, but many interpret his theory as requiring it, so that he is aiming to get at how types of cues indicate other types of cues, but need not require that each instance of the former bring an instance of the latter.

21 While this paper will focus on Grice’s account of natural meaning, I think Fred Dretske’s account of natural meaning—or natural signs—would work as well (i.e., that we can use his theory in order to elucidate the ways in which film is related to natural information). He presents an account of natural meaning in his article “Misrepresentation” in: Belief: Form, Content, and Function, ed. Radu J. Bogdan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). While his theory is not identical to Grice’s, it bears important similarities—and it endorses the key claims that I will center my discussion on. For him, as for Grice, natural meaning exists where some information state reliably indicates another because the latter typically, regularly, causes the former. As for Grice, Dretske takes this natural meaning to be independent of our aims or intentions; it’s just there because of the law-like relations that exist among information states.


representation of scenario content, every point in the movie screen displays phenomenal properties and the positions they would have if they existed in a space around the film viewer.

This perceptual projection imbues our viewing experience with deep causal and phenomenological ties to everyday perception, in at least two ways. First, films require us to deploy natural recognitional capacities in identifying objects and their features; as Noël Carroll puts it, “audiences do not need any special training to deal with the basic images in movies, for the capacity to recognize what these images are about has evolved part and parcel with the viewer’s capacity to recognize objects and events.” Being able to identify objects and their properties (and events) in images is the same capacity at work in our ordinary perceptual experiences. In addition, during film-viewing, we utilize everyday perceptual capacities in employing our knowledge of natural meaning.

Films contain the same basic sorts of cues for natural meaning as we encounter in real life, and our understanding of those cues plays a central role in our grasping a film’s narrative. For instance, we interpret what a character is thinking or feeling in part by seeing her facial expressions and gestures. When a character cries, we know she’s sad; when she gasps, we know she’s scared. We know all of this because those expressions and actions naturally mean sadness and anger and fear. The same is true of natural meaning that doesn’t involve people: we infer what has happened or will happen from hearing the sound of thunder or the sound of a dog barking off-screen, say.

We do all of this via everyday perceptual processes, and this just falls out of the fact that films present the same basic sorts of cues as we encounter in real life—sights and sounds of

\[\text{25} \quad \text{Of course, higher-level interpretive work often requires an understanding of film conventions, and isn’t just a matter of employing our everyday perceptual processes. Carroll’s thesis centers on the more basic level of film-viewing—the level of object and event identification—or at least that’s where I agree with him.}\]
\[\text{26} \quad \text{I simply assume here that we do see and hear the characters in a movie. Roughly: I think there’s a place for the notion of “seeing-as” in film-viewing, which is substantiated by a proper theory of imaginative filmic engagement. We know that we’re literally seeing actors and props when we watch a film. But, as George Wilson argues in Seeing Fictions in Film, we imagine we’re seeing what those people and things represent in the story: characters, settings, etc. As a result, we see the non-fictional elements as their fictional counterparts.}\]
objects and their properties. We gather information, including natural meaning, by seeing and hearing—by seeing tables, hearing dogs barking, or seeing a character grimace. Film-viewing and 3-D experience are causally importantly similar: both call on processes that involve gathering information perceptually, and the former does so by presenting the same sorts of cues (in 2-D), including cues of natural information.

Moreover, films don’t just trade on natural meaning; they can actually have it. We find extreme cases of this where films show behaviors that are fully unintended, even involuntary. For instance, method actors tap into their characters’ mental states by systematically transforming their own behaviors off-screen, strongly embodying their characters. Feeling, thinking, and acting like a character off-set leads to behaving like that character on set, where that behavior stems from real emotions and thus serves as a natural sign of the corresponding internal states. Similarly extreme cases of filmic natural meaning stem from on-set accidents. For instance, while filming The Godfather, Lenny Montana, who was playing Luca Brasi, was nervous about working with Marlon Brando and, in every take of their first scene together, forgot his lines. Francis Ford Coppola liked the idea of Brasi being nervous and purposely used one of those takes in the film.  

Similarly, Keenan Wynn and James Whitmore have a dance-duet to “Brush Up Your Shakespeare” in the movie-musical Kiss Me Kate (1953); they made numerous mistakes during production, and the director—thinking they were intentional—left that take in the film.

These cases demonstrate that films can actually possess natural relations between information states insofar as they show us actual natural cues. But more moderate cases of filmic natural meaning are pervasive. Natural meaning need not spring from (or consist in) fully involuntary actions. Indeed, many of Grice’s own examples involve the voluntary showing of natural information: Herod presents Salome with the head of St. John the Baptist to show that he is dead; a child lets its mother see that it is pale to show that it is sick; a father leaves the broken china on the ground for his partner to see that their child has broken it. All of these cases involve


28 From supplemental information on the DVD, “Kiss Me Kate.”
voluntary actions that have meaning whose informational content doesn’t depend upon anyone’s intentions; it’s just there to be seen. In the same way, we also find filmic natural meaning where actors are, in a sense, voluntarily showing information to us.

Such cases include the most common instances of character portrayal, where an actor takes her character to think and feel certain things during a scene, and wants to show those thoughts and emotions to us. To do this, she chooses not to control every expression or gesture, to just let things happen in order to depict her character in a certain way. Her actions here aren’t entirely involuntary; she’s highly conscious of the portrayal she wants to inhabit, and hasn’t embodied her character as method actors do. But her actions still allow for natural meaning insofar as her expressions and gestures result from her acting according to her general motivations and aren’t fully controlled. She lets a smirk show, or lets her eyes water, or lets her fists clench, thereby expressing the emotions she takes her character to have, and these expressions have natural meaning, separate from the aims surrounding them, in the same sort of way that the broken china has a meaning independent of the voluntary act of showing it.29

Similarly, films are rife with nonhuman natural meaning. Filmmakers film on location in order to use real weather and scenery in constructing the represented content: what is true within the world of the fiction. Filming horror films in the fall helps to make the plot more gloomy and tense. The real landscape of New Zealand makes the fictional setting in Lord of the Rings look majestic. The garbage on the streets in Taxi Driver helps to set the film’s tone and shows Travis Bickle’s

29 Mitchell Green discusses this idea of letting things happen in order to express mental states in Self-Expression (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). He claims that actions need not be fully involuntary in order to be expressive—we can either let the expressive behaviors out, or even voluntarily engage in them. For Green, what’s important is that acts of expression serve as signals that show our internal states, and they can serve as these signals as long as there are natural, conventional, or even idiosyncratic relations between the behaviors and the mental states. The existence of this signaling relation makes something an act of self-expression, and that relation can exist even where our aims or intentions are at play. I think his theory can help us make sense of natural meaning in these common cases of character portrayal—although intention is a play, and although the gestures and behaviors aren’t fully involuntary, there’s still a sense in which the actors can be engaging in expression by using cues that signal the internal states of their characters.
cynical perspective. Filmmakers almost invariably exploit the natural information carried by actual environments to build tone and reflect a distinctive perspective.

Filmic natural meaning, then, is pervasive. As viewers, we pick up on it perceptually—by deploying our everyday recognitional processes. Insofar as natural meaning exists in the world—regardless of our desires or aims—it is tied to reality. And in turn, film is realistic because it pervasively trades on and presents us with instances of natural relations among information states.

There is an important sense in which what I’ve said about film is true of other art forms as well. Novels frequently trade on our knowledge of natural meaning, presenting characters whose actions and gestures indicate their mental and emotional states, and describing plot events with everyday natural meaning, drawing on our knowledge of the latter to inform our understanding of the former.

However, the particular perceptual nature of film gives it a distinctively strong tie to natural meaning. I’ve outlined how this ‘nature’ connects film-viewing to everyday perceptual experience. But it’s necessary to delve more deeply in order to understand how all of this makes film’s tie to natural meaning unique. I will argue that it allows film to trade on our knowledge of natural meaning more immediately, more frequently, and more credibly than other art forms. Let’s start by comparing it to literature.

Movies present us with perceptually fine-grained and rich images of scenes. These allow us to take in facts (including natural information) about the characters, environment, and atmosphere, that are highly determinate; particular colors, particular houses, particular facial expressions, etc, are shown to us visually and audibly. This perceptual presentation allows viewers to gather natural information immediately, in part because the cues are so specific (specific gestures, weather conditions, and the like), in part because they’re shown perceptually and embedded within whole scenes which are also presented perceptually, and in part because viewers deploy ordinary perceptual capacities in recognizing them. All of this makes it seem as if the whole truth is just there before us—that we’re quite passively observing everything. Of
course, this passivity is only at the *basic* level of film-viewing: the level of object, event, and behavior recognition capacities and the natural meaning those things have (beyond this sort of identification level, there’s often much interpretive work necessary during film-viewing).

By contrast, literary narrators can only describe facts bit by bit, making our experience of the fictional world more piecemeal. This linear, digital mode of presentation forces authors to be more selective, and to rely more heavily on implication. Partly as a result, literary narrators’ descriptions are rarely straightforward statements about mental or emotional states (and the like); they employ literary strategies like metaphor and imagery which call on rich background knowledge just to identify the basic actions and events as they happen. Take, for instance, this passage from *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

“The main thing now was to find the steering wheel. At first, Billy windmilled his arms, hoping to find it by luck. When that didn’t work, he became methodical, working in such a way that the wheel could not possibly escape him. He placed himself hard against the left-hand door, searched every square inch of the area before him. When he failed to find the wheel, he moved over six inches, and searched again.”

The metaphor requires us to understand the way in which windmills typically move before we can picture just what Billy’s actions *are*; and, generally, the passage doesn’t specify his movements—how has he “placed himself”? How is he searching? What does he look like while doing so? We have to fill in these gaps. This all, despite the fact that this passage is an example of imagistic, concrete literary description. On the other hand, if we were *watching* this scene, we would see his precise facial expressions, gestures, and actions.

Thus, literary description frequently fails to provide concrete, rich, details that allow us to utilize our knowledge of natural meaning directly; instead it requires us to do significant inferential work to grasp the most basic, straightforward facts of the story. This causes different readers to conjure up different mental images of the narrative events, and imposes an intermediary between the initial presentation and deploying our knowledge of natural meaning. Rather than being

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directly shown concrete, literal sights and sounds, we’re offered descriptions that require our interpretive additions. In this sense, film calls on our knowledge of natural meaning more *immediately* than literature and *more frequently* by showing ample information (perceivable facts about a number of things) directly.

Literature and film don’t merely differ with respect to how much time they take to convey information, or how much information they convey; they differ with respect to *how* they convey that information. This fact centers on Grice’s distinction between showing and telling. The difference, for Grice, between showing "Mr. X a photograph of Mr. Y displaying undue familiarity to Mrs. X" and drawing “a picture of Mr. Y behaving in this manner” and giving it to Mr. X is that the former is showing; we’re being presented with information that’s independent of any perceptual or mental filter. This is why “Mr. X would be led by the photograph at least to suspect Mrs. X even if instead of showing it to him I had left it in his room by accident;” because the information itself (the meaning of the photograph) is independent of context and the shower’s intentions. 31 The latter is telling—we’re being presented with information that depends for its meaning on the aims of the shower; we have to grasp why the shower drew the picture before we can conclude anything about Mrs. X and Mr. Y from it. 32

Film engages in showing, allowing it to retain a credibility that literature lacks. This credibility is not photographic credibility. It doesn’t have to do with film images giving us access to the real world. It centers, instead, on the narrative level of film—that we trust that the images and sounds depict things that are true in the narrative (e.g., that a character’s gestures indicate her mental state). Because a movie shows us certain objects and events, it allows for precisely the unmediated, direct, perceptual access to narrative natural meaning that Grice articulates is a part of the concept itself. We directly see x (a smile), which naturally means y (happiness), and in that sense we have direct access to y, where directness is a lack of epistemic mediation by another agent. This holds even in cases of nonphotographic film: even if it's digitally constructed and we

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31 Grice (1957, p.383)
32 Grice (1957, p.382)
know this, there is no (or little) room for doubt about what we have been shown simply because we see the events and characters with our own eyes.

Literature, however, engages in telling. Literary narrators are our only access to narrative meaning, natural or nonnatural; and so our engagement with that information is more indirect—rather than seeing or hearing it, we read a narrator’s account of it. What we have here is something akin to the drawing of Mr. Y and Mrs. X: informational content being filtered through someone else. Here, there are two dimensions of filtering: (1) potential unreliability insofar as the narrator might be lying to us, and (2) selectivity insofar as we’re only shown part(s) of the scene(s).

Of course, this isn’t to say that narrators are always unreliable in literature or that films always lack narrators who can also be unreliable. My point centers on the difference between description and perceptual presentation, not between narrator and non-narrator. Even if we have reason to trust a literary narrator, narrative natural meaning still only gets to us through her, and we still have to find her credible before we find her descriptions credible. Instead of being presented with information directly, we’re being told about it, allowing for precisely the perceptual and mental filtering of (1) and (2), and preventing a lack of automatic credibility.

Relatedly, even when there are narrators in film, they have a different relationship to the stories they’re presenting than do literary narrators, because they’re showing their stories. Rather than filter every piece of information, they give us access to a full, fine-grained, perceptual world; in doing so, they show us aspects of the world beyond their descriptions. The perceptual nature of our engagement with the narrative makes us assume that at least some of the information is true independent of the narration. Filter (2) might become a worry insofar as we might doubt that their perspectives exhaust the whole story, and (1) might become a worry insofar as we might think that things aren’t quite as the narrator is showing them to us, but we’re still, regardless of unreliability and selectivity, shown information that seems to just be there. This makes it generally implausible to assume that we aren’t seeing any of the truth at all. Cases of hallucinations and dreams, for instance, are rare, and typically only exist in portions of a movie. Even in the film The
Sixth Sense, in which the protagonist sees ghosts, we might initially assume that he’s imagining or hallucinating what he “sees”, but we don’t assume that all of the scenes between him and his mom are hallucinatory.

Grice’s example of Mr. X and Mrs. Y shows that this difference in credibility extends even to imagistic media like painting. Like a movie or photograph, paintings depict fine-grained scenes in a way that calls directly on our perceptual recognitional capacities. But the painter’s intentions play a role much like the drawer’s intentions in Grice’s example; our access to the scenes is not epistemically immediate because it’s filtered through the artist. Second, unlike both literature and painting, movies are perceptually multi-modal, allowing for a rich stream of natural information cues produced by sounds. And unlike paintings, movies also move, allowing them to depict gestures and action. Both features make film-viewing more like the process of real-life perception, and allow films to depict more natural meaning. The same is true of photography. While it, unlike painting and literature, can possess natural meaning (because it can causally replicate information from its source), its restricted frame, its lack of motion, and its lack of sound, all prevent it from trading on our knowledge of natural meaning as much as film does through its two-hour long depictions.

In light of these differences, the phrase “films trade on natural meaning” is far too vague; it doesn’t specify what film-viewing actually consists in, which is seeing and hearing cues of natural information directly, and it doesn’t specify what film does—that it shows us those cues, and allows for immediacy and credibility. So we might say that, instead of merely trading on our knowledge of natural meaning, film provides us with as-if natural meaning—because movies show us the sorts of information states we find in real life in an epistemically unmediated way, it’s as if we’re genuinely encountering them.

33 Of course, this doesn’t make it impossible to portray motion. Some would say that Renaissance painters work very hard to depict motion in bodies, scenes, etc. Despite these techniques, however, the static nature of the canvas constrains painting in a way that moving images don’t constrain movies. At the very least, the specificity and amount of motion that paintings can depict is significantly weaker in paintings than in films.
So far, I have argued that film, as a medium, has an especially intimate tie to reality, because of the distinctively pervasive and direct manner in which it exploits natural meaning. This is an important advantage for my version of cinematic realism: realism reveals something fundamental about how film, as opposed to other media, works. I thus think my theory gives us reason to endorse a version of medium specificity (hereafter referred to as MS): that is, the theory that art forms, in virtue of their physical media, have certain unique artistic ends. Medium specificity is controversial; in this section, I address Noël Carroll’s arguments against it.\textsuperscript{34}

Carroll mostly argues against a particularly strong version of MS, derived from Clement Greenberg,\textsuperscript{35} according to which “each art form should pursue those effects that, in virtue of its medium, it alone—i.e., of all the arts—can achieve.”\textsuperscript{36} He takes issues with the basic idea that looking to physical media can illuminate artistic ends, arguing that each media has several distinct qualities, with distinct accompanying ends, and our purposes prioritize some above others. His focus, though, is primarily on the normative claims of MS theories. These claims state, roughly, that each art form should pursue the ends that, in virtue of its physical medium, differentiate it from other art forms, or the ends that it achieves best. Typically, the two are conflated; MS assumes that what is unique to an art form is also what it excels at doing (among all of its traits). Here Carroll points to the fact that the two don’t always co-exist—and when they don’t, when both movies and books excel at narration, say, the options MS leaves are unattractive: that one art form shouldn’t narrate, or that neither should. Both of these decisions impinge upon creativity. In fact, the same sort of problem arises with the more moderate claim


\textsuperscript{36} Carroll, “Specificity of Media,” p.6
about *excellence*: we shouldn’t care about a medium doing only what it *excel* at doing—it should do what it does “well,” even if it does something “better.”  

I think Carroll has pinpointed precisely the shortcomings this version of MS encounters. But my theory doesn’t face the problems he articulates because it’s not normative. I agree that a medium doesn’t specify which ends should be pursued—here, an interest in cinematic realism makes film’s relation to natural meaning important; merely examining the filmic medium doesn’t necessarily highlight this feature above others. I also haven’t argued that film’s relation to natural meaning is essential. Nor have I contended that films *excel* at particular ends (that certain filmic effects are better than other filmic effects), or that they should only do what differentiates them. Indeed, I don’t think that movies should *only* exploit their relation to natural meaning. There’s plenty of nonnatural filmic meaning—usually in the relations between shots (like jump cuts, and montage sequences), or genre conventions—and that meaning certainly matters. My point is that natural meaning (and *as-if* natural meaning) constitutes an especially rich, perceptually and epistemically immediate *base* for meaning in film more generally.

Having said all of this, though, I am at odds with Carroll. For I have contended that film’s tie to reality is *unique*, and Carroll is against even this. As he puts it:

“Even when analysts are not concerned with saying how a medium should be used but are only attempting to describe the unique, artistically pertinent features of a medium, I suspect that they are really speaking of styles within the medium...”  

My particular uniqueness claim is different from most, however. Rather than centering on one difference that stems from one unique feature of the medium, my uniqueness argument hinges on a *combination* of features. What’s unique about film is how it has a particular bundle of characteristics, none of which is individually peculiar to film, but all of which—together—make film special. These characteristics are: it has the potential to causally replicate information from its source (which photography shares); it is perceptual (which painting and photography, among

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37 “If a medium does something well and the occasion arises, why should an art form be inhibited especially just because there is something that the art form does better Carroll, “Specificity of Media,” p.14
38 Carroll, “Specificity of Media,” p.18
others, are); it can have a narrative form (similar to literature and theater); and it is made up of moving images (perhaps this feature does differentiate it, but this isn’t relevant for my purposes, since it alone doesn’t make movies most realistic). Having all of these features gives film a unique tie to reality. With this in mind, I think we should agree with Carroll that the more extreme version of MS is false, but nonetheless endorse this more modest version.

Common Pitfalls

In this section, I motivate my view by highlighting how it avoids some pitfalls faced by other versions of cinematic realism. The most extreme form of realism holds that films are sequences of photographs and that, in virtue of their indexicality (i.e., cameras have direct, causal access to things in front of them, creating a physical relation between those things and their corresponding images), they put us in direct perceptual contact with the world. Theorists explicate this perceptual contact in different ways. André Bazin claims that the photographic image just is its referent, so that seeing the former is seeing the latter. He states:

The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking, in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.39

Kendall Walton argues that photography “deserves to be called a supremely realistic medium”.40

This realism centers on the transparency of the photographic medium: the fact that we see through photographs (and photographic films). As Walton puts it:

With the assistance of the camera, we can see not only around corners and what is distinct or small; we can also see into the past. We see long deceased ancestors when we look at dusty snapshots of them. To view a screening of Frederic Wiseman’s Titicut Follies (1967) in San Francisco in 1984 is to watch events which occurred in 1967 at the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Photographs are transparent. We see the world through them.41

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41 Walton (1984, p.251)
The point, then, is not just that we see copies of people, places, and objects, when we see photographic images of them—we see, in a very strong sense, *them.*

Bazin’s view faces an immediate objection: seeing an image is different from seeing in 3-D, so his comments either can’t be taken literally or must immediately be dismissed. Walton himself admits this: “it is simply and obviously false that a photographic image of Half Dome, for example, is Half Dome. Perhaps we shouldn’t interpret Bazin’s words literally.”42 Stanley Cavell, too, wants to make Bazin’s claim but finds it “false and paradoxical,” as “obviously a photograph of an earthquake, or of Garbo, is not an earthquake happening (fortunately), or Garbo in the flesh (unfortunately).”43

While Walton’s version seemingly avoids this absurdity, insofar as it doesn’t hold that a photograph *is* its referent, it faces a similar objection—surely we don’t see people, *actual people,* when we look at a photograph. Surely seeing my grandma in the flesh is not the same as seeing an image of her. Walton hints at such a difference but insists that his claims be taken literally. He states,

“I must warn against watering down this suggestion, against taking it to be a colorful, or exaggerated, or not quite literal way of making a relatively mundane point…my claim is that we see, quite literally, our dead relatives themselves when we look at photographs of them.”44

We seem to be left with the slightly unspecified claim that we really do see objects when we look at photographic images of them. Perhaps this sense of “see” differs from others, but because of Walton’s reluctance to elucidate these different senses, it’s hard to read him in a less extreme way.45

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42 Walton (1984, p.249)
44 (Walton, 1984, p. 251-252).
45 When discussing the potential for the different senses of “see,” he states that he might be extending the use of the word, but that it is a very natural extension and need not imply any strict difference between seeing in the flesh and seeing in a photograph. He states “our theory needs, in any case, a term which applies both to my ‘seeing’ my great-grandfather when I look at his snapshot and to my seeing my father when he is in front of me. What is important is that we recognize a fundamental commonality between the two cases, a single natural kind to which both
To avoid these ontological claims, some theorists propose the humbler claim that films are especially realistic because their images stem from direct causal access to the world, and that they should exploit that access by producing images that are as similar as possible to what is in front of the camera during production. This means eliminating as many editing techniques as possible, and producing photographic films that don’t distort the appearance of the actors, sets, props, etc. In short, “the world of a realist film” looks like “what was before the camera when and where the film was made.”  

Siegfried Kracauer is typically placed within this theoretical camp. He argues that photographic films are uniquely capable of showing us physical reality: “film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us,” and should therefore capture “transient material life” that happens to be in front of the camera. This version of cinematic realism focuses on indexicality as Bazin’s does—it’s in virtue of the indexical relation between image and referent that the former stems from direct causal access with the world, and it’s in virtue of this relation that film is capable of capturing actual physical life. But it doesn’t move to the ontological claim about our seeing the referent itself as a consequence of this fact.

Even this less extreme version, commonly called direct realism, is problematic. First, it deems anything other than purely photographic films to be unrealistic, drastically, and implausibly, reducing the scope of realism. Second, as Carroll argues, it misconstrues what our focus in viewing films is (and should be) on. In watching a movie, our attention is not directed at the things in front of the camera, but rather toward the “nominal portrayal”—what those things represent. Direct realism (which Carroll calls “re-presentationalism”):

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belong” (252). He, thus, wants the two cases to be aligned; and he doesn’t endorse the sort of attempt we might make to appeal to notions of perception or indirect seeing in order to note relevant differences between the two.


Kracauer (1960, p.13)
“seems to say that what is important about any photographic image—whether in a fictional context or otherwise—is what it re-presents. Yet what is literally re-presented in a photographic fiction may be completely irrelevant to what the fiction represents. That is, when confronted with fiction, the re-presentationalist theory implies strange results by ontologically misplacing, so to speak, the focus of our attention...”

My theory avoids both these problems. First, by centering on how films can uniquely present as-if natural meaning or possess natural meaning, my version is applicable to photographic and nonphotographic movies. Film-viewing, like everyday perceptual experience, deploys our perceptual recognitional capacities, and it continues to do so even when the images themselves have been enhanced or constructed. Even in a thoroughly CGI-laden movie like 300, we’re often watching a projection of actual 3-D objects. And even when the objects depicted are themselves constructed, we still recognize them and their properties using basic everyday perceptual processes. For instance, we still recognize the Spartans—or the actors who portray the Spartans—as people, who are grimacing, leaping, and so on. This allows us to both pick up on the sorts of features Carroll points to, as well as the natural meaning inherent in them.

Such films also heavily present as-if natural meaning. Even if the facial expressions or actions in the film are constructed, they’re still shown, and we thus still perceive them and the natural information they possess just as we do in daily life. We see a character crying and thus see her sadness, or see a character clenching her fists and thus see her anger, even if we know her tears and fists are partially or wholly computer-generated, as with King Kong, the Na’vi in Avatar, or Shrek. Now, nonphotographic movies won’t themselves have natural meaning because they won’t show us actual cues of natural information. But movies needn’t maintain both of the relations that I outlined to be realistic, and—in any case—both photographic and nonphotographic films are uniquely realistic when compared to other art forms.

Turning to Carroll’s objection about the importance of nominal portrayal, we can also see that a focus on natural meaning needn’t conflict with attention to nominal portrayal. When movies possess natural meaning, it intimately affects, and significantly constitutes, the film’s nominal

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content: what is true in the fiction. The garbage in *Taxi Driver* affects its tone and
characterization; Montana's nervousness makes Brasi nervous; Wynn and Whitmore's confusion
makes their characters silly. Actors’ actions partially constitute their characters’ behavior,
affecting how we interpret those characters’ emotions and thoughts.

The point extends to the idea of *as-if* natural meaning. An integral part of our interpretations
of characters involves identifying their emotional and cognitive states by appeal to the
expressions and gestures that we see. Actors act accordingly—*with* those expressions and
gestures. Even when the performances of actors are completely digitized, as in the new *Planet of
the Apes* movies, their gestures and facial expressions have *as-if* natural meaning. All of this is to
say: film’s relation to natural meaning isn’t separate from its nominal portrayal; in fact, attending
to the latter typically requires attending to the former.

Carroll’s objection emphasizes something that cinematic realists don’t always emphasize
enough: that we are—during fiction film-viewing—observing a *fictional world*. My response to
Carroll illuminates that our following the fictional narrative need not be separate from our
employing basic perceptual processes to pick up on natural information. In fact, the latter helps
us move from what we literally see to what is fictionally shown. We see and hear certain qualities
at the non-fictional level—e.g., the actor’s gestures—and consequently recognize certain qualities
at the fictional level—e.g., the character’s feelings and thoughts.

So my theory is more inclusive than direct realism, and allows for an intimate interaction
between the natural meaning level and nominal level. At the same time, it articulates a
considerably more robust realism than the alternatives that theorists have offered to meet the two
aforementioned objections to direct realism. Stephen Prince, Gregory Currie, and Francesco
Casetti all propose versions of *psychological* realism, holding that film-viewing mirrors our
psychological engagement with the world. “Psychological engagement” here can be quite broad,
though these theorists typically focus on *perceptual* engagement (i.e., visual and auditory
experience). Importantly, they don’t prioritize photographic cinema—indeed, one merit of
psychological realism is that it acknowledges that digitally-based films can engage our perceptual
processes in the same basic ways. In elucidating what this ‘mirroring’ consists in, some theorists are quite general, focusing on how seeing images of things is very much like seeing things themselves. Some point more specifically to editing techniques, like depth of field, that depict physical relations between images that mirror physical relations between 3-D versions of those images. Others focus on something akin to perceptual or cognitive illusion, according to which film’s perceptual nature makes us either imagine that we’re in the screen or falsely believe that we are. Thus, Walton argues that spectators often put themselves imaginatively into characters’ perceptual perspectives: the spectator “participates in a visual game of make-believe using part or all of the depiction as a prop, and it is fictional that she sees in a way in which, fictionally, the character does—whether through the character’s eyes or her own; she imagines seeing thus.”

My view also emphasizes how our experience of film-viewing is similar to our everyday perceptual experience. Still, my view is at least a bit stronger, for it invokes a tighter tie that movies can have to reality: movies can, and often do, pervasively deliver natural information. Relatedly, psychological realism doesn’t elucidate the stark difference between film’s tie to reality and painting’s: that, while both visual art forms draw on perceptual recognitional capacities and knowledge of natural meaning, only film has the capacity to do so in an epistemically unmediated way—by partaking in showing (like the photograph of Mr. X and Mrs. Y) rather than telling (like the drawing of Mr. X and Mrs. Y).

Cinematic realism need not come in the ‘direct’ or ‘psychological’ forms I’ve laid out, however. In fact, one other camp differs from those. It’s one that deems movies realistic insofar as they comment on or express thoughts about reality. I’ll present this as a camp constructed from charitable interpretations of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Both Bazin and Kracauer are generally considered to be extreme or direct realists, because many of their comments either

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50 Bazin, 1967.
51 For Walton, properly engaging with fiction film involves imaginatively projecting ourselves into the action on the screen, pretending that we are surrounded by the characters and events. We use the screen images as props in a game of make-believe, which connects film-viewing to more ordinary games of pretense. He develops this theory in full in Mimesis as Make-Believe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990. The quote I’ve provided is on pp. 346-7.
explicitly say, or at least suggest they're interested in, accounts of cinematic realism that center on photographic indexicality. But some commentators present more complicated interpretations, drawing on significant textual and contextual evidence. So, it's worth looking at a species of cinematic realism that Bazin and Kracauer at least might have held.

In her interpretation of Kracauer, Miriam Bratau Hansen claims that especially in his earlier works, Kracauer is motivated by modernist concerns. Thus, he advocates that films should show us the fragmentation of the world by presenting fragmented images of it, calling *Die Straße* a "manifesto of metaphysical malaise" which shows "the suffering of the languishing soul in the lifeless bustle" of modern existence. The film expresses how isolating and distorting modern society can be by presenting piecemeal images of the things the protagonist encounters on the street—a "vertiginous sequence of futurist images"—and by anthropomorphizing inanimate things—"a lime wall announces a murder, an electric sign flickers like a blinking eye."

For Kracauer, a movie "mechanically recomposes the world"; serving as a "distorting mirror;" it can exaggerate the world's "unreality and thus point toward true reality," reach for a "deeper meaning" to existence, and serve as a vehicle of "material expression." That is, films do (and should) depict reality, by expressing or showing what the world is like: illuminating how it feels to live in a modern world, say. For Kracauer, cinematic realism doesn't consist in reproducing images of real physical things, but rather in showing us a deeper, sometimes nonphysical reality. And that involves (1) interpreting the world rather than merely photographing it, (2) commenting on it, and (3) sometimes using the nonphotographic tools at its disposal to depict that interpretation.

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53 Hansen (2012, p.9)
54 Hansen (2012, p.10)
55 Hansen (2012, pp. 8, 10, and 12).
56 It's more difficult to make these claims with respect to *Theory of Film*, as that book is generally considered to be an account of direct realism. But Hansen thinks that, even there, Kracauer's theory is more complicated than it's given credit for. In particular, she argues that our imagination and private associations have a place in Kracauer's theory—that he contends that we should use
Daniel Morgan interprets Bazin along similar lines, claiming that Bazin’s realism centers on acknowledging the physical world. As he puts it:

“A film, if it is to be realist, must construct a style that counts as an acknowledgement of the reality conveyed through its photographic base… in the acknowledgement, a film produces a particular reading (an articulation or interpretation) of the reality in the photograph, thereby generating what Bazin, in his discussion of neorealism, calls a fact (a social fact, a political or moral fact, a spiritual fact, an existential fact, and so on).”

Inasmuch as movies are photographically based, they must acknowledge their ontological foundation in reality. They do this by depicting certain objects, people, or places in the world and doing something with them—expressing thoughts about them, or interpreting them.

Morgan is quite abstract in his discussion, but he supports his interpretation with a shot-by-shot analysis of Roberto Rossellini’s Viaggio in Italia and explaining how Rossellini’s camera work attempts to evoke moods and thoughts about its images. Its goal isn’t merely to show us the world: it raises questions about what it is showing us, and uses the objects in its shots (art objects, in particular) to characterize the film’s protagonist, for instance, “the capacity of the statues to provoke Catherine’s imagination.”

What’s more, according to Morgan, the movement of the camera often mirrors the protagonist’s psychology and “responds to and evokes her mood.” Essentially, the film is involved in “judging, and interpreting the fact of Bergman’s physical and imaginative encounter with each statue.” All of this goes beyond mere physical reproduction. Insofar as Bazin considers this movie “realistic,” Morgan thinks we have reason to attribute to him a cinematic realism that depends not on photographic indexicality but on “acknowledgment”, a process whereby films turn features of physical reality into facts by interpreting them.

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them to imbue filmic images with more meaning than they possess photographically—and that purely photographic films aren’t the only ones he advocates for (Hansen 2012, 253-279).

57 Morgan, 2006
58 Morgan (2006, p.471)
59 Morgan (2006, p.465)
60 Morgan (2006, p.467)
61 Morgan (2006, p.469)
Although there are important differences between Bazin and Kracauer, Morgan’s and Hansen’s analyses argue that each proposes a version of cinematic realism on which a realistic movie says something about, responds to, or interprets the world. Sometimes this requires going beyond mere physical reproduction to distort physical reality. I think this account of cinematic realism is very plausible. Movies do accomplish the sorts of things Bazin and Kracauer discuss. They comment on society, on politics, on modernity, on cultural issues, showing us what racism, prejudice or certain cultural events are (or were) like, or what it’s like to be human: how we can err, love, struggle, etc. Their approach applies to movies in general, and gets at something important about why we watch movies. The problem is that because of its very generality, it doesn’t capture anything distinctive about movies, something that film can do better than any other art form. As such, their realism applies just as well to literary fictions as to films.

The novel Native Son shows what it’s like for a black boy to live in a racist society and the inevitable consequences of that society. The Stranger elucidates the absurdity of the universe and our irrational search for meaning. Crime and Punishment depicts the extreme psychological effects of murder. These books utilize literary techniques to accomplish these things. Richard Wright uses copious descriptions of Bigger Thomas’s living conditions: his cramped, poor, home; his social interactions with racists; and his psychology before and after he commits murder. The Stranger uses first-person narrative to illuminate Meursault’s psychology—his apathy, confusion—and depict the meaningless of his crime as well as the irrationality of society’s attempts to rationalize it. And Crime and Punishment gets at the psychological effects of murder by dedicating hundreds of pages to describing the guilt Raskolnikov feels after his crime.

These novels do just what Kracauer and Bazin emphasize: they express, respond to, and interpret various aspects of reality (murder, irrationality, racism, etc). Literature in general does this; indeed, it’s one of the primary things we take art to do. Thus, if we follow this minimal version of realism in deeming films realistic because (or when) they say something about the world, then we should admit that songs, novels, and paintings are realistic in just the same way. Of course, each art form expresses in different ways—via language, images, paint, instruments. And
perhaps film’s perceptual, imagistic nature makes its expressive powers special or better. But if so, it remains to be articulated how this is. By contrast, my view holds that film bears a particularly strong tie to natural meaning. It is true, and important, that other media can trade on knowledge of natural meaning, but film trades on natural meaning both more, and with more credibility, than other art forms do.

Thus, my version of cinematic realism avoids the implausible commitments of extreme and direct realism while identifying a moderate form of medium specificity that can underwrite a form of realism distinctive to film: it is, in short, a version of cinematic realism. Much remains to be filled in yet, especially with regards to my claims about immediacy and the general perceptual processes we engage in during film-viewing. But at least I think it puts us on the right track.

My chief aim in this paper has been to argue that turning to Grice’s concept of natural meaning—film’s relation to it, and our interpretation and perception of it—can help us make better sense of cinematic realism. It can allow us to understand how movies are singularly tied to reality and to specify what that connection amounts to. It can provide us with some resources that competing versions lack—the ability to motivate cinematic realism by elucidating how movies are more realistic than other art forms, and the ability to connect the ‘realistic’ level to the nominal level, thus making the former seem to matter insofar as it’s tied to how we watch and interpret filmic fictions. In the end, then, considerations regarding natural meaning can substantiate a motivated version of cinematic realism that gets at something important about films.
WHAT WE SEE AT THE MOVIES

Philosophers of film often discuss how film is a perceptual medium—how it shows us sights and sounds, how it engages our perceptual processes. When they do so, they center their discussions on the nonfictional level of film—the people, places and things that films in fact show us, and how their ability to show differentiates them from other art forms.

Treatment of the nonfictional diverges strongly from treatment of the fictional. With respect to the latter—to what Noël Carroll calls “nominal portrayal,” or what is depicted by the nonfictional—the conversation typically moves from a focus on the perceptual to a focus on the cognitive; theorists discuss how we think of or imagine characters, fictional worlds and the like.

In this way, a division is marked between the fictional and the nonfictional content in a movie; we (supposedly) engage with latter perceptually (and cognitively), and with the former cognitively. Intuitively this makes sense. What, for instance, do we see when we watch The Lord of the Rings? One answer perhaps immediately come to mind: that we see scenes made up of countryside, mountains, castles, cottages, actors like Elijah Wood and Cate Blanchett in their costumes and attire, and the landscape of New Zealand. If, on the other hand, we’re asked whether or not we see Frodo, Samwise, Gandalf, and the continent of Middle-Earth, many of us would (I think) say that it’s (at most) in a figurative or metaphorical sense that we do so. Fictional entities are only represented by what is on the screen, and this makes their very existence tenuous or confusing. We seemingly have to admit that, however it is that we get to know nominal portrayal, it isn’t by seeing it.

Theorists maintain this intuition, either failing to discuss how we perceptually engage with fictional content or denying such a possibility. But, as intuitive as this distinction might seem, it is

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62 George Wilson does so in Seeing Fictions in Film, p. 147. And imaginative engagement theorists like Noël Carroll and Gregory Currie deny that we even imagine seeing the depicted content in a fiction film, let alone that we see it in any genuine respect.
mistaken. In fact, there is no such obvious divide between our engagement with a film’s nonfictional and its fictional content because the latter is also perceptual in nature.

In this paper I will argue that there are various perceptual experiences audiences have during film-viewing—specifically seeing-as experiences—one of which is seeing a film's images as images of fictional entities. I will argue that, insofar as we perceptually experience the fictional, we ought to recognize how our engagement with it is more similar to our engagement with nonfictional content than is typically acknowledged.

Seeing-as

Ludwig Wittgenstein introduces the concept of “seeing-as” in *The Investigations.* It consists, he claims, in a fusion of thought and perception—interpreting an object and simultaneously seeing it according to that interpretation. His famous example is the duck-rabbit diagram—if we *think* of it as a duck (or rabbit), and that thought fuses with our perceptual experience, we thereby *see* it as a duck (or rabbit).

Despite the fact that, for Wittgenstein, we can’t analyze our subjective experience here—e.g., by positing the existence of some inner mental impression—in order to determine that this is a genuinely visual experience, we can do so by appeal to the behaviors we’re likely to engage in while seeing-as. I’m likely to point to pictures of ducks while I’m seeing the duck-rabbit as a duck, to identify his beak and eye in the diagram. What I’m seeing-as affects how I act towards, respond to, the picture—where I focus my attention, and what sorts of comparisons I draw. And these activities show that my visual impression is of whatever I’m seeing-as (e.g., is of a duck).

Wittgenstein focuses primarily on cases like the duck-rabbit diagram, cases in which we look at some image or picture and see it as one thing *rather* than another. With this focus on alternative aspect availability, Wittgenstein seemingly leaves out of his analysis ordinary cases that consist in simply seeing an object as the object it is of. Other theorists consider these more simple instances. P.F. Strawson, for instance, takes all seeing to involve seeing-as because, he

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64 (Wittgenstein, 197).
argues, the imagination is a part of perception itself.\textsuperscript{65} And for many conceptualists about perception, perceiving something requires thinking of it in a certain way and thus necessarily consists in a fusion of cognition and perception.\textsuperscript{66} So it's important to note that, despite Wittgenstein's interest, seeing-as might include all cases of perception.

At the other end of the seeing-as spectrum are cases of make-believe, in which we imagine or pretend that what we're looking at is very different from what we know it to be. The sorts of childlike games of pretense that Kendall Walton discusses in \textit{Mimesis as Make-Believe} fall under this heading.\textsuperscript{67} As children, we pretend that a rock is a bear, or that the sticks we're holding are swords, or that the grassy field is a sand dune. In doing so, we see those objects as the objects we're imagining them to be.

Additionally, seeing-as can occur in visual art contexts. As Kendall Walton argues, we can see a depictive representation as \textit{whatever it's depicting}; and, as Berys Gaut argues, we can see a depictive representation as \textit{possessing certain qualities}.\textsuperscript{68} These accounts of artistic seeing-as normally identify the \textit{imagination} as the cognitive faculty that fuses with perceptual experience. For Walton, depictive representations are props in games of make-believe, such that we imagine seeing the object represented in the work and see the latter as the former. For Gaut, we can—through the use of metaphorical language—imagine that a work possesses a certain quality and see it as possessing that quality.


The phenomenon of seeing-as is highly varied. But my aim here isn’t to examine the concept itself. It’s to see how it works in film, something that—even in analyses of artistic seeing-as—is neglected. With regards to how my claims will relate to the accounts I’ve outlined so far: (1) I will be assuming a broader account than Wittgenstein’s insofar as I will argue that we see-as when we engage ordinary perceptual recognition capacities; and (2) I will be focusing primarily on a type of seeing-as that enables us to see the fiction in a film. (2) puts me in line with typical theories of artistic seeing-as, like Walton’s and Gaut’s, as it focuses on how the imagination fuses with perception when we look at a depictive representation. It also separates me from them as I examine filmic seeing-as in particular and utilize the concept to ground a sense in which we see the fictional—where most theorists (Walton, Scruton, Gaut) center their arguments on how we see the nonfictional object depicted in a work or the expressive or metaphorical properties of a work.

I’ll focus most on this fiction-based seeing-as, but I’ll outline two other types of filmic seeing-as first, both of them consisting in the utilization of perceptual recognition capacities. My primary aims in this paper are to (1) argue that we see a film’s fiction; and (2) illuminate the different types of perceptual experiences we have during film-viewing and how they intertwine in intimate ways. Through my analyses, I’ll elucidate just how much we see when we watch movies and just how complicated that seeing is.

The Phenomenological Question

When we watch a film, we see a “series of still images, known as frames projected onto a screen at a rate of 24 frames per second;” these frames “are stationary and are momentarily blanked as a new frame replaces the old one.” The question I’m interested in this chapter is a question of phenomenology, namely: how do we perceive these frames during film-viewing? The focus here is not on what we know is on the film screen or what we see at some basic, sensory level; it’s about our experience, perceptually, of that screen.

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So, what is this experience? What do we see the images as? Some theorists, among them George Wilson, suggest that this experience includes a strong sort of medium awareness. Wilson focuses chiefly on our imaginative experience of the fictional: how we see the images when we’re engaged in a movie’s pretense. He states that we see “the fictional through the images which have been transparently derived,” imagine seeing “motion picture-like shots’ that have been derived in a fictionally indeterminate manner from pertinent segments of the fictional narrative worlds,” and see the fictional “through the mediation of the on-screen moving images.”

Through his discussion, Wilson suggests that we remain perceptually aware of the “on-screen moving images,” aware of the nature of the “image-track” throughout our filmic experience: both when attending to the nonfictional and when attending to the fictional.

Similarly, when discussing how we experience the fiction in a film, Rob Hopkins argues for a thesis of “collapsed seeing-in,” according to which we perceive the images on the screen as representations of the fictional (rather than as representations of the nonfictional depicting the fictional). For Hopkins, during fiction film-viewing, “seeing-in collapses, so that what we see in the picture is simply whatever the ‘inner’ representations represent. What we see in the cinema images before us will be nothing more than the story told.”

Like Wilson, Hopkins argues for a perceptual experience of the fictional (although Hopkins’s account establishes a stronger sort of perceptual engagement, which we’ll discuss in a bit) alongside a perceptual medium awareness. With regards to the latter, Hopkins states:

I have not claimed that the images projected on the cinema screen are illusionistic. At no point have I said that our experience of those images matches what we would have before ordinary events. I have thus not denied that when we watch movies we always experience what is before us as pictures...I reject the claims of those who see cinema as sustaining the illusion that certain nonpictorical events are before us. We seem to see directly neither the events filmed nor the events of the story told. We are always, plainly, looking at pictures, and so our experience of those events is only ever seeing them in the image before us.

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71 Wilson, p. 90.
72 Hopkins, Robert. “What Do We See in Film?” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 66.2 (Spring, 2008): 149-159.
73 Hopkins, p. 151.
74 Hopkins, p. 153.
So Hopkins maintains, with Wilson, that we perceive the film screen. And although he, too, focuses on the fictional, the medium awareness he discusses holds throughout film-viewing; for Hopkins, we are “always, plainly, looking at pictures.”

With Wilson and Hopkins, I reject the transparency thesis proposed most prominently by Kendall Walton—according to which we look through the film screen and “see directly” the objects, people, and places depicted (nonfictional or fictional) as though they are in 3-D before us, having an experience that “matches what we would have before ordinary events.” I thus endorse a perceptual medium awareness as well—an awareness of the recording. But I think neither Wilson nor Hopkins does enough to specify what our experience of the recording is like. Indeed, if we think of ‘images’ as ‘still frames,’ there’s an important respect in which we don’t perceive the images as images or as pictures. So we need to argue for a form of perceptual medium awareness that doesn’t commit us to the claims Wilson and Hopkins seem to make. In this section, I’ll argue for two main theses: (1) we do not perceive the images as images because we perceive depth and motion on the film screen; and (2) the perception of movie depth and motion is compatible with a perceptual medium awareness. After laying out both (1) and (2) I’ll claim throughout this chapter that we see a film’s images as cinematic recordings.

Let’s start with (1) by turning to the perception of movie depth, a phenomenon various theorists point to. As Donald Laird puts it:

At the outset it is evident that we are certain of our perception of the third dimension in the photoplay. The actors not only walk from right to left but enter and exit through a door at the rear just as they would on a real, three-dimensional stage. Then we see the screen troopers gallop away and out of sight into the distant hills. There is no denying the fact

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75 A thesis he explains in “Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism.” For Walton, as we discussed in chapter one, photographic depictions allow us to see through the photographic surface to the thing photographed. He also supports a transparency thesis with regards to nonphotographic depictions in Mimesis as Make-Believe, where he discusses our imagining seeing a depiction as whatever it depicts. As Walton puts it: the spectator of Hobbema’s Water Mill with the Great Red Roof “imagines that [he sees a red-roofed mill]. And this self-imagining is done in a first-person manner: he imagines seeing a mill, not just that he sees one, and he imagines this from the inside...he imagines of his looking that its object is a mill” Mimesis as Make-Believe, p. 293. By imagining “of his looking that its object” actually is a mill, the spectator lacks the perceptual medium awareness Hopkins and Wilson endorse.
that we receive the impression of depth; and there is no denying the fact that as an objective quality depth is lacking in the motion pictures.\textsuperscript{76}

Laird is intuitively right here. When we watch a film, we don’t just perceive the screen as consisting in 2-D color patches that make up certain shapes and sizes. Objects look like they are in front of our behind one another; trains, cars, and airplanes look like they are moving toward or away from one another.

Indeed, movie-depth perception is something filmmakers work hard to create. At a very basic level, they choose lenses that either enhance or eliminate depth perception, wide angle lenses being used for the former and telephoto lenses used for the latter. More specifically, filmmakers use techniques to achieve the perception of depth which entail showing real-world depth cues we’re accustomed to picking up on every day. One primary technique here is the employment of perspective. As Laird puts it: “distant objects are smaller than near objects; the lines in the visual field converge toward a vanishing point.”\textsuperscript{77} Because we’re used to interpreting distant objects as being a usual size, despite the fact that they cast a smaller impression on the retina, we do the same when we perceive the content of film images. Indeed, perspective has been widely used in all forms of visual art.

More broadly, theorists (like Laird and James Cutting) maintain that filmmakers show everyday depth cues like: height in the visual field, relative size, aerial perspective, accommodation, and motion perspective. Not only does it \textit{seem to us} like a film screen has depth; this is a substantive part of \textit{what’s shown} to us, a part of what filmmakers intentionally construct in their cinematic depictions. And, insofar as they employ everyday depth cues, this is yet another way in which film-viewing draws upon everyday perceptual capacities and processes, bringing us back to one of the main points I emphasized in chapter one.

In addition to depth, we perceive motion on the film screen. The phenomenon of apparent motion is widely-accepted by theorists (indeed, we’d be hard-pressed to find a theorist who

\textsuperscript{77} Laird, p. 376.
denies its existence) and it’s a phenomenon any movie-goer recognizes. Despite the fact that, as Tim Smith puts it, “the frames are stationary and are momentarily blanked as a new frame replaces the old,” the images look like they’re moving—or, to be more precise, “we experience film as a continuous image containing real motion.” For Smith, the perception of motion involves two things: “persistence of vision and apparent motion;” the former amounts to a continuous perception of light, which overlooks the “blanking” between movie frames, and the latter amounts to the perception of motion “based on static visual information” rather than “real motion.” Filmmakers most often use what Smith calls “short range motion” which occurs “when static images depicting only slight differences in object location are presented very rapidly.” He puts the point more solidly here:

Motion detectors in the early visual system respond in the same way to the retinal stimulation caused by real motion by rapidly presented static images that depict only slight differences in object location. This results in a sensory experience of film that is indiscernible from reality.

For Smith, the perception of apparent motion in film amounts to a combination of three things: (1) the perceptual cues we use to perceive motion in real life; (2) the speed at which a film’s images are shown in succession and (3) the merely slight variation in the content of those images. Additionally, according to Smith, filmmakers employ editing techniques to further enhance apparent motion. He discusses primarily continuity editing here where the aim is to “make the viewing process effortless and the editing ‘invisible.’” To achieve the perception of continuity, filmmakers use “natural attentional cues such as off-screen sounds, conversational turns, motion, gaze cues, and pointing gestures to trigger attentional shifts across cuts.” By depicting content that we most frequently attend to in real life, filmmakers carry our attention from one frame to the next, preventing us from noticing the cut in between. Continuity editing creates

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78 Smith, p. 1.  
79 Smith, p. 1.  
80 Smith, p. 2.  
81 Smith, p. 3.  
83 Smith, TATOCC, p. 5.
narrative continuity—our following a narrative coherently rather than experiencing a discontinuous series of events—and also helps create apparent motion. It’s precisely by overlooking cuts that we perceive a film screen as a continuous, moving image.

The existence of depth perception and motion perception pushes against the claim that we perceive a film’s images as images, that we are perceptually aware of the medium in this highly robust sense. We neither perceive the images as flat nor as static; and so we don’t really perceive them as images. Indeed, even more strongly, it’s not clear that we can perceive them as images—at least not without a great deal of effort. And motion perception is the chief impediment here. Even where a telephoto lens is used, and we thus don’t perceive depth on the film screen, it’s nearly impossible to see the images as a series of static frames because of the speed at which they’re shown in succession. Apparent motion takes us seamlessly from one frame to the next. For this reason, the medium of film is more difficult to perceive than the medium of a static depiction. Whereas we can often (albeit perhaps not always) attend to a painting’s canvas by seeing it as a flat surface with colors and shapes, we cannot as easily attend to a film’s screen as a flat surface depicting a series of static frames.

We can’t take Wilson’s or Hopkins’s claims literally, then. At the same time, endorsing this conclusion doesn’t (and shouldn’t) commit us to a transparency thesis. In fact, I think the most plausible account of our phenomenology here lies in between Walton’s and Wilson’s/Hopkin’s and maintains that the perception of movie depth and motion is compatible with a perceptual medium awareness. Looking at this compatibility will illuminate (1) why the transparency thesis is mistaken and (2) the proper account of how we see a film’s images.

Let’s start with the compatibility of medium awareness with depth perception. One article which is particularly pertinent here is Boyd Millar’s, “The Conflicted Character of Picture Perception.” Millar introduces the (common) thesis that picture perception is “conflicted” because it “involves two distinct impressions of space—the two-dimensional picture surface and

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the three-dimensional depicted scene—that are somehow in conflict, or inconsistent, with one another.\textsuperscript{85} As opposed to other theorists, who attempt to make sense of this conflict, Millar maintains that there is no such conflict.

Millar’s central point is that “in order for there to be a contradiction, a picture would have to be flat and non-flat in the same respect, or in the same sense.”\textsuperscript{86} This isn’t the case. For Millar: “the two-dimensional picture surface is perceived as belonging to ‘environmental’ or ‘real’ space, while the three-dimensional scene is perceived in terms of an ‘imaginary’ or ‘pictorial space.’”\textsuperscript{87} In this way, there are two perceptual experiences during picture-viewing: (1) perceiving the picture as a flat surface belonging to the world around us and (2) perceiving what’s represented in the picture as belonging to a 3-D pictorial space. The aforementioned ‘conflict’ disappears, then, since the ‘depth’ we perceive in picture-perception is not the same kind of depth we perceive in the real world; the latter amounts to seeing things as being 3-D in our world, the former to being 3-D in an imaginary world.

In defending his conclusion, Millar points out that, in pictures:

Monocular depth cues such as occlusion, relative size, relative density, height in the visual field, and aerial perspective tell us that we are looking at a 3-D object or scene. However at the same time, the information we get from cues such as accommodation and convergency, binocular disparities, and motion perspective tell us that we are looking at a 2-D surface.\textsuperscript{88}

Theorists typically see these two classes of cues as conflicting because they interpret “monocular depth cues” as giving us the same sort of information they give us in real life, causing the perception of environmental depth. For Millar, on the other hand, monocular cues indicate merely pictorial depth during picture-viewing; in this way, such cues change what they indicate depending upon the context in which they’re perceived, and are thus (in picture-viewing) compatible with the cues indicating flatness. For those doubting this fact, Millar argues that only his interpretation can make sense of our phenomenology. As he puts it:

\textsuperscript{85} Millar, p. 471.
\textsuperscript{86} Millar, p. 471.
\textsuperscript{87} Millar, p. 471.
\textsuperscript{88} Millar, p. 474.
If we assume that the same cues are always understood by the visual system as conveying the same information, we will not be able to account for the perception of pictorial space at all. To say, for example, that when we look at a picture the visual system reaches a compromise between the monocular cues suggesting a three-dimensional space and the stereo information suggesting a flat surface, does not explain why we perceive the three-dimensional scene in pictorial as opposed to environmental space. A strict compromise in such a case would be to split the difference between the two sets of cues and perceive the depicted scene as occupying a highly compressed real space—a space in which a sufficiently small person could move around. 89

Of course, we don’t perceive pictures as providing any sort of internal movement. Engaging in picture-depth perception doesn’t bring with it the same sorts of behavioral expectations or responses as engaging in environmental-depth perception. This is part of why any transparency thesis is mistaken. We don’t see what’s depicted in the same way that we see objects, people, and places in the world around us. Instead, for Millar, we perceive pictorial space, a space with an apparent depth that is distinct (and experienced as distinct) from environmental depth.

Millar’s thesis can clarify precisely the co-existence we need to clarify with regards to film-viewing, and it can elucidate what’s wrong with a transparency thesis. In just the way Millar maintains, if we endorse a transparency thesis, we can’t make sense of the responses and reactions we have during film-viewing, responses and reactions which elucidate that we are perceiving a space—and a depth—distinct from environmental space and depth. Just as we don’t see a picture as affording internal movement, we don’t perceive a film screen as affording movement. And nor do we perceive the movie-action as though it extends beyond the screen.

And these aren’t merely cognitive reactions or expectations. It’s not just that we know there’s no opportunity for internal movement and that the action doesn’t extend beyond the screen. This is all a part of our perceptual experience. Here it helps to take note of two things: (1) that we perceive the objects and people in the images as the sizes they are on the screen; and (2) we don’t perceive the action as though it’s ‘popping out’ at us. With regards to (1): we don’t engage in any sort of perceptual illusion that the images of the actors or props are ordinary sizes—the sizes they’d be if they existed in our environmental space. We see the small patches

89 Millar, p. 475.
they occupy on the screen, in the film’s frames, and we see those patches as small patches. With regards to (2): in typical instances of film-viewing, the depth we perceive is within the screen or within the action depicted in the screen; it’s a depth that exists in depicted space, not a depth that reaches out to us in environmental space. Perhaps in early instances of film-viewing, this wasn’t the case (e.g., the supposed incident of Paris audiences watching Lumière’s 1895 *L’Arrivée D’un Train En Gare De La Ciotat* and believing that the train on screen was moving towards them); but it’s rare to find such instances now. Indeed, constructed three-dimensional film-viewing experiences wouldn’t exist otherwise, as they wouldn’t differ from ordinary ones.

Together (1) and (2) suggest that we perceive the images, and the content of the images, as *being on a screen*. What’s depicted (typically) looks to be whatever size it’s shown as; and there’s an important respect in which we see depth in the screen but not from the screen. In this way, we perceive real-world flatness alongside of depicted depth as Millar articulates. I’m not sure just which perceptual cues cause ‘flatness’ and which ones cause ‘apparent depth.’ Since, as I mentioned, medium awareness is different in film-viewing than it is in our interactions with static depictions—because screens are more transparent than surfaces like canvases and therefore do not afford the same attention-to-depicting-surface—the cues Millar identifies might not be precisely the ones operating in film. But we don’t need to provide these specifications here. The point is just that we perceive the screen as a flat depicting surface in this world *while* we perceive depth in what the screen’s images depict.

Perhaps what we know is a part of what we see during film-viewing, such that our knowledge *that we’re watching a movie* is always a part of our perceptual experience. Perhaps this is why early instances of film-viewing differed from contemporary ones; because we know what to expect now, because we’re used to watching movies and are aware of the conventions at play. Even more specifically, we might turn to an enactive account of perception like Alva Noë’s, according to which perceptual experience involves the exercise of sensori-motor knowledge. If we endorse a Noë-like account we can claim something like this: we know that, if we move around the film screen, what’s depicted on it will not continue to be a part of what we see; this knowledge
becomes a part of our perceptual experience such that we see what’s on the screen as though it’s on the screen and not as though it continues beyond it. We might, more basically, just claim that—although the screen itself is highly transparent—we’re perceptually aware of the outer surface of the screen and that our perception of the outer surface affects the transparency, or limits it, so that we see it as a screen despite perceiving depth and motion in it.

Regardless of which account we endorse, the transparency thesis does not align with what it’s like to watch a movie. We don’t perceive any of the action depicted as though it’s a part of the space we occupy. Instead, we perceive it as occupying a depicted space. And we perceive the depth on the screen as depicted depth. We perceive trains and cars as moving toward or away from the objects, people, and places around those cars or trains on the film screen. We perceive the depth (a depth filmmakers work hard to show) in the rooms and on the streets shown to us on the film screen. How we see that depth is different from how we see the environmental depth in the people and objects surrounding the screen—the latter is a depth that affords movement and a type of action that the former does not allow.

What further support my (and Millar’s) thesis here, and extends it to the perception of movie motion, is the fact that we follow a film’s narrative unproblematically. As Trevor Ponech states, “seeing a movie leads to comprehension of, and emotional responses to the depicted individuals, events, and actions because one is aware, in the aforementioned sense, that one is watching a movie.” For Ponech, our ability to comprehend and respond to the narrative elucidates the extent to which we hold background beliefs and assumptions about the fact that “what we are watching is a selection and organization of images resulting from somebody’s rational, deliberate actions for the purpose of narrating a story.”

Ponech uses a detailed example of a scene from the movie Twister, in which we are shown a series of images, depicting views of a “shack as a swirling black tempest of debris gradually rips its planks away”—some of which are nearby shots and others more distant—as

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91 Ponech, p. 92.
well as various views of the characters (including point-of-view shots, close-up shots, and medium shots depicting their facial expressions) as they watch. Ponech states:

Despite the discontinuities between visual perspectives, we interpret this ensemble of pictures as a chronologically ordered series of informative views on a single, developing course of events, namely, the tempest's gradual engulfment of Jo and Bill, its impact on them, and their reactions to this crises...were they truly to induce loss of medium awareness, these images would be experienced as a bewildering succession of visual sensations, rather than as a coherent cinematic passage. The excitement they arouse would be due to the observer's confusion about the origins of his perceptions, the inexplicable perspectival discontinuities to which his visual field is apparently subject.  

For Ponech, the very fact that we interpret the shots as we do—as showing us a continuous event taking place over a short period of time—and the very fact that we aren't bewildered by their juxtaposition, elucidates that we are aware of the movie as a recording. If we looked through the movie screen and dropped medium awareness, “the imagery’s meaning in the context of the narrative” would “be lost.” We wouldn’t understand why the shots were shown in that specific order; we wouldn’t be able to react emotionally to what those shots depicted (in part because of our perceiving them as constituting "a bewildering succession of visual sensations"). The fact that we do react emotionally, the fact that what we’re seeing and hearing is coherent to us, the fact that we find the film’s editing techniques unproblematic in our grasping the story at hand: these phenomena only make sense if we take the film screen to be showing us a series of visual sensations that make up a recorded story. Importantly, as I’ll argue later, I don’t think this means that we always see a movie as a movie in a robust sense. I think that, while engaged in a fiction film’s pretense, we do not perceive the film as a film, where that amounts to perceiving it ‘as images of the nonfictional depicting the fictional.’ The perceptual medium awareness here amounts to seeing the images as recordings of a story. Sometimes we see those images as recordings of a true story (when we’re pretending that the fictional is real), and sometimes we see those images as recordings of a fictional story (when we’re not imaginatively engaged).

Ponech defends, more generally, a thesis very much in line with Wilson’s and Hopkins’s. He argues that, while imaginatively engaged in a film’s fiction, we perceive the fiction and

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92 Ponech, p. 93.
93 Ponech, p. 93.
Simultaneously perceive the film screen. Much like Wilson and Hopkins, though, Ponech doesn’t specify just what (2) amounts to, or clarify that it is distinct from, strictly speaking, seeing the images as images. In fact, his discussion of our perception of the film screen is cashed out in terms of “sensory seeing”—what we actually see at a bare level—so it isn’t clear if he thinks that we have a genuine perceptual experience of the film screen or what (for him) that perceptual experience would consist in. Instead, he bases his account on the distinction between “sensory seeing” and “cognitive seeing”—the latter being our experience of the fictional (of what’s depicted) and the former being our experience of the screen (of the depiction). As rich as his discussion is, then, Ponech doesn’t give us quite what we need to make sense of perceptual (rather than merely sensory) medium awareness.

Any defense of the transparency thesis requires evidence grounded in actions and expectations that align with our seeing a depth and space that is (or is very similar to) environmental depth and space. Instead, such actions and expectations align with my (Millar’s and Ponech’s) thesis. Indeed, while most anti-transparency theorists point to cognitive or emotional responses inconsistent with the transparency thesis, it’s important to note that the phenomenon of seeing-through is inconsistent with the other perceptual experiences we have during film-viewing.

It’s not clear how we could perceive the images as in 3-D while also perceiving them as being the sizes they are on the film screen: what does it mean to see the images as objects and people that are in our space while also seeing them as not possessing the sizes of the objects and people that are in our space? Similarly, it’s not clear how we could perceive the images as in 3-D while also seeing them as incomplete, cut off by the screen; what is it like to see part of a face as though it’s before us, or part of a car as though it’s before us? We experience such cut-offs unproblematically, and the best (or only) explanation of why we do so is because we see the content of the images as being on a screen in front of us. The transparency theorist needs to

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94 Ponech, p. 97.
explain how these seemingly-incompatible perceptual experiences co-exist. As it is, everything points to a perceptual medium awareness.

At the same time, any account according to which we perceive the images as *images* is untenable insofar as it overlooks the perception of depth and motion on the film screen. What we need is a theory of perceptual medium awareness that makes way for a combination of perceiving flatness and perceiving depth (and motion). This is what my theory provides. It maintains that we don’t perceive the images as a series of flat, static frames *because* we perceive depth and that we also don’t perceive real-world depth *because* we perceive the screen as a *screen*.

Of course, saying that we perceive the film screen as a *screen* doesn’t quite articulate how we see what’s on the film screen: how we perceive the content of the images. Here, we can claim that, because we perceive the screen as a screen, we perceive its images as *cinematic recordings* of events, people, places, and the like. Seeing a movie’s static frames as *cinematic recordings* involves (1) perceptually experiencing depth and motion on the screen; (2) perceiving that depth and motion as *movie depth and motion*; and thus (3) seeing the film screen as a continuous, moving image of recorded people, places, events, and things.

Some theorists have tried to maintain something *like* my account—in endorsing a perceptual awareness of the film screen—but haven’t made way for the perception of movie depth and motion. And some theorists have acknowledged the perception of movie depth and motion but haven’t coupled those analyses with a commitment to perceptual medium awareness. The best way to cash out what goes on, perceptually, when we watch a movie is a combination of these—typically independent—theses.

With my general phenomenological commitment—of our seeing the images as cinematic recordings—in mind, let’s specify further just what we see the images as cinematic recordings of. For the remainder of this chapter, I will outline three different types of seeing-as experiences we have during film-viewing. Throughout all three, we are aware, perceptually, of the recording—so that we see an image on the screen as a cinematic recording of something. But just what that
'something' is changes depending upon our cognitive engagement. In the next section, I'll spell this out more clearly by outlining two filmic seeing-as experiences. In the following section, I'll spend more time outlining a third, which will require returning to and clarifying the notion of 'imaginative engagement' that I've mentioned throughout this section. Importantly, for convenience, I'll sometimes shorten 'as cinematic recordings of' to 'as of.'

Two Levels of Seeing-As
Level (1) seeing-as is parasitic on the seeing-as that occurs in everyday life. It's simply: seeing the images on the screen as cinematic recordings of the ordinary objects they represent. Here, we see images of actors as cinematic recordings of people, or see the images as of buildings, dogs, cars, etc. The descriptors here are general—they're a matter of categorizing the images into ordinary-object types.

It's commonly held (and highly intuitive) that we employ the same recognitional capacities when we see images of objects as we do when we see objects themselves. As Gregory Currie, Noël Carroll, and Richard Wollheim all independently argue: if we can recognize objects as objects, then we can also recognize (accurate, non-abstract) images (e.g., pictorial representations) of those objects as images of those objects, and this includes screen (or film) images. Gregory Currie states, for instance:

Cinematic images, like other realistic representations, have an important feature recently noted: that our recognition of their representational content is in a certain sense productive. Roughly speaking, you can recognize an image as representing a man if you can recognize a man, and in general, if you can recognize x, you can recognize a x as represented in such an image...in interpreting cinematic and other realistic images, we apply the various capacities that enable us to recognize objects themselves; we recognize that the image represents a man by applying it to our visual capacity to recognize a man.95

In "The Power of Movies," Noël Carroll echoes Currie in arguing that being presented with the same sorts of visual and auditory cues in film that we encounter in daily life enables us to recognize and identify those cues automatically (where "cues" refers to objects as well as

features of objects), prior to extensive knowledge of film production—indeed, to a certain extent, prior to any film-viewing experience.96

Neither Carroll nor Currie turns theirs into a claim about seeing-as (indeed, doing so is at odds with their broader theoretical commitments, as we’ll see in a bit). But the latter follows from—in fact is perhaps equivalent to—the former. If we deploy ordinary recognition capacities in film-viewing, then this is just a matter of: seeing screen images as recordings of ordinary, 3-D, objects and properties.

Indeed, this phenomenon is similar to Wollheim’s “seeing-in.”97 For Wollheim, pictorial representations call on—and sometimes enable—recognitional skills of the objects represented in them. This recognition coupled with visual awareness of the depicting surface constitutes “twofoldness.” It’s this phenomenologically complex experience that (Wollheim maintains) is distinctive of our perception of visual representations. The level of seeing-as I’m discussing here is similar to Wollheim’s seeing-in it insofar as (1) it’s distinctive of our visual experience of a depictive representation; (2) it employs and enhances ordinary recognitional abilities; and (3) it involves a type of twofoldness—which I’ll discuss more later. Despite these similarities, I am outlining forms of seeing-as rather than seeing-in, and I’ll explain this in the concluding section.

It’s important to note that level one seeing-as holds for documentary and fiction film since it doesn’t depend upon anything at the fictional level. What’s more, it doesn’t just consist in attending to the nonfictional elements—such as the props and actors—on the screen; it consists in attending to the ordinary objects those things represent. Turning to nonphotographic film clarifies this distinction.

For the purposes of following a story, we often treat what looks like an image of a person as a cinematic recording of a person, or what looks like an image of a dog as a cinematic recording of a dog, even if the images are digitally manipulated. Think of Disney or CGI movies here. When we watch Planet of the Apes we see the images as of apes, just as we see the

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images in *The Lion King* as of lions. Doing this is distinct from attending to what the images are in fact of: i.e., photographed drawings or models. It’s a matter of treating them as recordings of whatever ordinary objects are depicted in the narratives at hand.

We can delve into much more detail with respect to this type of seeing-as. First of all, I’ve presented these ordinary-object categories as quite general, and they need not be. Perhaps instead of seeing an image as of a car, we can see it as of a 2014 Honda Accord; and perhaps instead of seeing an image as of a man, we see it as of a man in his forty’s with blond hair, brown eyes, a slim figure, etc. What’s more, precisely which properties we see-as is arguable; color, shape, and size properties might seem intuitive, but what about expressive or relational properties?

This question is related to a more general debate in philosophy of perception—i.e, which properties are represented in perception? In answering these question, some theorists maintain that only low-level properties—like color, size, and shape properties—are represented while higher-order ones are merely cognized; others maintain that we can perceptually experience high-level properties like kind properties, agential properties, semantic and emotional properties. While defending either camp in full is outside the bounds of this paper, I’ve already committed myself to the latter, as I’ve maintained that we see-as when we recognize an object *as the object it is*—a ball *as a ball*, a man *as a man*—and the properties at work there are highly conceptual. This puts me in line with theorists like Susanna Siegel,\(^\text{98}\) who maintain that gaining recognition capacities produces phenomenological, visual, shifts. Indeed, I think we can use Siegel’s account to make sense of the aforementioned fine-grained properties like “a Honda Accord”—it seems to me there’s nothing fundamentally different from recognizing the *type* of car (or the *type* house, ball, man, etc) and recognizing the *type* of tree (which is the example Siegel focuses on, as she analyzes recognizing “a pine tree”).

What's more, I do think we see emotional and expressive properties in objects, people, and places. The primary way in which, I think, we do so is by recognizing cues of natural meaning. Natural meaning "exists where one thing or property is a reliable indicator or sign of something else: stable correlations between information states allow one state to show something about another." H.P. Grice⁹⁹ and Fred Dretske lay out the concept, and—while their accounts differ in slight ways—they both point to this idea of "stable correlations between information states," the idea that one thing or property can just show something about another.

Among other things, we see natural meaning in unintentional facial expressions and gestures—smiles that mean happiness, tears that mean sadness, grimaces that mean anger—and features of nature—rain clouds that mean rain, a sound that means thunder, smoke that means fire. Because these cues are just there in the world, they allow us to pick up on their meaning in an importantly immediate way. This immediacy stems partly from the fact that we don't need to uncover intention in grasping what is meant and partly from the fact that we're used to seeing these signs in the world.

By grasping this meaning, we can see (among other things) expressive and emotional properties. I can see a person's happiness by seeing her smile; I can see her anger by seeing her grimace; I can hear the sadness in her voice. Grice and Dretske don't push their theories quite as far as this, but I think the phenomenon of natural meaning—and our relation to it—supports the idea that high-level properties, including emotional and expressive properties, can be perceived.

Movies trade on our knowledge of natural meaning; they show us actors' expressions and gestures, and allow us to hear the tones in their voices; they show us weather and scenery with the same sorts of cues (rain clouds, the sound of thunder, smoke, dogs barking) that we pick up on in real weather and scenery. Because they are perceptual presentations, movies call on us to use our knowledge of natural signs to grasp what's going on in their narratives—to understand how a character thinks or feels, or to understand what has happened or what will happen in the

plot. By recognizing people, places, and things that can deliver the same sorts of cues that we encounter in people, places, and things in everyday life, we can identify (immediately) expressive and emotional properties when we watch a movie.

Let's recap, then. Level one seeing-as includes seeing images as cinematic recordings of objects and properties; it includes, perhaps, fine-grained properties like "a 2004 Honda Accord" or "a man in his forty's with blond hair;" it also includes emotional and expressive properties like "sadness," "anger," or "fear." In short, whatever sort of seeing-as we engage in when we utilize everyday recognition capacities is the same sort of seeing-as we engage in during film-viewing because the latter calls on those recognition capacities through its perceptual presentation.

Now, especially once we turn to emotional and expressive properties, level one seeing-as bleeds into (what I will call) level three seeing-as. We see actors' expressive cues and—in doing so—see their characters' emotions and thoughts; we see the expressiveness of a movie's landscape and—in doing so—see the expressiveness of the fictional setting or world. In a later section I'll focus on how the three levels of filmic seeing-as intertwine, and this is one such intertwinement: when films call on our everyday perceptual processes to show us expressive and emotional properties they (1) allow us to pick up on those properties in order to (2) understand (and see) what's fictionally depicted.

With all of this in mind, let's turn to the second type of filmic seeing-as. Because it is purely dependent upon—and stems from—ordinary recognitional skills, level one seeing-as isn't specific to film as an artform, or to our knowledge of it as an artform. Level two seeing-as centers precisely on this further specificity.

Level two seeing-as is a matter of attending to the nonfictional in the way that level one does not. Here, we see the film's images as production shots or what George Wilson calls movie-picture shots: we see an image of Elijah Wood as a cinematic recording of Elijah Wood (rather than, as is the case with level 1, as a recording of a man), an image of Cate Blanchett as a cinematic recording of Cate Blanchett, an image of the landscape as a cinematic recording of New Zealand. This is the level at which we typically (simultaneously or consequently) evaluate a
film’s artistry—attend to the makeup and costumes, the set design, the score, and the actors’ portrayals. By seeing the shots as movie-picture shots, we enable ourselves to judge the film as a film. Unlike level one, then, this involves seeing the movie as a movie. But, like level one, it involves overlooking the extent of nominal portrayal that goes on in fiction film.\(^{100}\)

Just as level one needed further specification, level two does as well. We might wonder: are we just seeing the images as of “actors,” “sets,” “props” and the like? Or are we seeing them as specific tokens of those things—i.e., seeing an image as of “Daniel Day-Lewis,” a set as “the Lord of the Rings set”? The answer to this will vary, depending upon how much knowledge we bring to the film at hand. The more familiarity we have with particular actors, the more likely we’ll be to see the images of them as record\textit{ings of them} specifically. This is seemingly no different from—no more implausible than—our seeing friends and acquaintances as of themselves, a case Wittgenstein discusses.\(^{101}\) The less familiarity we bring to a movie, the less likely we’ll be to have this sort of recognition. Instead, we’ll see the shots as movie-picture shots—by seeing the attire as costumes, the actors as actors, and the sets as sets— without any further recognition.

Level two is more conceptual than level one, insofar as we use our knowledge and experience of film rather than just employing ordinary recognitional capacities. In this way, it might seem to be the most obvious of the three levels, since it’s a matter of seeing the screen images as the recordings they are. On the other hand, the extent to which it calls on our awareness of film as an artform might make it less obviously a case of seeing-as. Who’s to say that we aren’t just thinking of the images as of Cate Blanchett and Elijah Wood, or the scenes as sets and their objects as props? The more interpretation we bring to bear on our film-viewing

\(^{100}\) The difference between level one and two is: whereas the former consists in employing everyday recognition capacities of ordinary objects, the latter consists in employing awareness and knowledge of film objects and shots, so—for instance—the difference between seeing an image “as a man” vs. seeing it “as Daniel Day-Lewis.” Or seeing an image “as a lion” (level one) in The Lion King, vs. “as a photographic drawing of a lion” (level two)

\(^{101}\) “I meet someone whom I have not seen for years; I see him clearly but fail to know him. Suddenly I know him, I see the old face in the altered one. I believe that I should do a different portrait of him now if I could paint. Now, when I know my acquaintance in a crowd, perhaps after looking in his direction for quite a while,—is this a special sort of seeing? Is it a case of both seeing and thinking? or an amalgam of the two, as I should almost like to say?” (Wittgenstein, 197).
experience—here, the interpretation of a movie’s production elements—the less likely it might seem that we’re really seeing-as rather than just thinking-of-as. At the very least, whereas level one seems perceptual from the get-go—insofar as it calls on ordinary perceptual recognition capacities—we need to spell out more carefully the way in which level two is.

I’ll delve into these details in a later section, when I argue that all three levels of filmic seeing-as are genuinely perceptual. But to give a brief defense of level two here: level two is indeed a perceptual experience because it consists in attending to production-centered aspects of the film screen that we don’t otherwise attend to. Seeing the film as a film consists in listening to the score’s expressivity, looking at the connections between shots, the use of montage, the lighting; seeing the actors as actors involves picking up on their facial expressions and gestures, their subtle mannerisms, the tone in their voices. The reason level two involves (or lends itself to) 102 film evaluation is that it’s a matter of noticing distinctly stylistic and performative elements.

Particular things stand out to us, visually, on the film screen when we’re engaged in level two, and this makes it at once a cognitive and perceptual experience.

There is much more to be said about level two, and level one, seeing-as, and I’ll discuss more facts about them later—in particular with regards to how they interact with one another and with level three. But, for now, it’s important to note that they exist, and that they differ from one another in important ways. So having outlined that much, let’s turn to the level of seeing-as that illuminates my chief thesis here: that we engage with a film’s fiction perceptually.

Imaginative Engagement Preliminaries

Film theorists and philosophers of film often ask: how do we engage with the fiction in a fiction film? How do we attend to what is depicted on the screen? Perhaps the most popular and plausible response here is the claim that we imagine that what’s fictionally depicted is real—that the narrative events are actually happening, that the characters exist. Theorists spell out the

102 I won’t argue the point here, but I think a level two analysis involves—rather than just causes—film evaluation. Accepting the reverse, though, wouldn’t problematize my arguments.
nature of this imaginative engagement in different ways. Let’s briefly look at some of the most prominent accounts.

Gregory Currie and Noël Carroll claim that we partake in *imagining-that*. Currie grounds his thesis here upon the claim that an imagining (or making-believe) is “an attitude we take to propositions”—so imagining that x is the case is adopting an attitude of make-belief toward the proposition that “x is the case.” For Currie, we bring this attitude to our interactions with visual depictions (including fiction films), imagining that the depicted events are happening—that George Bailey is real, that he is about to attempt to commit suicide, that his guardian angel saves him, and so forth. And this is, Currie argues, the extent of our imaginative engagement: we merely take an attitude of make-belief toward whatever is represented, and we do not imagine anything about our perceptual experience of what is represented—we don’t imagine seeing George Bailey or seeing his guardian angel.

Other theorists, such as Kendall Walton and George Wilson, substantiate views (albeit importantly different ones) of imaginative engagement that make this further claim. For Walton, imagining seeing consists in imaginatively projecting ourselves into the fiction and imagining seeing the events and characters *from the inside*. When we watch a fiction film, we imagine occupying, having the perceptual experiences of, whatever points of view the camera shows. Berys Gaut sums up a Walton-esque account of imagining seeing here: “when someone watches a film, she imagines seeing the events depicted, and so is fictionally a member of the fictional world...she is to imagine herself as a kind of invisible observer at the scenes as they occur.”

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104 Currie, p. 20.
105 Walton doesn’t focus much on movies, but this ‘imagination-from-the-inside’ view stems from his more general account of how we see pictures and holds for all cases in which we are looking at a depictive representation.
George Wilson’s account of imagining seeing removes the “projective” aspect Walton’s includes.\(^{107}\) His theory—the “Mediated Version of the Imagined Seeing Thesis”—holds that:

It is fictional in our imaginative engagement with [mainstream] narrative films that they consist of ‘motion picture-like shots’ that have been derived in a fictionally indeterminate manner from pertinent segments of the fictional narrative worlds. Hence, when film viewers imagine seeing constituents of the narrative world, they imagine themselves seeing those fictional constituents through the mediation of the on-screen moving images, images that fictionally have been transparently derived from the dramatized situations of the story.\(^{108}\)

As film-viewers, we take “motion-picture shots” to be shots of props and actors. And we consider those shots to be images of things that are real insofar as they exist as a part of the constructed set. When we watch a fiction film, Wilson argues, we imagine seeing motion picture-like shots of the fictional entities, and so imagine seeing images of whatever it is that the props and actors are depicting. While we do imagine seeing, then, we remain aware of the medium—of the film screen—throughout our viewing.

Accounts of imaginative engagement are highly varied. Some focus on the concept of ‘imagining seeing,’ some on ‘imagining-that,’ and others on more emotion-based engagement—such as empathizing with characters or simulating characters’ mental and perceptual states.\(^{109}\)


\(^{108}\) *Seeing Fictions in Film*, p. 89

While varied, though, they tend to have one thing in common: they tend to be cognitive. Where perception-of-the-fictional is concerned, they either don’t discuss it, or they make it merely imagined rather than actual (as Wilson does). Some theorists, like Richard Allen, hint at our ability to perceive the fictional without fully spelling out the phenomenon. In “Looking at Motion Pictures,” Allen states:

My approach to the problem of perceiving fictions is simply this. Assuming that fictions can be depicted, then the arguments that I make about looking at pictures in general apply to pictures of fictions as well. That is, just as we might report that we saw Larry Hagman acting the part of J.R. being shot, we might also report, if we were avid Dallas watchers, ‘J.R. has been shot . . . I just saw it.’ Similarly, assuming that what is fictional can be depicted, then we can see what is depicted in a painting, whether the painting is of a horse or a unicorn. However, I shall not argue the case here.\textsuperscript{110}

Walton comes closer to providing an account of fiction-based seeing-as but falls short as well. He states:

Imaginings also, like thoughts of other kinds, enter into visual experiences. And the imaginings called for when one looks at a picture inform the experience of looking at it. The seeing and the imagining are inseparably bound together, integrated into a single complex phenomenological whole…It is this complex experience that is distinctive of and appropriate to the perception of pictures, the experience sometimes labeled ‘seeing the picture as a mill’…\textsuperscript{111}

For Walton, there is an important way in which our imaginings and perceptual experiences intertwine when we look at a depictive representation, so that we see the representation as the object it depicts. But, here, Walton focuses primarily (if not exclusively) on the nonfictional—cases in which we see a representation (e.g., a painting of a mill) as the real object it represents (e.g., as a mill), rather than cases in which we see a representation as the fictional object it represents. Doing the latter involves an additional layer of depiction: e.g., showing us a mill so that we see it as a mansion in a fictional world or as the house of a fictional character.

Rob Hopkins does make way for the notion of perceiving the fictional, and he does so more explicitly than Allen or Walton. Because he also retains a perceptual medium awareness,

\textsuperscript{110} Allen, Richard. “Looking at Motion Pictures.” \textit{Film-Philosophy} 5.25 (August 2001).

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Mimesis as Make-Believe}, p. 295.
his theory is partly in line with the one I'll outline here. The big differences between Hopkins's account and mine are: (1) he deems 'seeing the fictional' a form of 'seeing-in;' (2) he doesn't use the notion of imaginative engagement as extensively as I will; and (3) he cashes the phenomenon out as a type of illusion. We'll see that (1) is important, since I'll defend that 'perceiving the fictional' is best understood as a form of seeing-as and not a form of seeing-in. What's more, I take it that a full appeal to imaginative engagement should make us wary of any appeal to the notion of 'illusion.' It's not clear to me why "the representation of the story" in a film is illusionistic, especially once we understand the representation as prescribing us to imagine that the nonfictional entities are fictional entities. Granted Hopkins is talking about 'perceptual illusion' and not 'cognitive illusion' which makes his claim more plausible than other illusionists'—for him, we see the fictional in the images on the screen but do not mistakenly believe that they are images of the fictional. Still, I don't think there's a need to appeal to the notion at all. In fact, I think it misconstrues what's going on during film-viewing by putting the focus on 'illusion' rather than 'imagining.'

So there isn't much theoretical support for the idea that we see-as when we imaginatively engage with a film's fiction. Allen merely hints at such a phenomenon; Walton seems primarily (if not solely) focused on our seeing a film's nonfictional content through the film screen; and Hopkins discussing seeing-in rather than seeing-as (and suggests, mistakenly, that our experience is perceptually illusionistic). In the next section, I will provide an account of 'seeing the fictional' that I think works—one that extends Wilson's account of imagining seeing.

Seeing-as the Fictional

As Walton, Wilson, and Currie argue, the strongest explanation for how we cognize a movie's fiction is that we imagine it to be real. We pretend that Frodo is real, that he is on a mission to hide the Ring, and that he is accompanied by his friend Samwise. The strength of imaginative engagement theories stems partly from the implausibility of competing accounts of cognitive engagement (e.g., illusionism), partly from our emotional reactions to a film's fiction (for which we need some explanation), and partly from sheer phenomenology. It certainly seems to
me that I am doing something very much like believing that Middle-Earth exists without really believing it.\textsuperscript{112} Once we turn to imaginative engagement theories, George Wilson’s is comparatively strongest. To see why, let’s briefly look at the chief issues with Walton’s and Currie’s.

I think Walton’s view is open to an expansion of ‘seeing the fictional’—indeed it perhaps implies such an expansion—but I don’t think we can turn to him here for the simple reason that he doesn’t spell out the right kind of imagining seeing. His is a theory of projective imagining, according to which we imagine seeing the events and characters from the inside. If Walton turned this into an account of seeing-as, then he’d have to maintain that we see a film’s images as whatever they depict: as the narrative events, people, and objects. He’d have to maintain that we remain unaware of the medium during imaginative engagement and see the movie images as 3-D versions of whatever they fictionally portray. But, just as his account of seeing-through photographs is mistaken in maintaining that we look through a photograph’s surface and see, literally, the object photographed,\textsuperscript{113} this account of seeing-through a movie screen is unintuitive.

As I mentioned earlier, perceiving movie depth is not the same as perceiving real-world depth; and the way in which we ‘see through’ the film screen (and overlook the nature of the images as images) depends upon our being aware of it as a film screen. The fact that we’re imaginatively engaged in the fiction doesn’t change, or remove, this medium awareness.


Although one perceptual experience alters when we’re engaged in the pretense—i.e., what we see the content of the images as (characters and fictional events rather than actors, props, and sets)—the other perceptual experiences we discussed don’t. We still have the same behavioral responses and expectations (e.g., not seeing the film screen as affording internal movement); we still follow the narrative unproblematically (in the ways Ponech points out); things still don’t look like they’re ‘popping out’ at us; and the images still look to be the sizes they are.

Walton’s theory also gets things wrong emotionally. His thesis implies, and perhaps is committed to the claim that, we feel self-directed affective responses during fiction film-viewing. Indeed, this is an issue Noël Carroll raises with any Walton-esque imagined seeing thesis. If I’m imaginatively a part of the fictional world—I’m on the zombie-occupied streets of in 28 Days Later or at the battle scenes in The Thin Red Line—then I should feel fear for my own safety, panic at the thought of my destruction. After all, throughout my imagining, I’m actually there. But we don’t feel these sorts of emotions when we watch a movie. We feel sympathetic (even empathetic) emotions for characters and more general ones—like curiosity or suspense. But we don’t feel for ourselves. Insofar as a theory of projective imagining implies that we do, it gets something importantly wrong about film-viewing.

On the other hand, turning to a Currie-style view doesn’t quite work either for a similar reason: it seems phenomenologically unintuitive. Currie doesn’t discuss how we can imagine that things are true in the fictional world without also imagining seeing and hearing during film-viewing. And we have immediate reason to think that the two don’t come apart, partly because of the nature of other seeing-as experiences (in the Wittgenstein and Walton cases, imagining that something is the case leads to—helps constitute—a case of imagining seeing) and partly because of the difference between engaging with cinematic narratives and engaging with literary narratives. If Currie is right, then there is merely a causal difference between the two—sights and

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115 This follows, I think, from the fact that the imagination can give rise to emotions, a claim Walton would deny insofar as he argues that we only feel quasi-emotions while watching movies.
sounds cause our imaginings in one case while words on a page cause our imaginings in the other—but no substantiate difference in our imaginative engagement. In both cases, we *imagine that* certain things are happening. But it isn’t clear how this can be all that’s going on during film-viewing.

Do perceptual cues (people, scenes, objects) merely prompt our imaginings without serving as the objects for those imaginings—without our, in other words, imagining that the actors *are* the characters we’re imagining exist or that the sets *are* the fictional worlds we’re imagining exist? Surely a “yes” answer here is mistaken. Part of what makes film-viewing so distinct from reading is precisely that *only in the former* do we imagine that what we see and hear is what we’re imagining exists. We imagine, not just that Frodo is real, but that Elijah wood is him; we imagine, not just that Middle-Earth is real, but that the scenes in New Zealand that we see are pieces of that world. And if this is the case, if what we see and hear become the objects of our imaginings during film-viewing, then it’s hard to see how ‘imagining seeing’ isn’t occurring. How can we imagine that what we see and hear is a certain way, while we’re seeing and hearing it, without also imagining seeing and hearing it as such? Currie needs to provide an explanation here. Without one, his view seems untenable.

In light of the issues with Currie’s and Walton’s views, we seemingly need an imaginative engagement theory that maintains: (1) that we remain continually aware (perceptually and cognitively) of the film screen; and (2) that we do imagine seeing. Wilson’s “mediated version of the imagined seeing thesis” gives us this combination.116

Of course, here we need to bring in our previous discussion about medium awareness. While Wilson’s thesis is on the right track, it fails to specify just what medium awareness is *like* during film-viewing, that it includes perceiving movie *depth* and perceiving movie *motion*, and that these phenomena combine to make us perceptually unaware of the movie’s images as *images*.

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116 As he puts it: “when film viewers imagine seeing constituents of the narrative world, they imagine themselves seeing those fictional constituents through the mediation of the on-screen moving images, images that fictionally have been transparently derived from the dramatized situations of the story.” *Seeing Fictions in Film*, p. 89
strictly speaking. Even more substantively, Wilson fails to take into account how we perceive—rather than merely cognize—the fiction in a fiction film. In fact, he seemingly denies such a possibility here:

Perhaps, one is inclined to protest that the viewers simply see Ethan disrupt the wedding—no qualification by ‘imagined’ is required. However, in watching the very same scene, viewers also see John Wayne stride onto a Hollywood set and act out the pertinent prescriptions of the script. And yet, surely, viewers do not ‘see’ both the behavior of the actor John Wayne and the actions of the character Ethan in the same way…the difference, I am assuming, should be explained in this way: viewers actually see John Wayne and his behavior, and it is make-believe for the viewers that they see Ethan…the viewers imagine seeing those constituents in the fiction.\footnote{117 Seeing Fictions in Film, p. 147.}

Despite the distinction that Wilson draws (between how we actually perceive the nonfictional and imagine perceiving the fictional) his account immediately lends itself to an account of seeing-as, according to which—by imagining seeing images of characters and fictional worlds—we see the screen images as \textit{cinematic recordings} of those very things.

Extending an imaginative engagement theory into an account of seeing-as, in fact, immediately makes sense. As aforementioned, the imagination is typically the cognitive faculty that helps constitute artistic seeing-as; and it might in fact be responsible for even non-artistic instances, as Wittgenstein, Strawson, and Scruton all suggest. So, of all the cognitive faculties that could potentially fuse with perceptual experience, the imagination might be the most obvious one. Indeed, the nature of film-viewing gives us ample reason to extend Wilson’s account in this way, and for two related reasons: first of all, our imaginings are about the contents of our perception; secondly, our imaginings and perceptions develop together.

A movie consists in a richer perceptual apparatus than any other form of visual depiction because it gives us precisely the perceptual prompts that would exist if the fictional world were real. As Murray Smith puts it:

On the one hand, fiction films present us with complex narrative scenarios which we are required to engage with imaginatively in order to experience fully; on the other hand, the cinema is built upon an ‘apparatus’ which can, in certain limited ways, generate the
perceptions and sensations which we would expect to experience in the fictional
scenarios it prompts us to imagine.\textsuperscript{118}

Not only are we presented with these perceptual prompts, as Murray claims; those
prompts serve as the objects of our imaginings. And this makes film-watching \textit{at once} an
imaginative and perceptual experience, differentiating it from our engagement with non-visual
depictions. When we read a novel, our imaginings aren’t about our perceptual experiences—we
aren’t imagining \textit{that the words we read} are characters or fictional events. When we watch a film,
we do just this. We imagine that the images that we see are of certain things. We can see this as
a distinction between what Walton calls a prop and an object of our imagination; the former
merely incites, or causes, our imaginings, while the latter is what are imagining is \textit{of or about}. It’s
precisely in cases in which the content of our perception serves as the object of our imagination
that we tend to see-as. This is true of Wittgenstein’s examples as well as the artistic seeing-as
examples. We imagine that the duck-rabbit we’re looking at is a duck; we imagine that the
painting we’re looking at is a mill or is alive.

Merely defending the existence of level three seeing-as, however, does not establish
what I need it to. My chief aim here is to show how our engagement with a film’s depicted content
is perceptual as well as cognitive, thus eliminating the stark divide often drawn between the
fictional and nonfictional. But some cases of seeing-as aren’t \textit{really} perceptual. This happens
when the cognitive element is free-floating and not anchored in any part of the visual experience,
or in purely cognitive instances of the phenomenon. To show that level three \textit{is} perceptual—to
establish that, by imagining seeing characters and fictional worlds, we \textit{perceive} them—we need
to differentiate filmic seeing-as from these other instances.

In the next section, I will briefly outline what some nonperceptual cases of seeing-as are
like, and then I will argue that level three is distinct from them. In doing so, I will simultaneously
defend that levels one and two are genuinely perceptual.

Perceiving the Fictional

\textsuperscript{118} Smith, Murray. \textit{Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema}. Oxford: Clarendon,
To borrow an example of Richard Wollheim’s: suppose I’m looking at tilted columns outside of a building.\textsuperscript{119} I can undergo a couple different seeing-as experiences here. On the one hand, I can see the columns as falling over. But, with more imaginative work, I can see them as having been pushed by barbarians. In the latter case, there’s a distinct aspect in my experience that informs how I see the columns. But that aspect is free-floating—it isn’t anchored in the columns physically. I can’t point to the way in which they’re being pushed over or specify which parts look pushed over because there’s nothing in the columns that grounds their having been pushed over. The aspect I’m aware of is, in a sense, too far away from the columns, physically.

An even less perceptual case of seeing-as consists in “metaphorical construal”\textsuperscript{120}. As Elisabeth Camp argues, metaphors use one thing (a “representing frame”) to restructure our understanding, or perspective, of another (a “focal subject”). This perspective-shifting is, according to Camp, a case of “seeing X as Y,” despite the fact that we don’t actually need to be seeing subject, object, or—indeed—anything at all.

Now, if level three seeing-as is like metaphorical construal or the Wollheim case, then there isn’t a really important sense in which the representational is tied to the perceptual. Saying that we “see” the screen images “as” characters and fictional worlds isn’t really saying that we perceive them. It’s merely saying that we cognize them through our imagining without truly, genuinely, seeing them in the screen images.

What’s more, independent of these two examples, we might have reason to consider level three nonperceptual. Consider, for instance, what happens when we shift from level three to level two, or vice versa. There is a cognitive shift—from imagining seeing characters and fictional worlds to thinking of the images as of actors and props. But it might seem odd to say that there’s a perceptual change since nothing changes on the screen; we’re still looking at the same images, and the same properties of those images. So is it really perceptual? Or is it merely a cognitive act

to move from seeing Frodo to seeing Elijah Wood? Looking more closely at some attentional changes that take place when we move from level three to level two, and vice versa, shows that it is indeed a perceptual act.

Level three involves attending to the content of the images without attending to the way they’re constructed or presented. Level two involves noticing distinctly stylistic and performative elements: because we’re seeing the film as a film, we notice the types of shots taken, the transitions between them, the lighting, the actors’ mannerisms, the score’s expressivity. These are features of the film that aren’t salient when we’re imaginatively engaged in the fiction (despite the fact that they affect that engagement). Once we transition to level two, we look more closely at the screen—to evaluate mood, we see how bright a scene is compared to others; to evaluate acting, we see subtle expressions and gestures; to evaluate expressivity, we listen closely to the score. These are precisely the features that, I think, movie-goers don’t attend to when imaginatively engaged. Instead, the majority of our attention is spent on, more basically, grasping what’s going on in the narrative and what the characters are doing.

So, when we change from one type of seeing-as to another, we visually attend to different things on the screen. How we’re engaged cognitively becomes a part of how we engage perceptually, causing us to see more than we did before or less than we did before. These two experiences, thus, do constitute different perceptual experiences.

Turning to philosophers of perception like Susanna Siegel can help support my claim here. For Siegel, a perceptual experience can contain the representation of natural kind properties, such that, in seeing something (like a pine tree) we represent it as something (“as a pine tree”). Thus, for Siegel, a change in recognitional ability brings a perceptual shift; gaining the capacity to identify pine trees causes us to see the pine trees differently. For Siegel, this perceptual alteration doesn’t happen at the low level; shape, size, and color properties remain static. The transformation consists in a higher-level change in salience. Learning how to identify

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pine trees in a forest causes us to notice them. And because they stand out to us we see them differently. This is precisely what happens with filmic seeing-as; depending upon which type we’re engaged in, different things on the movie become salient.

Even harkening back to Wittgenstein, we see this support; for him, what shows that “noticing an aspect” is a visual phenomenon is the behavioral response we have to it—pointing to relevant comparisons and identifying part(s) of the diagram or object. Of course, Wittgenstein’s account centers on the notion of Gestalt switches in a way that my account does not. The duck-rabbit diagram changes, organizationally, for us when we alter what we see it as—e.g., the duck’s beak becomes the rabbit’s ears. The changes that occur in filmic seeing-as aren’t Gestalt-based. The actors’ faces and bodies don’t seem to take on a different organizational pattern, and neither do the sets or environments. Instead, we notice things in those sets or environments or faces that we didn’t before. So filmic seeing-as involves visual changes that are importantly different from Gestalt ones.

More importantly, getting clearer on just how much we see-as at the fictional level further solidifies that it is genuinely perceptual engagement. As I mentioned in my description of level one, we don’t just see the characters and fictional worlds depicted; we see many properties of those things. We pick up on natural meaning cues (which signify, and thereby allow us to grasp emotional and expressive properties) in the characters, environments, objects, and plot events. Now, sheer volume alone doesn’t establish the perceptual nature of this engagement. But what does is this: we grasp these signs in the same sort of way that we grasp them in everyday life because movies call on our everyday perceptual processes. Movies show us the cues that we encounter in the world; so if we admit that picking up on natural meaning is a perceptual (as well as cognitive) act in the latter, then we should seemingly admit that it’s perceptual in the former.

Indeed, when we’re watching a fiction film, and when we’re properly imaginatively engaged with it, we take it to be just showing us the people and events in the narrative. As Robert Burgoyne states, we experience the fictional world “directly as the autonomous facts of the
Similarly, as Jakob Lothe states: "film’s events manifest themselves as definitive. They show with sovereign conviction certain events." What these quotes suggest is that we take what we’re watching on the screen to be true, to be depicting a world that unfolds before our eyes (not as a world that is “the discourse of a narrator situated outside the story”). Another way to put this is that we assume objectivity in the narrative, a point George Wilson expands upon here:

One of the characteristic marks of classical narrative films is that their audio/visual narration is, in a certain sense, transparent. Very roughly, this means that (1) most of the shots in these movies are understood as providing the audience with ‘objective’ or intersubjectively accessible views of the fictional characters, actions, and situations depicted in the film and that (2) where the shots or sequences are not to be construed as objective, there is a reasonably clear marking of the fact that they are, in one of several different ways, ‘subjective.’

So, what does this mean? What does it matter that we treat the narrative as though it’s showing us things as they are, objectively? One thing it means is that we watch what’s happening as though we would a documentary. While imaginatively engaged, we treat the characters as people, the sets as real landscapes and environments, and the props as real objects. Given that we’re utilizing basic perceptual processes throughout, this just amounts to us engaging with the fiction in fundamentally the same way that we engage with images of things in the world. And so, just as we take ourselves to be seeing and hearing the latter, so too—when imaginatively engaged—we take ourselves to be seeing and hearing the former.

Given what goes on during imaginative engagement, given the extent to which we see-as the fictional and the way in which we do so, we should consider level three to be a genuinely perceptual experience—one according to which we see the fiction in a film. Theorists are thus

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125 Of course, this isn’t to downplay the role of interpretation and knowledge of film convention. We do much more than utilize ordinary perceptual processes. My point is that we use those processes throughout, even as we interpret, and that this allows us to pick up on basic facts in the fictional world immediately in just the same way that we pick up on basic facts in the real world immediately.
wrong in drawing a separation between how we engage with the nonfictional and how we engage with the fiction. Even more broadly, all three levels of filmic seeing-as engage both our cognitive and perceptual processes.

How the Levels Intertwine

So far, I've argued for three types of filmic seeing-as, and I've treated them as distinct. But part of what makes filmic seeing-as so interesting and complicated is that the three levels intertwine, interact with one another. Their ability to do so differentiates them from other, more frequently discussed, forms of seeing-as, and disproves some notions we might've had about the phenomenon.

Although I introduced level one first, as a basic recognition ability, in fact it occurs throughout all of film-viewing—while levels two or three occur. It's difficult—if not impossible—to engage in level three, and thus see an image as of a particular character or particular setting, without also seeing it as of a man or woman, or as of consisting in trees or clouds. Similarly, it's confusing to consider seeing an image as of Daniel Day-Lewis without simultaneously seeing it as of a man. And if we're wary of making a necessity claim here, we can at least admit that this simultaneity is possible. There's nothing about seeing an image as of Daniel Day-Lewis that prevents, or rules out, our also seeing it as of a man; there's nothing about seeing the Lord of the Rings setting as of Middle-Earth that prevents, or rules out, our seeing it as containing hills and mountains.

This simultaneity distinguishes filmic seeing-as from many other instances of the phenomenon. With regards to the duck-rabbit, seeing one aspect requires our not seeing another because of the attentional responses it necessitates. Seeing the figure as a duck means drawing comparisons between it and other ducks; it means identifying a certain collection of lines as its beak. Doing this prevents our noticing the rabbit-aspect, as the latter requires different comparisons and identifications. The same is true of other cases of seeing-as. Childlike games of make-believe require our not seeing particular objects or people as themselves because noticing
them as *themselves* spoils our attempts to engage with them as objects in our imaginings. During film-viewing we don’t face this exclusion where level one is concerned.

Delving more deeply into level one’s intertwinements: as I mentioned earlier, we pick up on expressive and emotional properties during film-viewing that infect what we perceive at the fictional level. Utilizing basic recognition capacities doesn’t just enable us to see ordinary objects and properties; it also enables us to see fictional objects and properties. And the reverse is true as well: engaging with the fiction affects our engagement with level one. As I mentioned in my initial explication of the latter, just how we identify the objects and people—just which basic categories we group them into—often depends upon our following a film’s narrative; we need to understand the fictional world of *The Simpsons* and *The Lord of the Rings* before we can know whether or not their characters are humans, for instance. So, although we can often identify the objects and properties on a film screen without any familiarity with the film at hand (indeed, without any prior experience of film), it sometimes requires engaging with a film’s fictional content. And this elucidates the chief difference between level one and level two: whereas the latter consists in attending to what is *in fact* on the screen (e.g., seeing the sets depicting houses, cottages, and castles as *sets*), the former consists in attending to whatever ordinary objects are *represented on* the screen (e.g., seeing the sets as houses, cottages, and castles).

Despite these intertwinements, I think we can experience level one on its own. Take, for instance, a person who has never seen *Lord of the Rings* and happens to view a random scene from it. This viewer doesn’t see an image of Frodo as a cinematic recording Frodo or an image of Middle-Earth as a cinematic recording of Middle-Earth. She sees the former as of a man, and the latter as of a place with trees, clouds, castles, and the like. Frodo’s story, his quest, and his personality is completely unknown to her, as is Middle-Earth’s existence as a continent containing Elves and Ainur. Without an awareness of the narrative, this viewer engages in level 1 *and not* level 3. The latter requires her learning of the aforementioned elements in the fiction so that she can imaginatively engage with that content. Doing so enables her to see and hear the images
according to the story—see an image of Frodo as a recording of that particular character, with his particular quest, and his particular characteristics.

It’s worth it to note that, while it’s possible to just engage in level one, it’s not very easy to. If we become even slightly imaginatively engaged—pretending that the characters are people, even though we might not know anything about their specific stories—we’re likely to attribute emotions and thoughts to them (and ignore the fact that they are actors), and to try and figure out what the fictional world is like (and ignore the fact that it is just a set). We’re likely, in other words, to have some bare engagement with level three.

Let’s move now to how levels two and three intertwine. During typical seeing-as experiences, two (potential) aspects are non-simultaneous and antagonistic, with the latter perhaps causing the former; because engaging in certain attentional processes prevents our engaging in others, double-aspect seeing is impossible. But levels two and three enable non-antagonism even while they necessitate non-simultaneity.

If I’m attending to Daniel Day-Lewis as Daniel Day-Lewis in *There will be Blood*, then certain features of the character of Daniel Plainview become more prominent to me. I know that Day-Lewis tends to portray intense characters, and I’m aware of some of his chief approaches in doing so—e.g., conveying emotion through looks, his eyes showing an internal anger or grief that isn’t released vocally. With this in mind, I notice Daniel Plainview’s eyes, and worry that his emotions aren’t being healthily exposed to those around him. I notice this feature in Daniel Plainview more because of the knowledge of Daniel Day-Lewis that I’m bringing to my viewing. In this respect, level two can affect level three.

The reverse is true as well. How we judge a film (aesthetically) results from our engaging imaginatively with the world it presents to us. It’s by becoming ensconced in the action and feeling for the characters that we can discuss how the plot was structured, or how well the actors’ portrayals warranted our affective responses. Similarly, picking up on certain stylistic, production-level, elements enables us to engage imaginatively with the story. It’s by being familiar with point-of-view editing, for instance, that we can thereby imaginatively take on a character’s perspective.
So, when we watch *American Beauty*, our awareness of the way in which the image is telescoped and the stylized use of sound, shows us that we are entering Lester’s fantasy.¹²⁶

Levels two and three can support each other in these ways. And this all despite their non-simultaneity. We can’t evaluate the film *while* we’re imaginatively engaged in it; we can’t feel for the characters *while* critiquing the actors’ performances. And this differentiates the interaction between two and three from what occurs between them and level one; whereas level one is inherently a part of them, the latter are necessarily separate.

Now we might doubt this last claim. Thinking more carefully about the relation between ‘actor’ and ‘character’ in particular might make us deny the supposed non-simultaneity of levels two and three. I said above that our awareness of an actor can affect our awareness of her character. We might think that this intertwining is stronger than I’ve presented it: if we’re familiar with an actor, can we really see them as the character they portray in a given film without remaining aware of *them*, as performer, throughout? Can level three exist without level two in this case? And, on the other hand, don’t we build an actor’s persona in part from the roles she has portrayed? Is there really such a thing as seeing the former without seeing the latter? Stanley Cavell in fact argues for an association between character and actor that gives us some reason to think that there isn’t a genuine distinction between the two.¹²⁷ According to Cavell, “for the stage, an actor works himself into a role; for the screen, a performer takes the role onto himself.”¹²⁸ This difference amounts to an ontological distinction which Cavell expands upon here:

> On the stage there are two beings, and the being of the character assaults the being of the actor; the actor survives only by yielding… the screen performer is essentially not an actor at all: he is the subject of study, and a study not his own.

> Cavell’s meaning here is a bit elusive, but I think he’s getting at this idea: a theater role, a stage character, is an entity (somehow) separate from the actor who portrays it. The latter becomes, or “yields” to, that role. A screen performance differs in this respect: the actor doesn’t

¹²⁶ Sheri Tuttle Ross mentioned this at the 2015 Eastern Division meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics
¹²⁸ Cavell, p. 27.
“yield” to a character because the character doesn’t exist separate from the actor that portrays it. The latter becomes the former by creating it, by bringing it to life; in this sense, what exists on the stage is a character played by an actor while what exists on the screen is both actor and character—the two constitute one being or create each other simultaneously. The point becomes a bit clearer when Cavell states:

'Bogart' means ‘the figure created in a given set of films.’ His presence in those films is who he is, not merely in the sense in which a photograph of an event is that event; but in the sense that if those films did not exist, Bogart would not exist, the name ‘Bogart’ would not mean what it does.  

What I think we should take away from Cavell’s analysis is that movie stars are associated, necessarily, with the characters they portray—so much so that their very names conjure an awareness of the latter or perhaps even mean the latter. We carry Humphrey Bogart’s or Cary Grant’s roles with us when we watch their films (or when we see their images elsewhere).

Cavell’s ontological claims here are quite strong, and I don’t think we should necessarily endorse them. If they’re right, then there is seemingly no real difference between levels two and three: if we watch an actor’s films, we can’t just see her as the character she’s portraying because we’re also aware of her as a performer; and, on the other hand, being aware of someone as an actor just consists in being aware of her characters. Here I think we need to take a step back. Indeed, I don’t think the two levels are fully simultaneous, let alone identical. And in order to make sense of this fact, while keeping in mind the association I’ve admitted above, we need to clarify a few things.

First of all, it’s important to keep in mind that the association only happens when we’re familiar with an actor’s work; being unfamiliar, we’re entirely able to just see-as character when we watch a film and entirely able to just see-as actor when we wish to evaluate the movie as a movie. Secondly, even with this aforementioned familiarity, we’re not fully engaging in levels two and three together throughout film-viewing.

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129 Cavell, p. 28.
When I bring an awareness of an actor’s roles with me, I still see-as character throughout the movie I’m watching. I still engage in level three. Indeed, the sort of character-awareness Cavell speaks of consists in an awareness of past roles, an awareness of an actor’s history of depiction; but the only way to build that awareness up, and the only way to continue building it, is to experience level three—to imaginatively engage with the actor’s characters. What’s more, perhaps (with the aforementioned familiarity) we frequently see-as actor to a certain extent as we watch a film. But this doesn’t amount to experiencing level two as I’ve described it.

Level two requires active attention to stylistic elements of the production so that we can evaluate the film as a film. The sort of actor-awareness that, I think, we bring to a movie is much more bare than this. It consists in knowing that I’m watching an actor—e.g., Daniel Day-Lewis—and attending to some of his typical techniques. If I’m imaginatively engaged, if I’m really experiencing level three, then this is the extent of my engagement with level two. I can’t actively pay attention to his past roles or to his expressions and gestures as an actor if I’m seeing him as the character he’s portraying. And I certainly can’t attend to stylistic elements beyond him—the lighting, the other actors’ mannerisms, the score’s expressivity. Level three engagement is fully imaginative; and with it, the most we can bring from level two is a less active, bare awareness of the actors we’re watching (the same is true of our familiarity with directors, writers, cinematographers, etc).

I think, then, we should admit that (1) we can attend to an actor as her character throughout film-viewing; (2) even with an awareness of the actor and her past roles we do not fully experience level two throughout level three; and (3) given that level three requires imaginative engagement, we cannot experience it when we experience level two. With regards to (3): seeing-as actor throughout film-viewing or independent of film-viewing (e.g., just thinking of an actor’s persona in the way that Cavell discusses), is not identical to, nor is it simultaneous with, imaginatively engaging with the actor’s characters. We might keep in mind their roles when we think of them, and we might build our perception of them off of those roles (taking them to possess some of the characteristics their characters possess); still, this is not level three insofar
as it (1) is not imaginative engagement, and (2) consists in our awareness of the actor as portraying the fictional roles. Level three involves (1) and cannot involve (2): because of our game of pretense, we aren’t thinking of what we’re seeing as portrayal or depiction. For all of these reasons, I do not think levels two and three are simultaneous despite their close intertwinements.

Let’s get back, then, to the focus of this section. I’ve argued here that there are various interactions—among levels one, two and three—during film-viewing. Taking note of them enables us to acknowledge that there more perceptual experiences during film-viewing than we might’ve recognized, more than theorists usually spell out, and that they intertwine in important ways. Indeed, they intertwine in ways that other, if not all, seeing-as experiences cannot. This fact suggests both that film-viewing is a highly complex experience, one that combines cognition with perception at many different levels, and that we have more work to do in understanding seeing-as more generally—in grasping the characteristics that it can possess, in rethinking whether or not (and how) different types can co-exist or support each other. To determine whether or not filmic seeing-as is unique in the ways I’ve laid out, we need to get clearer on the phenomenon of seeing-as itself.

Further Thoughts

The analysis I’ve presented here is only a starting-point. Among other things, we should examine more closely the types of filmic seeing-as I’ve outlined, look for others, and continue analyses of (non-filmic) seeing-as. This paper is a step towards further avenues of research in philosophy of film and philosophy of perception. Before concluding, I’ll introduce some possible future routes and answer some objections we might raise against my account.

Although I’ve focused on narrative films, we ought to examine how seeing-as works in nonnarrative, or experimental, movies. For films that lack obvious plot and character development, what does seeing-as consist in? It’s not difficult to see how levels 1 and 2 can occur. After all, even films that lack a clear storyline or characters still (indeed, frequently) present us with images of ordinary objects and people that we must use everyday recognition capacities to identify. And we can evaluate the films stylistically, by examining their clever use of editing.
techniques, special effects, and lighting. Experimental films often exploit the potentialities of the filmic medium, and seem to be ‘about’ nothing more than that exploitation. So engaging in level 2 seeing-as might even be the most appropriate approach.

It’s more confusing to consider level 3. Many films lie somewhere within the narrative—nonnarrative divide by possessing, to some degree, identifiable plot points and characters (e.g., David Lynch’s movies, or expressionist films like Nosferatu and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari); when viewing those films, level 3 will happen whenever we are imaginatively engaged and not (actively) attending to the stylistic and performative elements. But when it comes to what we think of as purely nonnarrative movies, such as Stan Brakhage’s films, level 3 is questionable. Often the closest we get to a type of depicted content is “expressed content” where this refers to the emotions expressed in the work. The short film Orpheus, for instance, concerns a man who seems stuck in a vicious cycle of pain and forgetfulness, and many of the scenes take on an expressive quality; we see the devastation in his face and actions, and represented by the filth and grayness of his surroundings.

Are we experiencing level 3, though, when we attend to such expressed content? The answer depends on whether or not doing so involves visual, attentional, habits that are distinct from level 2’s. I don’t think it does. Recognizing the sadness in Orpheus is a matter of looking at the scenes’ colors and lighting, the actor’s mannerisms and facial expressions. It’s a matter of considering shot transitions, in particular how certain shots tie into others—what it means for the flowers in one scene to be burning, suddenly, in the next; how his waking up in a garbage dump, or his inability to throw away a necklace, represents his pain. None of this requires imaginative engagement. And nor does it seem distinct from attending to the film as an experimental film; there, too, we look at the colors, lighting, shot transitions, and the actor’s gestures. Analyzing a film might even require evaluating its expressive abilities.

Indeed, most accounts of artistic expression either implicitly or explicitly engage in something like a level 2 analysis; what makes something valuable as a work of art or (even more
strong) what makes it a work of art, is, at least partly, the fact that it expresses emotions. In this way, discussing artistic expression is attending to art in the way that level two requires. Of course, few if any theorists make theirs a claim about perception—a claim that we see-as when we notice expressed content in a film. In this respect, my account goes further than theirs.

It's worth noting, however, that there is some theoretical support for this further (seeing-as) claim. In Musical Meaning and Expression, Stephen Davies argues, among other things, that music (1) literally possesses emotion properties (like sadness, happiness, joy, etc) so that we can hear what it expresses and (2) intentionally and systematically uses natural meaning. I've argued for a version of (2) (with regards to film), and—as I mentioned—think that film’s use of natural meaning cues allows it to express emotions and thoughts in the same sort of way that everyday people, places, and objects do. In substantiating his theory, Davies argues that we often attribute emotion properties to appearances of things—to human faces, to aspects of weather and the environment, to animals, etc—and he compares this to the way in which we attribute emotion properties to songs. Music expresses, for Davies, not by sharing the composer’s emotions and not by arousing the listeners’ emotions but by being emotional: by having the same sorts of emotion properties that we have when we feel.

I think Davies would perhaps avoid extending his theory to film, partly because he differentiates between works of pictorial depiction and musical works: the former, he claims, refer to or depict emotions while the latter possess emotion. But I think film’s relation to natural

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meaning, a relation that distinguishes it from other forms of pictorial depiction, supports the idea that it expresses in the same way that music does—especially once we center our discussion on nonnarrative films. Experimental films, like narrative films, show us emotion properties by showing us cues of natural meaning; in this sense, their shots possess those emotions. Indeed, we might think experimental films often exploit natural meaning cues more purposefully than narrative movies do. They play off of the meaning delivered by garbage dumps (as in Orpheus), bird chirping and flowers blooming (as in Meshes of the Afternoon), and bloody organs (as in Dog Star Man). When these natural meaning cues aren’t helping to constitute a fictional—or narrative—level, they are used precisely to express at level 2. And we see and hear what they express.

My focus so far has been on how films express via the content of their images: what cues, natural meaning or otherwise, they show. But much of what a movie, experimental or narrative, expresses stems from its production and post-production techniques—shot-types, shot-transitions, montage, and post-production effects. How a movie shows what it shows is just as important, for expressive purposes, as what it shows. And, what’s particularly interesting with regards to this expressivity is that it seems to constitute a type of nonnatural and natural meaning. Insofar as it is expressed content, and insofar as it stems from conventional techniques that have nonnatural meaning (indeed, semioticians often point to film’s editing to substantiate their idea of film possessing a grammar-like syntax which makes it language-like), it’s nonnatural; but insofar as we’re shown or feel what’s expressed, that content is direct in a way that makes it like a form of natural meaning. I’ll discuss this more in the appendix, citing relevant examples. With this in mind, let’s turn to some other issues I haven’t yet mentioned.

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133 Some experimental films, as I claimed earlier, do have something like a fictional level, even if a bare one. I think Un Chien Andalou falls within this camp: while we perhaps can’t pinpoint a narrative or characters, there’s something narrative-like about it. The same is true of movies like Eraserhead,
One immediate worry we might have with my account of filmic seeing-as centers on how I've presented the interaction between levels 2 and 3: in particular with regards to my claim that they cannot occur simultaneously. As I discussed earlier, this claim of non-simultaneity might seem false. And, rather than argue along the lines of the character-actor relationship, we might argue more generally: it just might seem like we’re able to watch a film as a film while imaginatively engaging with it. I don’t think we can provide a decisive answer here, as phenomenology will necessarily differ for different moviegoers. I consider such simultaneity to be difficult, if not impossible. I consider level three to be an experience of full imaginative engagement that prevents the sort of production-level awareness that level two necessarily involves.

Importantly, as I’ve specified throughout, I do think we attend (perceptually) to to the film screen—to the nature of the recording—throughout level 3. So there is a type of what Wollheim calls “twofoldness” here. But I think this attention is different from level 2. The latter requires actively noticing production elements, stylistic and performative aspects of the actors, sets, and props. This consists in much more than merely noticing the film screen, and if only the latter co-exists with level 3, then there isn’t full simultaneity between levels 2 and 3. This isn’t to say that no movie-goer can fully engage in the levels at the same time; it’s just to say that, based on how much I think is involved with each level, I do not see how such a co-existence would be possible.

Let’s turn now to a more general worry with my account, on that centers on my terminology: is what I’m talking about seeing-as or could it more properly called seeing-in? I’ve mentioned Wollheim a couple of times, each time drawing comparisons between his thesis and mine, so it’s worth it to clarify whether these phenomena are experiences of seeing-as specifically. I think they are.

Like Walton, Wollheim takes there to be an experience specific to “seeing a pictorial representation.” The phenomenon he spells out is similar to the phenomenon Walton elucidates, as it is a simultaneously visual and cognitive experience. Still, there are important differences between the two, most prominently: (1) seeing-as requires seeing a particular object as an object
of a certain kind while seeing-in is more general; (2) seeing-as is localized in a way that seeing-in isn’t; and (3) seeing-in requires a twofoldness that seeing-as prevents.

We can see that (1) is true in some of the instances I’ve talked about: the Wittgenstein and Walton examples involve seeing something as an object of a certain kind. Wollheim claims that seeing-in, and only seeing-in, allows us to see more general features of a work: to see a certain state of affairs, to see that something is the case (e.g., that a fire is starting, that a storm is gathering). Relatedly, with regards to (2), seeing-as requires us to be able to point to a place in the representation and say what we’re seeing that spot as. Seeing-in, for Wollheim, doesn’t require such localization; I can see that an event is taking place without being able to point to where, in the picture, I see it.

I think Wollheim is right to say that (1) and (2) are typically assumed in accounts of seeing-as. And much of what I’ve talked about goes against both of them: I’ve discussed seeing expression and emotion in a film (at both the narrative and nonnarrative level), and I’ve discussed seeing narrative events taking place. I’ve also discussed seeing an actor as a character, where that doesn’t amount to seeing particular things on the screen in a certain way (as I mentioned, nothing really changes (at the low level) on the film screen when I switch from level 2 to 3 or vice versa); in this sense, there isn’t the sort of localization that Wollheim claims seeing-as requires. Perhaps in making my theory more general than more traditional accounts of seeing-as, then, I’ve put myself more firmly in line with Wollheim.

I don’t think we should conclude this quite so quickly, though. For some theorists don’t endorse (1) or (2); they provide accounts of seeing-as that can accommodate for the generality I’ve articulated. Berys Gaut and Roger Scruton both maintain that we can see broader features of (or qualities in) representations by seeing-as—seeing a painting “as alive,” seeing “some of the bathers in Cézanne’s picture (National Gallery) as either moving or at rest”—thus going against (1) and (2) (I take it that there isn’t a place specifically in the painting that makes it look alive or a specific location in Cézanne’s that makes the “bathers” look “at rest;” rather we can, at most,
point to several different places in the pictures which all contribute to their generally looking as such). 134

If we think that seeing-as can make sense when we’re talking about states of affairs or qualities, then we can deny that (1) and (2) are necessarily the case. The same is true of (3). While Wollheim claims that we remain aware of the medium only in the case of seeing-in, I don’t see why this is necessary. If we use George Wilson’s theory of imagining seeing, or adopt the sort of account Hopkins proposes, then there’s nothing implausible about our seeing the film screen while engaging in level three. In fact, as I argued, that seems the most accurate description of what’s going on.

In short, if we think that the conditions Wollheim has articulated are necessary for seeing-as, then perhaps we should conclude that I’ve been talking more about seeing-in. But if we doubt the necessity of those conditions, then we needn’t do so. Wollheim has Walton specifically in mind when laying out the concept, but there are better—more plausible—theories of seeing-as that we can turn to. With this in mind, then: is there any reason to distinguish between the two? Is there any reason to talk of seeing-as rather than seeing-in during film-viewing? Once we admit that the former can possess some of the supposed properties of the latter, we might think that there’s no sense in which they are fundamentally different. In fact, though, I think there are two chief differences, and they put me more in the seeing-as camp.

First of all, the twofoldness I’ve articulated is not the same as the twofoldness Wollheim articulates. As I argued earlier, we can’t really see the images as images, and thus don’t see the medium in the same way that we see the medium of a painting or picture. In a movie, the medium is more transparent than in static forms of depiction (primarily because of the perception of motion). So it’s not clear that we’re seeing the surface as robustly as Wollheim suggests we do during seeing-in.

Secondly, Wollheim doesn’t allow enough space for the role of imagination in his account of seeing-in. For Wollheim, seeing-in is a psychological ability that, as Jerrold Levinson states, “is generally prior to, and not to be analyzed in terms of, imaged seeing” (227). We don’t need to imagine seeing a certain state of affairs in order to see that state of affairs in a picture. Wollheim and I part ways here. With regards to the role of the imagination, we might be ambivalent about or indifferent towards endorsing seeing-in vs. seeing-as in the sorts of instances theorists typically focus on (instances, like the ones Wollheim and Walton discuss, in which we see a pictorial representation as the nonfictional object it depicts). But when it comes to seeing the fictional, when it comes to level 3 seeing-as, imaginative engagement is key; and because it is, we need to appeal to a phenomenon that can make sense of this necessity. Since accounts of seeing-as tend to center on imaginative engagement (e.g., Strawson’s, Gaut’s, Walton’s, and Scruton’s), I think that, when it comes to fiction-based seeing-as, we should admit that this is the experience at work. And if we admit this with level 3, I also think that we should admit it with the other two levels. If we don’t have reason to think that the latter are cases of seeing-in rather than seeing-as, and if we have reason to choose seeing-as in level 3, then we should provide the more nuanced characterization of seeing-as which I laid out above, one that can include all three experiences I’ve discussed.

Seeing-as is a complicated phenomenon. In this chapter I have tried to shed light on just three variants of the experience, specifically three that happen during film-viewing. I’ve argued that they are highly complex in ways that other instances of seeing-as are not, and that—through this analysis—we ought to recognize just how nuanced our film-viewing experience is. When we watch a movie, our cognition and perception fuse in diverse, intimate, ways, so that we can see ordinary objects and their properties, actors and props, and (most importantly) fictional entities, characters, and worlds. Theorists don’t recognize enough that we can see the fiction in a film; indeed, they don’t recognize just how many perceptual experiences we have during film-viewing. This paper is a step toward doing justice to these experiences, to grasping just how much goes on when we watch movies.
Appendix

Earlier I referenced production and post-production techniques that seem to produce a natural and nonnatural form of meaning insofar as they directly express but are nonetheless conventional and importantly constructed. Now it’s worth it to look at some examples of this phenomenon. Importantly I won’t be specifying general types of editing techniques, as I think nearly every editing technique can be used for such expressive purposes. My analysis here comes down to two basic points: that shot-types, shot-transitions, and post-production effects can (1) enable spectators to experience expressed emotions; and (2) show characters’ subjectivity.

Let’s start with (1), the more common of the two phenomena. One immediate editing technique to take note of here is the point-of-view (or POV) shot. Here, we see through a character’s eyes and—by perceptually experiencing events in the narrative as the character experiences them—emotionally experience events as she does. Horror movies exploit this technique regularly. As the camera takes us through hallways, around corners, into bedrooms, we move with the character. Lacking any more (perceptual or epistemic) access to the narrative than the character herself possesses, we feel her fear. Indeed, one horror sub-genre—the found footage film—bases itself entirely off of this effect: utilizing POV shots throughout so that we’re continually unaware of what might be beside, behind, or in front of the character. By granting us access to characters’ perceptual perspectives, POV shots grant us access to their subjectivity.

Like POV shots, other production and post-production techniques enable spectators to feel the emotion expressed in a film. Jump cuts, for instance, produce tension and drama, as in the opening sequences to City of God and Snatch. Compare our experience watching these scenes to our experience reading about them. We pick up on the tension expressed in the latter by interpreting word choice and sentence-structure and feeling the tension only as a result of our interpretation. In the former, we experience the tension straight away: by seeing quick cuts from one frame to the next as burglars try to access a diamond company in Snatch, and by seeing quick shots of a chicken interspersed with shots of a knife being sharpened, vegetables being cut,
and dancing in City of God. This sort of speed mirrors (perhaps symbolizes) the plot’s drama, expressing narrative tension through perceptual means: by affecting how quickly or how briefly what we see and hear is shown to us. In doing so, jump cuts allow for an immediate experience of tension that cannot be produced through purely linguistic forms of communication.

Tweaking with camera speed can cause the same sort of experiential effect: think of how slow-motion or rapid camera movements (as well as quick zooming) make a scene feel (among other things) hallucinatory, frightening, confusing, or calm. In thriller or suspense sequences, for instance, slow-motion heightens dread by showing us every moment and each precise action as it leads up to a potentially unfortunate conclusion (e.g., the infamous prom scene in Carrie).

Long-takes achieve a similar effect. Take the Copacabana sequence in The Good Fellas: here, the camera follows Henry as he brings Karen into the club, past the line outside, through the service door and kitchen, and to their seats. Through this fluid camera movement, we get a sense of Henry’s smooth, easy lifestyle—people and places are available, open to him. Similarly, in There will be Blood’s oil disaster sequence, the camera fixates on Daniel as he runs with an injured H.W; without any cuts, the sequence makes us feel Daniel’s urgency and impatience. In these ways, long-takes express tone, mood, and perspective by letting us experience tone, mood, and perspective.

Camera scale can, at an even more basic level, be employed for expressive purposes. This is something experimental and narrative films both frequently exploit: e.g., showing us an eyeball up close (as in Hitchcock’s Psycho), a fly up close (as in Un Chien Andalou), mothwings up close (as in Stan Brekhage’s Mothlight). Just by seeing these objects occupying an entire frame, we can feel unnerved—the scale isn’t what we might expect, and so it’s off-putting. More specifically, close-ups have various aims in films—like expressing horror via close-ups like Psycho’s, or expressing a character’s mental state. With regards to the latter, a close-up of a gun in a western duel expresses the character’s nervousness, illustrating the extent to which their attention is fixated on the weapon that could potentially kill them (importantly, this isn’t a POV shot since the character doesn’t actually see the gun as being that size).
Let’s sum up the phenomenon we’ve been discussing so far—and, of course, these examples don’t exhaust it. Some production and post-production techniques express emotion, tone, and mood by letting spectators experience emotion, tone, and mood. The way we’re shown what we’re shown gives us an immediate sense of what characters are feeling or how tense or dramatic a scene has become. Seeing the rapidity of shot-transitions, following a fluid camera through a narrative sequence, seeing an eye up close: by perceptually experiencing a narrative in these ways, we feel horror, dread, tension, excitement, and the like.

Now, these production and post-production techniques have nonnatural meaning—they’re conventional, and they provide movies with a grammar-like syntax (as semioticians maintain). But they also do something that other forms of nonnatural meaning typically don’t, and can’t, do: they express emotion directly and perceptually, by tweaking how we see and hear a scene. There’s an important respect, then, in which they engage in showing. Rather than call on us to interpret mood and tone, they call on us to sense the mood and tone they express straight away. They thus engage in a direct, immediate form of communication.

We can see this even more clearly by turning to (2), production and post-production effects that show us a character’s subjectivity. The chief technique here is using a subjectively-inflected shot. As George Wilson and Sam Shpall define them: “These are non-POV shots (more broadly, impersonal shots) that are subjectively inflected but do not share their vantage point with the visual perspective of any character in the film.” A good example of this, which Wilson and Shpall provide, is from Murder My Sweet. Wilson and Shpall state:

Phillip Marlowe (Dick Powell) has been knocked out and drugged. When he eventually comes to, we ‘see’ him stagger around the room. However, these shots of him are, in a certain respect, clearly subjective. In voice-over, Marlowe describes his clouded perceptual experience, and the shots with which we are presented look as though they had been filtered through smoke and spider webs. The look of the shots in this respect is obviously meant to correspond to key aspects of the way that things are looking to Marlowe in his drugged condition, but the screen image here does not purport to give us his actual visual perspective.”

136 Wilson and Shpall, p. 85.
We see this sort of effect in many films: when a character is dizzy, the camera might wobble back and forth as we watch her stumble; when a character is tired, the camera might show us her through a blurry haze; when a character is anxious, sounds might be enhanced and faces skewed in the character’s environment. The subjectively-inflected shot grants us access to a character’s perceptual perspective but in a different way than the POV shot. Rather than see things through her eyes, we see how things look to her because of what she’s feeling or otherwise experiencing. As Wilson and Shpal put it, we are “to suppose that the pertinent phenomenal properties included in the onscreen visual perspective reflect specific qualitative inflections with which we imagine” the character’s “visual perspective to be suffused.”

Let’s compare this phenomenon to the cues of natural meaning we’ve discussed throughout these first two chapters. Facial expressions, tones of voice, and gestures express a character’s emotions and thoughts by showing them to us: via smiles, frowns, grimaces, and the like. Subjectively-inflected shots don’t engage in precisely this form of showing, but they engage in a similar (indeed perhaps more substantive) one. A subjectively-inflected shot shows us a character’s subjectivity by showing us the qualitative, phenomenal properties of her subjectivity: by showing us how things look to her because of her internal state. Here, we don’t see fatigue and anxiety by seeing the facial expressions and gestures that express them: instead, we see fatigue and anxiety by seeing what they’re like—by seeing and hearing what the character sees and hears, but (as opposed to POV shots) more specifically how she sees and hears because of what she feels.

The subjectively-inflected shot constitutes another form of nonnatural-natural meaning. Again, the technique is conventional and importantly nonnatural. But, again, it seems to engage in a type of showing, indeed a more direct type of showing than the other techniques we discussed. In addition to allowing experience of an internal state, the subjectively-inflected shot expresses in the sort of way that natural meaning cues do: by making perceivable an internal

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Importantly, though I’ve been focusing on visual examples here, filmmakers subjectively-inflect the aural content of the scenes as well (e.g., when a character is underwater).
state. Unlike linguistic forms of communication, movies that employ the subjectively-inflected shot can express via their perceptual content.

Throughout this appendix, I’ve associated ‘expression’ with ‘the communication of emotion.’ I’ve focused on how movies express tone and mood generally as well as how they express characters’ internal states. Of course, movies express in a multitude of other ways: they express perspectives, thoughts, and feelings toward characters, narrative events, and the world outside of the narrative via a variety of means we haven’t outlined. And they perhaps engage in different types of showing via those means, further blurring the line between natural and nonnatural meaning. But, without delving into that fuller analysis, let’s sum up my chief point here.

There’s an important respect in which natural meaning and nonnatural meaning are opposed; theorists (among them, Grice) treat them as such, and by definition they seem incompatible. One entails a speaker communicating via an utterance a meaning that isn’t just found in the world: it entails picking up on intention and (sometimes, but not always) understanding convention. When we think of how movies possess nonnatural meaning, we might think of production techniques that choose certain shot types and string shots together into a coherent narrative; insofar as those techniques build a story from images of things in the world (or of photographed drawings, models, or computer-generated images), they construct a meaning that isn’t just there. Indeed, they provide films with a grammar-like syntax, one that often requires our knowledge of film conventions and one that enables films to communicate and express thoughts about the world. But production and post-production techniques can often, also, engage in an immediate form of communication—indeed, sometimes a type of showing. They can make emotion, tone, and mood perceivable; and they can make emotion, tone, and mood experiential. In this way, they’re like forms of natural meaning.

By analyzing how movies express via their production and post-production techniques, we can (1) recognize yet another way in which seemingly different levels of meaning intertwine in film and (2) question just what the distinction between natural and nonnatural meaning is. With regards to (1): we’ve analyzed how the perceptual and the representational interact in two ways
(i.e., how cues of natural meaning make up the narrative and how we perceptually experience the fictional). Here, we can see how what seems a highly constructed, convention-based aspect of film—what shots are chosen, how those shots are edited, and how they’re strung together—is intertwined with the immediate and the perceptual. And we can see how what we might think of as a merely interpretable level of meaning—what a film expresses—is intertwined with what we see, hear, and experience during film-viewing.

It’s important to note how the constructed (narrative, representational, conventional, etc.) and perceptual interact with one another. As I mentioned in the preface, these interactions just aren’t acknowledged by theorists, and we perhaps—pre-theoretically—don’t expect such interactions. We need to be more accurate in our analyses of filmic meaning and in our analyses of film-viewing. Much is involved in what movies mean, how they mean, and how we see and understand them. So far we’ve focused on these nuances with regards to the perceptual and representational, as well as the perceptual and expressive—how the fictional and what’s shown intertwine, and how the expressive and what’s shown intertwine. Now, let’s move to another layer: the epistemic. In the following two chapters, I’ll discuss how film’s perceptual immediacy helps give it (what I call) epistemic directness.
CHAPTER 3

UNRELIABILITY IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

The existence (and pervasiveness) of filmic seeing-as, in addition to film’s relation to natural meaning, amounts to a phenomenological immediacy. We perceptually engage with a movie’s fictional world, and—through utilizing ordinary, natural-meaning recognition capacities—grasp much about that world. A movie’s fiction is just there for us to see, hear, and understand in a way that other (primarily literary) fictions are not.

Indeed, theorists echo this point. In “Narrative in Fiction and Film,” Jakob Lothe states: “film’s events manifest themselves as definitive. They show with sovereign conviction certain events.”138 Similarly, Robert Burgoyne states that a film world is a “world which is experienced not as the discourse of a narrator situated outside the story but rather directly as the autonomous facts of the fictional universe.”139

These quotes rephrase what I’ve laid out so far—that we experience, directly, a film’s fictional world—but they also go a bit further. For Lothe, a film doesn’t just show us its events; it shows us them “with sovereign conviction.” For Burgoyne, we don’t just see and hear a film’s narrative; we experience “directly” the “facts of the fictional universe.” These points get at what I want to argue in these final two chapters: that there is an epistemic directness in fiction film—that we are shown the truths in a fictional world when we watch a movie. There are many routes we might take in making this epistemic move. I’ll take one in particular: comparing fiction film to documentary film.

In this chapter, I’ll outline two types of unreliability documentary films possess. In the following chapter, I’ll argue that fiction films lack both types of unreliability and that this—combined with their phenomenological immediacy—makes their fictional truths epistemically direct.

Documentary Preliminaries

Moving from phenomenological to more constructed theses—that center on how movies communicate truths—requires some initial clarifications, among them: (1) who is this “we,” this audience, that I’ve been talking about; and (2) what, specifically, settles a documentary’s facts?

While (2) seems the more robust question, it’s particularly simple when we examine documentary film, and—as we’ll see—much simpler than it is in fiction film. Documentaries have, as their subject matter, real-world events, people, and places. What settles the “facts” of a documentary’s subject matter, then, is whatever exists in what Dan Shen and Dejin Xu call "extra textual reality."¹⁴⁰ What determines whether or not Fahrenheit 9/11 is communicating facts to us is a matter of the facts of 9/11 itself. What makes The Cove factual is a matter of the actual Seaworld events it’s narrating to us.

Now, documentaries don’t always communicate facts about their subject matters—they can lie or mislead, and this is what I’ll talk about here. The point for now is that what makes something an actual fact in the subject matter of a documentary—what makes something true or false about the events, people, or places depicted—exists outside of the documentary itself and coincides with (or just is) a matter of whatever is a fact in the world. This extra-textual settling of a documentary’s facts is precisely what makes them capable of certain sorts of unreliability, and it’s one of the chief distinctions between fiction and nonfiction film. So we’ll come back to these points later. Keeping this in mind, let’s move to (1).

As I’ll clarify and specify throughout this chapter, the answer to (1) is importantly hypothetical. The audience I’m keeping in mind is not an actual audience; and the sorts of audience-based responses I’ll discuss are not contingent, a matter of what audience members happen (or happened) to think or feel or believe about a documentary’s subject matter. Instead, my claims employ the idea of a hypothetical, ideal audience. This audience is one who is aware of the aims of the filmmakers, the conventions at play, and who is perceptive to what’s stated or

implied by the text. Only such an appeal enables us to get clear on what’s in a documentary, what cognitive processes it actually prescribes. In this way, I’m against strong reader-response theories according to which what is true in or what is meant by a work of art is (in some way) constructed by spectators (readers, interpreters, etc.).\textsuperscript{141}

I’m also against typical anti-reader-response theories according to which a work’s meaning in somehow just in the work itself. The problem with these sorts of accounts is precisely that they make truth (or meaning) too separate from audience-based responses; here, artistic meaning doesn’t depend at all on our (hypothetical) interpretive additions or on an artist’s expectations of those interpretive additions. Strong intentionalist theories fail along the same lines. Insofar as, for strong intentionalists, the meaning of a work of art just is whatever meaning the artist intended the work to have, it stems entirely from the author, with the audience playing no constructive role.\textsuperscript{142}

My emphasis throughout, then, is somewhere in between these two extremes. I’ll discuss how ideal audience members react, or what they come to believe, based on the film. If we want, we can cash this out as how audience members should react, given the features the film possesses: what perspectives it’s attempting to get us to endorse, what implicit and explicit claims it makes about the subject at hand, what perceptual information it shows. Both analyses—based on how we should react and how ideal, hypothetical audiences react—amount to the same thing insofar as ideal audiences interpret the film (and respond to it) in the way that they should (i.e., they are attentive to the film’s relevant features, the conventions it’s employing, and the like).

More generally: I adopt a roughly Gricean model of communication according to which (1) some facts are communicated explicitly in a text, either by being stated or shown by it; and (2)


some communication depends very much upon the (hypothetical) audience’s responses and interpretations and the speaker’s (i.e., filmmaker’s) expectations of those responses and interpretations. With regards to (2): the filmmaker employs certain conventions in order to communicate more than is directly shown in the film; similarly, she implies (or implicates) more than is directly shown in the film. Here, audience members are called upon to employ their awareness of the intentions or aims of the film, familiarity with and knowledge of genres, conventions, and styles, and real-world knowledge; this enables appropriate extrapolation from the explicit content of the film.

I will argue that facts are communicated via four central things: (1) explicit stating; (2) implication; (3) our expectations of genre, style, or documentary conventions; and (4) showing. Some of the content of what’s communicated is “in” the film itself in an important sense—explicitly a part of it through showing or stating—while some depends more heavily upon our awareness of intention: picking up on the filmmaker’s aims in order to grasp what’s implied by the shots we’re shown, and utilizing our knowledge of convention to recognize what the film is trying to do. While all of this is very general right now, I’ll delve into specifics throughout the remaining sections of this chapter.

When talking about the filmmaker here, I have the same sort of model as for the audience: a roughly hypothetical intentionalist one. There is an important space for the notion of intention—what aims the film has, what it’s trying to get us to believe, what perspectives it’s taking toward the events portrayed; indeed, we’ll see that this space is necessary for my concepts of unreliability, as is a space for our attention to intention. But the idea isn’t that we construct the actual filmmaker’s aims or beliefs from the evidence in the film. Rather, we take the film as evidence for how the filmmaker seems to believe, what the filmmaker seems to be up to, how she presents herself, regardless of what motivations or opinions she in fact holds (or held).143

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With these things in mind, we can see how this chapter and the following one move beyond phenomenological questions. When it comes to epistemic questions, we need to analyze movies in the same sort of way we analyze any communicative situation (linguistic, artistic or otherwise): by specifying how we take away more from a text (or from an utterance) than is directly, perceptually there—e.g., by utilizing awareness of convention and context to pick up on Gricean implicature. A large part of what I’ll do in these final two chapters is outline how this extrapolation happens in nonfiction and fiction film.

So far, none of these preliminaries is specific to film. I consider any work of art to be within a (roughly) Gricean model. One thing that does differentiate movies is its collaborative nature: the fact that multiple filmmakers work together on a production. The notion of multiple authorship complicates the sort of communicative situation we’re in—since it’s not within the individual speaker and individual listener model—but I don’t think it makes it non-Gricean or prevents an appeal to intention. I endorse some appeal to collective intentionality, whereby we construct one overarching intention from among the many individual ones in the production and thus have an authorial intention despite multiple authors; in this way, this distinction between movies and art forms like paintings and novels doesn’t problematize my general Gricean commitment.144

More important for our purposes here, in distinguishing movies from other artworks, is the role of ‘showing’ at play in the former. What I said about fiction film in the previous two chapters holds for documentaries—they show us situations so that we can utilize our knowledge of natural meaning and our ordinary perceptual capacities to pick up on narrative information. While there’s

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144 For some prominent theories of collective intentionality see: (1) Bratman, Michael E. Shared Intention. *Ethics* 104.1 (1993): 97-113; and (2) Searle, John R. “Collective Intentions and Actions.” *Consciousness and Language*. Cambridge: 2002. 90-105. Their accounts differ in important ways, but either can be applied to film in order to make multiple authorship compatible with the notion of (hypothetical) intentionality.
an important sense in which documentaries are Gricean communicative utterances, then, it’s necessary to keep in mind that they also have a type of meaning that is not Gricean: one that doesn’t amount to being told and that enables a direct delivering of information. We’ll talk about this, as well as points (1)-(4) above, in depth in the following sections. So, with these initial commitments spelled out, let’s turn to that discussion now.

Documentary Truth

How can documentaries lie? How can they withhold facts? Before we provide analyses of these types of unreliability, it’s necessary to outline a conception of documentary truth; the former, it seems, will amount to some lack of the latter, or some untrustworthiness with regards to a documentary showing us the latter.

The topic of documentary truth is a highly complicated one, but—from the get-go—we can reject a simplistic account according to which documentaries just show us reality. As Errol Morris argues, in documentary filmmaking (and, relatedly, photography) choice and intention are at play immediately, preventing full objectivity. Filmmakers choose what to show us (and thereby what to crop out), how to show it, and how to connect the different things they show us. These decisions already carry evaluation—i.e., this subject should be shown and is therefore more important than alternatives. Morris states:

The minute you take one picture as opposed to another, or the minute you select one photograph from a group of photographs, you are doing something very, very similar to manipulating reality. It may not be the same as picking up an object in a home and removing it or taking something out of your pocket and putting it on a table. But you are selecting images—as in the case of Walker Evans and the Guders. You are selecting certain photographs for Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, and you are editing out other photographs that may not support the ideas that you want to present. Why is that so different in kind from taking something out of your pocket or moving something that you see in a bedroom or in a living room from one place to another and then photographing it?  

By “cropping reality,” by “tearing an image from the fabric of reality”—something all photographers and all filmmakers must do—the artist prevents herself from just showing, objectively, how things are in the world.

Other theorists echo Morris in discussing photographs and documentaries alike and extending the idea of manipulation to further processes of filmmaking (e.g., post-production, editing processes). Patricia Aufderheide deems “documentary” a genre “defined by the tension between the claim to truthfulness and the need to select and represent the reality one wants to share;” John Grierson famously deemed documentary “the creative treatment of actuality;”\textsuperscript{146} and Bill Nichols has perhaps provided the most extensive account of the ways in which documentaries are tied to reality \textit{despite} being fundamentally texts and therefore artistic interpretations of the world.\textsuperscript{147} As he puts it: “documentaries direct us toward the world but they also remain texts. Hence they share all of the attendant implications of fiction’s constructed, formal, ideologically infected status.”\textsuperscript{148} While there is some sense in which documentaries are tied to truth, we should discard any appeal to their “just showing” us objectively accessible facts about the world. Documentaries treat reality “creatively” by “representing” or “arguing about” it.

Within this space of intentional and subjective presentation, the documentarian has—and employs—a plethora of formal techniques that decrease objectivity further. A few of the more common ones are:

1. \textit{The use of reenactments}. In moves like \textit{The Thin Blue Line}, \textit{Nanook of the North}, and \textit{Stories we Tell}, documentarians use actors to represent real-life subjects. In this way, they make performance an explicit part of their films, blurring the line between documentary and fiction.

2. \textit{The use of the essay film}. Some documentaries eschew any pretense of objectivity by making subjectivity a part of what’s depicted. In these cases (e.g., \textit{The Gleaners and I}, and \textit{Man with a Movie Camera}) the documentarian becomes one of the represented subjects, making the film’s nature as a \textit{film}—and the filmmaker’s nature as a \textit{filmmaker}—explicit. Films like this acknowledge openly and reflexively that representation is subjective.

3. \textit{The use of a political agenda}. Political, commitment, and propaganda films all—in various, and sometimes highly divergent, ways—present historical or social events from a particular perspective. In doing so, they often leave out conflicting viewpoints and represent facts in a purposefully biased way. Michael Moore’s movies all fall within this camp.

4. \textit{The use of techniques that place doubt on documentary objectivity itself}. Some movies, like \textit{Exit Through the Gift Shop} and \textit{Night and Fog}, make their narratives \textit{about}


\textsuperscript{148} Nichols, p. 110.
the inaccessibility of objective truth. The former does this by presenting us with
untrustworthy narrators and shots whose origins are unclear; the latter contains voice-
over narration which explicitly questions the possibility of accurate memory or
representation. Other films make their subject matter unclear and thereby remove
whatever expectation of objective presentation we might’ve had. Sherman’s March, for
instance, is ostensibly about the lingering consequences of General Sherman’s march
through the South during the Civil War, but it ends up being as much—if not more—about
documentarian Ross McElwee’s quest for romantic love. Throughout our viewing of it, it’s
difficult to figure out just what we’re watching or why we’re watching it.

So this is the space documentarians work within: a non-objective space in which artistic
representation of reality is key. In light of this non-objectivity, some theorists reject that
documentaries are tied to reality—or truth—claiming that there is no real distinction between
documentaries and fictions. Others try to accommodate for subjectivity and artistic
representation whilst still preserving the intuition that documentaries have some tie to the world
that fictions lack.

André Bazin, commonly considered a cinematic realist who takes the photographic image
(in fiction and documentary film) to provide unmediated access to things in the world,
acknowledges the lack of objectivity in documentary filmmaking. According to Philip Rosen,
Bazin maintains that

If formal and stylistic procedures cannot provide an actual, unmediated access to the
objective, then the basis for evaluating those procedures is located elsewhere than in the
relation of text to its referent: in the processes of the subject, its modes of postulating and
approaching ‘objectivity.’

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149 Indeed, some theorists rest this upon the more general fact of reality being inaccessible
outside of our mental representations full-stop. As Dirk Eitzen puts it “even our ‘brute’ perceptions
of the world are inescapably tainted by our beliefs, assumptions, goals, and desires. So, even if
there is a concrete, material reality upon which our existence depends…we can only apprehend it
through mental representations that at best resemble reality and that are in large part socially
created.” Eitzen, Dirk. “When is a Documentary?: Documentary as a Mode of Reception.” Cinema

150 William Gunn makes this claim in his book A Cinema of Nonfiction (London and Toronto:
Associated University Presses, 1990), 17ff. Related arguments against this distinction are laid out
in Barbara Foley, Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction (Ithaca and

151 Rosen, Philip. “History of Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin.” Rites of

152 Rosen, p. 46.
If “the objective is always inflected by the subjective,” never approachable outside of our modes of representation, then—for Bazin—we can only evaluate documentaries by appeal to how closely they “approach,” how they strive towards, objectivity. Here, Bazin offers an account that can (correctly) discard the possibility of objective presentation but still make sense of documentary’s truthful or realistic nature: the latter amounts to coming as close as possible to the former.

Appealing to Bazin doesn’t quite work, though, and for one chief reason: many movies that we categorize as documentaries don’t try to approach objectivity. Some focus primarily on the presentation of subjectivity and expressivity, as essay films such as Agnes Varda’s do; some focus on fully biased perspectives of events in the world, as political and propaganda documentaries do; and some take their subject matter to be the impossibility of objectivity, as Exit Through the Gift Shop and Night and Fog do. In light of these examples, we seemingly have to get rid of the notion of objectivity—admitting that an appeal to it isn’t even necessary in our evaluations of works within the genre.

Here we might turn to Bill Nichols again. For Nichols, documentaries make “arguments” about historical reality—historical reality being “brute reality” in which “objects collide, actions occur, forces take their toll.”\footnote{Nichols, p. 110.} As I mentioned earlier, Nichols acknowledges subjectivity by emphasizing how documentaries comment on—rather than merely show—the world. Insofar as they are texts, they are necessarily inflected with our interpretations (and with culturally-specific ideological constructs). Still, they are tied to reality by commenting on reality: they “refer to, represent, or make claims about historical reality.”\footnote{Eitzen, p. 84.} Nichols’ approach is more promising than Bazin’s insofar as it discards an appeal to objectivity altogether. Still, it faces a different sort of problem: it doesn’t distinguish documentaries from fiction films accurately, a point that Dirk Eitzen makes. He states:

There are many fiction films that refer to, represent, or make claims about historical reality. Spike Lee’s School Daze, for example, portrays tensions in the student body of a
fictional all-black college—tensions that include strong differences of opinion on the issue of whether the college should divest its holdings in companies that do business in South Africa. In 1987, when the film was made, this issue was certainly a historical reality on many college campuses.\footnote{Eitzen, p. 84.}

Nichols tries to accommodate for the fact that fictions refer to the real world by claiming that they do so “metaphorically,” but—as Eitzen argues—this doesn’t adequately capture what movies like \textit{School Daze} do. \textit{School Daze} “points to historical reality without resembling it in the least and without explicitly comparing it to anything else.”\footnote{Eitzen, p. 85.}

Nichols is right in taking there to be an important difference between the way in which fiction films refer to the world and the way in which documentaries do so. But the distinction isn’t a matter of being metaphorical or literal. It’s a matter of what Carl Plantinga calls “stances.”\footnote{Plantinga, p. 107.}

Fiction film refers to the real world through a fictive stance—presenting us with an imaginative reality in order to comment on historical reality. Documentary takes a merely assertive stance—straightforwardly, non-imaginatively, commenting on historical reality. The difference is, more precisely, between “presenting the state of affairs for our delectation, edification, education, amusement, or what have you, but not to have us believe that the state of affairs that constitute the world of the work holds in the actual world” on the one hand, and asserting “that the state of affairs making up that projected world holds or occurs in the actual world” on the other.\footnote{Plantinga, p. 107.} Indeed, there is more to the idea of documentaries “as assertions,” and spelling it out (particularly by appeal to Plantinga) can give us precisely what we need to make sense of the difference between fiction films and documentaries and how the latter are tied to reality (or truth).

Plantinga states:

\begin{quote}
Central to our idea of the typical or usual documentary...is the implicit directorial assertion of veridical representation, representation that is, in the case of implicitly or directly asserted propositions, truthful; and in the case of images, sounds, or combinations thereof, a reliable guide to relevant elements of the pro-filmic scene or scenes. When a filmmaker presents a film as a documentary, he or she not only intends that the audience come to form certain beliefs, but also implicitly asserts
\end{quote}

\footnote{Plantinga, Carl. “What a Documentary Is, After All.” \textit{The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism} 63.2 (2005): 105-117.}
something about the use of the medium itself—that the use of motion pictures and recorded sounds offer an audiovisual array that communicates some phenomenological aspect of the subject, from which the spectator might reasonably be expected to form a sense of that phenomenological aspect and/or form true beliefs about the subject.\textsuperscript{159}

This passage illuminates the chief difference between Plantinga and Nichols. Nichols focuses on how documentary films comment on the world, while Plantinga takes them to (additionally) comment on themselves. The documentarian makes implicit and explicit propositions about a state of affairs and implicitly “asserts something about the medium itself”—that the film is a truthful representation.

Let’s unpack this further. There are seemingly four things going on, for Plantinga, in documentary films: (1) explicit propositions about a state of affairs; (2) implicit propositions about that state of affairs; (3) direct showing, via images and sounds, of “relevant elements of the profilmic scene or scenes;” and (4) the implicit assertion of truthfulness by the movie (or by the filmmaker).\textsuperscript{160} (1) is quite easy to grasp, as it seemingly consists in direct statements—made via voice-over narration, interviews, text, and the like—about the film’s subject matter. So, we have Michael Moore telling us in Roger and Me that, in Flint, Michigan, “the Hyatt went bankrupt and was put up for sale, Waterstreet Pavillion saw most of its stores go out of business;” Blackfish telling us, via interviews, that “all whales in captivity have a bad life” and “this is a multi-billion dollar corporation that makes its money through the exploitation of Orcas;” and Joshua Zeman telling us, in Cropsey, that “Cropsey was an escaped mental patient who lived in the tunnels beneath the old Willowbrook mental institution, who would come out late at night, snatch children off the streets."

While (1) is easy enough to grasp, (2) is a bit less clear. With regards to this, Plantinga states:

Consider an observational film such as Frederick Wiseman’s Hospital (1970)… Wiseman clearly implies much about the hospital through the selection of footage

\textsuperscript{159} Plantinga, p. 111.

\textsuperscript{160} Plantinga initially talks of the “director” asserting, but switches back and forth between that a talk of the film asserting. I think the latter is, for him, entailed by the former.
and through editing, so one might find in the film propositional content that is implied or asserted.\(^{161}\)

Plantinga doesn’t expand upon the idea of implicit propositions, as he talks at once of “implied or asserted” content, but I think this category captures most of the “arguments” or “comments” we typically take documentaries to make. Making a Murderer implies that Steven Avery was convicted of a murder through incompetent investigative work; Fahrenheit 9/11 implies that George Bush was an incompetent president; The Thin Blue Line implies that Randall Dale Adams was innocent of his conviction. These films make such implied propositions through a combination of their imagistic/aural content and directly asserted propositions. Making a Murderer uses direct statements from Avery’s family and defense attorneys detailing the unjust actions of Manitowoc county officials and shows shocking recordings of investigators’ manipulative interviews with Avery and his nephew, Brendan Dassey; The Thin Blue Line uses reenactments to show us the implausibility and inconsistency of various witnesses’ testimonies (testifying to Adams’ guilt) and statements made by Adams asserting his own innocence; Fahrenheit 9/11 tells us that George Bush “when informed of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center, where terrorists had struck just 8 years prior… decided to go ahead with his photo opportunity,” and shows us footage of him reading “My Pet Goat” for “nearly seven minutes” after hearing of the second tower’s destruction. Documentaries make claims about, comment on, their subject matter; and the arguments they make outstrip their explicit propositions. Indeed, here we see the importance of the films’ imagistic and aural content (\(^{(3)}\) above), as it gives documentaries this broader communicative ability.

Outlining (3) more solidly, Plantinga states that

It may be that certain images and sounds, or sequences thereof, are meant to approximate some element of the phenomenological experience of the event, such as how it looked or sounded from a particular vantage point, or how it was full of energetic good cheer or a strong sense of foreboding. Thus the film may be taken to assert that the relevant scenes give a sense of how the filmmakers were ‘aped peared to’ aurally and/or visually.\(^{162}\)

\(^{161}\) Plantinga, p. 110.
\(^{162}\) Plantinga, p. 110-11.
Plantinga differentiates himself from other documentary-as-assertion theorists by acknowledging that documentaries communicate certain phenomenological facts about a state of affairs—how it looked, sounded, appeared to the filmmaker—that aren’t propositional. This takes us back to the point about phenomenological immediacy and elucidates how it applies just as much to documentaries as fiction films: both engage in showing by directly presenting us with looks, feels and sounds in a way that literary art forms cannot. As Plantinga states: “the moving photograph and the sound recording are to some degree belief-independent. Their communicative richness extends beyond the intentions of the filmmakers and leaves something for interpretation and discovery by audiences.”

What we discover through the perceptual content can include the sort of “sense” that Plantinga focuses on, but it’s important to specify here that it can also include facts. We can know what happened when George Bush found out about the second tower just by seeing him read *My Pet Goat* and watching the time tick away in the left corner of the screen. We can know that Mantiwok county officials were manipulative by seeing and hearing their interactions with Avery. Direct propositions, made by the documentarians and interviewees, contribute to our knowing such facts, but propositional content is also communicated perceptually (something that is true in the aforementioned cases of natural meaning; by seeing cues of natural information, we pick up on propositional content—we grasp facts about a person’s emotions and thoughts and facts about weather and scenery).

Importantly, even though (3) constitutes “showing,” it still includes the notion of assertion, for Plantinga, insofar as “the filmmakers might be taken to be asserting that a scene shows what the pro-filmic event looked like, or approximates how the filmmakers ‘were appeared to.’” Getting clearer on this implicit assertion is key to Plantinga’s account, so let’s delve into it more fully.

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163 Plantiga, p. 110-11.
164 Plantiga, p. 111.
For Plantinga, the documentarian (and her film, as a result) makes this implicit assertion of veridicality “when” she “presents a film as a documentary.” I think we should take this to mean that the very categorization of the film carries the implicit assertion: given the genre—its history as well as viewers’ accompanying expectation of its tie to reality—a documentarian claims that her film abides by the convention and expectation of truth. She does this not through any particular formal techniques but through the very presentation of the film: through naming or categorizing it as a work within the genre.

I think we can take this idea of implicit assertion to be synonymous with (or, at least, very similar to) Grice’s “conversational implicature.”¹⁶⁵ For Plantinga, filmmakers don’t commit to their veridical representation by stating it explicitly, just as speakers don’t linguistically (based on the conventional meaning of the words they utter—or what they say) commit to their implicatures. But, by engaging in the convention of documentary film the filmmaker commits implicitly to providing a truthful depiction of reality—just as speakers of a language, in presenting themselves as being cooperative, commit implicitly to certain propositions their statements suggest. Importantly, other cases of implicit assertions that I’ve discussed and will continue to discuss (e.g., The Thin Blue Line implying that Adams was innocent, and Making a Murderer implying that Avery was innocent) are, I think, stronger than cases of Gricean implicature—insofar as the content of the film itself, and not the mere assumption of cooperation, suggests those propositions—and I’ll talk about this in the following section.

Plantinga’s account ties documentaries to truth in two ways: through the assertions they make about states of affairs and through the implicit assertion that they are truthfully representing the states of affairs. Of course, just how documentaries represent the world—and just what they take their subject matter to be—varies. Here we need to keep in mind the subjectivity and intentionality mentioned earlier. Indeed, this is something Plantinga discusses here:

What counts as assertedly veridical representation, however, differs in various contexts. For example, what is accepted as a veridical representation depends in

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Plantinga expands upon this by stating that veridical representation can include, among other things, “animated maps, occasional reenactments, the relatively loose use of archival footage, and so forth, as long as such images and sounds are not fundamentally misleading.” Part of this variation stems from subgenre differences.

If we watch The Gleaners and I, we are—or, at least throughout the viewing, become—aware of its nature as an essay film. We, correspondingly, expect representations of Agnes Varda’s subjectivity and techniques that enhance the film’s expressiveness, such as her filming her hand up close at various points throughout the movie in order to acknowledge her own mortality. We don’t expect what we expect from an expositional documentary: i.e., truthful propositions about a reality external to the filmmaker. If we watch an observational documentary like Frederick Wiseman’s Hospital, which is done in the cinema verité tradition, we expect (or come to expect) “no voice-over narration” and the use of “images and sounds recorded on location to present a portrait of New York’s Metropolitan Hospital.” If we watch Fahrenheit 9/11, we expect, among other things: an everyday-man depiction of Michael Moore and footage of interviews with politicians and governmental actions that support a socially liberal perspective. We don’t expect an unbiased look at the political landscape; we don’t expect an expositional documentary; and we don’t expect the “verité” style of movies like Hospital.

In these ways, we tweak our notion of ‘truthful representation’ so that it applies to the particular subgenre in which a film belongs. Because we expect essay films to accurately represent the filmmakers’ expressivity and subjectivity, we don’t consider Varda’s movies untruthful when they focus less on objective truths. Because we expect politically-motivated films to provide real footage that supports and motivates one political perspective, we don’t consider

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166 Plantiga, p. 112.
167 Plantiga, p. 112.
168 Plantiga, p. 110.
Moore’s movies non-veridical because they fail to show all sides of the story. What makes the movies accurate, what makes them trustworthy, depends upon their purposes.

Even more broadly: our knowledge of the plethora of genre-neutral techniques available to the documentarian further affect our expectations and conception of documentary veridicality. Realizing that *The Thin Blue Line* utilizes reenactments, we don’t expect the film to show us the actual people involved in the crime—and so its failure to do so doesn’t constitute a veridical failure. Watching *Exit Through the Gift Shop* and noticing that there doesn’t seem to be any objective presentation of facts (because there is no reliable narrator), we realize that the film is *about* the lack of objective presentation—and so its failure to provide one doesn’t constitute a veridical failure. As we learn what to expect from subgenres and what to expect from particular filmmakers (what their favored techniques and subject matters are), we apply a notion of “veridicality” that takes into account their aims and styles: one that doesn’t necessitate full-blown objectivity, one that preserves a broad conception of the category of “documentary,” one that—generally—acknowledges how intention and subjectivity are at play in complex and highly varied ways throughout filmmaking. We admit that different filmmakers and different films are focused on different “truths” and consequently employ different techniques in communicating them.

Acknowledging this variation needn’t (and shouldn’t) mean overlooking what all documentaries have in common: that they say something about the world and that they say something about their medium. Documentaries carry a norm of assertion that fiction films do not carry. Even though both represent their subjects artistically, only the former has events or people or places in the world as their direct subject, and only the former shed honest light on that subject (“honest light” being the very thing that alters).

Indeed, we can see documentaries more specifically as communicative utterances that carry Gricean nonnatural meaning. The director uses her film—which, importantly, partly engages in showing and therefore carries some natural meaning—in order to communicate (via explicit and implicit propositions) certain truths about a real-world subject matter; she implies, and thereby communicates, that her intention is to tell us such truths; we, aware of her intention to
communicate and the specific techniques she's using in order to do so, take hers to be an utterance that can communicate (directly and indirectly) facts about (some aspect of) the world. Plantinga's implicit assertion, because reflexive, in addition to an emphasis on our awareness of the variation in 'shedding honest light' can allow us to see documentaries as bearers of Gricean nonnatural meaning.169

Closely tied to this idea of communication is the idea of reliability. If documentaries aim to show us true facts about the world, in their nuanced and diverse ways, they are reliable when they actually do so—when, by watching them, we can come to true beliefs about the subject matter at hand. Documentaries are reliable when they serve as reliable guides to true beliefs. This amounts, more specifically, to (1) making true propositions (both explicit and implicit) and (2) providing an audiovisual array from which the spectator might reasonably be expected to form true beliefs about the subject.

Plantinga, in fact, includes the notion of reliability in his account, stating that, "documentary representation commits the filmmaker to assert the reliability or functionality of whatever materials are used to show the spectator how something is, was, or might be in the actual world."170 What makes a documentary reliable is that it presents us with (and, importantly, it asserts that it is) presenting us with) images and sounds that directly show us phenomenological aspects of the subject matter and (implicit and explicit) propositions which assert true facts about the subject matter—whether that subject matter be subjective, biased, or political in nature. On the other hand, documentary unreliability consists in leading us to false beliefs about people, events, or places in the world.

Using Alvin Goldman's definition of reliability we can bolster this discussion.171 For Goldman, reliability—or reliabilism—grounds the notion of belief-justification and applies primarily to cognitive belief-forming processes. While there are many complexities to his account and many

170 Plantinga, p. 111.
contemporary versions of it, we only need to work with his original, basic definition here. Goldman maintains that a belief is justified if and only if it was caused by a reliable process; and what makes a process (here a cognitive process, like perceptual processes, good reasoning, remembering, and introspection) reliable is its tendency to produce true beliefs.

Accounts of process reliabilism generally apply to cognitive processes, and I'm attempting to spell out ways in which movies can be reliable (or unreliable), but my discussion of the latter is really shorthand for a more complicated account. A movie's reliability (or unreliability) is determined by the cognitive processes it engages. When a movie engages viewers in cognitive processes that tend to produce true beliefs, the movie is reliable to that extent; when a movie engages viewers in cognitive processes that don't tend to produce true beliefs, the movie is unreliable. It's important here to note that, in line with epistemological accounts of reliability like Goldman's, the focus here is on process types—movies engage tokens of process-types that are or aren't reliable.

Process reliabilism can center on what a cognitive process actually does in the world—its history of producing true beliefs—or it can center on counterfactual, possible-world outcomes. In various ways, my account of film-viewing does the latter. I'm not interested in whether or not movies do in fact cause certain cognitive processes in viewers; I'm interested in whether or not, given the convention of documentary and viewers' general expectations of veridicality, a movie would—across various viewing situations—engage reliable cognitive processes. Assuming that we trust that what we're watching is a truthful depiction—and assuming that the movie presents itself as such a depiction—we treat the documentary as a Gricean utterance with nonnatural meaning. We take it as some sort of testimony to the facts (of a case or event or subject matter). When a documentary is honest in its testimony, it engages reliable cognitive processes. When it is deceptive in its testimony it engages unreliable cognitive processes.

There are more nuances we could specify here, but this basic account is enough for now. With this in mind, "the documentary is unreliable" really amounts to "the documentary calls on unreliable cognitive processes;" and "the documentary tends to produce false beliefs" or "the
documentary leads viewers to false beliefs” is shorthand for “the documentary engages a token of a cognitive process type that tends to produce false beliefs.” What’s more, given the counterfactual nature of my account, reference to what ‘we,’ as viewers, expect from a documentary or the cognitive processes ‘we’ engage in is reference to ‘attentive,’ or ‘ideal’ viewers—viewers who are taking the documentary at hand as a communicative utterance and who are aware of its epistemically-relevant features, perspectives, and aims (the features, perspectives, and aims that either make it an honest or a dishonest depiction).

With all of this in mind, let’s turn to an examination of documentary unreliability centered on how documentaries can lie and mislead. We’ll then be equipped to make the positive claims about fiction films’ epistemic directness.

Two Kinds of Documentary Unreliability

Theorists discuss documentary unreliability just as they do fiction unreliability. Sometimes they do so in order to distinguish between the two in the sort of way I will.\(^{172}\) Too often the focus is on unreliability via unreliable narrators: voice-over or character-narrators who say or imply false things about the subject matter presented, and whose unreliability we discover by noticing how their claims are inconsistent with the image track, what we know about the subject matter, or what other characters in the film say or imply about the subject matter.\(^{173}\) Theorists typically point to *Land without Bread, The Oath, and Exit Through the Gift Shop* as prime examples of this form of deception.

My focus in this section will be on something quite different: how documentaries can deceive without such narrators. Indeed, I think it’s important to point out that cases of unreliable

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narration via narrators in documentary are not really cases of unreliability: if the film itself exposes the speaker as unreliable, then the film itself is reliable. What we need is a conception of documentary unreliability according to which the movie deceives us. This is what I will map out here. I’ll argue that there are two chief ways in which documentaries can be unreliable: they can lie to us about their subject matters or they can mislead us about the perspectives they place upon their subject matters. Let’s start with the concept of lying.

Dirk Eitzen argues that the genre of documentary should be defined by its ability to lie. He states that, whether something is or is not a documentary depends on:

whether it is perceived in such a way that it makes sense to ask ‘might it be lying?’ I propose that the applicability of this question, ‘Might it be lying?’ is what distinguishes documentaries, and nonfiction in general, from fiction.

I think Plantinga gives a slightly more attractive—if only because more complete—account, but I don’t think Eitzen’s is as different from Plantinga’s as he takes it to be. Depending upon our notion of “lying,” Eitzen’s might require Plantinga’s—indeed, it might be no different from it. If we can only lie by making an assertion—implicit or explicit—then documentaries can only do the former because they do the latter. We’ll return to these concepts in a bit. For now, regardless of whether or not Eitzen’s is distinct from Plantinga’s, it’s not hard to find documentaries that lie via explicit propositions: Waiting for Superman provides incorrect statistics in its attempt to convince audiences of the superiority of a charter school education; Religulous falsely claims that the model of Jesus was copied from earlier religions; Blackfish says that it’s interviewing SeaWorld employees when it’s frequently interviewing animal rights activists; and Searching for Sugar Man tells us that singer Rodriguez was unsuccessful (when he was, in fact, highly popular).

In addition to making false explicit propositions, documentaries can lie via false implicit propositions. One subgenre regularly partakes in this sort of deception: nature documentaries. They often, among other things: (1) imply or state that the animals they’re showing are in the wild when they’re really in zoos; (2) imply or state that they’re showing us a space without humans.

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175 Eitzen, p. 89.
when in fact they’re just cropping people outside of the frame; (3) imply or state that they are
showing us genuine animalistic behavior—such as predator-prey interactions, killings, feedings,
or suicides—when those events have been staged.\footnote{One shocking example of staged interactions is found in the documentary \textit{White Wilderness}. In one scene, we’re shown a group of dead lemmings and are told that they committed suicide (and that they do this regularly), when in fact the lemmings were pushed off of a cliff using a rotating platform. This is an instance of explicit lying, but other cases of implication are: in \textit{BBC’s Frozen Planet} (which shows a captive polar bear at a Holland zoo) and in \textit{Wild America}, which staged many of its predator-prey interactions.}

Michael Moore does a similar thing in \textit{Bowling for Columbine}. He shows footage of
Charlton Heston saying “I have five words for you: from my cold head hands” alongside footage
from the Columbine massacre, implying that Heston was (coldly) referring to the massacre in his
statement. In reality, Heston made that comment a year after Columbine in response to someone
giving him a musket as a gift. What’s more, Moore states that there are 11,127 gun murders per
year in America, a statistic that—it was later discovered—is actually a combination of the figures
for murders, uses of guns for self-defense, and use of guns by the police. Similarly, the nature
documentary \textit{Blackfish} makes false suggestions in order to advance its claims against
SeaWorld’s treatment of killer whales, including its suggestion that one killer whale—Tilikum—
had become psychotic and that SeaWorld never informed Tilikum’s trainers of this fact.

These cases involve documentaries lying through their implicit propositions (or assertions). Nature documentaries imply—without directly stating—that the events and subjects
they’re filming are one thing (in the wild, genuine, etc) when they are another (in zoos, staged,
etc); and \textit{Bowling for Columbine}—through its tricky editing—implicitly asserts (falsely) that
Charlton Heston responded coldly to Columbine.

How do these movies make such implicit propositions? They do it partly through their
perceptual content—showing us Heston’s quotes interspersed with Columbine footage and
showing us activities of animals “in the wild.” They do it partly through the facts they leave out—
e.g., the fact that Charlton Heston said what he said in an entirely different context, and the fact
that there are humans just outside of the movie shots. And they do it partly through the
propositions they explicitly make—in the context of Michael Moore’s various statements regarding gun violence in America and similar statements his interviewees provide, we’re likely to interpret Heston as one among many citizens who hold fierce, irrational beliefs about guns. Implicit propositions are made through a combination of information-withholding, visual and aural content, and explicit propositions. When movies use those three avenues in order to imply false conclusions, they lie.

Any case of lying—whether it’s done via explicit propositions or implicit propositions— involves two forms of deception. First of all, the films lie about their subject matter: they make false claims about what is true in the real-world people, places, events, or things they examine. Secondly, they lie via their implicit assertion. The documentarian presents her film as a documentary, thereby implying that hers is a veridical representation of its subject matter. Insofar as she does not provide such a veridical representation, she lies to viewers about what she’s showing them.

This is where we need to be quite careful, however. For talk of implicit propositions or implicit assertions might seem incompatible with talk of lying. For many philosophers of language, “lying” requires, as Andreas Stokke puts it: “saying something one believes to be false with the intent to deceive one’s listener.” More specifically, it includes there being “a proposition p such that A says that p to B…” If we agree with these accounts, then “saying” or “asserting” is at the root of lying, where “asserting” consists in explicitly stating a proposition (it consists, in other words, in sentential or linguistic meaning—the conventional meaning of the words actually uttered). We must, consequently, admit that (1) there is no such thing as lying via reflexive implicit

assertion and that (2) cases like *Bowling for Columbine* and deceptive nature documentaries aren't cases of lying.

It wouldn't threaten my discussion here if I were to accept (1) and (2). Despite (1), we still have cases like *Religulous, Blackfish,* and *Searching for Sugar Man* that make false explicit propositions. And if we admit (2), we need to tweak our account of what's going on in these instances, specifically by talking of misleading rather than lying: many theorists differentiate between the two by specifying that the latter involves what *is said* being false and the former can involve what is suggested but *not said* being false. Endorsing both of these conclusions would enable us to understand two types of unreliability in documentary film and to recognize—as is my chief aim in this paper—how fiction films are incapable of both insofar as they cannot lie (i.e., they cannot provide false information about their fictional worlds) or mislead (i.e., they cannot withhold facts about their fictional worlds).

I don't think we need to be so quick to accept (1) and (2), however. First of all, we needn't equate what is said or asserted with what is explicitly stated—we can have a more pragmatic account according to which we, by making an utterance, sometimes say or assert more than what our sentences (conventionally) mean. Contextualists about language make precisely this move, maintaining that "contextual factors can pervasively 'intrude' into the semantics, to affect what a speaker says"—so that "what is said" can amount to more than the conventionally encoded meaning of the words uttered (and include, among other things, loose talk and metaphor).  

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adopt a contextualist view about implicit assertions, then what is said can include what is implied, in which case the implicit assertion Plantinga discusses and the implicit propositions documentaries make about their subject matter are all actual assertions—instances of saying. We can thereby adopt the ‘lying requires saying’ view and still make sense of the cases discussed so far as cases of two-fold (subject-matter-level and reflexive-level) lying.

Another route we can take is to equate what is said or asserted with sentential (or linguistic) meaning, in which case implicit assertions are not a part of what is said (even though they are a part of what is meant), but claim that we can lie via implicit propositions. Theorists have defended this move as well, maintaining that we can lie about what we merely implicate and, more generally, that we can lie while saying the truth. Again, I don’t think it threatens my aims here to endorse this or the previous saying-includes-implicating view. I am most convinced by this final take on the matter, though: according to which we (1) say what we merely assert, where that is cashed out in sentential meaning, (2) often imply more than we say, and (3) can lie via (1) or (2).

Here it’s important to clarify just what I mean by ‘implicit assertion’ or ‘implicit proposition.’ First of all, the sort of implicit propositions I’m talking about aren’t what we might think of as logical entailments: i.e., saying something that logically implies another statement, and thereby committing ourselves to the content of the latter. I don’t think that we can make sense of images logically entailing some proposition, and—as I stated—a documentary’s implicit propositions are

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supported in part by the image-track and sound-track; at the very least, I’m not prepared to
defend how that would be the case. At the same time, the implicit assertions I’m discussing aren’t
mere cases of Gricean implicature. For Grice, implicatures are communicated via what is said
and the conversational context. By itself, what is stated—the utterance—does not communicate
the contents implicated; this is precisely why saying one statement in one context can implicate x
when it doesn’t implicate x in another conversational context. What the hearer appeals to is the
cooperative principle and its various maxims; assuming that the speaker is being cooperative, the
listener concludes that the speaker means more than, or something distinct from what, she says.

I think Plantinga’s implicit assertion is a case of implicature as I argued earlier. And
perhaps some other cases of implicit assertions are as well: perhaps ‘nature documentaries’
engage in implicature when they show us shots without people and thereby implicate that there
are no people—maybe all we appeal to here is our idea of the movie as a nature documentary.
But the cases of implicature I’ve been focusing most on are broader than this; they have to do
with implying things via the shots and via the explicit propositions in the film. And in this sense
they stem from the content of the utterance (if we think of the film as an utterance here) more
than Grice’s implicatures do. Rather than being as context-sensitive as conversational
implicatures, these implicit assertions are communicated—or should be communicated—
regardless of the particular viewer or the particular (viewing) situation. I think that, for this reason,
they carry more commitment than conversational implicatures (and that it’s perhaps more
plausible to think of them as capable of lying).

With this in mind, let’s cash out just how this is a form of unreliability. We can grasp it by
returning to the idea of documentaries as (Gricean) communicative utterances. When we watch a
documentary, we treat it as a veridical representation. While the notion of veridicality varies, and
while we keep a flexible conception of it in mind, at the very least we expect that what we’re
watching isn’t a lie: that the explicit and implicit claims are not false. More specifically: we expect
that, if the film is meeting its implicit assertion of veridicality—if it’s maintaining the normative
standard of documentary film—its claims are not false. So viewers treat the documentary’s claims

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as testimony to the facts of the subject matter at hand. More specifically: they take the
documentary’s claims as input and form further conclusions or beliefs based on that input. Now,
when a documentary lies, viewers are taking a deceptive testifier’s claims as input, and herein
lies the link to a more general unreliable process-type: generally, any cognitive process that
involves trusting a deceiver, any process that takes a deceptive testifier’s claim as input to further
beliefs, will tend to produce false—not true—beliefs. A documentary that lies is, thus, engaging a
token of an unreliable cognitive process-type. Of course, there are a few other ways we might try
to cash this out. Perhaps, for instance, rather than see this as ‘taking a testifier’s claims as input,’
we should see it as ‘taking the belief that the testifier is truthful as input.’ Either way, the cognitive
process will not be a reliable one.

I think this is the primary type of unreliability that documentaries can possess. And,
although I haven’t made this explicit yet, the notion of ‘lying’ here is centered on the idea of
intentional deception—i.e., the documentarian is purposefully presenting or suggesting false
information with her film. It might be difficult, if not impossible, to find evidence for this intent to
deceive, but I think we can assume in some instances that—based on the type of documentary at
hand, and the aims the documentarian has in showing her film—it is at play. There may be other
cases of accidental deception, cases in which a documentarian makes certain explicit or implicit
propositions in her film which she doesn’t realize are false. We might be wary of calling this lying,
since—as Stoke puts it—lying is typically assumed to consist in “saying something one believes
to be false with the intent to deceive one’s listener.” So perhaps cases of accidental deception
constitute their own category of unreliability.

It’s hard to find instances of this, primarily because (1) it often seems like the deception at
play is intentional and (2) the documentarian should have evidence and facts at her disposal
(given the responsibility of veridical representation she’s taken upon herself) that enable her to
communicate truthful propositions. Still, there are cases that we can appeal to here, such as
ethnographic documentaries. These films take themselves to be informing us about a particular
group of people and unintentionally present that group as ‘savage’ or ‘other.’ In this sort of case,
the filmmakers are dishonest with themselves or—to be more precise—don’t realize the implications of what they’re representing. This should, it seems, constitute a type of unreliability insofar as (1) trusting the film’s representation will cause us to form mistaken assumptions about the subjects and (2) any film that doesn’t recognize its own implications can’t be trusted as a guide to truth. Still, it’s distinct from the case of lying since the intent to deceive is absent.

There is more to be said about this potential second category of unreliability, but let’s turn, now to a second (I’m not treating ‘accidental deception’ as its own category for now) category. My discussion of it will be more complicated than the first, partly because I only have one film to appeal to here and partly because I think it might seem conceptually problematic. Let’s start with an example.

*Making a Murderer* is a Netflix documentary special that has caused quite an outrage recently. The film presents a particular perspective on an issue: a perspective of a convicted murderer’s innocence. In order to construct its perspective, it is careful in its selection and arrangement of content. We view scenes in which police investigators are behaving incompetently and manipulatively (interviewing convinced murderer Steven Avery and his nephew, Brendan Dassey, individually without their respective lawyers present and manipulating them into admitting to the murder of Teresa Halbach) and are producing ‘evidence’ that seems planted—for instance, a key at Halbach’s apartment which was found in plain sight seven days into a nine-day long investigation of Avery’s property. Throughout the film, the Manitowoc County sheriff’s department appears to be framing Avery for the murder or (at least) appears too eager to convict him of it. *Making a Murderer* constructs its perspective by withholding facts, including relatively unquestionable evidence that links Avery to the crime as well as facts about Avery’s past that show his history with violence (which I’ll detail soon). Withholding facts in and of itself isn’t problematic: all documentaries do it to a certain degree, and openly opinionated or one-sided documentaries do it especially. The problem with *Making a Murderer* is that it hides its one-sidedness.
Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos, Making a Murderer’s directors, are nearly nonexistent in the film. No voice-over narration hints at Avery’s innocence, and we do not see the filmmakers on the screen (in fact, it’s hard to tell when they—and not reporters—are performing the on-screen interviews). This absence combined with further techniques trick us into thinking we are watching a more objective presentation of the case than we are. For instance, the first episode presents a visual timeline of the events and then seemingly shows those events in order. This chronology suggests that we are merely seeing the events unfold as they occurred, watching the timeline take shape rather than watching a biased interpretation of those events. What’s more, throughout the series, the shots largely consist of people (including Avery’s defense attorney and family members) who attest to Avery’s innocence and a plethora of non-subjective evidence suggesting the same: e.g., recordings of Manitowoc County officials, recordings of investigators’ manipulative interviews with Avery and Dassey, trial proceedings, footage from news outlets, etc. Because of this plethora of seemingly-objective content, it really seems like the evidence (for Avery’s innocence) is speaking for itself.

While the aforementioned evidence for Avery’s innocence is prioritized in the film, evidence for his guilt is omitted. Handcuffs and leg irons were found in Avery’s trailer; DNA from his epithelial cells was found on the hood latch of Halbach’s car; a bullet in Avery’s garage, which contained Halbach’s DNA on it, was fired from the same model rifle above Avery’s bed; and Halbach’s camera and cellphone were found in the burn pit behind Avery’s trailer. In addition to leaving these facts out, Ricciardi and Demos fail to share information about Avery’s past—for instance that at the time of Halbach’s disappearance, he was being investigated for the alleged sexual assault of a teenage female relative.

Making a Murderer implicitly asserts that Steven Avery is innocent. It does this via visual and aural content (of the investigations, manipulative interviews, footage of trial proceedings, etc) and directly asserted propositions (claims made by Avery’s defense attorneys and family members). Because the film is—on the surface—an objective investigation into the case (one that reaches the conclusion that Avery is innocent), we believe that Avery is innocent as a result of
watching the film. Indeed, viewers believed this so strongly that almost 130,000 people signed a petition asking the president to pardon Avery and his nephew “for their wrongful conviction in the connection to the murder of Teresa Halbach.” They reached this conclusion by assuming objectivity in the film and not knowing about further facts regarding the case’s evidence and Avery’s background. Had they (1) been aware of those withheld facts, or (2) known that the film was setting out to show Avery’s innocence by providing a subjective presentation of the case, they likely would’ve formed more qualified beliefs—taking the film to show just one side of the story, expecting evidence to the contrary, and hesitating from making the quick judgment of innocence. Now, not all one-sided documentaries engage in this deception. As problematic as Michael Moore is as documentarian, for instance—because of the lying his movies often engage in—one strength he has consists in his openness. To see this, let’s return to Bowling for Columbine.

Michael Moore’s movies are typically, among other things, critical commentaries on the American government. Bowling for Columbine is no exception. In the film, Moore ostensibly examines why the Columbine massacres occurred, strongly suggesting that America’s history of and preoccupation with gun violence bears responsibility. This film is by no means objective; it presents its story from one socially liberal perspective. Indeed, as is the case with all of Moore’s films, it is particularly blunt in its support for its perspective. This brazenness gives the film a form of reliability.

While Ricciardi and Demos and absent in their film, Moore’s voice-over and on-screen narration make his opinions and evaluations as much a part of the film as the footage he shows. And he combines this openness with other transparent filmic techniques—interviewing highly conservative individuals whose answers will likely seem extreme and ridiculous (at one point, Moore speaks with a teenager in a local bar who bemoans the fact that he wasn’t placed at the top of his high school’s “bomb threat” list) and playing sarcastic music—“What a Wonderful World” and “Happiness is a Warm Gun”—alongside montages of gun violence and military destruction. Through these techniques, Bowling for Columbine is open about its subjectivity—it’s
open about the perspective it’s presenting its story from and its aims in doing so. This openness makes us, as attentive viewers, able to form appropriately qualified beliefs about the subject matter at hand. Since we know we’re seeing one liberal side of the story, we don’t (if we’re attentive viewers) draw general conclusions about the American government’s history of gun violence; at most, we take the film as some evidence or support for one possible conclusion.

*Making a Murderer* fails in just the way that *Bowling for Columbine* succeeds: it doesn’t make its perspective apparent. It isn’t honest with viewers about the fact that it is withholding facts. I think this lack of openness constitutes a form of unreliability: the film cannot be trusted as a reliable guide to truth because it uses viewers’ mistaken assumptions about its perspective in order to guide viewers to ill-informed—albeit perhaps not false—beliefs about its subject matter.

More carefully, returning to the idea of documentaries as communicative utterances, we can make sense of what’s going on in *Making a Murderer* as just another token of the process-type at work in instances of lying. Here, as in the previous cases, we’re taking a deceptive testifier’s claims as input, or we’re taking ‘the belief that the testifier is trustworthy’ as input for the formation of further beliefs.

At this general level I think we can see *Making a Murderer* as the same sort of unreliability as instances of lying. We can also, though, specify the processes at work here more specifically; and at a lower level, they’re slightly different. Lying involves making false propositions—either explicitly or implicitly—about the subject matter. It involves saying or suggesting untrue things about the people, places, things, or events it’s showing us. If we trust a liar, we take false claims as true, and we form further conclusions based on our mistaken assumption of their truth. When documentaries mislead, the footage they present may be true, as is the footage in *Making a Murderer*. They might be leading us to true beliefs about the subject (*Making a Murderer* does this to a certain extent, as Manitowoc County officials did behave incompetently during the investigation, and the film may even be correctly implying that Avery is innocent or was framed). There need be nothing false about what they are showing, saying, or suggesting. Their deceptiveness amounts to being dishonest about their aims; in *Making a
Murderer’s case, this is done via formal techniques that suggest an objective perspective (albeit, of course, not a fully objective perspective) from which the filmmakers are not operating. If we trust this sort of deceiver, we aren’t necessarily taking as true claims about a subject that are false. Instead, something more nuanced in going on.

In cases like Making a Murderer, we (1) take the testifier’s claims as true; (2) assume that the information in those claims is sufficient for us to draw further conclusions about the subject; and (3) thereby draw further conclusions about the subject. (2) is where the unreliability really lies. This type of unreliability amounts to using information as sufficient evidence when, in fact, it isn’t sufficient evidence. We engage in a cognitive process that involves placing too much stake in the information we’re given—it involves drawing conclusions based on insufficient evidence (evidence that is insufficient either because there is competing evidence that we’re unaware of or because there just isn’t enough evidence to support any fixed conclusion). And this type of cognitive process will, I think, tend to produce true beliefs less frequently than it tends to produce false beliefs. So, although in this specific case, we could very well be forming true conclusions about the subject matter, we’re (1) using a false belief about the film in order to draw our further conclusions and (2) thereby engaging in a token of a cognitive process that generally tends to produce false beliefs.

As I mentioned at the outset, this type of unreliability is less plausible, conceptually, than the first. First of all, there aren’t many films that engage in it (Making a Murderer is the only one I’ve found), and so it doesn’t really seem like a general form of unreliability that documentaries engage in. What’s more, my description of Bowling for Columbine’s reliability is perhaps questionable, partly because the very same film lies, and partly because my account of it almost sounds like “it’s reliable because it’s open about the fact that it might be unreliable.” I stated that viewers who pick up on the techniques (that signal bias) are able to form appropriately qualified beliefs. But doesn’t this just mean that we, as viewers, don’t really trust that what we’re watching is giving us an honest portrayal of the American government? Doesn’t our awareness of the fact that we’re watching a subjective presentation prevent us from drawing solid conclusions about the
subject matter? If this is the case, then ‘reliability’ here has become something strange: it consists in a movie being open about the deception it might partake in so that we refrain from forming beliefs on the basis of what we’re watching. I can’t discard these worries in full here, but I think there are some defenses available.

The chief thing to keep in mind is the difference between ‘forming false beliefs about the subject matter’ and ‘refraining from forming beliefs about the subject matter.’ I’ve been treating ‘unreliability’ as the former; a movie is unreliable when it makes us think that something false is true about a state of affairs in the world or when it misleads us into forming ill-informed beliefs (i.e., beliefs that may be true but are formed with the use of false information) about a state of affairs, thereby (in both cases) engaging unreliable cognitive processes. What Michael Moore’s movies do is something quite different: they make us hesitate from forming beliefs full-stop. When we’re aware that a film is one-sided (because of its open subjectivity), we typically remain hesitant, not knowing what to believe about 9/11 or global warming (as in *An Inconvenient Truth*) or the treatment of dolphins (as in *The Cove*).

Now, this is precisely where the worry above arises: how can a film be reliable if it makes us question its presentation of facts? But this is also, I think, where the worry should dissipate: what we have here is a high-level honesty (about a film’s aims) preventing us from being taken in by whatever low-level dishonesty (the explicit or implicit claims it makes regarding its subject matter) it might partake in. If an openly-opinionated movie lies to us, as nearly every such film is accused of doing, we aren’t deceived by its lies.182 And if it doesn’t lie, if the information it presents—while biased—is accurate, then it leads us to true beliefs about the subject matter.

Things do get more complicated here though because, keeping in mind type one unreliability—which many opinionated documentaries engage in—we’ve already maintained that

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182 Just a few examples of other politically or socially motivated documentaries that are one-sided and have been accused of lying (through presenting false information, making false implications, or staging scenes): *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Sicko*, *2016 Obama’s America*, *The Prosecution of an American President*, and *The Cove*. The list goes on, as nearly every such motivated documentary—even when thoroughly open about its subjectivity, as all of the aforementioned films are—is accused of being propaganda or of manipulating audiences through untruthful film practices.
*Bowling for Columbine* is deceptive. What do we do with this co-existence? Does the fact that a documentary’s openness prevents attentive viewers from believing its false statements or implications eliminate that initial form of deception? We seemingly have two options: (1) claiming that these sorts of films (e.g., Michael Moore’s) are reliable full-stop because their higher-level reliability eliminates their apparent low-level unreliability, or (2) claiming that they are unreliable full-stop because their openness just makes us aware of their potential unreliability and shouldn’t be, in and of itself, considered a form of reliability.

If we take option (2), and if we still want to make sense of how *Making a Murderer* is unreliable, then we need a different comparison class, a different sort of documentary that is reliable in the way that *Making a Murderer* is not. One option here, and perhaps the best one, is to say that the only openly-opinionated documentaries that are reliable in this respect are those that don’t lie. I think we’d be hard-pressed to find movies that fall within this camp, as nearly every openly-opinionated documentary is accused of lying either implicitly or explicitly. One odd but potentially helpful category here is ‘reality tv shows.’ While they aren’t *really* documentaries, let alone aesthetically valuable ones, they do possess a high-level reliability *without* engaging in low-level unreliability. Viewers are aware that, for the purposes of maintaining viewership, the producers of reality shows edit footage and conduct interviews which make events and interactions between people (contestants on a cooking show, or contestants on *The Bachelor*, for instance) appear more dramatic than they actually are. Still, we know that we aren’t *really* watching lies either. We’re seeing real people with real stories engaging in real activities. We’re seeing genuine interactions between people, and events and interviews that did take place. Perhaps in this respect, as odd as it may sound, reality tv shows constitute the chief documentaries that engage in high-level reliability (i.e., being open about bias or potential manipulation) *without* lying.

Let’s look now at option (1). As Plantinga discusses, with regards to the implicit assertion of veridical representation, the documentarian presents her film as an honest depiction. As I mentioned earlier, this is a case of Gricean implicature: just as we grasp conversational
implicatures by appeal to the cooperative principle and its maxims, so too we grasp a
documentary’s implicature (of veridical representation) by appeal to an analogous cooperative
principle. Now, when a documentary is open about its one-sidedness, or open about its bias, this
is seemingly a case in which we are no longer expecting Grice’s cooperative communicative
context: because it’s clear to the viewer that there may be manipulation of some sort at play,
given the film’s purposes, she takes herself to be in a less honest situation, one in which the film
may suggest or imply false conclusions about the subject in order to convince viewers of its
particular perspective on the subject. We might think that, by being open with viewers about this
potential deception via film techniques that make its purposes and subjectivity clear, a
documentary can eliminate the deceptiveness of its false implications altogether.

Let’s think about this more carefully. The idea here is that, because of the film’s
openness, viewers are no longer in a position to take the film as testimony to the facts of the
subject matter; they aren’t in a position to believe the claims made by the documentarian (via her
film). Hence, when the film lies, no cognitive process like ‘taking a deceptive testifier’s claims as
true’ occurs. In fact, we might think that a particularly reliable cognitive process occurs. Since
we’re careful to form judgments about the subject throughout film-viewing, we’re likely to (1) take
the film’s claims as constituting just one account of the story at hand; (2) look outside of the film
for validation of those claims; and (3) form further conclusions about the subject that are either in
line with the film’s (if a sufficient number of external claims supports the film’s) or that diverge
from the film’s (if we find external evidence to the contrary). This amounts to a combination of
gathering evidence and remaining hesitant to form beliefs until a sufficient amount of evidence
points to further conclusions. And the cognitive processes involved here are highly reliable. We
might even think they simply combine two of the processes Goldman himself deems reliable:
good reasoning and introspection.

So, I think we should take option (2). Movies like Bowling for Columbine are reliable full-
stop insofar as their higher-level honesty prevents viewers from engaging unreliable cognitive
processes (even when they lie). We can take option (1), and it wouldn’t threaten the discussion of

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unreliability I’m focusing on here: we can (and should) agree that *Making a Murderer* is deceptive (and that it’s deceptive because it falsely presents itself as an objective presentation of information) even if we disagree over just how a movie can be reliable in the way that this film fails to be. Still, insofar as most openly-opinionated documentaries are accused of lying, and insofar as I think we need to do justice to the high-level honesty such films possess, option (2) seems preferable.

As I mentioned at the outset, type two unreliability is complicated. Before concluding this section, it’s worth it to tackle just one more question about this phenomenon. I’ve presented *Making a Murderer*’s dishonesty as a form of misleadingness, and I’ve argued that it does not constitute a case of lying. We might question this distinction.

Keeping in mind Plantinga’s account, all documentaries implicitly assert that they are veridical representations—where the definition of “veridical” varies from genre to genre and filmmaker to filmmaker. Given this, we can reframe what I’ve said about *Making a Murderer* in this way: the movie implicitly asserts that it is one kind of representation when it is a different kind. It implicitly asserts, via its formal techniques and the content of the images it shows us, that it is merely representing the case of *Avery’s* trial. In fact, it is representing the case of *Avery’s innocence*. Is this, then, just another case of lying via false implicit assertion?

If this does constitute a case of lying, it’s importantly different from the ones previously discussed: those involved making false claims about the subject matter and therefore making a false claim of veridical representation, while this kind only involves the latter. Where we land on this is more a matter of terminology. There is one complication with making this move, though, and I’m therefore hesitant to do it.

If we claim that *Making a Murderer* is lying in this way, then it seems to me that we are re-defining (or expanding upon) what Plantinga’s implicit assertion consists in. On the one hand, and this is the sense in which I’ve used it (and the sense in which he seems to use it) it means “implicitly asserting that the representation is a veridical representation of the subject matter” where that includes (1) not lying about that subject matter and (2) presenting visual and aural...
content that gives viewers an accurate sense of its phenomenology. Documentaries lie via this implicit assertion when they do not represent their subject matter veridically.

The sort of unreliability I've outlined for *Making a Murderer*’s does not involve false explicit or implicit propositions about the subject matter. In this sense, it doesn’t—at least not straightforwardly—consist in lying about being a veridical representation. Instead, it involves dishonesty about what kind of veridical representation it is; it involves pretending to be an objective presentation when it is subjective one. This means that, if we claim that *Making a Murderer* lies here, we need to admit one of two things: (1) that Plantinga’s implicit assertion contains within it an implicit assertion about what perspective the film is taking or (2) that there is another implicit assertion, alongside Plantinga’s, that makes this further claim. Both alternatives complicate matters. Specifically, they require something that Plantinga’s implicit assertion does not require: reflexivity about the formal techniques and perceptual content used in the film.

The only way in which a documentary makes its perspective clear, the only way it can claim to be one sort of 'look' at a subject, is through the formal techniques it uses and the sights and sounds it shows us—techniques and content that either suggest subjectivity as Michael Moore’s films do or techniques and content that suggest objectivity as *Making a Murderer* does. Here, then, the filmmaker doesn’t just make her implicit assertion by presenting and categorizing the film as a documentary: she makes an implicit assertion by employing particular stylistic and formal methods. Now, there’s nothing inherently wrong with this conclusion. But if we endorse it, we end up turning the documentary film into an almost entirely linguistic tool of communication: one that asserts through its artistic techniques and perceptual (visual and aural) content. I think we then run the risk of overlooking the extent to which documentaries show information.

It’s one thing to say that the documentary filmmaker asserts her film’s veridicality by presenting it as a documentary; it’s another to say that she does this and asserts what kind of representation it is through her stylistic choices. The former enables us to look at the film more closely, examine just what is shown and said about the subject matter, and admit that the “showing” outstrips and remains importantly independent of the “saying.” The latter requires us to
take a notion of assertion with us when we engage in that examination—interpreting what is shown and said as constituting *one of the propositions that is asserted*. Perhaps this isn’t problematic. But, at the very least, we’d need to clarify this account more clearly before we can see what it requires of our interpretations of documentaries. Until we provide such an account, it seems wisest to stick with Plantinga and to—as a result—deem this example of *Making a Murderer* a case of misleading but not lying.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I’ve defined two types of documentary unreliability. One central thing grounds, or enables, both of them: the relation documentaries bear to the world. As Shen puts it: “the discovery of various kinds or degrees of fictionalization [in autobiography] is based on the very fact that there exists an extra textual reality for distinguishing the fictional from the factual.”

The phrase “extra-textual reality” is key here: it’s only *because* such a reality exists that documentaries can lie about their subjects. Indeed, we typically search that extra-textual reality (finding information online, in interviews, and the like) to check for a documentary’s accuracy.

What enables a documentary to lie is precisely the fact that it doesn’t construct its own truths; it isn’t responsible for settling whether or not what it communicates about 9/11 or Steven Avery or Randall Dale Adams is true—the world is. What enables a documentary to mislead is precisely the fact that it doesn’t create the truths, or information, in its subject matter; it isn’t responsible for settling whether or not there’s additional information (information it may not be showing us) about a real-world event or person—the world is. In other words: the divide between what is *shown or said as true* about a subject matter in a documentary and *the actual truth* about that subject matter enables (1). This divide doesn’t exist in fiction film; and because it doesn’t, fiction films cannot possess either type of unreliability we’ve discussed in this chapter. In the next chapter, I will argue for precisely this point.

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In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which documentaries can be unreliable. In this chapter, I’ll turn to fiction film. My chief thesis will be that fiction films cannot be unreliable in the ways that documentaries can and that this—combined with their phenomenological immediacy—makes them epistemically direct. As we did in beginning our discussion of documentaries, let’s lay out some important preliminaries, the primary two being: (1) who is the ‘audience,’ and (2) what settles a fiction film’s facts?

(1) is the same as it was in the previous chapter. Here I’ll be discussing an ideal audience, one that imaginatively engages with the fiction film and reacts (emotionally and cognitively) in the way prescribed by the work. The notion of ‘prescribed responses’ is a complicated one, but it’s one that many theorists depend (and expand) upon. The general idea is that an appeal to prescribed responses (or ideal audiences) is necessary for us to uncover the features a work actually possesses—what (moral, emotional, and cognitive) perspectives it takes toward the narrated events, people, and places; what characteristics those events, people, and places have (which we deduce partly from the perspectives placed upon them). Insofar as this is the sort of analysis I’m interested in, the ‘audience’ is one who picks up on precisely these features by engaging in a game of make-believe. For similar reasons, in addition to the ones mentioned in the previous chapter, I’m implicitly adopting a hypothetical or constructed concept of the ‘author.’

More broadly, facts are communicated in fiction film via four central things: (1) explicit stating; (2) implication; (3) our expectations of genre, style, or storytelling conventions; and (4) showing. In this way, some content is communicated explicitly, and some requires the sort of extrapolation and appeal to intention that we discussed with nonfiction film. We’ll get clearer on this throughout the chapter, as I specify just what content is ‘shown’ in a film, and what a fiction
film implies (as well as how it implies), especially when I discuss principles of generation that depend upon our real-world knowledge for the construction of fictional truths. For now, it’s important to note that this is a roughly Gricean model, albeit one that allows for a non-Gricean ‘showing’ (which partly involves the cues of natural meaning that we discussed in chapter one).

Turning to the question of what settles a fiction film’s facts or truths, there are two related questions: (1) what are the facts about in a fiction? And (2) what settles those facts? Because of the nature of fiction film, (2) will be much more nuanced than it was in our analysis of documentary film. Let’s look at each one in turn.

(1) is a question of ontology. It asks: what are fictional entities, characters, and worlds? Theorists fall into two broad camps here: realist theories and anti-realist ones. The latter come in several varieties, but the most prominent and plausible is a pretense theory endorsed by (among other theorists) Kendall Walton. For pretense theorists, we pretend that fictional entities exist for the sake of engaging in a work of fiction when, in reality, they do not exist (and therefore statements about them are always literally false). There are several merits with this sort of anti-realist view, but I won’t be adopting it here.

Within the realist camp, there are three chief routes theorists take: a Meinongian one, a kind-theory one, and an artifactualist one. I won’t be discussing the first, partly because it encounters several difficulties not worth discussing. The second—the kind-theory—defines fictional characters as “‘person-kinds’ which do exist.”¹⁸⁴ For such theorists, characters are abstract entities which exist prior to their creation—authors and storytellers select them “from among all the available possibilia”—and are metaphysical ‘kinds’ made up of all and only “those properties the work attributes” to them.¹⁸⁵

Artifactualist theorists, like kind-theorists, consider fictional entities abstract in nature; the chief difference between them is that artifactualists define such entities not by appeal to the properties they’re fictionally ascribed but by appeal to their creation. So, for instance, Sherlock

¹⁸⁵ Thomasson, p. 8.
Holmes is defined as "a character created by Arthur Conan Doyle, who modeled Holmes on a medical doctor" rather than a person-kind that has properties of "being a man, smoking a pipe, etc." For artifactualists, like Amie Thomasson, fictional characters are abstract individuals that have a purely contingent existence dependent upon the storyteller’s "activities in writing or telling stories;" they do not possess the sort of Platonic existence kind-theorists attribute to them.

I favor an artifactualist view for a few reasons, most primarily: (1) it aligns more strongly with our intuition that storytellers create, rather than merely define, the entities in their works; and (2) it avoids one implausible commitment of kind-theorists, namely that "no fictional character could have had any properties other than those they are ascribed." So I’ll be adopting the artifactualist model.

The general model of artifactualism is: a storyteller brings characters into existence by creating works in which they inhere; within those works, the storyteller engages us in a game of pretense according to which she pretends to assert things (and we pretend to believe things) about those characters; the storyteller ascribes certain properties to the characters via those pretend assertions. This last claim is, I think, one of the toughest to clarify, and Thomasson isn’t as helpful as she might be with regards to it. On the one hand, she seems to maintain that the propositions in a work (propositions that tell the story of the fiction, e.g., “Sherlock Holmes has a partner named Watson; Sherlock Holmes smokes a pipe”) ascribe actual properties to a character, stating:

The artifactualist typically treats historical continuity—not properties ascribed—as the primary factor for the identity of a fictional character. This leaves open the idea that an author might have described a character somewhat differently than she did, and allows that a later author may prescribe new properties to a preexisting fictional character, provided she is familiar with that character and intends to refer back to it and ascribe it new properties.

If we take Thomasson literally here, it seems that a work’s pretend-assertions function to actually give abstract entities characteristics. But it’s not clear how an author “can refer back to a

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186 Thomasson, p. 10.
187 Thomasson, p. 10.
188 Thomasson, p. 12.
189 Thomasson, p. 13.
character and ascribe it certain properties (by pretending to assert more things about it)” 211. If the statements of a novel, or other fictional work, do just “pretend to assert various things, i.e., of Sherlock Holmes, they pretend to assert that he smokes a pipe,” and if—in this way—the properties ascribed to the characters aren’t literally properties the characters can possess, then it seems that no properties are genuinely ascribed to the character via the work’s propositions. Thomasson seems in line with this and thus goes against what the above passage implies when she states:

According to the pretense invoked by the story, Frankenstein’s monster was a creation of Dr. Frankenstein, but really it is a fictional character created by Mary Shelley; and according to the pretense invoked by the story, Sherlock Holmes is a detective, but really Holmes is a fictional character who thus cannot be called upon to solve crimes. 190

So Thomasson seems slightly contradictory when it comes to the idea of prescribed properties. My own view is that no genuine properties are ascribed to characters via pretend assertions; they are ‘pretend properties’ that the character does not genuinely possess. Within the game of make-believe, we imagine things like “Sherlock Holmes is a man,” and “he has a partner named Watson.” These statements are literally false; insofar as characters are abstract entities, they cannot literally be men, and they cannot literally smoke pipes. Outside of our game of make-believe, the true assertions we make about characters are the sort that Thomasson identifies, ones that center on their creation—e.g., “that Sherlock Holmes is a character created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle”—and that correctly ascribe to them an abstract, contingent, existence.

Artifactualism is a view about fictional characters and entities in general. When discussing movies, we need to clarify or expand upon a few of the theory’s commitments. Initially, artifactualism might seemingly help us makes sense of perceptual engagement. Since it considers fictional characters individual entities, it makes intuitively unproblematic the notion that we can perceptually experience them in the same way we experience other individual entities in

the world (whereas it would be much more difficult to substantiate the claim that we can perceptually experience characters as ‘kinds’ composed of a bundle of properties).

On the other hand, insofar as artifactualism is committed to the abstract existence of fictional characters, the idea of perceptual engagement runs into a bit of a problem. For Thomasson, fictional characters are “clearly abstract in some sense” and "lack a spatio-temporal location (and are not material).” Given what I’ve said about ‘perceiving the fictional’ during film-viewing, we might think that I either have to discard this aspect of Thomasson’s view—at least with regard to movies, plays, television shows, and the like—or discard my commitment to genuine perceptual engagement.

In fact, though, I don’t need to discard either commitment. It is the case the characters are abstract. It’s also the case that we experience them perceptually and thus as physically instantiated. Here’s why: whether or not a character is merely abstract or physically instantiated (and therefore perceivable) depends upon what sort of seeing-as we’re engaging in. In chapter two, I spelled out three different seeing-as experiences, each of which consists in a combination of the cognitive and perceptual. What we need to keep in mind here, with regards to my account of seeing the fictional, is that that experience only takes place if we’re imaginatively engaged in the pretense. Much like our ability to see and hear fictional worlds depends upon whether we’re attending to the fictional or the nonfictional, so too a character’s existence (as merely abstract or embodied) depends upon whether we’re attending to the fictional or the nonfictional.

With this in mind, there are two answers to the question ‘are characters spatio-temporally located in film?’ At the nonfictional, real-world, level: no. In fact, characters are abstract entities created by storytellers, and actors portray (but do not physically become) them. At the fictional, pretense, level: yes. Through imaginative engagement, the actors become the characters and the sets become the fictional worlds. By pretending that Daniel Day-Lewis is Daniel Plainview, and by imagining seeing the former as the latter, I do see the former as the latter. I have a genuinely

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perceptual experience of the character because my cognition—my imagining—is bound up, intimately and inseparably, with what’s (perceptually) on the film screen.

Much of what I’ve been talking about, in answering the ontological question, centers on the idea of pretense—of pretending to assert or pretending to believe things about the fictional world. This concept of pretense bleeds into the second aforementioned question—i.e., what makes something fictionally true (or what settles the facts of a fiction)? If we consider characters abstract entities brought to life by their creators, and if we—with Thomasson—maintain that imaginative engagement consists in pretending that characters have certain properties and that they engage in certain actions, the question here is: which pretend assertions, which pretend beliefs, are true in that imaginative world? What makes it the case that a character does fictionally possess certain properties or that a certain plot event does fictionally happen?

One intuitive place to start here is with the account of fictional truth Gregory Currie provides. Currie grounds his thesis upon the notion of ‘taking a text as evidence,’ stating: “the proposal is not that fictional truth coincides with what the author believes…but that it coincides with what the text provides evidence for him believing” (hence supporting a hypothetical rather than actual intentionalist model). What the text provides evidence for coincides with (or is just a matter of) what a reasonable, informed viewer would think the author believed (here Currie maintains the model of a hypothetical, ideal reader I’ve been endorsing). This ‘reader’ can be understood either as someone who mistakenly thinks that work is nonfiction (i.e., that the work is “a serious, assertive utterance”) and thus takes the statements as evidence for what the author believes or as someone who make-believes that the work is nonfiction and thus “make believes’ that the text is evidence for what the author believes.” Both accounts amount to the same sort of analysis, since “the inferences that it is reasonable to make in the case of mistaken belief are

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193 Currie, p. 201.
194 Currie, p. 209.
195 Currie, p. 205.
exactly the inferences that it is reasonable to make in the case of make-belief—since make-belief is a conscious mimicking of belief.\textsuperscript{196}

For Currie, \textit{what is fictionally true} in a work is whatever an ideal reader would (either make-believedly or genuinely) \textit{reasonably infer} about the author’s beliefs, using the text as \textit{evidence} for those beliefs. But it’s worth it to delve just a bit more deeply here, since I think that—when we do so—we can see just how in line Currie’s thesis is with other accounts of fictional truth.

What is it reasonable for a reader to infer about the author’s beliefs? Well, if we’re talking about an internal perspective—i.e., a reader making-believe that the text is a work of nonfiction and making-believe that the author genuinely asserts things about a fictional world—then \textit{what it’s reasonable to infer the author believes} is just a matter of \textit{what it’s reasonable to imagine the author believes}. And what it’s reasonable to imagine \textit{the author believes} will just be whatever it’s reasonable to imagine \textit{is true about the fictional world}; after all, we’re figuring out what the author believes about that fictional world. What is it \textit{reasonable to imagine is true}? Well, given that we’re cashing out the notion of ‘reader’ by appeal to an ideal reader attentive to the properties the work genuinely possesses, then \textit{what it’s reasonable to imagine} will amount to \textit{whatever the work is prescribing us to imagine}.\textsuperscript{197}

The notion of prescribed imaginings is what theorists typically use to ground their accounts of fictional truth. For fictional-truth theorists, a proposition is fictionally true if we are prescribed to imagine that it’s true about the fictional world, and a proposition is fictionally false if we are not prescribed to imagine that it’s true about the fictional world. In other words: what makes something fictionally true is just a matter of whether or not the (constructed, hypothetical) author is calling on us to imagine it.

\textsuperscript{196} Currie, p. 206.
\textsuperscript{197} This is importantly different from what the author is \textit{actually} trying or intending to prescribe. The idea here is that \textit{the work} is doing the prescribing because of the features it actually possesses. This takes us back to the distinction between actual intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism.
What does this prescribing is the work (the novel, painting, movie, etc.) combined with principles of generation. Kendall Walton provides the most in-depth discussion of the principles, and most theorists’ discussions take his as a starting point.\(^{198}\) I'll rely upon Walton’s account to some extent, although I’ll focus mostly on the account Anthony Everett gives primarily because it's more directly applicable to movies and the concept of 'showing’ I’ve been emphasizing.\(^{199}\)

Everett sums up his position here: "games or pretenses are governed by principles of generation which determine what counts as true within that game or pretense and hence what we are to imagine being the case when we engage in that game."\(^{200}\) In spelling out the idea of prescribed imaginings, Everett focuses on the analogy between the prescription of imaginings in pretense and the formation of beliefs in the real-world. Discussing works of visual art, including movies, he states that there are "very close similarities between the way in which our ordinary beliefs may be generated and the ways in which our imaginings are often generated in response to a fiction."\(^{201}\)

What are the similarities Everett points to? He makes two basic points: (1) we form imaginings based on what we see and hear in a fiction analogous to the beliefs we form based on what we see and hear in the world; and (2) we form imaginings that extend beyond what we see and hear analogous to the beliefs we form that extend beyond what we see and hear in the real world. We can see (1) as, roughly, what Walton calls directly-generated fictional truths and (2) as analogous to what Walton calls implied fictional truths. Let’s start with (1).

Everett states:

Fictions which have a visual component, such as plays and puppet shows and films and television shows, will typically generate imaginings either in something like the sort of direct manner that our observations of real events so or in the manner that our consumption of factual documentaries does.\(^{202}\)


\(^{200}\) Everett, p. 18.

\(^{201}\) Everett, p. 30.

\(^{202}\) Everett, p. 30.
With regards to these direct imaginings, “in the simplest instances we will imagine that we are directly perceiving real people and real events; we will treat our perceptions as-if they were simply perceptions of reality.” Where, had we seen and heard the pretense-content in the real world we would’ve formed certain “demonstrative beliefs,” we form analogous “demonstrative imaginings” toward the work of fiction. Works of fiction generally prescribe us to form these imaginings, and—in doing so—construct basic fictional truths.

Film-makers prescribe us to treat the actors and props and sets as the characters and fictional places they depict. In doing so, they make it fictionally true that they are those things: that, when we see John Travolta’s actions and hear his words, we are seeing and hearing Vincent Vega’s; that when we see and hear aspects of New Zealand, we are seeing and hearing aspects of Middle-Earth. At the barest level, fiction films prescribe us to take what we see and hear to be a part of the fictional world at hand and thus make what we see and hear a part of that world.

Returning to the idea of natural meaning that we’ve been emphasizing: by perceiving cues of natural meaning, we form imaginings about characters’ emotions and thoughts; and we form imaginings about what has happened or what will happen in the plot. We do this in the same way we form beliefs based on cues of natural information in the real world. In the first chapter, we discussed these cues by focusing on how they give movies a unique tie to reality. Here we’re moving from the pure phenomenological claim to a constructed, epistemic one, namely: films utilize these perceptual cues in order to make things the case in their narratives.

Moving beyond natural meaning cues, many movies show their plot events in a more general sense: by showing Uma Thurman overdosing in Pulp Fiction; by showing Verbal Kint’s gestures change in order to communicate that he is Keyser Söse in The Usual Suspects; by showing Malcolm’s bloody back so we realize that he has been dead all along in The Sixth Sense. By using perceptual prompts, movies prescribe us to imagine that certain plot events are
happening in their fictional worlds and thereby make true those events. The Sixth Sense makes it the case that Malcolm discovers that he has been dead all along while standing up against a wall in his house; Pulp Fiction makes it the case that Mia overdoses while at Vincent’s house.

Engaging in this pretense enables us to pretend-prescribe properties to the characters and fictional worlds in the way that Thomasson states. For Everett:

A perceptually formed demonstrative belief is about the object perceived. In a similar way, when we watch a play and make-believe that the actor we see is a character in the play, within our make-believe our demonstrative imagining will count as being about that character—it will function as-if it was a demonstrative belief about the character.205

So, for instance, we can pretend-assert that Vincent Vega has black hair and that he wears a suit in the same sort of way that we genuinely assert such things about an actual person.

The sort of “showing” I’ve been discussing isn’t the same as Gricean showing. It extends beyond the presentation of natural meaning cues and centers on the idea of seeing the fictional—being able to just perceive many of the events taking place. And we might worry here about just how broadly I’m using the term ‘show.’ I’ve claimed that we “can be shown” complex narrative events in a movie—e.g., that a character “has overdosed” and that a character “is dead.” These phrases employ quite loaded concepts. Given the amount of interpretation that viewers must bring to their “seeing” and “hearing” these events, it might seem worrisome to deem these instances of “showing.” We might even think that talk of “what is directly shown” in a movie only makes sense when we’re referring to basic perceptual content—like sense-data.

Fully answering this worry is beyond the scope of this paper, as it depends upon more general views in philosophy of perception. But, to at least slightly allay it for now: I think there’s a stronger sense of “showing” that we can and do employ in everyday life. I think we can immediately and directly—perceptually—pick up on concept-laden information. Because we’re used to employing certain concepts, we can grasp much about what we see and hear—when we walk outside, look around the house, go to a coffee shop—straight away. My point with regards to movies is no different from this: because movies call upon ordinary recognition capacities and

205 Everett, p. 31.
depict sights and sounds that help constitute their narratives, we see and hear their actions and events in just the same way that we see and hear actions and events in everyday life. If we agree that, in the latter we can be "shown" or "directly (immediately) perceive" content despite our interpretive additions, then we should admit the same about the former.206

There is an even more basic point I’ve been attempting to make here, though. We might disagree over the content that is shown in a fiction film. Perhaps I take it to be quite rich—e.g., "being shown Uma Thurman overdosing" in Pulp Fiction—while a friend takes it to be bare—i.e., "being shown patches of colors and shapes on the film screen." The two of us needn’t settle our disagreement in order to come to one shared conclusion: that the film is showing us something. It’s showing us some content, content that narrative art forms like novels cannot show us. And, in providing that perceptual content, it enables us to grasp narrative information in a different sort of way than we can with books or short stories—by employing ordinary recognition capacities so that we can pick up on facts as directly as we do in everyday life.

Although I’ve been discussing a broader non-Gricean type of showing, we can turn to Grice for support here. In his aforementioned photograph example, his aim isn’t to specify what is shown: it’s to claim that something is shown—that, as opposed to a drawing, there is content that is accessible independent of any appeal to the shower’s intentions. Grice wouldn’t deny that Mr. X interprets the photograph in order to glean its full content—and indeed, given that his example

206 For support here, we can turn to representationalists about perception, who maintain that—although interpretation or the use of concepts is at work in visual experience—our experience is still importantly perceptual, phenomenological. The fact that we can make sense of interpretation being a part of perception itself elucidates that we can substantiate a form of "showing"—by which we do see and hear certain contents even as we represent or think about them. Of course here I’m making sense of a more “direct” account of perception—I’m arguing that we can directly, immediately, perceive certain contents even if we employ concepts in doing so. But nearly every representationalist about perception would admit that much of our experience is phenomenologically direct—we feel as though we perceive certain contents straight away. There is a difference between maintaining that perceptual experience is (metaphysically or ontologically) indirect because mediated by the mind (in maintaining this ontological claim, representationalists separate themselves from non-representationalists or non-conceptualists) and maintaining that perceptual experience seems phenomenologically indirect. We can admit the former and deny the latter, which is precisely what I am doing here.
is one that requires picking up on infidelity, Grice would (and should) admit that much interpretive work is done.

Despite the role of interpretation, the photograph has a basis of perceptual content that enables it to communicate meaning naturally. The fact that Mr. X has to utilize his concepts in interpreting it just means that (1) what is shown is more basic than what he ends up inferring about his wife (perhaps what is shown is simply that a woman is standing near a man, or perhaps it’s even more basic than that) or (2) what is shown is more robust and can include what Mr. X cognizes (perhaps what is shown is that his wife is having an affair). Regardless of which alternative we accept, the photograph still has a perceptual content that communicates meaning in a way that intention-dependent art forms, like paintings and drawings, do not. Whereas the latter cannot even show that a woman is standing near a man—because Mr. X has to appeal to why the drawer drew them as such in order to know that fact—the photograph (at the very least) shows Mr. X content that (1) has a natural meaning he can grasp immediately and (2) Mr. X can draw further inferences from.

Similarly, because of its perceptual presentation, a film is depicting—via sights and sounds—some content. We might take this content to consist merely in sense-data; we might choose to talk about Gricean content and maintain that movies only show the natural meaning cues they present to us; and we might have a more extensive account according to which more conceptually-laden content can be shown. In the end, a disagreement over what is shown amounts to a disagreement over the number of truths which a film directly generates—it doesn’t change the principle of generation itself, or threaten the relevant distinctions between movies and other art forms.

None of this is to say that we should endorse a general principle like “whatever is part of the explicit content of a film is (gives rise to propositions which are) fictionally true.” This is a point Walton emphasizes when he maintains that what he calls directly-generated fictional truths should not be confused with the explicit content of the work: what is said or shown in it. As Walton states, and this is primarily the case where unreliable narrators are concerned, sometimes what is
shown or said is not fictionally true (we’ll discuss examples of this in a later section). Still, we can say this much: if we think of truths that are directly generated—fictional truths that are not implied by others—they are the truths that are shown. The film’s perceptual content itself gives rise to them, without any further inferential work (other than the ordinary inferential work required to grasp ‘what is shown’). Every movie prescribes us to imagine that fictional propositions are the case; and every movie engages in this prescription in part through its explicit ‘showing.’ While we may not be able to trust that everything we see and hear in a movie makes up the fictional world at hand, it’s generally (indeed, I would argue, always) the case that some of what we see and hear does. And that content is responsible for some of the film’s fictional truths.

Of course, not all imaginings are prescribed directly from what we’re shown in a film. And this takes us to how movies generate implied fictional truths—how they prescribe imaginings that stem from, but extend beyond, what we see and hear. Roman Frigg introduces the concept of implied fictional truths here: “the leading idea is that primary truths follow immediately from the prop, while implied ones result from the application of some rules of inference.”²⁰⁷ Everett doesn’t use the language of ‘primary’ vs. ‘implied’ in quite the same way as Frigg (or Walton). But I take it that ‘primary truths,’ insofar as they “follow immediately from the prop,” consist in the sorts of ‘shown’ truths we’ve discussed so far.²⁰⁸ Implied fictional truths require “rules of inference” that enable us to build fictional truths from what’s shown.

Cases of implication often depend heavily upon narrative context—a context that amounts to a combination of what has been shown and what has been said. An example of Walton’s helps here. He states:

²⁰⁸ Of course, not everything we’re directly shown in a film does give rise to (or consist in) fictional truths. This is a point that Walton makes, and is the chief reason he doesn’t associate “explicit content”—e.g., what is said or shown—in a work with the concept of “primary truth.” We’ll get to this idea later, when I discuss fiction films that deceive or trick us by showing us content that is not actually a part of the fictional world. For now, we can keep this much in mind: when it comes to works of visual art—including movies—a truth is only ever directly generated when it’s shown. So, although we cannot endorse the relationship of showing—> direct generation, we can endorse direct generation—> showing; if there is direct generation in movies and paintings and pictures, it amounts to content that is shown.
Goya’s No Se Puede Mirar from The Disasters of War shows the bound victims of an execution by firing squad and the muzzles of guns pointing at them. It does not show the soldiers wielding the guns; they are outside the picture frame. Yet there can be no doubt that there are soldiers (or anyway people) holding the guns. We know that there are because of the position of the guns…it is fictional that there are soldiers because it is fictional that there are guns positioned as they are.209

Similarly, discussing the aforementioned example of the newspaper headline in Conrad’s The Secret Agent, Walton states that “the fact that fictionally this headline appeared in a newspaper shortly after Mrs. Verloc had embarked for the Continent…makes it fictional that Mrs. Verloc committed suicide.”210

We can think of these processes of inference as analogous to everyday processes of inference, as relying “upon the sort of processing which underlies our visual responses to the real world.”211 Walton’s examples above support this point: the imaginings at hand are based on what we would believe if we saw or read the content outside of the pretense, and this analogy just stems from the fact that we’re treating “the fictional text or narrated story essentially as-if it were a purported factual report.”212 We make these sorts of inferences constantly during film-viewing: when we infer what a character feels about another character by appeal to the same sorts of behavioral cues we use in real life; when we make inferences about a character’s past by appeal to cues in the current plot (e.g., in their interactions with family members and their living situation); when we make inferences about a fictional town’s financial and social situation by appeal to perceptual and structural cues we encounter in the world.

While these inferential processes are real-world inferential processes, much more is at play in our engagement with fiction. For one thing, implied fictional truths—or, rather, the principles of implication responsible for them—often require knowledge of “genre or symbolic conventions.”213 An example Everett uses here is: “when reading a vampire novel, a principle like
“if someone hisses at a cross they are a vampire” is operative.\textsuperscript{214} Similarly, when a romantic-comedy film ends with the two protagonists finally uniting, it implies that they will be in a relationship, and when a horror movie ends with the protagonist screaming, it implies that she has been harmed. More generally, implied truths depend upon a combination of narrative context and genre conventions. When we deduce that George Bailey will remain as happy as he is in the ending of \textit{It’s a Wonderful Life}, that Randle Patrick McMurphy would have remained mentally ill in \textit{One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest}, or that Travis Bickle will perform more psychotic actions in \textit{Taxi Driver}, we attend to what the depiction shows us about the characters (George’s satisfaction at the film’s finale, McMurphy’s psychosis before his death) as well as the type of film at hand (e.g., because of the tone and aim of \textit{It’s a Wonderful Life}, we can safely assume that its protagonist will not end up unhappy, while the same cannot be said of \textit{One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest}).

Of course, it’s not always easy to figure out what a movie implies about its fictional world, and different viewers often walk away from a film with different conclusions. Sometimes both conclusions are compatible with what is shown and said in the narrative, in which case the film is indeterminate. Sometimes there’s more evidence for one assumption, in which case we typically take that to be the more likely one. Even more basically: it’s difficult to say what the difference is between ‘implying’ and ‘showing’ in fiction film (a point Walton also makes). While I contend that \textit{The Babadook} implies that Amelia experiences a period of frightening depression each year around her son’s birthday, someone might contend that that fact is shown in the film; while I contend that \textit{Bringing up Baby} implies that David wouldn’t be truly happy if he married his fiancé, Alice, we might wonder if that fact is actually shown via loveless conversations between David and Alice; while I contend that \textit{Birdman} implies that Riggan Thomson’s daughter, Sam, ends up with a mental disease analogous to his, who’s to say that the film doesn’t show us that Sam is mentally ill by showing her smile when she sees (what we know to be) her father’s dead body?

\textsuperscript{214} Everett, p. 33.
We can think of this discussion as analogous to the debate in philosophy of language about the distinction between *what is said* and *what is suggested or implied*; where we land on that is a matter of our theoretical commitments, and the same is true here. I take these aforementioned facts to be implied by the film’s narrative context—a combination of what we see and hear between David and Alice’s conversations and what we see and hear, comparably, between him and Susan; a combination of seeing Riggan contemplate jumping to his death, watching Sam search for him in his hospital room, and knowing (from what we’ve seen and heard) that Sam struggles with drug problems and that her father imagines himself to be a superhero. I also think we need to make room for the idea of film implication. Claiming that these instances are all instances of ‘being shown’ simplifies the films unnecessarily (and inaccurately). There’s a reason *The Babadook* only suggests that Amelia struggles with depression each year around her son’s birthday (because it aims to treat the matter of mental illness in a more aesthetic—less heavy-handed—way). There’s a reason *Birdman* ends as it ends, on what some viewers feel is an ambivalent note regarding whether Riggan committed suicide or whether he flew away; saying that we’re *shown* one or the other downplays the nuance in the film’s narrative and cinematography.

In addition to context and film convention, implication can depend upon what Walton calls “the reality principle” and the “mutual belief principle.” Walton defines the reality principle here: “the basic strategy which the Reality Principle attempts to codify is that of making fictional worlds as much like the real one as the core of primary fictional truths permits.”

Everett sums up the reality principle similarly, stating that it prescribes us to “fill in the background of our imaginative scenario on the basis of what the real world is actually like or what it would be like were the content of our pretense to really obtain.” Employing this principle, we expand the number of fictional truths by appeal to what further facts would be true if certain, basic fictional truths held in

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215 Walton, pp. 144-5.
216 Everett, p. 22.
the real world. We ask “what else would be true if they [the directly-generated fictional truths] were?”

Does a novel say that it’s raining in the fictional setting? Then the characters are getting wet when outside, just as they’d get wet if they existed in the real world. Are the characters interacting in a social setting? Then they’re dressed in some form of attire, just as they would be if they were interacting in the real world. Most of these expanded fictional truths consist in rather basic, ordinary facts. Many novels don’t even state that the characters are human, or that their worlds have grass and houses. As Walton puts it: “it is because people in the real world have blood in their veins, births, and backsides that fictional characters are presumed to possess these attributes.” We use our knowledge of reality to fill in these gaps, and insofar as works call on us to do so, they possess a plethora of fictional truths that aren’t explicitly stated (or shown) or strongly implied by what’s explicitly stated (or shown).

The mutual belief principle, like the reality principle, expands fictional truths by appeal to real-world knowledge. But it, more narrowly, maintains that we take into consideration “what is or was commonly believed in the author’s community.” So, for instance, although Sherlock Holmes doesn’t say that Baker Street is closer to Paddington station than to Waterloo, that fact counts as a truth in that fictional work because “it would be reasonable for our reader of Sherlock Holmes to suppose that Conan Doyle believed that Baker Street is closer to Paddington than to Waterloo.” Despite gaps in the explicit or strongly implied content of a work, the mutual belief principle constructs fictional truths that depend upon what the storyteller likely believed in addition to what she stated and implied.

Let’s apply these two principles to film. Among other things, we bring our knowledge of natural meaning and human psychology in order to understand characters’ emotions and thoughts—what their gestures and facial expressions indicate, what their reactions to certain

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217 Walton, p. 145.
218 Walton, p. 145.
219 Currie, p. 201.
situations will be (how they will be heartbroken, upset, or angry because of other narrative events). We bring our knowledge of history to grasp what sorts of conventions were operating during a particular time period in the narrative (what social conventions were at play, what respective roles women and men held, etc.). More generally, we imagine that the fictional world extends beyond the shots we see, so that other people exist in other parts of the fictional world and engage in similar sorts of behaviors. We assume these things insofar as they are consistent with the fictional truths we are shown and the fictional truths that are strongly implied.

Although it’s important to notice how the reality principle and mutual belief principle are at work in cinematic depiction, it’s equally important to note that they play a more minor role than they do in nonperceptual art forms like literature. In virtue of its perceptual presentation, as I argued in chapter one, more content is ‘just there’ in a film than it is in novels. Where we might have to assume that characters are human when we read, we see that they are when we watch a movie; where we might have to assume that cars or houses or animals exist in a novel’s fictional world, we see and hear those things during film-viewing. Many basic facts are perceptually, and thus directly, available to us in a film’s scene: facial expressions, gestures, movements, tones of voice, objects, etc. And this means that some of what only exist as implied fictional truths in literary works exist as directly generated fictional truths in film.

Everett’s account coupled with Walton’s clarifies how facts, or truths, are settled in a fiction film. The general, commonly-endorsed, answer is: they’re settled by whatever we’re prescribed to imagine. And prescriptions to imagine happen via the prop (the work of fiction) in addition to principles of generation. We’ve outlined a bit just what those principles are, how they work in fiction film, and how they work differently in fiction film than in other artforms. But it’s difficult to delve more deeply—to specify the principles further, or differentiate among them. As Everett states:

Thus, for example, we must also determine whether we are to employ the Reality Principle to fill in the background details, or some version of the Mutual Belief Principle, or whether we are to employ different principles in different contexts. We must determine what genre and symbolic conventions are in force and which further principles of generation we should adopt because of these, and so on. Beyond this, of course, we will also have to
determine exactly what the consequences are of the principles we do adopt. In short we must determine how we are to interpret the fictional text.\textsuperscript{221}

Walton echoes this uncertainty, or lack of systematization. For Walton, “common sense is our guide.” 172. He states:

When...we look to see how direct generation does work, we are treated to a veritable variety show. Artists use every trick in the book and more. Some techniques are more or less traditional; others are strikingly ad hoc...some, even some ad hoc ones, leave no doubt about what is fictional; others keep us guessing forever. Some require familiarity with the genre to be understood, or familiarity with one or another aspect of the outside world. 171

Indeed, the specification of principles of generation—the rough specification it's possible to provide—doesn’t settle interpretive debates. We'll still continue to disagree over—among other things—what is true in a work of fiction, what's shown vs. what's implied, and whether or not we ought to use the reality principle and the mutual belief principle. We can, with Everett, "regard the debate concerning how a fictional text should be interpreted as, in essence, a debate concerning which principles of generation should be taken to govern our imaginative engagement with that text and what factors determine whether a particular principle can play this role."\textsuperscript{222} In this way, interpretive debate doesn’t threaten an appeal to principles of generation.

Everett forms a notion of fictional truth that includes the notion of interpretive debate, and it’s useful to adopt his approach. He claims:

We can define what counts as true in a given interpretation of the fiction in a straightforward manner. In an interpretation of a fiction p will be true just in case it is true within the scope of the pretense associated with that interpretation. In an interpretation p will be false just in case not p is true in that interpretation. Otherwise it will be indeterminate whether or not p is true in that interpretation.\textsuperscript{223}

A proposition, thus, counts as fictionally true in a given interpretation of a work of fiction just in case, according to that interpretation, it’s prescribed to be imagined. What's more, we can use the notion of multiple interpretations in our more general definition of fictional truth. As Everett puts it: “in the fiction p will be absolutely true just in case it is true in all acceptable interpretations. In the

\textsuperscript{221} Everett, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{222} Everett, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{223} Everett, p. 36.
fiction \( p \) will be absolutely false in case \( \text{not} \ p \) is true in all acceptable interpretations. We needn't adopt these further specifications of Everett's account. But the chief merit in doing so is that Everett's account is explicitly sympathetic to the notion that there are multiple interpretations of a text—sometimes all (or many) of which are compatible with the text—and to the notion that interpretive work doesn't always lead up to one correct interpretation.

Let's sum up the points I've made about the facts of a fiction film. Whatever is fictionally true is whatever we're prescribed to imagine. Some principles of generation—the principles responsible for prescriptions to imagine—are frequently used and thus nearly generally applicable: e.g., the reality principle and mutual belief principle. Beyond that, we perform interpretative work—taking into account genre, style, conventions, ordinary processes of inference, and real-world knowledge—when interacting with a work of fiction in order to grasp what principles are operating and thus what we're prescribed to imagine about the fictional world.

The notion of prescribed imaginings grounds the notion of epistemic directness I want to substantiate in this chapter, so let's turn to that now. I will argue that, because a film's facts are established by prescriptions to imagine, fiction films cannot be unreliable—they cannot lie or mislead in the ways that documentaries can—and they are necessarily (epistemically) trustworthy.

Lying, Misleading, and Fiction Film

To review from the previous chapter: unreliability consists in a film engaging unreliable cognitive processes. When we bring this concept to fiction film, the 'beliefs' we're talking about are 'fictional beliefs' and the 'truth' or 'falsity' at hand is 'fictional truth' or 'fictional falsity.' 'Reliability' here, then, is defined in a way analogous to how we defined it with documentary film: it's a matter of whether or not a fiction film can lie about its fictional world, whether it can engage unreliable cognitive processes by deceiving us into thinking that something 'fictionally false' is 'fictionally true.' We might find such talk problematic or implausible, requiring a discussion of

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224 Everett, p. 37.
genuine truth or genuine belief in any discussion of reliability. In this case, we can focus on a type of discourse about fiction called external discourse.

Sometimes we make statements about fictional worlds and characters while not imaginatively engaged, uttering statements like “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” or “Norman Bates killed Marion Crane.” We make precisely the claims I’ve been calling pretend-assertions, but we do so from a perspective external to the pretense and in a (seemingly) genuinely assertorial way. Now if we take these statements literally, they are—as we mentioned earlier—false. Insofar as Norman Bates is an abstract entity created by Robert Bloch, he isn’t capable of engaging in any physical action, let alone those actions necessary to kill someone (albeit ‘someone’ who is also abstract). But some theorists consider these statements shorthand for assertions that are genuinely true or false. As Frigg puts it:

When we metafictionally assert p, what we really assert is ‘in work w, p.’ Asserting that something is the case in a work of fiction is tantamount to asserting that it is fictional in that work. Hence asserting ‘in work w, p’ amounts to asserting ‘p is fictional in work w,’ which in turn is equivalent to ‘it is fictional in work w that p.’

Alex Neill echoes Frigg, stating that there is an “apparent paradox” that arises from statements about fictional entities, events, and worlds. Such statements seem, intuitively, true despite the fact that they express propositions about fictional characters (and the like) which aren’t literally true. For Neill,

One way of dispelling the apparent paradox here, as a number of philosophers of noted, is by construing statements such as ‘Winnie Verloc had a pretty miserable time of things’ as elliptical for statements of something like the form of “It is The Secret Agent-fictional that Winnie Verloc had a miserable time of things.”

If we take the Neill-Frigg approach (an approach endorsed by many theorists), then we seemingly have no problem discussing reliability. The statements we make are assertions that are genuinely true or false, and the beliefs we express via those statements are genuine beliefs. As Neill puts it:

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225 Frigg, p. 263.
227 Neill, p. 2.
There is nothing fictional about beliefs of this sort; it is their content that concerns the fictional. Beliefs about what is fictionally the case, that is, are just that: beliefs...in believing that it is fictionally the case that my attitude is one of judgment, the expression of which is assertion.\textsuperscript{228}

As opposed to the sort of internal discourse I've been focusing on, which expresses fictional beliefs—beliefs we only maintain from within our imaginative engagement and which are thus not genuine beliefs—this external discourse concerns the beliefs we have about “what is fictionally the case” in a story. Its being fictional is a part of our thought-content, then, while its being fictional is not a part of our thought content in internal discourse. If we take this external route, our analysis here centers on whether or not fiction films can lead viewers to false beliefs expressed via statements about ‘what is true within the world of the fiction.’

In between the internal-discourse and external-discourse approaches is an approach that Eddy Zemach takes.\textsuperscript{229} Zemach analyzes internal discourse and claims that such discourse possesses genuine truth-value. His argument centers on how a token-sentence is intended for evaluation. As he puts it:

I attribute truth-value to token-sentences, maintaining that a token-sentence is true if and only if the statement it expresses is true in the world(s) in which it is intended to be evaluated. Thus most tokens of ‘Anna Karenina loved Vronski,’ being intended for evaluation in the target-worlds of Anna Karenina, are true, while for that reason most tokens of ‘Anna Karenina married Vronski’ are false.\textsuperscript{230}

For Zemach, we can count such claims, which are a part of internal discourse, as genuinely true or false; they express propositions that are intended to be evaluated in the fictional worlds, and insofar as that’s the case, they have not-merely-fictional truth-value.

With all this being said, we have several options regarding how to understand the discussion of fiction film reliability (and unreliability). If we’re wary of discussing a type of reliability that centers on fictional beliefs and fictional truths, we can discuss merely external discourse or internal discourse cashed out in the way Zemach maintains. I prefer the internal-discourse route, according to which we analyze whether or not fiction films can lead us to false fictional beliefs

\textsuperscript{228} Neill, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{230} Zemach, p. 43.
which we express via claims that aren’t literally true. I prefer this route because my focus is on, in many ways, our imaginative engagement—how we interact with a fiction film while make-believing that the fiction is real. Since my other analyses in these chapters center on this internal interaction with a fictional world, and since our perspectives as engaged film-viewers is of utmost interest to me, I prefer to be consistent with my central motivations here.

It’s important to note, though, that we can reframe the conversation entirely in terms of external discourse, and my theses will be unchanged. The core idea is, *given the beliefs we’re discussing*, can fiction films engage unreliable cognitive processes that produce *those beliefs*? If the beliefs at issue are genuine, external-to-the-fiction, beliefs, and if fiction films engage reliable cognitive processes in producing those beliefs, then the films are reliable to that extent. If the beliefs at issue are fictional beliefs, and if fiction films engage reliable cognitive processes in producing those beliefs, then the films are reliable. I’ll argue for this second claim (regarding fictional beliefs); but its truth establishes the truth of the first claim (regarding genuine beliefs). If we, as viewers, form true fictional beliefs about the fiction while imaginatively engaged, then we also form true beliefs about the fiction when not imaginatively engaged. After all, we cash out ‘what is fictionally true’ by stating the very things about the characters, events, and worlds that we pretend are true from the internal perspective. Reliability in the latter guarantees reliability in the former.

Bringing back my commitment to artifactualism, we can see how—whether we take the external or internal discourse route—we have no problem making sense of how our statements (fictional or genuine) can be true or false (fictionally or genuinely) in film-viewing. With regards to external discourse, the claims we make about *what’s fictionally true in the story* are claims about the abstract, individual entities created by the storyteller and the actions and behaviors they fictionally partake in; and they are true or false in just the way that statements about other (abstract or non-abstract) individual entities are. With regards to internal discourse, the claims we make about the characters and fictional worlds are about the fictional entities that we perceptually experience, and—*because* we perceptually experience them as individuals—those claims are
(fictionally) true or false in an analogous way to the claims we make about entities we perceptually experience in the real world. Endorsing an ontology according to which fictional entities are real and individuals (rather than ‘kinds’) enables us to make sense of our perceptual experience of them as well as the (fictional or genuine) truth or falsity of the claims we make about them (where a ‘kind theory’ would make the former less plausible).

So, with internal discourse in mind, the question is this: can fiction films be trusted as reliable guides to true fictional beliefs about the fictional characters, events, etc., that we pretend possess certain properties while imaginatively engaged? Or can fiction films deceive us about these fictional facts in the same sort of way that documentaries can deceive us about real-world facts?

From the get-go, fiction films seem incapable of unreliability precisely because they use principles of generation. Insofar as a work uses principles that depictive representations generally use, we can typically trust that (1) what is explicitly stated or shown in the work is true in the work; and that (2) we can infer what is true based on principles of implication we’ve already learned. The fact that we interact with works of art so frequently makes us equipped to, through interpretive work, recognize the principles employed to generate fictional truths. Indeed, we are especially equipped to recognize them since many of them involve real-world processes of inference.

Delving a bit more deeply, when we think about the perceptual cues shown to us in a film—including cues of natural meaning—those cues typically indicate certain fictional facts. More often than not, certain facial expressions, gestures, and tones of voice indicate particular emotions and thoughts—just as they typically indicate those emotions and thoughts in real life. More often than not, rain clouds in a fiction film indicate rain in the fictional world—just as they typically indicate rain in real life. As Grice and Dretske maintain, cues of natural information have a meaning in virtue of the fact that they tend to indicate (but do not always indicate) the presence of something in the world; they are, in this way, reliable. The same is true about as-if natural meaning in fiction film. Though movies can deceive us by providing us with perceptual cues that
do not indicate the fictional facts they tend to indicate (which we’ll come back to in a bit), on a
very general level we can trust that much of what we see and hear on the screen is there for us to
imagine (and thus to take as true) about the fictional world.

There’s an even stronger argument available to us here, though, once we take into
consideration the two particular types of documentary unreliability. Let’s start with the first type of
unreliability: lying. My argument here runs as follows: (1) what a fiction film prescribes us to
imagine is what it presents as true in its fictional world; (2) what a fiction film prescribes us to
imagine is fictionally true in its fictional world; (3) given (1) and (2), a fiction film cannot present as
fictionally true something fictionally false; (4) lying requires a film to present as true (or as
fictionally true) something false (or fictionally false); (5) therefore, fiction films cannot lie to us
about their fictional worlds.

As Robert Burgoyne states:

In producing the facts of the fictional world, the impersonal narrator creates a
universe that, once established, cannot be revoked, for this discourse provides the
very basis of the fictional world…Any kind of false report or lie on the part of the
impersonal narrator— which in film might take the form of images which are
directly presented as facts, without the intermediate agency of a personal narrator,
and which are then contradicted by other images—would simply be taken as
incoherence in the fictional world itself, leading the spectator to question the very
existence of a diegetic universe.231

Being prescribed to imagine, in fiction film-viewing, is analogous to being prescribed to believe, in
documentary film-viewing. Documentaries lie when they prescribe us to believe something
untrue. This divide isn’t possible in fiction film because whatever we’re prescribed to imagine is
fictionally true. That’s just the definition of prescription we’ve been discussing. Hence, fiction films
cannot lie to us about their fictional worlds. There is no such thing as a narrative presenting as
true propositions about a fictional world which are false because whatever it presents as true just
is true in the fictional world.

The same reasoning that grounds this conclusion, in fact, grounds why fiction films are incapable of what I called 'accidental deception'—e.g., what ethnographic films engage in. If whatever is presented as true is true in a fiction film, then there’s no sense in which a film can ‘accidentally’ present something as true. We might think of cases in which filmmakers accidentally imply certain propositions with their films—e.g., unintentionally racist movies like The Toy or Driving Miss Daisy, or unintentionally sexist movies like many superhero or sci-fi films. But these aren’t cases of accidental deception. These are cases in which the films just means something different from what was intended. They’re cases in which some propositions about the fictional world are presented—explicitly or implicitly—as true and thus are true. In other words: once we talk about a film as a narrative, we analyze the propositions that are in fact made within it; whatever was intended to be expressed, or whatever the filmmaker accidentally asserted, is irrelevant because the concepts of ‘intention’ or ‘accident’ (where we don’t mean those terms hypothetically) aren’t at play in this analysis.

So fiction films are incapable of type (1) unreliability, where this refers to both intentional lying and unintentional deception. Let’s turn now to type (2) unreliability. This requires a combination of two things: (1) withholding facts in order to present one perspective on the story at hand and (2) dishonesty about this aim. Fiction films cannot have this combination for two reasons: first of all, they cannot engage in (2): if they do present their narratives from particular perspectives, then they cannot be dishonest about doing so. Secondly, they cannot engage in (1). Let’s start with (1).

Narratives can and do withhold information. Sometimes they do so in order to present particular perspectives within their fictional worlds. Showing the subjective experiences of characters—presented via voice-over narration, first-person point of view, or both—is one of the most common approaches here, as is having subjectively-inflected shots. Indeed, simply focusing on a protagonist throughout the film (which can be done with a voice-over narrator, as in The Shawshank Redemption) makes a narrative skewed; we’re tempted to sympathize with her and to interpret things as she interprets them. These sorts of perspective-showing require information-
withholding—so that we don’t see other characters’ subjectivities or other viewpoints of narrative events. In this respect, fiction films can be one-sided.

Even more generally, every narrative places a certain perspective upon its events: by showing a particular character as a protagonist (and causing the bias mentioned above), by connecting the events in purposefully manipulative ways (e.g., *Pulp Fiction*—which presents its story non-chronologically—or *The Usual Suspects*, which presents Verbal Kint as pathetic in order to shock us by his guilt), indeed by connecting the shots at all (narratives *just are* constructions which impose some sort of order upon people and events).

But this perspective-taking is importantly different from documentary one-sided-ness. *Bowling for Combine* is a perspective on America’s gun violence. *Making a Murderer* is a perspective on the Steven Avery case. What it means for these movies to be one-sided is that they take (and show) stances on an event (or set of events) that exists external to them. In a fiction film, one-sided-ness is internal to the narrative. We see (or otherwise experience, sympathize with, etc) the perspective of a character who exists in the fictional world. Because there is no “extra-textual reality,” there is no possibility of a narrative presenting a perspective on events that exist outside of itself—at least not at the fictional level. Indeed, even narrators who are supposedly telling us the stories of their fictional worlds, as in *The Princess Bride* or *Stand By Me*, are still within the narrative; their narratives are just multi-leveled.

Of course, this isn’t to say that fiction films don’t also present perspectives on the world. Many, if not most, fiction films do just this: implying something about their extra-textual reality by commenting on (among other things) social or cultural issues, human identity, relationships, emotions and psychology. And these perspectives can be evaluated as reliable or unreliable in the same sort of way that documentaries’ perspectives can—we can ask whether or not they can lead viewers to true beliefs about people, places, or phenomena in the world. These aren’t the viewpoints I’m interested in here, as I’m analyzing whether or not fiction films can lie about their fictional worlds. Still, it’s important to take note of this fact, as it illuminates how fiction films often make assertions about the same extra-textual reality that documentaries comment on.
Moving back to the idea of fiction-based perspectives, another point is important to note here, namely: the information that a fiction film withholds (in order to present its one-sided-ness) is not the same sort of information that a documentary withholds. Whereas the latter withholds facts about their subject matter, the former merely withholds information; it just doesn’t tell us what is true or false about other events or characters. Whatever information is left out makes the narrative incomplete in the way I mentioned earlier.232

Relatedly, it’s hard to see how a fiction film can be dishonest about its one-sided-ness (which is what type (2) unreliability amounts to in full). As in Making a Murderer, this would amount to presenting the story from a perspective without letting us know that it is doing so. More specifically, it would amount to our finding no evidence in the movie itself for that perspective. This just takes us back to our fundamental point about extra-textual reality: if there is no evidence for a perspective in the narrative, then no such perspective exists. In the same way that narratives cannot leave out information about the content of—the facts of—their fictional worlds, so too they cannot leave out facts about how that content is structured. Fiction films, then, are incapable of type (2) unreliability. They cannot be misleading about their one-sided-ness.

So, fiction films are incapable of the types of unreliability that documentaries can engage in. They cannot lie to us about their fictional worlds, and they cannot accidentally deceive us about them, because they construct whatever truths there are in their narratives and. They also cannot mislead us in the way that documentaries like Making a Murderer can because they cannot hide the perspective they place upon their narrative events.

A Type of Fiction Film Unreliability

I’ve argued that fiction films are reliable insofar as they cannot lie or mislead, and my defense for this has rested upon the claims that a fiction film’s narrative (1) cannot present as

232We’re just left not knowing about other characters or aspects of the fictional world. This isn’t to say, of course, that nothing external to the character’s perspective can count as fact. Indeed, unreliable narrators exist precisely because they don’t know all there is to know about the story or they present the story incorrectly, and we can identify their doing so. The point here is that, whatever information actually is left out, throughout the entire film, doesn’t really count as information in the documentary sense.
fictionally true propositions which are fictionally false and (2) cannot withhold facts about its fictional world. These claims seem defeated by the existence of films which do seem to withhold facts and which do seem to lead us to false fictional beliefs. In this section I’ll discuss these films and then argue that their existence does not complicate the concept of fiction-film reliability I’ve been outlining. To get started, let’s look at some examples.

*The Sixth Sense* is a horror film about the relationship between a psychiatrist—Malcolm—and a boy—Cole—who possesses the capacity to see ghosts. We watch as Malcolm helps Cole attain a peaceful, bearable way in which to deal with his predicament. In the film’s shocking finale, it’s revealed that Malcolm was a ghost all along. *Fight Club* is ostensibly about an unnamed narrator who befriends a man named Tyler Durden, starts a “fight club” with him, and co-leads the formation of fight clubs across the country. In the film’s finale, we learn that Tyler Durden is a dissociated personality of the unnamed narrator’s. *Memento* centers on a protagonist, Leonard, who struggles with retrograde amnesia—tattooing his body to remind himself daily of important facts. The film starts at the end chronologically, with a photograph of a dead man, and moves in reverse order as we follow Leonard in his search for his wife’s second killer. Throughout our viewing, we believe that Leonard is partaking in a worthwhile search and that one man (Teddy) is to blame for his wife’s death. In the film’s finale, we discover that the dead man from the beginning is Teddy, that Leonard has killed him, that Teddy is in fact innocent, and that Leonard’s wife wasn’t murdered at all; she actually died from an insulin overdose.

Each of these films constructs its narrative by playing off of our basic assumptions and expectations—e.g., that the characters we see are real and non-hallucinatory, that what seems to be the movie’s plot is the plot (as in *Memento*)—and withholding information that would enable us to reject those basic assumptions and expectations. Returning to the idea of principles of generation, they seemingly (1) fail to employ the principles of implication we’re used to and (2) reject the first principle regarding directly-generated fictional truths that stem from the content we see and hear. In these instances, what we see and hear is not actually a part of the fictional world (and thus does not help constitute fictional truths despite our assuming they do so) and we’re
tricked into thinking that what we see and hear is as similar to the world as it appears to be (that the characters who are speaking exist, and that they do not exist as ghosts or hallucinations).

*The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club*, and *Memento* thus seem to present *as true* propositions about their fictional worlds that are false, and they do not seem to employ common principles of generation. Indeed, these are the types of films theorists tend to point to in their discussions of fiction unreliability, arguing that fiction films are unreliable either because of character or voice-over narrators that mislead us about their fictional worlds or because of implied, cinematic narrators that mislead us about their fictional worlds.233

So don’t these films threaten my earlier discussion? Isn’t their unreliability precisely a matter of withholding facts—*actual facts*—about their fictional worlds? And don’t they present *as fictionally true* propositions which are fictionally false? For much of the movie: yes. For all of the movie: no. Eventually the truths about the characters are revealed. In the end, they do present as *true* what is, in fact, fictionally true: that Malcolm is dead, that Tyler Durden is a hallucination, that Leonard killed his own wife. In the end, they do present the facts—the actual facts—about their fictional worlds. This means that these films don’t engage in the sort of deception that documentaries do. Whereas we discover the truth about an unreliable documentary’s subject matter by appeal to extra-textual reality, we discover the truth about a movie like *The Sixth Sense* by appeal to the movie: the movie *itself* reveals its truths to us. And because it does, taken as a

233 Gregory Currie, for instance, defines cinematic unreliability in much the same way I have here, maintaining, when talking about a film’s implied author: “an agent can do something with an intention of the following complex kind: she creates or presents something which she intends will be taken as evidence of her intentions ,and she intends that superficial evidence will suggest that her intention was X, whereas a better, more reflective grasp of the evidence will suggest that her intention was Y.”, Currie, Gregory. “Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film”. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53.1 (1995): 19–29. Dan Shen and Dejin Xu discuss fiction film unreliability as well, although they focus largely on character narrators in the narratives and maintain a separation between what the “narrator” says is true about the fictional world and what the “implied author” maintains about the narrator’s reliability, distinctions that I can’t delve into in full here. Shen, Dan and Dejin Xu. “Intratextuality, Extratextuality, Intertextuality: Unreliability in Autobiography versus Fiction.” *Poetics Today* 28.1 (Spring 2007): 43-87. Jakob Lothe, like Shen and Xu, discusses primarily character narrators but outlines the same idea of misleadingness. Lothe, Jakob. *Narrative in Fiction and Film: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford, 2000.
whole, it does not deceive—it does not withhold facts, and it does not present fictional falsehoods as fictional truths.

This is something I think theorists too often miss: the distinction between being unreliable for some or even most of the film and being unreliable overall (‘overall’ being ‘even after the film ends, the unreliability remains’). The latter is what I’ve been talking about, and this is what I’ve claimed fiction films are incapable of. Indeed, if a documentary engages in partial unreliability by lying to us for most of the film and then revealing the truths it had hidden, then we should say precisely the same thing that I’ve said about these aforementioned fiction films.

Not only is the truth eventually revealed to us in supposedly tricky fiction films cases: there’s a sense in which the facts weren’t really withheld to begin with. One chief reason we re-watch The Sixth Sense is so that we can notice the clues we’d missed all along. The film even provides a flashback montage at the end, so that we can do just this (an approach many similarly tricky films employ). We discover that, while we’d assumed that Malcolm was interacting with other characters, in fact there isn’t a single clip in which he is; while we’d assumed his wife was unhappy for no definable reason, in fact she was depressed because of his death; and when Cole told Malcolm that ghosts didn’t know they were dead, he was referring in part to Malcolm. The movie constructed its narrative so that we would misinterpret these clues or overlook them, but the clues were there.

The Usual Suspects is a prime example of how clues are hidden but still very much present. Once we realize who Keyser Söze is, we see (via the film’s flashback sequence and re-viewings) Verbal Kint in a completely new light; we notice that, in his first trip to the police station he was perusing the bulletin board for the information he’d present as ‘facts’ in his story to the detective (the first time we watch it, he just looks bored); we notice that he’d held his cigarette in a ‘European’ way; we even notice that the voice from the beginning of the movie (the voice of Keyser) is Verbal’s. Everything clicks in this film—and in films like it—because we see the very clues we’d been manipulated to overlook. In this sense, it’s hard to say just how much information was withheld at all.
In fact, and this brings us back at the distinction between film and other narrative art forms: the information is often, in these cases, shown. The clues we find via the flashback montage in *The Usual Suspects* are (and were) perceptually available: we are shown Verbal Kint holding his cigarette in the aforementioned way, shown a voice in the beginning (the voice of Söse’s) that matches Verbal’s, shown him scanning the bulletin board in the beginning. Because the film constructs its story in a way that leads our interpretations elsewhere, we don’t pick up on their relevance (or even notice that we’re seeing and hearing them). But this doesn’t change the fact that they were presented to us in a way that they couldn’t have been presented in a novel.

So theorists aren’t fully correct in deeming these sorts of films ‘unreliable.’ In fact, some theorists (Volker Ferenz in “Fight Clubs, American Psychos and Mementos,” and Fiona Otway in “Unreliable Narrators in Documentary”234) claim that the idea of ‘reliability’ doesn’t apply to fiction film. My argument doesn’t hinge on our accepting or not accepting the term ‘unreliable’ here; what’s important is that, if we do use the term to talk about films like *The Sixth Sense*, we keep in mind that this unreliability doesn’t amount to the deception, lying, or misleading I’ve laid out.

**Epistemic Directness**

The argument in this chapter has been largely negative: I’ve argued against the thesis that fiction films can be unreliable by claiming that they cannot deceive us as documentaries can. It’s worth it now to articulate the positive claims we can glean from this analysis.

If fiction films cannot deceive us by lying to us or misleading us about their fictional worlds, then they are necessarily epistemically reliable. As I’ve argued, the truths of—the facts in—their fictional worlds are there for us, as viewers, to find. Sometimes they’re there even when they seem to be absent (as in tricky films like *The Usual Suspects* or *Fight Club*). We can’t always agree upon what those truths are, and it’s not always easy to find them. But, regardless, we can

234 The two ground their claims upon slightly different reasons. Ferenz maintains that we can use different “recuperations strategies” when we encounter inconsistencies, instances of information-withholding, or instances of misrepresentation in fiction film, and that the construct of the “unreliable narrator” is unnecessary. Otway differentiates fiction film from documentary by stating (albeit briefly) that the fictional storyteller creates the very world she tells and thus cannot truly deceive us about it (hence harkening back to Burgoyne’s aforementioned point).
trust that whatever facts there are to grasp about narrative events, places, and people, are—in an important sense—in the film itself. Fiction films are honest with us about their fictional worlds; they show us them, necessarily.

Of course, the phrase “in the film itself” is a bit deceptive here and needs qualification by appeal to the notion of implication—and more particularly by appeal to principles like the reality principle and the mutual belief principle. Some fictional truths are not ‘in’ the work in any genuine sense and instead depend upon viewers using real-world knowledge to construct more than is shown to us on the film screen.

Admitting this much, though, doesn’t threaten my chief claim here. The idea of epistemic directness I’m employing isn’t a matter of ‘making fully apparent’ fictional truths; it’s a matter of our ability, as (ideal) viewers, to form true fictional beliefs about the fictional world, a film’s engaging reliable cognitive processes in our forming those beliefs. This consists in fiction film’s inability to lie or mislead—in our ability to trust that what is shown or said in the film as true is true in the fictional world, that what is implied strongly by what is shown and said in the film is true, and that we can trust any other inferences (those, for instance, based on the reality principle and mutual belief principle) the film as a whole calls upon us to make. By using principles of generation, and by constructing the (explicit and implied) truths they prescribe us to fictionally believe, fiction films necessarily lead us to true beliefs about their fictional worlds.

This is what differentiates fiction films from nonfiction—or documentary—films. What differentiates them from literary art forms is their phenomenological immediacy: the sense in which many of their truths are there directly, because perceptually. We see and hear a great deal of information about characters and fictional places—and, as I argued, we really see that information—and we do so immediately by calling us our knowledge of natural meaning and our ordinary, everyday perceptual processes. Thus, while literary art forms also have an important epistemic status because they—like all narrative art forms—construct the truths in their fictional worlds, they do not have the epistemic directness that movies have. When we read, we co-construct the narrative by mentally imagining how characters and places look and sound, and
how full scenes appear. The narrators of a book tell us the facts, while the narration in a movie shows us the facts; the latter enables the immediacy and direct engagement that the former prevents.

Similarly, while other perceptual art forms—like paintings, pictures, and photographs—construct their fictional truths (and thus have epistemic reliability) they don’t engage in the same form of showing that movies engage in. Paintings, photographs and pictures, like films, call on ordinary recognition capacities and present cues of natural meaning that we can grasp immediately (because perceptually). So they are more phenomenologically immediate than literary art forms. But I don’t think they do show us their fictions (or their nonfictional representations) in quite the same way that movies do because they’re static.

Static forms of visual depiction present one viewpoint (of an object, person, place, etc.). That viewpoint illuminates features of the represented subject and gives us a way of seeing it so that we pick up on particular features—expressive, physical, emotional, and the like—that allow the representation to communicate its meaning. Now, it’s important to note the extent to which we are given a viewpoint, the extent to which emotional and expressive facts are shown to us so that we interpret the representation in a certain way. It’s also important to note the extent to which artistic techniques can draw our attention to specific features within the represented scene. The way the depiction uses lighting, color, focus, and the like make certain aspects of the scene stand out to us. Still, beyond this, static depictions don’t take us through their representations—whether fictional or nonfictional. Instead, we search them. Herein lies the chief difference between static depictions and fiction films.

When we watch a fiction film, we see moving images of the people, places, and thinks depicted, and—via the use of editing techniques that connect those moving images—we’re led through the story. Rather than look at one static image and examine the features within it, we see (1) many images in quick succession, so that their connections (rather than their minute features)

\[^{235}\text{Indeed, theorists like Wollheim, Currie, and Carroll all independently make this point about paintings and pictures—if we can recognize 3-D objects and properties, we can recognize images of those objects and properties when looking at paintings and pictures of them.}\]
are prioritized and (2) whatever features within a shot that are prioritized by having our attention
drawn to them via editing techniques. In a film, the camera (to a certain extent) becomes our
eyes—it scans an environment, scene, event, or person, and shows us the aspects that matter
for the narrative. It does, in other words, what we have to do when we look at a picture.

None of this is to downplay the role that our own interpretive and perceptual additions
play in fiction film viewing, and nor is it to downplay the role that artistic techniques play in
drawing our attention to features in static depictions. I don’t think we should see what I’ve argued
as necessary or firm. Still, we should admit that the role of motion in film, and the role of its
various editing techniques (which often mirror ordinary perceptual processes) make it more able
to take us through its world than paintings, pictures, and photographs.

Another, related, difference between movies and static depictions is: while both engage
ordinary perceptual and recognition capacities, only the former really engages everyday
perceptual processes. Static depictions call on the same recognition capacities that we use in
everyday life so that we can identify objects and their properties (including their natural meaning
properties); film-viewing involves seeing in the same sort of way that we see in everyday life.
Here, we can return to the idea of our ‘examination’ of a static depiction. This examination
involves close attention to detail—looking at different aspects of the work over time, staring at the
canvas or photograph to analyze the one viewpoint of the subject it’s showing us.

This sort of attention is vastly different from the perceptual processes we use in daily life:
where we scan objects and environments as we move through them, see them at various
distances (as we approach them or walk away from them), move quickly from perceiving one
thing to perceiving another, pay attention to the spatial relations between the things around us,
and place ourselves within our space (picking up on egocentric spatial information). In short, the
typical perceptual processes we use as we interact with the world are a matter of seeing and
hearing various objects in our environments at various moments at various distances as we grasp
our changing relations to them. They typically don’t include staring at one object or scene from
one point of view over time. In this respect, although what we see in pictures and paintings—
objects and their properties—is similar to what we see in the world, how we see the former differs vastly from how we see the latter.

Movies prioritize the sort of scanning we ordinarily engage in over the static examination of paintings and pictures. Among other things, movies (by taking us through their narratives) show us distances and relations between objects in their fictional worlds, allow us to move perceptually through their fictional worlds (as the camera does so) in much the same way that we move through our actual environments, and offer us point-of-view and deep focus shots that mirror our basic perceptual processes. Rarely are we presented with a motionless shot during film-viewing; rarely are we called upon to look closely at the details of a particular object from a particular point-of-view. Instead, we’re called upon to move along with the camera to see and hear the fictional world from alternating points of view.

Of course, it’s dangerous to draw an exclusive divide here: through many editing techniques, movies call on perceptual processes that differ widely from everyday ones. They often present us with perspectives we couldn’t actually attain when engaging with the world, and (by changing focal length and focus distance) make us more attuned to features that we overlook in daily life (or less attuned to features that we notice in daily life). I’m not claiming here that film-viewing is identical to world-viewing. What I am claiming, though, is that it is more like world-viewing than our perception of paintings or pictures. In this respect, fiction films engage in a form of showing that frequently calls on ordinary, everyday perceptual processes, while static depictions engage in a form of showing that frequently does not.

For these reasons, the sort of ‘showing’ that I’ve discussed in this paper really is specific to motion pictures. It consists in taking us through a (typically objectively-presented) fictional world as we employ everyday perceptual capacities and processes so that we pick up on narrative information directly. Without being perceptual, literary art forms lack the phenomenological immediacy (and thus the capacity for showing) that makes their narrative facts directly accessible. Without depicting motion, static forms of visual depiction don’t allow us to pick up on information in the same sort of way that we pick up on information in daily life.
With this in mind, let’s turn to another clarification: why I’ve talked of film narratives showing us rather than film narrators showing us. My answer here is twofold: first of all the sort of unreliability in fiction that I initially mapped out and the sort of epistemic directness that I’ve been attempting to elucidate cover cases that include film narrators as well as cases that don’t. Fiction films can be unreliable by withholding information when they have unreliable character-narrators, as in Fight Club and The Usual Suspects. They can also withhold information when they don’t have narrators, as in The Sixth Sense (any M. Night Shyamalan film in fact), and many horror films generally. Additionally, both types of movies are importantly epistemically direct: they necessarily present us with the truths in their fictional worlds and they necessarily make apparent the perspectives from which they present their narratives. Indeed, I discussed cases of unreliable narrators—like The Usual Suspects—in which ‘clues’ are there all along. The second reason for talking more broadly of ‘narratives’ rather than ‘narrators’ is this: when it comes to films without character or voice-over narrators, I don’t think we should appeal to the idea of a cinematic narrator.

In defending this move, it’s worth it to look at the film-narrator debate more generally. David Bordwell is perhaps the most well-known defender of the narrator-less view. Bordwell’s defense rests on two essential claims: (1) as I mentioned earlier (in virtue of phenomenological immediacy) we are seldom aware consciously of a film narrator when we watch a movie; and (2) there is no necessity for the concept. With regards to (2), Bordwell argues that any trait we might assign to the implied author (a concept I’ll outline soon) or to the narrator can simply “be ascribed to the narration itself: it sometimes surpasses information, it often restricts our knowledge, it generates curiosity, it creates a tone, and so on.” The construct of the film narrator, or any sort of fictional shower, doesn’t help us—in other words—make sense of film-viewing. Anything we might want to say about the film narrator could just as easily be said about the narration itself. When we want to say that the film narrator is hiding information, we could—for Bordwell—simply say that
the narration is hiding information. When we want to say that the narrator is creating a certain sort of mood, we can say that the narration is doing so.236

Several theorists reject the Bordwell view; in fact, the no-narrator concept seems to be in the minority opinion. Jakob Lothe, Dan Shen, Robert Burgoyne, and Seymour Chatman all point to the necessity of the cinematic narrator. Burgoyne’s defense is twofold: (1) the concept of unreliability and the hierarchy of different voices structuring the movie narrative only make sense if we posit the existence of an impersonal, cinematic narrator; and (2) the idea of truth in fiction film only makes sense if we posit the concept. With regards to (2), Burgoyne seems to think that we can only say that there is such a thing as truth in a film if there is someone, some agent, communicating those truths to us. With regards to (1), Burgoyne takes the idea of unreliability to necessitate the existence of a film narrator: if there is a perspective placed upon the fictional events, and if we are being shown those events in a way that could potentially mislead us, we’re seemingly interacting with a narrator who is doing the showing.

I side with Bordwell and for two related reasons. First of all, I think Bordwell is right in that we don’t typically experience—aren’t aware of—a film narrator when we watch a movie. This partly stems from the phenomenological immediacy and assumption of objectivity I mentioned earlier. Things seem to just be there, audibly and visually, when we watch a fiction film; they don’t seem to be presented by someone or something (excluding cases of character-narrators, of course).

236Gregory Currie agrees with Bordwell in this fundamental point: that there isn’t necessarily a film “narrator” or “cinematic narrator” in fiction film. Unlike Bordwell, though, Currie does posit the existence of an “implied author.” The implied author is, for Currie, separate from a narrator and actual filmmaker. Instead it is the set of (or the hypothetical agent we take to hold) the perspectives, ideas, and viewpoints the film endorses toward the fictional events it depicts, more specifically: moral and emotional perspectives. For Currie, when we figure out what these perspectives are—and this is, for Currie, one of our aims as film-viewers—we figure out what the implied author’s viewpoints are. Because we have this construct of the implied author, coupled with our awareness of film narration, Currie argues that there just isn’t the need for the idea of a “film narrator.”
This claim is, of course, a purely phenomenological one, and we might argue that I've gotten our phenomenology wrong. In order to argue this point, though, we need some positive reason to think there is a cinematic narrator. As Bordwell states, it's unnecessary to claim that some construct exists when we can seemingly explain everything about a movie without it. Here it also helps here to look at Burgoyne, who gives one of the most spelled out defenses of the cinematic narrator: while he points to the supposed necessity of the construct, he fails to prove its necessity.

One of Burgoyne’s chief claims is that we can only make sense of fictional truth if we posit the existence of a film narrator. This claim just doesn’t seem true. Surely we can say some things about a fictional world without appeal to a narrator. We can say that Frodo exists, the Middle-Earth is a place full of elves, that Gandalf is a wizard, that Frodo’s best friend is Sam-wise, etc. We know these things just by watching the film—not by acknowledging a narrator in Lord of the Rings. Burgoyne needs to give some positive reason for our thinking otherwise. Here, he might appeal to the ‘messenger’ model of film that he espouses. But this model is both unconvincing and unilluminating—saying that films are like messages communicated from one agent (a narrator) to another (an audience member) is really just another way of saying, rather than defending or describing, that we need to make way for the existence of a film narrator.

Delving further into the ‘film narrator’ debate is beyond the scope of this paper. But, for now, I don’t think we have any reason to appeal to the construct; I thus think that talking about what narratives show us and how they can deceive us is best. Now, on the one hand, I don’t think my chief arguments—about everything that’s presented as true being true in a fiction film and about the necessary presence of narrative facts and narrative perspectives—remain any less plausible if I shift to talking of a cinematic narrator. So I do think much of my analysis regarding the distinction between documentary unreliability and fiction film reliability remains in tact. Still, the idea of a narrator might immediately imply the idea of ‘telling’ rather than ‘showing’—problematizing my distinction between literary and cinematic narratives—and my earlier claims about the lack of intentionality and the lack of ‘accidental deception’ in fiction film might seem less
plausible if we make sense of an actual agent presenting the fictional world. So, while I do think that ultimately the idea of fiction film epistemic directness could be defended regardless of where we land on this issue (indeed, theorists like Burgoyne substantiate a notion of fiction film reliability while using the ‘narrator’ construct), it would require more work to lay out.

Let’s look, now, at some broader consequences of this chapter’s analysis. In chapters one and two, we saw how the perceptual and the representational (more specifically, fictional) intertwine during film-viewing insofar as what we see and hear at the natural-meaning level makes up what’s represented in the narrative, and insofar as we have a seeing-as experience of fictional characters and worlds. Now, we can note how the epistemic and perceptual intertwine. During fiction film-viewing, we pick up on narrative facts by imaginatively engaging with the story: by cognizing, forming fictional beliefs about, characters’ emotional states, actions, and narrative events. Insofar as truth (genuine and fictional) can only really be interpreted, whatever we know about a film’s fiction is seemingly constructed from—and not a part of—what we see and hear. In this way, an analysis of fictional truth and an analysis of the perceptual seem independent. But this isn’t the whole story.

Fiction films have an epistemic value—an epistemic directness—partly in virtue of their phenomenological immediacy. They don’t just show us actors and sets that represent characters and fictional worlds; they show us fictional truths. They make the fictional perceivable and construct some fictional truths via that perceptual content. They show us characters and the actions they partake in; they show us dogs barking and cars moving and rain falling. Insofar as they prescribe us to imagine that what we see and hear is a part of the fictional world, movies allow us to directly see and hear facts about their fictional worlds in the same sort of way that we see and hear facts in the real world. Just as we pick up on what color hair a person has, what sort of emotion they’re feeling, or how the weather is outside, so too we pick up on what color hair a character has, what sort of emotion they’re feeling, and how the weather is in the fictional world. If we think (as I do) that the former constitutes an immediate perceiving of facts in the world, the latter constitutes an immediate perceiving of facts in the fictional world. Because movies engage
in this fictional-truth showing (keeping in mind, of course, that not all of their truths are shown), they are uniquely epistemically direct because of their phenomenological immediacy.

Medium Specificity

Throughout these chapters, I've argued for some descriptive medium specificity claims: claims that establish the ways in which movies are unique—how they possess capacities other art forms lack or how they can exercise some common artistic capacities more than, or in different ways than, other art forms. Despite these descriptive claims, I stated in chapter one that I’m against normative claims of medium specificity of the kind Noël Carroll takes issue with. In this concluding section, I’ll delve more carefully into the nature of the medium specificity thesis by laying out some typical defenses of it. I’ll then defend my rejection of the normativity commonly endorsed.

Briefly, we can think of medium specificity as the idea that, as Henry John Pratt, puts it:

The media associated with a given art form (both its material components and the processes by which they are exploited) (1) entail specific possibilities for and constraints on representation and expression, and (2) this provides a normative framework for what artists working in that art form ought to attempt.  

For medium specificity theorists, a medium—where we think of medium as the “ensemble of possibly diverse materials, instruments, and procedures effectively involved in the fabrication or use of a particular…display or category of displays”—determines the properties or capacities essential to an art form, and an art form ought to exploit those properties or capacities.  

Defenses of medium specificity have been common in film theory, particularly stemming from an interest in combatting charges against film's nature as a new art form.

Following Clement Greenberg, some avant-garde or modernist filmmakers maintain that essential, physical properties—like “the film strip, projector, camera, and screen”—serve as

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limitations on the cinematic medium.\textsuperscript{239} The central claim made by Greenberg-ian avant-gardists is that movies ought to exploit and draw attention to these limitations, and that they ought to do so at the expense of narrative; rather than tell a story, films ought to show us the medium itself, reflexively. Some examples of movies made within this movement are: “The flicker films of Sharits… and Conrad (\textit{The Flicker})” which “foreground the structure of the filmstrip and the mechanism of both camera and projector that make the illusion of movement possible in cinema,” and Andy Warhol’s “long, static, silent” films \textit{Empire} and \textit{Sleep} which lack content and “focus the spectator’s attention on the unique physical characteristics of the medium itself: the grain of the image, the shape and two-dimensionality of the support, and so on.”\textsuperscript{240}

At the other end of the spectrum are the cinematic realists we discussed in chapter one: extreme realists like Bazin and Kracauer who maintain that film’s essential capacity, which stems from its photographic nature, is to show us reality. Despite the strong divergence in their claims, realists “posit as its basis the photographic/illusionistic/representational properties” of film, emphasizing the content of a film’s images (content which, in one way or another, shows us the world) over the visual reflexivity of avant-gardists.\textsuperscript{241} Similarly, supporters of the \textit{Dogme 95} filmmaking movement eschew post-production editing in favor of simple narrative. \textit{Dogme 95} movies depict basic events without props, produced sound, or genre; their films are shot with hand-held cameras and on location so that theme and story are prioritized above special effects.

Somewhere in between these two extremes is Rudolf Arnheim, who emphasized film’s unique recording capacities which enabled film to show images different from “the images we obtain when we look at the physical world.”\textsuperscript{242} Unlike cinematic realists, Arnheim maintained that movies could show us objects, people, and places differently than reality could; unlike avant-gardists, Arnheim didn’t argue for a strict reflexivity and instead prioritized film’s unique \textit{recording}

\textsuperscript{240} Walley, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{242} Carroll, Noël. \textit{Theorizing the Moving Image}. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. P. 4

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capacities: its ability to, for instance, show a close-up which “can make an object appear enormous in a way that would not occur in natural perception.” Similarly, in between the avant-garde extreme and the cinematic realistic extreme, Soviet montage theorists maintained that film’s unique capacity was editing: specifically stringing together images via montage to enable expressivity and narrative understanding.

Medium specificity theses span a wide range. Despite their divergences, they begin with the same two initial assumptions: that movies do have unique capacities or properties and that movies ought to exploit those unique capacities or properties. My defense of medium specificity rejects both initial assumptions. In doing so, it remains more plausible than these aforementioned ones. Having outlined some typical defenses, then, let’s turn to mine: how it diverges and why it remains particularly strong.

Avant-garde filmmakers focus on the physical properties of movies; cinematic realists focus on film’s photographic capacities; Arnheim focuses on film’s unique recording abilities; and montage theorists focus on film’s ability to communicate through shot-transitions. Each defense focuses on just one filmic capacity or a subset of filmic capacities. And they do so because they search, straight away, for film’s uniqueness: what separates the filmic medium from other artistic media. Because other art forms can tell stories, avant-gardists deem that capacity unimportant for film; because other art forms can use expressive techniques, cinematic realists focus on film’s distinctly photographic nature; and, for montage theorists, only film has the capacity to express through connections between frames.

The starting-point of my medium specificity claim is very different. Rather than look for what makes movies unique, I attend generally to what movies are capable of: what capacities they have, including what capacities they share with other art forms. And I draw out a uniqueness claim from the combination of those capacities. Thus, where other medium specificity theorists start with a uniqueness claim, I end with one. We can, perhaps, articulate my uniqueness claim as, roughly: movies can show us their stories in ways that other art forms cannot. This amounts to

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243 Carroll, p. 4.
making their stories perceivable through the employment of everyday perceptual processes and recognition capacities (including our recognition of natural meaning cues).

What enables this unique ‘showing’ is a combination of: (1) film’s photographic ability (i.e., how photographic movies possess natural meaning); (2) film’s perceptual nature (which makes its story, fiction or nonfiction, perceivable); (3) film’s motion and sound (which makes film-viewing more like everyday perception than our perception of static depictions); (4) filmic editing techniques which enable expressivity and everyday ‘scanning’; and (4) film’s narrative ability (the way in which, like books, movies can show us stories). Some of these capacities—(1), (2) and (5)— are shared with other art forms; and some—(3) and (4)—aren’t. What’s more, some—(1)—while shared, can be uniquely exploited by film. But the central point for my claim of medium specificity doesn’t hinge on which individual capacity (or capacities) distinguish movies from other art forms. Rather, my claim is that, taken together, these capacities make movies unique. Their combination enables movies to engage in a form of showing that other art forms cannot engage in.

This distinction between my theory and other medium specificity theories can allow us to see one of the central shortcomings of the latter: by focusing on what distinguishes film from other art forms straight away, they overlook a plethora of filmic capacities. This is problematic for the reason Carroll states: if we really care about art, and we really care about the expressive and emotional and narrational abilities of artforms, then we ought to care about all of those abilities. We shouldn’t eschew or overlook something movies can do merely because books or paintings can exercise the same capacity. Movies can tell stories; they have editing techniques at their disposal; they can photograph reality; they can engage everyday perceptual processes; and they can engage perceptual processes that we can’t exercise in everyday life. At the core of my medium specificity thesis is that all of this matters. And medium specificity theorists haven’t made it clear why it shouldn’t.

Additionally, and perhaps more fundamentally, there’s something right (and therefore wrong) about each of the medium specificity theses above. Film’s photographic ability does
differentiate it from other art forms (albeit not precisely in the way cinematic realists maintain); a movie's editing techniques do give it expressive and communicative abilities other art forms lack; and film can draw attention to its unique physical properties. The medium of film makes way for each of the artistic capacities medium specificity theorists typically defend. And this means that such theses arbitrarily choose one among many traits supported by the medium—more than one of which is unique to film (and all of which can be uniquely exploited by film).

As Carroll argues, and as we discussed in chapter one, medium specificity theorists use their own aims or values to determine which capacities or properties are 'essential' to the medium; in doing so, they don't actually pinpoint capacities or properties that are any more objectively 'essential' than the ones other theorists identify. As Carroll puts it:

The medium specificity theorist, it would seem, has no non-arbitrary way to choose between conflicting aesthetic programs that may be equally grounded in the complex of possibilities afforded by the medium. Nor is this problem a merely academic one. For very often contesting artistic programs attempt to vindicate themselves by means of invoking the nature of the medium. But this is of little moment, because the media we are considering can each support contradictory programs. A medium does not ordain a single style or even a single family of styles, but generally affords the opportunities for a plethora of incompatible styles.²⁴⁴

Oddly enough, the central problem with medium specificity theses is that they attempt to identify what makes film unique—or what is essential to it—and end up identifying an arbitrary capacity that isn't any more 'unique' or 'essential' than others. In the process, they misunderstand the medium or miss what's most interesting about it: that it does afford multiple (sometimes conflicting) opportunities, that it possesses more than one unique trait, and that it can exploit some common artistic capacities differently than other art forms can.

My medium specificity thesis doesn't start with a claim of uniqueness. Instead, it acknowledges filmic capacities and properties generally—regardless of whether or not they're unique. By grounding itself upon this more nuanced understanding of what the medium of film is like, my thesis attends to (1) the multiple, individual properties unique to film; (2) the properties it

²⁴⁴ Carroll, p. 13.
shares with other art forms; (3) the properties it exploits differently than other art forms; and (4) the unique form of showing that (1), (2), and (3), give rise to. In this way, it doesn’t limit our discussion of the filmic medium as other theses have, and it reaches a more accurate, complete picture of what movies can do.

Let’s turn, now, from the descriptive to the normative claim, since the latter is perhaps the biggest shortcoming with typical defenses of medium specificity and since we might wonder just how I can plausibly reject it. As Steven Maras and David Sutton put it:

The discussion of the essence or specificity of an art form is very quickly liable to become normative: critics establish the ‘essence’ of a particular art form from their own historical, cultural, and personal perspective, but they then all too easily begin to use that definition in order to exclude all manifestations which run counter to it.\(^{245}\)

In excluding “all manifestations which run counter” to their “historical, cultural, and personal perspective,” medium specificity theorists endorse a general, exclusive claim: that movies are aesthetically better \textit{when they do} \textit{x}. If movies ought to do what makes them unique, then any movie that doesn’t is less good \textit{as a movie}. Each of the theses I’ve discussed is guilty of this normativity. On the one hand this normative commitment is intuitive. If movies are unique in certain ways, does it \textit{really} make sense to say that they needn’t show their uniqueness? But, as intuitive as it may seem, the normative claim is mistaken. To see why, and to make sense of how I \textit{can} reject it (despite endorsing the descriptive medium specificity claim), it helps to look at movies that don’t exercise all of the capacities I mentioned.

Many experimental films eschew narrative in favor of post-production effects and modifications, and in this way tie movies more strongly to paintings than narrative artforms like literature; they thus do not elucidate film’s storytelling capacities. At the other end of the spectrum, \textit{Dogme 95} or extreme cinematic realist films eschew technical gimmicks and post-production effects in favor of narrative (or in favor of capturing the transient everyday encounters Kracauer emphasizes); they thus do not take advantage of the expressivity which cinematic

editing techniques enable, and they do not utilize the full range of techniques which separate filmic ‘showing’ from the ‘showing’ of static forms of visual depiction.

These movies don’t exploit all of film’s capacities, and they thus do not engage in film’s full ‘showing.’ To endorse the normative claim, I’d seemingly have to maintain that these films are less good aesthetically than movies that do exercise filmic ‘showing’—this second category perhaps including standard Hollywood movies which tell stories through the use of montage and post-production effects. But this comparative claim isn’t true: it’s not the case that Stan Breakage’s films are less good (as a general rule) than they would be if they told stories. It’s not the case that *Dogme 95* movies are less good (as a general rule) than they would be if they utilized more editing. These movies have different aims, and they elucidate different filmic capacities: as a result, they have different kinds of aesthetic value. It’s this distinction among *kinds of aesthetic value* that typical medium specificity theses ignore.

When we watch Stan Brekhage’s films, we notice how editing techniques can be used to create movies that are like moving paintings: we recognize the expressivity in what we’re shown at a bare perceptual, natural-meaning, level (and the expressivity it enables at a higher, emotional, level). And we recognize how movies *differ* from static forms of visual depiction because of the editing techniques at their disposal as well as their nature as *moving* images. When we watch a *Dogme 95* movie, we see how movies can be used to tell stories—indeed to tell very basic stories—through a form of *showing* that novels are incapable of. By highlighting one, or a few, of film’s capacities these movies do two things: (1) they draw our attention to that capacity and (2) they highlight something that differentiates movies from another art form. Who’s to say that doing (1) and (2) isn’t as good as drawing our attention to all of film’s capacities in the way that a Paul Thomas Anderson film or a Robert Zemeckis film does?

We might even think there’s a special sort of aesthetic value that comes with appreciating one particular filmic capacity. By showing us expressive visuals and sounds, without an accompanying narrative, experimental movies enable us to appreciate filmic editing techniques (and the expressivity they’re capable of) more than we do when we’re simultaneously paying
attention to a story. By showing us a basic story without enhanced post-production effects, *Dogme 95* movies enable us to appreciate the ways in which movies can take us through a narrative more than we do when we’re simultaneously attending to editing techniques. It’s not clear that either of these is a lesser sort of value than appreciating all of film’s capacities to a moderate degree.

Similarly, sometimes purposefully eschewing certain filmic capacities draws our attention to those capacities in a way that provides yet another sort of aesthetic value. *The Artist* is a good example of this. Made in 2011, the film mimics the style of 1920’s silent black-and-white films. Partly because it’s silent and (colorless) in 2011 and partly because of the plot, the film draws our attention to *sound* in film. How is watching *The Artist* different from watching sound films? What does it do for us, as spectators, to see a film purposefully eschew one of the central aspects of contemporary cinema? If we’re attentive viewers, these are the questions *The Artist* raises, and—inhospitably as it does—it has a particular type of aesthetic value: one that amounts to thinking more about the filmic medium, what its properties are, and what value those properties bring. More basically, *The Artist* is a visually stunning film, and our experience of it entails attending to its visual cues more carefully than (I think) we do when we watch sound-films. The beauty in its images, the cinematic questions it raises, and its providing viewers with the opportunity for enhanced attention to *what they see*, makes *The Artist* valuable precisely because it isn’t aural.

Movies can be aesthetically valuable, then, by eschewing filmic capacities. They can also be aesthetically valuable when they exercise all of the capacities we’ve discussed. The central point here is that different types of movies (experimental films, *Dogme 95* films, standard fiction films, etc.) can allow for different kinds of cinematic value. Importantly, this isn’t to say that every film has value.\(^\text{246}\) Nor is it to say that aesthetic value only consists in exploiting filmic capacities

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\(^{246}\) Does every film have some aesthetic value? I’m tempted to say ‘yes,’ if only because I think there’s aesthetic value in appreciating filmic capacities—and this goes for movies that aren’t particularly well-written, well-acted, well-shot, or well-directed. But we might worry that this claim is too strong. After all, it would seemingly entail that any work of art has value simply by exploiting its medium; surely we don’t want to say that every painting is aesthetically valuable because it’s
(we care about acting, directing, cinematography, score, etc.). It's to say that we cannot look to ‘uniqueness’—i.e., whether or not a movie exploits all of film's capacities (or at least the ones I've identified)—to determine how aesthetically valuable a film is. And this is why the normative claim is mistaken.

So far, I've been operating under the assumption that, to endorse the normative claim, I'd have to maintain that films ought to exploit all of their capacities—since the 'uniqueness' I've argued for results from their combination. And we've seen why this claim can't be convincingly maintained. But let's consider a slightly weaker normative claim, one that states: a movie ought to exercise at least one capacity unique to film. Should I make this claim, or—more importantly—have I implicitly maintained it?

I do think I've maintained it, but I don't think it's normative. Most any film will exercise a capacity it has which other art forms lack or it will exercise a common artistic capacity differently than other art forms. Any fiction film will necessarily engage in showing, distinguishing itself from novels and static forms of visual depiction (the former because of its perceptual nature and natural meaning cues, the latter because of its motion and sound); most any film that utilizes editing techniques—in fact, any film that moves—will 'show' differently from static forms of visual depiction and will engage ordinary perceptual processes and recognition capacities that nonperceptual art forms (like novels) cannot engage. This is true even of basic, Dogme 95 films. In this way, I think the claim above is true necessarily, descriptively—and thus not as an ‘ought.’

If we're wary of endorsing this general claim, we can endorse a more moderate one, namely: every film will exploit a capacity it has which at least one other art form lacks, and will in this way show film’s comparable uniqueness. Each of the examples above achieves this, as do more extreme examples. For instance, a film that doesn’t move—one composed, say, of a series of freeze frames—will differentiate itself from literature via its natural meaning cues and 'showing' even though it doesn’t differentiate itself from photography.

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painted, that every novel is aesthetically valuable because it's written, and so forth. So I'm not sure just what my commitment is here.
Now, I don’t want to commit myself to the necessity of these claims. Perhaps there are (actual or potential) films that eschew filmic capacities in ways I haven’t realized and that therefore don’t even show film’s comparable uniqueness. Merely because of this potential, I don’t want to maintain the ‘ought’ above. If it’s not true descriptively that movies exercise at least one unique capacity (either a capacity which other art forms lack generally or a capacity which at least one other art form lacks), then I don’t think movies ‘should’ do so. While I can’t cash this out, since I can’t think of relevant examples, my guess is that we’ll find an interesting, distinct, aesthetic value in such films—and, once again, we need to leave open this space for various kinds of aesthetic value.

My thesis of medium specificity, then, isn’t even normative in this weaker sense. And not only is this not a shortcoming—it’s a merit; it makes my thesis open-minded and (perhaps more importantly) accurate about the fact that different movie-types have different kinds of aesthetic value. Normative medium specificity theses aren’t just problematic because they’re exclusive; they’re problematic because they’re incorrect about what can make a movie good as a movie.

All of this points to perhaps the fundamental distinction between my medium specificity thesis and others: I’m not interested in uniqueness for uniqueness’s sake. I care about the filmic medium and what sorts of capacities it has. And I care about artistic media more generally: how they diverge from one another, what a canvas or photograph affords that a film doesn’t, what a movie provides that a book can’t. I care about these things just because it’s worthwhile to understand artistic media.

None of this gets us to a normative claim about what art forms should do. And none of it amounts to claims of excellence. We shouldn’t compare one general type of movie to another general type of movie—e.g., an experimental to a narrative film—and deem one more aesthetically valuable than another. And we shouldn’t compare one art form to another art form. With regards to this latter claim, I haven’t been arguing for ways in which movies are superior to books or paintings or pictures. While movies can show in ways that other art forms can’t, this ‘showing’ doesn’t make movies comparably better. In many ways, we might think a novel’s telling
is superior to a film’s showing (because it leaves more room for our imaginative co-construction of the fictional world) or that static forms of visual depiction are superior because static (precisely because they often draw enhanced attention to one or more aspects of a scene rather than engage in ‘everyday scanning,’ and thereby exercise perceptual processes that we don’t otherwise get the chance to exercise).

So this is what my medium specificity thesis amounts to. It amounts to understanding ‘filmic capacities’ as ‘filmic opportunities’ in the way Carroll articulates. Movies can tell stories. They can connect their images via a multitude of editing techniques. They can be aural. They can be expressive. When they take advantage of all of these opportunities to some degree, they distinguish themselves from other perceptual and nonperceptual art forms. But filmmakers have various purposes and therefore exploit the medium in various ways: sometimes by not taking all available opportunities. Indeed, some “aesthetic programs” are conflicting despite being “equally grounded in the complex of possibilities afforded by the medium.”

Some filmmakers aim to elucidate the physical capacities of film and produce the reflexive movies of the sort Warhol produced; some aim to take advantage of film’s storytelling capacities and produce movies along the lines of Dogma 95 films; some utilize montage above all else in order to express and communicate through shot-transitions. None of these projects is any ‘better’ than any other because (1) each stems from the medium itself; and (2) each brings a specific kind of aesthetic value which can’t adequately be compared to the others.

Other, traditionally defended, medium specificity theses are mistaken in two central ways: in searching for one unique, essential filmic capacity or property, and in maintaining that that property or capacity ought to be exploited. Despite these shortcomings, each does point to a capacity of film, one that it’s important to take note of insofar as it’s important to understand the medium of film and to grasp how that capacity distinguishes movies from (some) other art forms. I’ve argued that we ought to endorse a descriptive claim of medium specificity that acknowledges

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247 Carroll, p. 13.
each aforementioned capacity (and others) and that leaves open the space for different, equally valuable, kinds of aesthetic merit.

Conclusion

One of my central aims throughout these four chapters has been to clarify how movies are distinct from other perceptual and nonperceptual art forms. In concluding, it’s worth it to keep in mind broader aims as theorists, film-goers, and appreciators of art: to understand what artistic media can do, to clarify what’s involved in our interactions with various forms of (fictional, experimental, and nonfictional) depictions, and to think more about how we see and cognize and know the fictional worlds we experience. I’ve provided many of these specifications with regards to film. And we need to continue with these sorts of analyses—analyses that get at our cognitive, perceptual, and epistemic engagement with film, and analyses that don’t treat the ‘perceptual’ and the ‘cognized’ (or ‘constructed’) separately.

Movies have an epistemic value—an epistemic directness—that stems partly from their perceptual immediacy. They engage us imaginatively in their worlds and therefore perceptually. They construct many of their fictional truths by showing them. They express via editing techniques that are constructed and conventional (and therefore nonnatural) as well as capable of direct showing (and therefore natural). What we see and hear isn’t all there is—we do much extrapolating and inferring, bringing in conventional and real-world knowledge, as we do in ordinary communicative situations. But there are important and interesting intertwinements between what we know, what we see, what we imagine, and what we cognize during film-viewing. We can’t reach a full, adequate theory of film meaning unless we acknowledge—and build upon—the interactions I’ve laid out in these chapters. Movies are multi-modal. They are aesthetically complicated. And they’re complicated in ways that other art forms are not. Film theory and philosophy of film need to reflect this. I hope I’ve paved the way for this further work, and I hope I’ve motivated corresponding directions of research in theories of art more generally.
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