

# The Fictional Film

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**Abstract:** A typical strategy in the philosophy of film is to identify a question or theory and then consult the data of cinematic phenomena that might speak to it. Here I take somewhat the opposite approach. I start with a particular phenomenon and make the case for its application to a fairly wide range of issues. The phenomenon in question is the “fictional film,” which may be either an embedded fiction or a fictional document. I argue that the fictional film helps us work through some particularly thorny issues in film ontology, meaning, engagement, authorship and ethics.

*Keywords:* Realism, film ethics, movies-within-movies, embedded fictions, fictional documents

In a period of just a few minutes toward the crescendo of David Fincher’s *Gone Girl* (2014) we see:

- (i) Characters carry out the film’s fictional events without being filmed;
- (ii) Characters watch news coverage of some of the film’s fictional events;
- (iii) Characters watch video surveillance footage of some of the film’s fictional events;
- (iv) Video surveillance footage of fictional events which (as far as we know) no character watches

Now of course in (i) the *actors* are *actually* being filmed, but the characters, who fictionally do all sorts of things, are not fictionally being filmed. But in (ii)–(iv) we have filming of both actors (actually) and characters (fictionally). There are, then, in (ii)–(iv), what we’ll call “fictional films,” not to be confused with a “fiction film,” like *Gone Girl* itself, which is a kind of actual film.

To be sure, fictional films are also actual films. After all, the video of Nick Dunne (character) being interviewed on the news is also a video of Ben Affleck (actor) acting. The surveillance video of Amy Dunne (character) is also a video of Rosamund Pike (actor) acting.<sup>1</sup> And yet there is something present in these cases that is absent in (i), where the actual film that we see contains no fictional films.

In a kind of inversion of the standard way that we approach film philosophically, I’ll begin in the first section by looking closely at this fictional film phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> And then in the second I’ll consider some of the questions it may help us address.

## I. Fictional Films, Fictional Cameras

One way of characterizing fictional films is that they are both depicting and depicted in film. There is, for instance, the snippet of film in *Gone Girl* that depicts Amy Dunne on security camera footage. That same snippet also depicts the footage itself via the use of a style which we immediately recognize as being like that which is produced by security cameras. Most importantly, it is in black and white, of a lower quality than the rest of the movie, and shot from a static above-the-action angle. It is possible, though not necessary, that the footage was produced by an actual security camera. Fiction films that are neither themselves fictional films nor include fictional films imply the existence of an actual camera – after all, we are watching something recorded on one – but not a fictional camera. Fictional films imply both an actual and a fictional camera. The camera in a fictional film both captures the fictional content and is itself a prop in the fiction, albeit a potentially unseen one.

So, the fictional film involves a camera that lives on both sides of the “is fictional that...” operator. That is to say, we may recognize both actual and fictional filming. To complicate matters a bit, the fictional film may in turn be either fiction or non-fiction within the world of the fiction film with which we engage. In the former kind of case – for instance “Tears of Love” in *The Artist* – the fictional film is an embedded fiction, a film-within-a-film. This phenomenon has received more theoretical and critical attention than other forms of fictional film, owing in part to Hollywood’s obsession with itself.<sup>3</sup> In the latter type, the fictional film documents events true within the fiction film. All of the instances (ii)-(iv) above are of this kind.

Both sorts of fictional films have analogues in other artforms. The play within *Hamlet* and various stories in *The Canterbury Tales* are embedded fictions. The newspaper articles that we read in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Isabella’s letter in *Wuthering Heights* are fictional documents. A more intriguing (for our current purposes anyway) literary example may be Phil José Farmer’s *Venus on the Half Shell*, a ridiculous book written – fictionally – by Kilgore Trout, Kurt Vonnegut’s equally fictional science fiction writer. Even painting may allow for similar phenomena, as in Vermeer’s *The Art of Painting* or Courbet’s *The Painter’s Studio*, both of which prominently depict paintings via painting.

The fictional film also has a number of filmic cousins. Archival films repurposed in a contemporary documentary, for example scenes from *The Shining* that we see in *Room 237* – a documentary about interpretations of *The Shining* – seem at first to operate much the same way. However, *The Shining* is not presented as fictional in the world of *Room 237*. Being a documentary, that world is – we hope – the actual world, where *The Shining* is an actual, not fictional, work of fiction. A more difficult set of questions arise from film of actual events repurposed in fiction films – for example, the newsreel footage projected during a “treatment” scene in *A Clockwork Orange*. It seems to me just as reasonable to say that anything in a fiction film is fictional as it does to say that the snippet is a departure from the purely fictional content of the otherwise-fiction film. Either way, the inclusion or exclusion of that newsreel footage will ultimately hinge on whether the viewer takes the filming of that snippet *in that context* to be an actual or merely fictional event. Again, and in any event, a fictional film implies a fictional camera.

## II. Lessons

I would not want to have to justify the intrinsic significance of fictional films. We should instead be interested in them for their instrumental value in helping us work through some more general issues in the philosophy of film. I’ll try to make the case here for their suggestive value, though I’ll have to stop short of claiming that the fictional film provides anything like a final resolution to any problem. In the absence of such bounty, we’ll have to judge the harvest by the quality of what it brings in.

To that end, let us start with some low hanging fruit: the fictional film provides us with some data that disconfirms an extreme version of realism in the ontology of film. For such a view we need look no further than realism’s first great champion, Andre Bazin, who famously said things like “The reality that cinema reproduces at will and organizes is the same worldly reality of which we are a part, the sensible continuum out of which the celluloid makes a mold both spatial and temporal.”<sup>4</sup> On this view the camera, acting as a kind of perceptual aid, is in kind no different from a window except that its main advantage is that it allows us to see past events instead of events beyond a wall. When we see a fiction film, then, the fiction-making must all be done on the other side of the camera. Just as we might see a play performed just outside our window without the window itself doing any fiction-making, so too does a camera add nothing other than an aid to seeing a past performance.

Now even an extreme realist can make sense of some fictional films quite easily. Take a case like (ii) above. The news-coverage film is just a part of the performance that delivers *Gone Girl*’s

fictional content. The characters fictionally look into the past to see an interview the same way that we actually look into the past to see what amounts to a stage performance. That we are literally seeing into the past twice provides no additional complication. To extend our previous metaphor, the fictional film is like a window in a stage setting, which we may see through our actual window along with the rest of a play.

The problem for such accounts emerges instead in cases like (iv), where we are told that we are seeing characters through security camera footage, either by the use of a camera filter or an actual security camera. In response to case like this, where the entire screen that we see is taken up by the fictional security footage and there is no suggestion that any character fictionally sees the footage, it seems that we cannot say that all of the fiction-making happens on the other side of the camera. The camera itself, though we never see it, rather obviously provides some of the fictional content. Specifically, there is a fictional security camera in *Gone Girl* depicted by the *way in which* the action is filmed rather than what is filmed.

The fictional film also speaks to questions we may have about meaning in film. Gregory Currie's well-known arguments against the notion that film is a language – most notably that that film is not a symbol system complete with syntactic rules together with a semantics that maps well-formed formulae generated by those rules to meanings in a way that does not depend on natural fit or resemblance – seem to me entirely correct and devastating to such a strong claim. But film can be language-like in any number of ways without being a language per se.

The fictional film suggests that film can be language-like in two important respects. First, films admit of levels of meaning the same way that languages do. Quotations and references to – as opposed to uses of – words and phrases provide much the same function in everyday language that the fictional film does in communicating cinematic meaning. For example, by using quotations, a speaker puts herself at some degree of removal from the content of the quoted material, even if the “person” being quoted is hypothetical or otherwise fictional. The implication is that she is not just re-presenting what someone or something else said but presenting it *as* a presentation of those words distinct from her own. So too is a fictional film distinct from the overall filmic presentation in a way that matters quite a bit to meaning.

To see the second way that film can be language-like, we might focus narrowly on the changes in color, texture, contrast etc. that happen when the film moves to fictional security-camera footage. The meaning change – especially for our purposes the introduction of the fictional security camera – isn't simply carried by the fact that the shot looks like security camera footage, but also by the fact that the rest of the movie *doesn't* look like that. There is an understood norm of filmmaking and film engagement that allows us to expect consistency in film style. When that norm is obviously violated we are primed to look for a corresponding change in intended meaning that would warrant such a violation. The meaning, then, is carried out in part *by* the upsetting of our reasonable expectations. This is precisely how violations of (more or less Gricean<sup>5</sup>) conversational maxims carry meaning in sentences. We recognize sarcasm, for instance, by virtue of recognizing that a speaker has seemingly violated a maxim that we are to not say what we think to be false. The violation of the maxim forces us to look for a change in the surface meaning of the words that would justify it, exactly as the violation of cinematic norms forces us to posit a change in meaning when we are suddenly presented with film in a very different style. We may say, then, that film may lack linguistic syntax and semantics, but shares at least some of the pragmatic features of everyday language.

There are additional lessons to be drawn from fictional films regarding our engagement with film in general. We may, despite some justified pessimism about Bazin-style realism, think that our experience of film is *as of* a distinctly realistic medium. Currie, for instance, argues for a kind of limited realism wherein film is distinct among artforms by virtue of its capacity to depict via the same sorts of perceptual experiences that we use to identify objects in real life.<sup>6</sup> To extend that sort of account a bit, we watch *Gone Girl* and simply see Amy Dunne doing whatever she

fictionally does in the film, whereas in Gillian Flynn's novel on which the movie was based, we read and at most *see that* Amy does whatever she fictionally does.

The question before us is ultimately about whether – or to what extent – our engagement with film involves a direct and literal “seeing” or an inferential and therefore more figurative “seeing.” To see how the fictional film may bear on that question, we should first notice that we experience the transition from actual fiction film to fictional fiction film strikingly seamlessly, despite the violation of expectation we just considered. Part of that is surely due to the prevalence of fictional films and the cinematic conventions that surround them. But the transition is smoother than those facts can explain. I do not seem to have to attend to any convention or need much experience with the phenomenon to follow what is going on in movies that contain fictional films. That phenomenal continuity makes it reasonable to assume, *ceteris paribus*, that whatever processes help us understand the security-camera sequence are the same that were operative in our engagement with the shots right before and right after. And there is no sense – at least in (iv) above – in which we directly see Amy Dunne captured on security footage. The nature of those shots, especially their juxtaposition to the cinematography of the rest of the film, allows us to *see that* she was (fictionally) captured by a security camera. We make an inference to the fictional camera not from what we see but from the way that we see it. The continuity of our experience, then, suggests that film engagement in general involves more inferential process than we may realize.

We can find another piece of evidence for a more inference-dependent experience of film by comparing our emotional connections to embedded fictions (i.e. fictions-within-fictions) to our emotional connections to fictional documents (like the security camera footage). We have some relative emotional distance from the embedded fiction that we don't from the fictional document. We tend to care more about the characters in the latter than in the former. But why? We “see” – in whatever sense we do so – things happening to fictional characters in both instances, but somehow the emotional resonance of film fictions does not carry across two fiction/non-fiction divides all the way to us, at least not without some seriously diminished returns. Because the sensory experience of the two sorts of fictional film are the same, the difference cannot be merely sensory. And because they are both fictional, the difference cannot be precisely the same as that which causes the differences between our emotional engagement with fictional and real-life events.

Let us move now from a focus on the reception of films to their creation, and the question of film authorship. Traditionally, the problem of authorship in films is about the *necessity* of requisite intention and control, which are often lacking in (especially large studio) films whose contents result from the decisions of far too many people to posit a single author. And that group's intentions may be too varied for even collective authorship to be plausible. We can set these issues aside – along with more fundamental questions about a stable notion of “authorship” in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

Rather, the possibility of an embedded fictional film in even the smallest, most tightly and individually controlled movie suggests that responsibility for making is not *sufficient* for authorship. That sort of film, as a fictional object, has at most a fictional author. People make fictions, but no one actually makes strictly fictional things. But the fictional film has a sort of dual life. It is a fictional film because it is a film in the world of a fiction. But it also an actual sequence of film. It exists in our world as much as any other actual duration of film. And it *could* be separated from the fiction in which it occurs and shown on its own as any other film. If it were to be so separated and displayed, its authorship would be no more in question than the film in which it was a fiction.

The question, then, is whether that potential is enough to provide the fictional film with its own independent identity in the actual world. I think that it does not. Unless and until that kind of separation actually happens, our hypothetical ultra-auteur has only authored one film, not two – no matter how fully realized the embedded fictional film turns out to be. The actual filmmaker has *made* the embedded fictional film as much as the actual film, but authorship seems to require something else, something found in the nature of a film's display or presentation.

A final – at least for now – return on our investment in fictional films concerns ethical issues in films and filmmaking. Here are five claims that likely seem to many of us to be independently plausible:

- (a) Filmmakers are morally responsible for the message or meaning of their films.
- (b) Filmmakers make both fiction films and the fictional films they may contain.
- (c) Fictional films can have messages or meanings.
- (d) Filmmakers are not morally responsible for fictional actions or their results.
- (e) Fictional films result from fictional actions.

These claims are *prima facie* inconsistent. (a), (b) and (c) together imply that filmmakers are morally responsible for the messages and meanings of fictional films, (d) and (e) imply that they are not.

How are we to escape this apparent impasse (I stop short of calling this a “paradox” for reasons that will become apparent in a moment)? Let’s start with a couple plausible strategies that won’t quite work. First, some of these claims may be more controversial than I think. (a), for starters, is a substantive claim about film and ethics and – unless there is something strangely unique about film – relies on a principle about the ethics of narrative art, which is (at present) the subject of much controversy and discussion. However, not every claim in a field rife with disagreement is subject to disagreement. The controversial issues at the intersection of ethics and narrative art tend to concern either the ethical status of works themselves or the impact of moral value on aesthetic value.<sup>8</sup> (a) above involves neither of these. All agreement on (a) seems to require is a recognition that making a film, like anything else that people do that can impact others, has moral value. To deny that, one would have to either deny that any action has moral value or that filmmaking is a very special activity not subject to moral constraints. If I have lost the attention of adherents to these views, it is not by introducing (a), but by considering ethical issues of filmmaking at all. For anyone else, just imagine a film with the worst sort of aggressively racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise untoward message – could an appeal to the innocence of filmmaking in general justify making it?

Next, it may look like I’m cheating a bit with (c). Fictional films may have meanings and messages, but those meanings and messages will be just as fictional as the films themselves, and so of a different sort than the meanings and messages of actual films. I have already said as much earlier in this paper. The question, then, is whether or not this difference means that my use of (c) above is improper. True, the messages and meanings of fictional films are fictionally directed to fictional audiences to whom no actual harm can come. But even if actual audiences are only overhearing them (which would be a fairly gross understatement of our role), it is at least not obvious to me that people are not morally responsible for the effects of their messages on those who are likely to overhear them.

(d) may seem obvious to us, but it is worth noticing that no less a shadow than Plato’s looms over it. In Books II and III of the *Republic*, he comes awfully close to claiming that fictional stories should not depict evil deeds – and he at least claims that good things should not happen to those who do evil. If either of these are correct, then we have a condemnation of fiction-making as we (“we” including Plato) understand it. If the reader holds Plato’s view of narrative fiction, I will not try to argue against it. Instead I’ll just applaud your patience for getting this far in a conversation about what you must see as a woefully misunderstood and benighted subject.

Another attractive path out of our predicament may be to claim either that (b) and (e) are already inconsistent, so the larger inconsistency shouldn’t be surprising, or that they are consistent only because of a hidden equivocation among them between fictional and actual making. This strategy, though, seems only to re-state the problem. Of course fictional and actual making are different. What we are struggling with is the dual nature of the fictional film, which must be actually made in order to play the right sort of role in the fiction in which it appears. In this it is no different from a prop hammer made just for a stage play. That hammer is both actually and fictionally a hammer, and no less of either because of the other. So there is some ambiguity. But mere ambiguity does not entail equivocation. We can, while maintaining the distinction between the fictional and actual natures of the fictional film, think of the problem this way: the filmmaker

seems to be responsible for the fictional film in one sense but not in the other. It is our present task to make sense of this in a way that can inform actual decisions and how we think about them – which is why we are dealing with a puzzle rather than a paradox.

How then, should we resolve this issue? For that, I think we ought to revisit (a), but for different reasons than those considered above. Specifically, we ought to return to the distinction between the makers and authors of film. If we replace “filmmaker” in (a) with “film author” our problem evaporates because, as we discussed, fictional films have actual and fictional makers but only fictional authors. What this means, then, for moral responsibility in film is that moral demands attach to film authors rather than makers.

### Conclusions?

We have considered a number of standing issues in the philosophy of film and resolved none of them. But if successful, I have convinced you that the fictional film is an as-yet underdeveloped and underutilized tool that we can bring to bear on them. As it goes with philosophy, a new tool will likely bring with it a host of new problems. We will have to see over time if those problems outweigh the advantages to which I have appealed.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> What I'm alluding to here is essentially the motif/model distinction Arthur Danto makes in *Moving Pictures* (1979).
- <sup>2</sup> There are examples of this sort of data-focused strategy. Perhaps most famous among them is Deleuze's (1989) emphasis on the montage in grounding his understanding of the time-image.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for instance, James Lyons's criticism-focused “Portals: Exploring Films Within Films” edited collection of review essays (2000).
- <sup>4</sup> Bazin (2003), 30.
- <sup>5</sup> Grice (1989), esp. 26–32.
- <sup>6</sup> Currie (1995) esp. 79–112.
- <sup>7</sup> Though for both of those, along with a slightly different distinction between filmmakers and film authors, do see Livingston (2006).
- <sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Carroll (2010).

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