Why We Should Give Up on the Imagination

DEREK MATRAVERS

Although there is recent and interesting work on film acting directly on our nerve endings so as to stimulate feelings and emotions, it is assumed, in Anglo-American philosophy of film (also known as "cognitive film theory"), that our engagement with film is largely mediated by the imagination (Coplan forthcoming). Hence, any account of the relation between film and emotion should take as central that viewers, generally, imagine the contents of the films they are shown. I think this is a mistake. In this paper, I want to argue that the imagination is not a helpful concept in accounting for our engagement with film (or indeed with literature, although here I will focus exclusively on film). More specifically, it is simply not clear what theorists mean when they talk of "the imagination." Famously, in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Kendall Walton describes the term as "serving as a placeholder for a notion yet to be fully clarified" (Walton 1990, 21). The lack of progress with such clarification has always hampered the debate, but now—in my view—it has become a real barrier to progress. Let us call the claim that viewers are mandated to imagine the content of films the "i-claim." Although it might look as if this paper is directed against Walton (and some of it is) I think it is much closer to his position than might appear. I shall say a little about this at the end, but in the meantime will omit caveats that explain when Walton's view escapes my arguments.

There seem to be five arguments for the i-claim with respect to films, although they are seldom clearly distinguished. The first argument is that the propositional attitude we have to the propositions that form the content of films cannot be a belief because, if it were a belief, audiences would be motivated to act

by (for example) running out of the cinema.[1] More formally, the argument is as follows:

1. If the audience did believe what they were watching, then they would be motivated to act.
2. The audience is not motivated to act.
3. Therefore, the audience does not believe what they are watching.

Given (3), the question is raised as to what the propositional attitude of the audience actually is. The answer generally given is, of course, that they imagine what they are watching—thus the i-claim. The game is then on to show how imagination differs from belief. However, (1) is false. If the audience believed they were watching a documentary, they would believe what they were watching. However, such audiences are no more motivated to act than audiences of fictions. There is already a sufficient explanation for the lack of motivation to act—namely, that the audience are watching a representation—hence, there is no need to posit a distinctive mental state in place of belief.

The second argument is that we obviously do not believe the content of fictions. The audience watching *Sense and Sensibility* does not believe that Marianne is heartbroken over Willoughby, as they do not believe such people existed. They do, however, have a pro-attitude to this proposition; they would assent to it if asked, and would distinguish it from such propositions as that Marianne is indifferent to Willoughby. Hence, the claim is that the audience imagine (or "make believe") that Marianne is heartbroken over Willoughby. However, with respect to this argument, there is no need to propose such a mental state: all that is needed is that the audience believe it is true in *Sense and Sensibility* that Marianne is heartbroken over Willoughby.

The third argument is that the imagination is needed to explain depiction. Kendall Walton has argued that a depiction "is a representation whose function is to serve as a prop in reasonably rich and vivid perceptual games of make-believe" (Walton 1990, 296). Walton gives his theory in terms of a painting (Hobbema's *Wooded Landscape with a Water Mill*), although it is clear from his examples that this generalizes to film. Here is the account in more detail:

> Rather than merely imagining seeing a mill, as a result of actually seeing the canvas (as one may imagine seeing Emma upon reading a description of her appearance in *Madame Bovary*), one imagines one's seeing of the canvas to be a seeing of a mill, and this imagining is an integral part of one's visual experience of the canvas. (301)

This is not the place for a full exploration of Walton's theory. I do not so much want to dispute it in its own terms—that is, show it contains some contradiction or

has some implausible entailment—but rather suggest that it is not the most enlightening way of conceptualizing the situation. Walton's theory could be interpreted as an answer to one of two questions. The first is a causal question: by what mechanism are we caused to have our visual experience of film? The second is a constitutive question: given that looking at a film is not like looking at the events depicted face to face, what is the most perspicuous description of looking at a film? As Walton takes his account to be an elucidation of Richard Wollheim's notion of "seeing in," we can take it that he is aiming to answer the second question (Walton 1992).

The issue, then, is whether we need to invoke the imagination to provide a constitutive account of the nature of the experience of film. The experience is a visual experience, with much in common with our face-to-face seeing (i.e., empirical results suggest that recall of the content of visual representations have more in common with perceptions [they have "more sensory and contextual information"] than recall of the contents of representations that have been merely presented to us verbally [Johnson 1988, 390]). Why should the imagination be thought constitutive of a visual experience of a representation? As Malcolm Budd has pointed out, the experience has prima facie properties that are at odds with it being imagined: it is highly stable, detailed, and we are unable to imagine that it could be anything other than the perception it in fact is (Budd 2008, 212). It would be a decisive point in Walton's favor if an imaginative project somehow featured consciously in our experience—however, that is no part of Walton's claim (Walton 1992, 285).

Away from the undoubted seductive power of Walton's theory, it is worth remembering that people generally *contrast* perception with imagination. It is, for example, a common complaint against the visual nature of film that it renders the imagination otiose. Here is the point as put by Wolfgang Iser:

> Without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the texts, we should not be able to use our imagination.
>
> The truth of this observation is borne out by the experience many people have on seeing, for instance, the film of a novel. While reading *Tom Jones*, they may never have had a clear conception of what the hero actually looks like, but on seeing the film, some may say, "That's not how I imagined him." The point here is that the reader of *Tom Jones* is able to visualize the hero virtually for himself, and so his imagination senses the vast number of possibilities; the moment these possibilities are narrowed down to one complete and immutable picture, the imagination is put out of action, and we feel we have somehow been cheated. That may perhaps be an oversimplification of the process, but it does illustrate plainly the vital richness of potential that arises out of the fact that the hero in the novel must be pictured and cannot be seen. With the novel the reader must use his imagination to synthesize the information given him, and so his perception is simultaneously richer and more private; with the film he is confined merely to physical perception, and so whatever he remembers of the world he had pictured is brutally cancelled out. (Iser 1978, 283)

In fact, there is good reason to reject the contrast Iser draws on the grounds that there is no evidence that reading literary texts has an accompanying film show in the head; in fact, there is good evidence to reject this claim (Gerrig 1993, 30–40). The point remains, however; the intuitive contrast is between seeing something and imagining it. The point is pithily stated by Richard Wollheim, who contrasts the two notions, claiming that "imagination has no necessary part to play in the perception of what is represented" (Wollheim 1986, 46).

It could be, of course, that Walton's theory is directed at answering our first, causal, question; that is, an exercise of the imagination "results" in a rich and vivid game of make-believe. One may doubt whether such an explanation would work—why would our imagining effect such a transformation of our phenomenology?—but that need not matter here. What interests me is the nature of the experience of engagement, and that is a matter of it being a visual experience rather than being an imaginative experience. Of course, nothing I have said here amounts to a positive proposal about what the difference is between the visual experience of a representation and the visual experience of events witnessed face to face.

The fourth argument for the i-claim rests on the contrast between perceiving events as they happen in film and perceiving events as they happen in our environment. When I am sitting in the cinema, I seem to be watching the unfolding lives of three sisters. However, my engagement with them is mediated: what I see is a selection of scenes, each apparently chosen to advance my understanding of the story. I do not take myself to be looking directly at the world; something mediates between me and them, and explaining this is also held to involve the imagination. Providing an account of this mediation has become rather an industry. Here are some candidates as to what is going on (there are others, and variations on these, but I do not believe they raise issues that are different in kind): we imagine of our looking at the film that it is a looking at a documentary of the lives of the sisters or we imagine of our looking at the film that it is looking at the lives of the sisters. There is also a third option: that the film generates, directly and impersonally, but visually, that we imagine the lives of the sisters.[2]

Objections to the first two options are readily at hand. Both seem to have unacceptable consequences. For the first, my imagining I could see the sisters would involve imagining that they could see me, that I was there at their most intimate moments and so on and so forth. For the second, my imagining I was watching a documentary of the sisters would involve imagining that they were being constantly watched by a television crew or similar. The line I want to take here is not that these positions have been refuted or can be defended, but rather that the debate is so absurd that our philosophical hunch must surely be that we have got off on the wrong foot; something has gone horribly wrong.

Let us examine the first option; that we imagine of our looking at the film that it is a looking at a documentary of a series of events. That is, watching a film raises philosophical problems that are solved by our imagining, of our watching a film, that it is a watching of a documentary. We can notice immediately that two things

---

2. The various arguments, positions, and objections are neatly summarized—and provided with full references—by Berys Gaut in Gaut (2004).

need to be true for this explanation to work. First, it must be the case that by "watching a film," we mean "watching a fiction film," otherwise we would simply be imagining of our watching a documentary that it is watching a documentary. Second, it must be that watching a documentary is in some way unproblematic, otherwise no problems would be solved by our imagining of our watching a fiction film that it is watching a documentary.

With these two observations in place, we can see what is wrong with the argument. The imagination is invoked to move us from something problematic (that we are watching a fiction) to something unproblematic (that we are watching a documentary). However, this is merely our second argument—that we need the imagination in order to give us a mental attitude to the content of fictions. The fourth argument looked to be arguing something else: that we needed the imagination in order to move from the artfully constructed presentation of scenes to our representing the story. However, if this is right, then the first option is hopeless as documentaries are every bit as artfully constructed as fiction films. For example, a documentary might have as a part a number of people driving a car. We see, from above, the car speeding along the highway. We cut to the conversation in the car. We see, from the side of the road, the car speeding past. Again, we cut to a shot of hands holding the wheel (this is an utterly standard representation of a car journey). Of course, the director would have taken those shots on different occasions, with different cameras, possibly even in a different order, and cut them into a sequence later. The experience of the audience is of the conversation happening in the car as they see it rushing down the road. In short, the argument can be broken into two. The first is that the imagination is required because the film being watched is fiction not documentary. However, that is simply our second argument, and we have already seen that it has no force. The second is that the imagination is required because the film is artfully constructed. However, that would render our first option otiose because documentary films are also artfully constructed.

Now let us examine the second option; that is, that the audience imagine, of their seeing the film, that it is a seeing of the actual events. This is a very different proposal from the first option. First, it is truer to the motivation for the fourth argument: it concerns the mediation between the audience and what the film is about, and applies equally to fictions and documentary. That is, it holds that I imagine I am there, watching Marianne play the piano, and equally—with documentary films—that (for example) I imagine I am there watching The Dandy Warhols play on stage.

My objection to this option is not that it always fails to capture the phenomenology. There are cases where this does: one has a vivid impression of looking at Indiana Jones when he lifts the artifact from the pedestal. However, it does not always capture the phenomenology: one does not have a vivid impression of looking at the men hurling themselves over the top in the films of the trench warfare in World War I; perhaps it is because the film is black and while, jerky, and so well known.

The principal objection to this option is that it actually fails to claim anything. The problem was that the way films represent their content is not like watching the real world. There are actually three different possible sequences we could observe. First, there is the action as we would see it were we present. Second, there is the

action as we would see it watching the film (with discontinuities in time and point of view). Third, there is the action as it actually happened during the making of the film. Consider once again portion of the film of a car journey described above. Depending on a number of variables such as whether the film was a fiction or a documentary, how many cameras were involved, how much rehearsing was done, it is possible that the shots were filmed in a different order, on different days, possibly even involving different cars.

One part of the art of filmmaking is to take the third sequence (the raw footage), edit it into the second (the film), so as to create the impression of the first (that we are there, observing it). It does this by using all the filmic tricks of discontinuities in time and point of view. That is, it is intrinsic to film narrative to do this. There is nothing to explain; nothing is gained by saying that we imagine of our seeing the film that we are seeing the real world—we get that phenomenology for free. We are watching a film narrative, we believe we are watching a film narrative, it could have (as some film narratives do have) the phenomenology of watching the actual events; nothing is gained with the additional claim that we imagine, of the narrative, that it is a watching of the real world.

The third option has been put forward by Gregory Currie.

> What I imagine while watching a movie concerns the events in fiction it presents, not any perceptual relations between myself and those events. My imagining is not that I see the characters and the events of the movie; it is simply that I imagine that these events *occur*—the same sort of impersonal imagining I engage in when I read a novel (Currie 1995, 179).

Currie gives up on the claim that the viewer needs to imagine himself or herself to be in some relation to the events represented on the screen. In other words, Currie sets no store by our fourth argument. Nonetheless, he thinks the viewer still imagines the events represented on the screen occur. As he does not base this on the fourth argument, he must base it on the first, second, third, or fifth. As (as I will argue) all those arguments fail, we can accept Currie's view that there is nothing to the fourth argument, but reject his maintaining that we imagine what is represented on the screen.

The fifth argument returns to the rebuttal of the first argument, which involved the claim that our attitude to the content of representations is that we believe they are true-in-the-representation. In addition, we might either believe this (if we believe the event to have taken place in the real world) and/or believe it to be true-in-a-fiction (if we believe the event took place within a fiction). Why do we need to imagine it as well? The answer might be that unless we are imagining it, we are not truly engaged with the fiction; the representation might simply sit in our consciousness, causally inert. That is, the imagination is the magical ingredient that gives the inner representation the vivacity to enable it to play its requisite role in our mental economy. This is wholly unconvincing. I might witness a relative of mine drinking a cup of tea and remain wholly unmoved. However, we could add some relevant context. Perhaps she has just suffered some grievous loss, had her confidence destroyed, looked as if she was unable to go on. In such circumstances,

I might find her quiet engagement with a domestic ritual extremely moving. Clearly, the latter case is not the former with a dose of the imagination; it is only that in different circumstances, different features move us. It is certainly true that to be moved at all, we need to be engaged—it might be that I am so cold to the world that the plight of my relatives does nothing to move me, whatever their circumstances. However, again, whether or not we are engaged with a situation (given to us via a representation or happening in our immediate environment) is not a matter of whether or not we are imagining it.

It is time to enter a caveat. Nothing I have said so far implies that it is *impossible* for a viewer to exercise their imagination. I have agreed with Walton that the concept of the imagination needs to be clarified, and have been trying to argue that there is no good reason for thinking that imagination plays an essential role in our engagement with film. However, there are more secure uses of the term in which all sides can agree that imagination has a role. When watching a film, we can imagine what it would be like to live in Barton Cottage, to face the kinds of lack of opportunities faced by educated women in Regency England, to be married to Colonel Brandon, to make love to Marianne Dashwood. We can use our imaginations to make connections: to work—for example—through the similarities and differences between Willoughby and Edward Ferrars.[3] Furthermore, the imagination might be used in specific mental activities such as empathizing (if indeed we do empathize with fictional characters and if the mental state characteristic of empathy really is the imagination). All this I can happily allow, but it does not lie at the heart of the viewer's engagement with film.

I hope my arguments against the i-claim will appear more plausible if, first, I put them in the context of a positive proposal. The proposal is that we take the notion of a narrative as philosophically primitive. A narrative can be put to use in different ways—this taxonomy is only rough. There are stories about what is about to happen (warnings), about what could happen (hypotheticals), what is happening elsewhere (news), what once happened (history), what did not happen but could have happened (realist fiction), what did not happen and could not have happened (non-realist fiction), and so on and so forth. These stories can be put to different uses: to warn, to inform, to speculate, or to entertain—to name only the obvious. In addition, narratives can be presented in different media: through speaking, through writing, through pictures, through puppets, through drama, through mime—again, to name only the obvious. Is this pusillanimous philosophical quietism? Surely, something as complicated as narrative, something which sits at the intersection of so many concerns, and so many different branches of philosophy, cries out for analysis. My answer is that the claim is only that narrative is *philosophically* primitive. The proper domain for the study of narrative is psychology. Narratives bring about in their consumers a structure of representations. The features of such a structure seem to me to be—in this area—the interesting object of study. There will be features of the way the structure is built up, features of the structure once

---

3. Whether this counts as an exercise of imagination depends on one's theory of imagination. I shall confess that I find no extant theory even remotely satisfactory.

it has been constructed, and features of consequences of engaging with the structure for other parts of the viewer's economy.

Finally, I would like to contrast the view put forward in this paper with those put forward by the two philosophers whose views of this area are both comprehensive and make the imagination central: Gregory Currie and Kendall Walton. Currie might well object to my claim that there is no clear account of the imagination that will serve our purposes, as he claims to provide one.

> A fictional work, assuming we know that it's fiction, can have effects on our mental processes similar on various ways to the effects of non-fiction. Fictional works can engage our attention, and they can have what is, on reflection, a surprising capacity to move us. But we do not acquire from them beliefs in the straightforward way that we acquire beliefs from non-fiction. With fictions, our mental processes are engaged off-line, and what we acquire instead of beliefs is imaginings which simulate belief. When I work out that Sally believes about the location of her chocolates, I mentally simulate Sally's mental processes, her having certain perceptions and thereby acquiring certain beliefs. In other words, I imagine being in Sally's situation, responding as she responds. When I engage with fiction I simulate the process of acquiring beliefs—the beliefs I would acquire if I took the work I am engaged with for fact rather than fiction. Here I imagine myself acquiring factual knowledge. In the Sally case I imagine being in the situation someone else actually is in; in the fiction case I imagine being a situation I could be in but actually am not in. In the first case the imagining is an instrument to a further purpose: to inform me of the mental processes of someone else. In the second case the imagining has no further purpose: the simulation provoked by the fiction is simply something I enjoy . . . Running off-line is, exactly, a matter of severing the connections between our mental states and their perceptual causes and behavioural effects. A belief run "off-line" isn't really a belief, just as a monarch who has been deposed is no longer a monarch. Revolutions transmute monarchs into ex-monarchs. Simulation transmutes beliefs into imaginings. Just as a belief and a desire may have the same content but differ functionally, so may a belief and an imagining. Believing that it will rain has certain connections to perception and behaviour which, when they are severed, transmutes the belief into a case of imagining that it will rain. (Currie 1995, 148–49)

It is no part of my case against Currie that he thinks imagining that p and believing that p are incompatible; he is explicit that they are not (Currie 1995, 160–61). Nonetheless, it will be clear (I hope) that Currie's position arises from confusing the various roles of the imagination that I have been at pains to separate. Here are three such confusions. First, there is the confusion between imagination being the propositional attitude we have to propositions true-in-fiction (my second argument) and imagination between the mechanisms by which we engage with representations (my fourth argument). That is, throughout the quotation, a contrast is drawn between fictional narratives and nonfictional narratives, with the latter

being taken to be problematic. However, the point of the discussion is to provide an account of the mechanisms by which we engage with narratives. However, to restate the point made above, the two matters are quite independent: whether or not a representation is fictional is independent of the fact that some mechanism is needed to engage with it (and—or so I claim—the imagination is not needed for either). Second, there is a confusion between our engaging with a proposition that is part of the content of a representation and our propositional attitude to that proposition. Our engaging with a proposition that is part of a representation is quite independent of whether or not we believe that proposition. Finally, there is the confusion about the connection to motivation: propositions we believe and propositions we imagine (or, as I would say, propositions we believe to be true only in a fiction) have no systematic differences in their link to our motivations. We either can or cannot act on representations, whether or not we believe their contents. A novel set in contemporary Afghanistan may well motivate me in a way that a biography of some long-dead historical figure does not.

Although the approach I am taking here is wholly incompatible with that taken by Currie, it has more in common with Walton's approach than appears on the surface. That is, Walton is explicit that, for him, fictions are all those representations with which (to put it in my favored terminology) we engage (Walton 1990, chap. 2). Although he draws back from taking the step, Walton is (I think) best read as disregarding the traditional fiction/nonfiction distinction and giving an account of what it is to engage with representations *per se*. That is (in Walton's terminology), when we engage with a narrative representation, we imagine its content: there is no mental state peculiar to fiction, nor are there distinctive problems concerning our engagement with fiction. All that I heartily applaud, although I would favor dropping the term "imagination" from trying to account for our engagement with representations. As, for Walton, "imagination" is a term of art, the difference between his approach and that taken here might be (many details, important and not important aside) largely terminological.

REFERENCES

Budd, M. 2008. "Postscript to 'On Looking at a Picture'." In *Aesthetic Essays*, 208–15. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chatman, S. 1990. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Coplan, A. Forthcoming. "Film and Non-Cognitive Affect." In *Film and Philosophy*, ed. H. Carel and G. Tuck. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Currie, G. 1995. *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gaut, B. 2004. "The Philosophy of the Movies: Cinematic Narration." In *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. P. Kivy, 230–353. Oxford: Blackwell.

Gerrig, R. J. 1993. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Iser, W. 1978. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Johnson, M. K. 1988. "Reality Monitoring: An Experimental Phenomenological Approach." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 117(4): 390–94.

Matravers, D. 1998. *Art and Emotion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Meskin, A., and Weinberg, J. M. 2006. "Imagine That!" In *Contemporary Discussions in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. M. Kieran, 222–35. Oxford: Blackwell.

Walton, K. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walton, K. 1992. "Seeing-In and Seeing Fictionally." In *Psychoanalysis, Mind and Art: Perspectives on Richard Wollheim*, ed. J. Hopkins and A. Savile, 281–91. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wollheim, R. 1986. "Imagination and Pictorial Understanding II." *Supplementary Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 60: 45–60.