I. INTRODUCTION

At least since Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* the standard procedure for identifying “the narrator” in a fictional work has been to ask the question “Who is speaking?” This question is imprecise, however, since there are a number of narrators in literary fiction who are, strictly speaking, not speaking. For instance, in Sue Townsend’s *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 ¾* the narrator, Adrian, does not speak but writes entries into his diary. There are also a number of texts for which it is impossible to determine whether the narrative is conveyed through speech, writing, or perhaps even thought. If we construe speaking, writing, and thinking as forms of telling then a more precise question for identifying narrators presents itself: “Who is telling the story?” But even this question fails when applied to non-literary narratives such as comics, theater plays, and films, for these appear not to be told at all. Instead, they seem simply to unfold in front of us. Recognizing this problem, Gregory Currie introduces the term “controlling fictional narrator,” construing narrators as the source of the whole of the text. The aforementioned Adrian and the majority of literary narrators including, say, Nick Carraway from *The Great Gatsby* become controlling fictional narrators under this framework while remaining the tellers of their stories. Moreover, Currie’s term is also applicable to non-literary narratives. In the case of film we can ask: who is the source of the audio-visual film track? More precisely: is there an agency fictionally in control of all but paratextual (e.g., opening and closing credits) audio-visual information on the screen?

The prevalent opinion among analytic philosophers has been that in the greatest majority of fiction films no such controlling fictional narrators exist. Simply put, there appears to be no filmic analogue to literary narrators. Whereas in literary fiction the words we read are usually under the control of some fictional entity (whether they are spoken, written, or thought), the information we see on screen does not appear to be fictionally controlled by anybody. In other words, the burden of proof lies with those who wish to argue for the existence of controlling fictional narrators in film. George Wilson, to whose work I now turn, presents the best such argument.

In his latest monograph, Wilson has proposed that his Fictional Showing Hypothesis is a necessary condition for the existence of minimal narrating agency in fiction film. The hypothesis states that movie-going audiences are prompted to imagine themselves watching “the fictional exhibition and sequential arrangement, by means of editing, of motion picture shots of the occurrences that constitute the story.” I believe that the Fictional Showing Hypothesis has been adequately criticized by Noël Carroll, Berys Gaut, and Andrew Kania. They have shown that by subscribing to complex fictional entities such as the “naturally iconic images” that make up motion picture shots, the hypothesis fails to meet the Reality Heuristic. According to these critics, it is true that there is nothing incoherent about Wilson’s naturally iconic images—images which present us with slices of the fictional world much like photographs present us with slices of the real world, but whose mode of production, unlike that of actual photographs, is left completely indeterminate. However, given that under the Reality Heuristic we imagine fictional worlds as similar to our own when there are no signs to the contrary, imagining that the fictional world is mediated by naturally iconic images is unwarranted. Elsewhere, I have supplemented this critique by pointing out that the arrangement of naturally iconic images into a filmic whole invokes an untenable material version of the ontological gap argument. If under Wilson’s framework the production of naturally iconic images is left indeterminate, there is also no reason to imagine that they are
exhibited and sequentially arranged, that is, there is no reason to imagine a minimal narrating agency behind the exhibition. In other words, in the absence of fictional truths suggesting the contrary, the manner in which viewers access naturally iconic images also remains indeterminate.

Rather than pursuing old critiques, however, I wish to offer a new and a more fundamental objection to Wilson’s account of controlling fictional narrators. I will do so by criticizing his Imagined Seeing Thesis. According to this thesis, the viewers imagine themselves seeing actual slices of the fictional world from a string of precisely determined visual perspectives. In his latest work, Wilson has noted that the Fictional Showing Hypothesis rests on the Imagined Seeing Thesis. Thus, if the Imagined Seeing Thesis is invalid, then the Fictional Showing Hypothesis will also be invalid. Although Wilson’s thesis is clearly of relevance for the epistemology of film, I aim to argue that it is inapplicable to the discussion of controlling fictional narrators. The reason for this stems from the confusion between what has been termed game-worlds and work-worlds. In what follows, I produce the argument for the Mediated Version of the Imagined Seeing Thesis that Wilson ends up endorsing, which is the view that the slices of the fictional world are mediated by naturally iconic images. My argument, however, is applicable to all of the thesis’s versions.

II. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN GAME-WORLDS AND WORK-WORLDS

According to Wilson, while watching a film it is fictional that the viewers see naturally iconic images. This, in turn, he claims, means that it is fictional that the viewers are being shown those very images. The agent fictionally showing the images is none other than the controlling fictional narrator. Wilson claims that he understands “being fictional” as “being work-fictional” in Kendall Walton’s sense. According to Walton, p is work-fictional if and only if it is the work’s standard function to prompt appreciators to make-believe that p:

> [I]t is a standard function of a cinematic work of fiction to prompt viewers to imagine—to make believe—themselves being shown the narrative events and circumstances of successive shots. Moreover […] it is fictional in the movie […] Since ‘fictional showing’ is putatively what the movie’s images are meant to achieve, and ‘imagined seeing’ is putatively what movie viewers do in response to those images, it is often easier to formulate certain points in terms of one thesis rather than the other. But, to repeat, the two theses are utterly interdependent, although, of the two, the Imagined Seeing Thesis is probably the more fundamental.

There is more to the work’s standard function in Walton than Wilson lets on, however. Walton claims that something is work-fictional if and only if it holds for any game of make-believe the work prompts. Otherwise, it is game-fictional. An example from Walton illustrates the distinction. Although it is both work- and game-fictional that there is a couple strolling in Georges Seurat’s painting A Sunday Afternoon, it is only game-fictional that Jim, a visitor at the Chicago Art Institute, is seeing the couple strolling. In other words, as long as the game is authorized there will be a couple strolling regardless of who is playing the game. But given that on this occasion it is Jim who is appropriately playing an authorized game of make-believe it is only game-fictional that he is seeing the couple. For if Julia were to be looking at the painting she would be prompted to imagine that she is seeing the couple and not Jim.

Notice that Wilson cannot defend his claim by replacing Jim and Julia for a variable X. He cannot say that it is work-fictional that X sees the couple strolling. There is simply no X in the painting doing the looking. In other words, A Sunday Afternoon mandates no game of make-believe in which we are prompted to imagine that somebody is looking at the Island of La Grande Jatte and that this person’s look corresponds exactly to Seurat’s depiction of the island. An alternative that concedes that there is no such work-fictional character but claims that there is subject-less work-fictional “seeing” would not work either. For just as there is no X doing the relevant looking and seeing, there is no subject-less “seeing” in addition to Jim imagining himself or in addition to Julia imagining herself seeing the couple. Under Wilson’s framework, then, we are forced to conclude that the Imagined Seeing Thesis and, in turn the
Fictional Showing Hypothesis, are not work-fictional but are instead game-fictional. As such they cannot tell us anything about controlling fictional narrators because any narrator’s existence or absence is work-fictional. This, however, should not lead us to reject completely the idea of controlling fictional narrators, for there are several distinct categories of films in which we can identify the source of all sounds and images as fictional.

The first group includes mockumentaries such as Zelig (Woody Allen, 1983) and This Is Spinal Tap (Rob Rainer, 1984) in which we are prompted to imagine that everything we see and hear on screen was recorded by a crew of fictional filmmakers. This Is Spinal Tap, for instance, opens with a “behind the scenes” shot of the director Marty DiBergi (played by Rob Rainer) introducing us to the film we are about to see. In it DiBergi gives a brief account of his motives for making a film about the famous Spinal Tap rock band. DiBergi is clearly the fictional director and, in turn, the controlling fictional narrator who is responsible for whole of the film we see in front of us (including the “behind the scenes” shot). A variation on the theme obtains in recent horror films in which the camera and its crew are swooped up into the action: consider, for example, [Rec] (Jaume Belaúgeró and Paco Plaza, 2007), Paranormal Activity (Oren Peli, 2007), or Cloverfield (Matt Reeves, 2008).

Recent sitcoms such as The Office (2001–2003) and Parks and Recreation (2009–present) also seem to suggest a fictional crew filming the characters. The presence of the crew is implied through the characters’ addresses at the camera. Moreover, sometimes the characters appear to answer questions posed by the personnel behind the camera. The crew’s identities and reasons for filming are, however, left indeterminate. What all of these films and TV shows have in common is that they prompt us to imagine that they have been fictionally recorded. So at the very least we can identify the fictional recording as the source of all of the audio-visual information we are presented with. Although these examples admit of controlling fictional narrators or narration, they depart from Wilson’s thesis in this: in this group of fiction the make-believe remains work-fictional because we need not imagine ourselves being shown these fictional recordings. Moreover, these examples also demonstrate that, contrary to Wilson’s claims about naturally iconic images, we need strong markers within the fictional world to prompt us to imagine that the world in question is mediated through some sort of fictionally produced images.

There is at least one film in which all of the film’s sights and sounds (minus the paratextual ones) are attributable to a fictional character who is not recording the events in front of him: the stranger in Aleksandr Sokurov’s Russian Ark (2002). The whole film is an exquisitely choreographed 99-minute-long point-of-view shot. Moreover, there is not a single non-diegetic sound in the film which could wrest control over even a part of the audio-visual track away from the stranger. As such, the stranger could be compared to literary first person narrators, such as Katniss Everdeen from The Hunger Games, who speak in the present tense about the events unfolding in front of them. Finally, both film critics and analytic philosophers have offered the possibility that some voice-over narrators may be controlling fictional narrators.

III. VOICE-OVER NARRATORS AS CONTROLLING FICTIONAL NARRATORS

Turning to the question of voice-over narration, it is generally agreed upon that neither standard voice-over narrators nor character-narrators such as Walter Neff from Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944) amount to controlling narrators. First, the problem with these character-narrators is that, according to Genette’s typology, they are intradiegetic. By definition this means that they are not in control of the text for the whole duration of the text. Second, even if we focused on the particular intradiegetic segments, the character-narrators would still not be in full control of either the sounds or the images that make up the segment. The reason is simply that although character-narrators start recounting their story in their own voice, the sounds and the images that follow that recounting, although meant to be understood as an audiovisual instantiation of the character’s spoken word, are not clearly marked as being under their control: The character-narrators are certainly not characterized as having any recording devices at their disposal. Moreover, their words are simply too general and impoverished to specify all of the wealth of
audio-visual information presented simultaneously. In other words, although what is represented by their words and what is represented audio-visually on screen allows for the reconstruction of the same story, character-narrators are only in control of the audio track corresponding to their voice and not of the remaining audio-visual representations. The same considerations apply to standard extradiegetic voice-over narrators such as the one in The Magnificent Ambersons (Orson Welles, 1942). For markers of control over all of the audio-visuals we need to look at more specific cases.

One such case appears in the literature more than once: the example of character-narrator Addison DeWitt in Joseph Mankiewicz’s All About Eve (1950). According to both Sarah Kozloff and Berys Gaut, DeWitt is a controlling fictional narrator. In order to respond to their claims, it first must be made clear that DeWitt cannot be a controlling fictional narrator for the whole duration of the text as Gaut suggests. There is clearly a moment at which another character—Karen Richards—takes over from DeWitt. This takes place immediately after the sequence Kozloff and Gaut both analyze. The same holds for Bette Davis’s character Margo later on. Nevertheless, because DeWitt’s narration remains on the extradiegetic level, if Kozloff and Gaut are right, an analysis of the sequence in question could permit the definition of a possible subclass of fiction films with voice-over narrators as controlling fictional narrators.

The sequence to which Gaut and Kozloff appeal is the opening one (All About Eve, 1:06–4:31). An elderly actor is to present Eve with an award, and theater critic DeWitt makes introductions and gives commentary throughout the presentation. Kozloff’s and Gaut’s claims in favor of DeWitt’s control rely on the following facts: (1) We do not hear most of the old thespian’s speech because DeWitt deems it uninteresting. (2) Once the actor reaches the part of the award presentation speech DeWitt does find interesting we are allowed to hear what he is saying. (3) DeWitt introduces each character as he or she is shown, (4) and when he reaches Eve, the frame freezes and DeWitt offers detailed commentary. I could add (5) DeWitt comments on the only remaining prize in the following manner: “the minor awards, as you can see, have already been presented.” Items (1) and (2) certainly speak in favor of DeWitt’s control over the sound whereas (3), (4), and (5) speak in favor of his control over the image. Together, according to Kozloff and Gaut they make DeWitt the segment’s controlling fictional narrator.

The key problem with this account is the non-diegetic music that plays throughout the sequence. By definition then, DeWitt is not in control of the whole of the audio-visual track, which means that he cannot be the controlling fictional narrator. There are also problems with the synchronization of image and sound as it pertains to point (3). It is true that DeWitt’s spoken word generally cues the images of characters being introduced. However, the level of synchronization between the images and DeWitt’s introductions fluctuates. For instance, the synchronization is at its best when the camera pans from DeWitt to Karen immediately following his comment: “This is Karen Richards.” When the characters are introduced by cuts instead of pans the synchronization is not as good. The cuts tend to be slightly out of sync with DeWitt’s introduction because a part of the body of the character to be introduced usually enters the shot when the current introduction is still taking place (e.g., producer Max Fabian’s hand enters the frame while DeWitt describes another type of producer and Margo’s hand reaches for the cigarette while DeWitt is still speaking of Max). These discrepancies further undermine DeWitt’s position as the one in control of the images.

Yet another problem with the cueing of images by speech arises once the old actor’s speech is made audible to the viewer of the film. During his speech, the actor comments on Eve’s hands, and his comment is followed by a shot of her hands not belonging to any diegetic subjective position. At this point, following Gaut’s logic, it could be said that it is DeWitt again who is in control of the image. Just as easily, however, it could be said that it is the old actor who is responsible for the image of Eve’s hands. The third option, and the one to which I am inclined, would be to say that nobody is fictionally in control of the image. This third option could also be used to account for the introductions for which the sounds and images are synchronized less than perfectly. All of this, however, does not discount the fact that DeWitt does enjoy quite remarkable control over particular aspects of the segment. These include the introduction of Karen, the muting of the actor’s speech while the others are being introduced, and the freeze-framing of Eve as she is receiving the award. Moreover, although DeWitt is not the controlling
fictional narrator in the strict sense, the control he does have makes it possible to imagine how such control could be established for a diegetic character.

One example comes readily to mind: consider the rewind sequence in Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* (1997, 2008). After Anna has managed to shoot Peter with a shotgun, Paul searches frantically for the remote control and, having found it, pushes the rewind button. What follows is the whole sequence played out in reverse. What this illustrates is that, because of the current conventions in film fiction, we need the continuous appearance of salient intradiegetic cues to fictionally assign narrative control to the character-narrator. In other words, clear and unequivocal work-fictional truths about this control need to be generated. Therefore, although in principle there is nothing that would constrain the existence of controlling fictional narrators in fiction film, in practice strong and reoccurring markers of control are necessary to any attribution of such to a particular character-narrator. Although some such markers can be found in the opening sequence of *All About Eve*, the sequence is best described as a series of intermittent moments of assuming and relinquishing partial control that stop just short of full control.

IV. CONCLUSION

A tentative conclusion presents itself. Although generally absent from fiction film, there are ways in which controlling narrators may appear: (1) sustained point of view shots without non-diegetic elements (e.g. *Russian Ark*), (2) fictionally determinate motion pictures shots (e.g. mockumentaries, implicit fictional shooting in sitcoms such as *The Office*, and camera horrors influenced by *Blair Witch Project*), and (3) control proper, persistently marked by salient cues (e.g., local examples in *All About Eve* or *Funny Games*).

To this we might also add situations in which it is fictional that somebody orally recounts the story but the person in control of the images and corresponding sounds is the addressee rather than the teller. A localized example may be found in *The Fall* (Tarsim Sing, 2006). The girl who is listening to Roy’s story, Alexandria, visually imagines one of the characters—“The Indian”—to be from the Asian subcontinent when he is in fact Native American. The discrepancy is revealed by the fact that Roy refers to the Indian’s wife as a “squaw” and to his dwelling as a “wigwam.” As a point of further interest, from a historical point of view it would be interesting to investigate whether lecturers in the early period of cinema of narrative integration (or even later in the case of benshies in Japan) were ever perceived to enjoy the control similar to that of exemplary voice-over narrators such as Addison DeWitt. It is doubtful, however, that such an analysis can be undertaken without recourse to historical documents, especially those informative of reception.
Endnotes

9. This inference from imagining seeing to fictional showing is what I effectively criticize in Slugan, “An Asymmetry of Implicit Fictional Narrators in Literature and Film,” in order to argue against the controlling fictional narrator in film in general. Here, I bracket off the inference and take a look at the consequences “imagining oneself” has for Wilson’s argument.
11. Ibid., italics in the original.
13. I take the following as demonstrating an inadvertent admission that imagined seeing is in fact game-fictional: “they [the spectators] imagine, falsely but quite legitimately, about the shots of the film, that those have been transparently derived from certain visible constituents of the fictional world that the film creates” (Wilson 2011, 90, italics in the original).
14. This analysis is, therefore, neutral as far as to whether the Imagined Seeing Thesis itself holds or not.
15. There have been other films which are made up of exclusively point-of-view shots such as *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) and *Blue* (Derek Jarman, 1993). Both of them, however, make use of non-diegetic sounds.
Bibliography


