Film Narrative/Narration: Part IV Introduction (by Noël Carroll)

Film is often used as a vehicle for storytelling. And where there is a story, there is usually a story*teller.* That is the starting point for the natural question “Who is the Narrator?” and that question is natural because a *story* is a *narrative* (an ‘account of connected events’ according to the Oxford English dictionary).

Why this is not the end of any discussion of *film narration:* as you have (or will) discover in watching *Rashomon,* while every story implies a storyteller, there can be stories-within-stories, and a story I tell can involve a central character who guides you, the viewer, *through* the overarching story as the voice-over narrator (cf. De Niro’s character, Travis Bickle, in Taxi Driver). But there can also be multiple narrators, as was the case in Terrence Malick’s The Thin Red Line.

**Some Distinctions**

In literary studies, ‘frequently distinctions are drawn between the actual author, an implied author, and a narrator.”

Actual Author: the actual person who creates the story: Kurosawa, Shakespeare, Homer

Implied Author: the *sense* of the author one gets in reading/viewing their ‘text’ (and that sensed person can be an accurate reflection of the actual author, or a persona they adopt).

Narrator: a fictional person/speaker who tells the story and either is in a “God” position relative to the fictional world being portrayed, or is one of the characters (and there can be more than one of these [cf. The Thin Red Line])

Explicit: Ishmael in Moby Dick**,** Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver.

Implicit: “Implicit fictional teller of the tale”….A posited speaker [even if they only ‘speak’ through the medium (words for literary stories/images+sounds+speech for film stories)] (cf. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” that begins the Tale of Two Cities)

*How these distinctions apply to film stories*: This seems straightforward in several cases (Kurosawa is the Actual Author, the Implied Author is either again Kurosawa or the various agents responsible for the contents of what is seen and heard in witnessing the film are the Implied Author [let’s say], and the Explicit Narrator is (I think) the woodcutter), and the Implicit Narrator is the same as the film itself: *it* presents the story.

Controversy in philosophy of film arises with the Implicit Narrator: some say *no* film has one of these, others say in all films, and others still in only *some* films. George Wilson tries to defend the “all films have implicit narrators” camp.

Evidence for the ‘All Films Have Implicit Narrators’ Camp: “’narration requires narrators”.

Counterargument: ok, but then why not think that the **Implicit Narrator** is just the **Implied Author** (for Rashomon, it is Akira Kurosawa)?

Counter to this counterargument: “The actual author of a fictional narrative can tell the tale as fictional, but cannot tell the tale **as true**”. That seems to require “…some agency presenting the facts of the fictional world as true, and that, allegedly, is the implicit narrator.” [176Rm]

Counter to the counter to the counterargument: why not just assign the function of the **Implicit Narrator** to the “fictive intention of the author (that we imagine such-and-such **as true**)”? [176Rb]

Problem for those who insist on an Implicit Narrator: sometimes the story *leaves open* something (something like “how things turned out in the end”) that, given the God-like position of the Implicit Narrator, s/he **should know**. This appears to be a contradiction: the implied narrator is the one responsible for the presentation-as-true of an ending in which the outcome is *unsettled*, while as the God-like purveyor of the fictional world, **must know** how things turned out (particularly for a story that ends abruptly but with all the fictional characters and world continuing on past the ending shared by the storyteller).

These problems for the ‘Implicit Narrator Hypothesis’ cut equally well against the literary version of the hypothesis. *But are films different in this respect?*

One Big Difference: when I am, on the basis of a written-out description, encouraged to imagine Sherlock Holmes’ apartment building on Baker Street, **I do the imagining**. But when a Holmes movie presents an establishing shot of Sherlock’s apartment building on Baker Street, **I am SHOWN Baker Street and his home!** While the movie certainly is only asking me to *imagine that Holmes’* ***actual home and street*** looks as it appears in the establishing shot, **WHO IS DOING THE SHOWING?** Answer: ‘a fictional presenter’.

JP: this problem seems to turn on the difference between imagining in your ‘mind’s eye’ Baker Street while reading one of Arthur Conan Doyle’s short stories about Holmes’s life as a private investigator, and **literally seeing a street and an apartment building**.

Best Answer: “As we view a fiction film, we are being present with visual information from the fictional world. On reflection, we must ask ourselves how this is being accomplished. The most plausible hypothesis is, allegedly, that some fictional agency, the implicit narrator, is making this information available to us. That is, we are being shown people and things in the fictional world. Reason enjoins us to ask how this is possible. That we are being shown these things by a fictional presenter is our best answer.”[177Rmb]

JP: If this is right, then it really seems this cuts equally well in favor of saying the same thing about the literary fiction (in which case my comment above is mistaken, since the *mode of presentation* of an *imagined scene* need not make any difference to whether the *thing imagined requires a presenter of the imagined scene* [i.e., the ‘image in the mind’s eye’, pursuant to words that evoke it, is not materially different from our ‘taking the film image as true representation of the fictional scene’: BOTH seem to require a presenter of the imagined scene).

This ‘Best Answer’, however, is vulnerable to the objection that whether we are imagining Holmes’s apartment building due to the evocative effect of Doyle’s words, or due to what we see in a sequence of fictional film images, *we don’t think we are* ***actually seeing Holmes’s apartment building*** (since that would imply that when viewing a war scene like the Normandy beach scenes in Saving Private Ryan**,** we would take it as so realistic as to imagine the bullets (when coming *at me* in one of those scenes) is **going through ME**. But in fact we *don’t* experience a film fiction in this way.

Another objection: how are we to interpret ‘dissolves’, great leaps through time and space that occur between cuts at times, etc.? Surely we are not to take these as *actually occurring in the fictional world!* And *even less* that they are happening *to us!*

JP: I think the temptation in film is the one that Noel Carroll here is really exploiting. That film can be taken to have a ‘you are there’ quality, one that is missing in literary fiction due to the means by which our receptivity to storytelling is provoked by words. But this is *illusory*. And I think the proposal that literary fiction **requires an implied narrator**confuses things that are different: someone tells me a story, I *forget* that *they* are telling me the story, and the same is true when I watch a film. To assume that the **imaginarial** **experience** requires an ongoing **sense of a speaker/presenter** just is undermined by our ability to have **imaginarial experience WITHOUT any sense of a speaker/presenter**.

Final salvo from Carroll: “…if we need a fictional intermediary to secure access to whatever is fictional, and the implicit narrator/presenter is fictional, then in order to make contact with the first implicit narrator, we will need a second implicit narrator, and then, for the same reason a third implicit narrator….and so on.” [178Rb]

Wilson’s eventual solution retains a place for the Implicit Narrator. His solution: replace the ‘literal seeing/hearing’ version of *imaginarial film narration* with a kind that depends on the audience treating what they have direct contact with as *images generated by some image-making device*. So it is as if we are bearing witness to something happening *that we know is meant to provoke our imagination* and **that requires an implicit narrator**. Wilson’s name for this is a **naturally iconic representation or image** (one that occurred in nature without human intervention).

Objection: the mental gymnastics required to accept this way of preserving the idea of Implicit Narrator seem hardly worth it given that they are vulnerable to almost all the same objections leveled against the alternative approaches that insist all films have implicit narrators (especially those that seem to involve contradictions, like **taking as true** images oflive fire coming at us on the beaches of Normandy in WW-II but not take ourselves as **at risk of taking a bullet**). In both cases, we are told we need some intermediary in order to achieve ***imaginarial experience***.

**JP: But this ignores the spontaneity of the human capacity for imagined experience** (suitably prompted by effective use of stimulants to the imagination, like well-formed word strings, as well as moving pictures!).

Wilson’s approach to these objections is to say that not *everything* we are asked to imagine necessarily involves us in imaging *those* *other things* that in the real world would be entailed by what we are asked to imagine (we can imagine seeing the birth of the solar system without imagining how *we* could be there to witness it, or how a non-human source of the images could possibly manage to survive the 4.6 billion years since that time and be preserved and accessible to us in the present, and **as images with sound!**).

Rejoinder: sure, but it is also plain that in watching a film fiction we regularly fill in parts of the situation that have not been explicitly addressed with things that comport well with “our beliefs about how the actual world works.” This “realist heuristic” seems to apply naturally and this shows that Wilson is wrong “in maintaining that we are not mandated to imagine that which has not been said or shown by the fiction.”[181Lm]

Very compelling objection to the Implied Narrator view: “…no fiction tells us that it possesses an implicit narrator/presenter”[181Rt]. And when it directs our attention to an Explicit Narrator, we don’t seem to need an *additional,* implicit narrator to carry the burden of what is not being presented by the Explicit Narrator.”

Final, best objection to Wilson’s position: film viewers would never come up with the idea of a natural iconic image generator that functions to be the implicit narrator of the fictions we ***imaginarially experience***. “It [the natural iconic image generator] may not be an entity only a metaphysician can love, but it is certainly the type of entity that only a metaphysician can manufacture.”[181Rb]

General objection to the appeal to the need for Implicit Narrators for both film and literary fictions, i.e., the need for something to function as the *agent* that *creates the narration*, without which we could not have the imaginarial experience, leads to odd/silly questions like “how does the implicit narrator know what happened [in cases where] it is indicated that no one knows this in the fictional world?” [182Lm] Defenders of the Implicit Narrator Hypothesis for *all* films suggest that once we have taken the instruction from that narrator to accept what they have explicitly told us about the fictional world, we stop engaging with that narrator. To Carroll, this seems arbitrary.

**Alternative Views re: Implicit Narrators**

That some films have them.

Evidence: the films that have **unreliable narrators** (The Usual Suspects implicitly, Rashomon explicitly).

Why does this seem to require the function of **Implicit Narrator**?

Because we become **conscious of the narration** when we discover we have been misled, and **being misled** seems to required **someone who intends that we be misled**. [182Rtm]

Currie offers a version of this view. But he thinks we can do without appeal to Implicit Narrators because that function can be satisfied by the Implied or Actual Author!

Final question: is there any reason to continue to pursue the **Implicit Narrator Hypothesis** for some or all film fictions?