THE NATURE OF FILM: PRESENTATION, REPRESENTATION, AND THE IMAGINATION

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The Nature of Film: Presentation, Representation, and the Imagination

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This is an essay on the nature of film. In particular, it is an inquiry into the metaphysical and epistemological dimensions of film. I will center my analysis on the question of representation, namely, whether or not films and their constitutive images are essentially representational. Although the prevailing view in film studies and the philosophy of film, I will argue that this view, the representation thesis, is fundamentally mistaken. To this end, I will develop a competing view, the presentation thesis, which avoids the mistakes of the representation thesis, I will develop an alternative account of representation as a subsidiary function, determined by the desires and intentions of agents, and I will critique the accounts of representation defended by leading philosophers of film. The mistake of characterizing films as essentially representational has wide-ranging repercussions. First, it mischaracterizes the nature of film itself. The presentation thesis, according to which films function essentially to present the content out of which they are constituted, serves to put film on a secure theoretical footing. Second, the representation thesis leads to a mistaken view about the nature of fictional entities. Films, I will argue, cannot represent fictional characters because they serve to create and present these characters instead. Third, the representation thesis is intimately bound up with the view that the imagination is an important or necessary element of our film viewing experiences. I will argue, on the contrary, that we need not imagine when viewing films, and the presumed need for the imagination in our film viewing experiences all but evaporates when we characterize films as essentially presentational.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Philosophers of film are in almost unanimous agreement that films are essentially representational. The dominant view is that films, alongside paintings, sketches, sculptures, novels, and the like, are paradigmatic representational works of art. In this paper, I will argue against the prevailing view, and defend the claim that films are essentially presentational. I will detail the concept of presentation, and explain in what manner films are essentially presentations of perceptible content and not representations of content beyond themselves. In addition, I will present a positive account of representation and explain that although films are not essentially or primarily representational, they may serve a subsidiary representational function. In so doing, I hope to achieve a reassessment of the representational status of films, and to avoid at the same time radically distorting the nature of the film. My reassessment, though decidedly against the philosophical grain in film studies, ought to cause no consternation among the rebuked: My aim in this paper is to preserve the representational status of films while simultaneously setting film on its proper foundation.

My reassessment of the film as essentially presentational, and of the representational function of films as subsidiary, will bear ripe philosophical fruit in three key areas of aesthetics and film studies.

First, in setting the metaphysics of film on a secure theoretical footing, I will in turn set epistemological studies of film on firm ground. In particular, my analysis of the film as essentially presentational will equip me to argue against a prevalent (almost ubiquitous) though mistaken thesis regarding the film viewing experience: I will argue strongly against
the view that the film viewing experience necessitates employment of the imagination. I will argue not only that we need not imagine when viewing films, but I think instances in which spectators actually engage the imagination during film viewing are rare. I will show in what way the mistaken view that films are essentially representational leads to the equally erroneous view that we must imagine when viewing films.

Second, my account of films as presentational will provide me with the theoretical tools necessary for solving seemingly intractable paradoxes of fiction. According to the most prevalent cinematic paradox of fiction, film viewers become confronted with a paradox when they view moving images of the actual world that purport to depict fictional characters and worlds—characters and worlds, mind you, that do not exist. I will show that paradoxes of fiction are problematic only for those philosophers who characterize films as essentially representational. The paradoxes effectively vanish once films are defined as presentational.

Third, I will provide a natural avenue by means of which to repudiate the controversial transparency thesis, the view according to which to see a photographic or cinematic image of \(X\) is literally to see \(X\). I will argue that while proponents of the representation view may indeed reject the transparency thesis—as do Noël Carroll and Gregory Currie—my preferred vision of films as presentational makes rejection of this troubling thesis more natural, and my account is thereby more attractive. I will argue that insofar as visual images such as photographs and films are essentially presentational, and thus present nothing over and above themselves, they are thereby essentially *opaque*. Photographs and films *must be* opaque on my view; it is not clear that this must be the case for proponents of the representation view who nonetheless reject the transparency thesis.
CHAPTER 2

PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE ONTOLOGY OF FILM

To say that a film is a representation is presumably to say that it represents something, particularly something in the world. Cinema taken as a whole, then, may be understood fundamentally as a human endeavor to represent the world in which we live, the world we are often too preoccupied with our familiar and habituated circumstances to truly observe and understand without the mediating influence of the camera. In this capacity, films serve as powerful pedagogical tools. On the one hand, they inform audiences about heretofore misunderstood or overlooked aspects of familiar and foreign environments and cultures. On the other hand, they stimulate audiences to uniquely see their world. To borrow a phrase from Arthur Danto, films “transfigure the commonplace.”¹

But films, particularly fictional films, also present spectators with compelling worlds—worlds existing independently of ours—some mundane, some fantastical, but all larger than life. We experience these worlds not primarily as perceptual or epistemic conduits to the actual world, but as autonomous worlds in themselves. Films are not composed of images taken or captured from a fictional world—they are, I want to say, the (fictional film) world itself. Rather than moving perceptually and epistemically from the film world to our world—understanding the latter in terms of the former—we bring our experiences and knowledge of our own world in order to understand the unique film world. This is not to

deny that we can learn about the actual world by means of film viewing. What I am claiming is that of central importance to the attentive film viewer *qua* film viewer is the comprehension of the structure of the film world itself. We desire to understand the rules—the logic—of the film world, those dynamic forces that propel the film throughout its duration. To understand a given film world often requires knowledge of cinematic technique, and other times a sophisticated hermeneutic framework. But often it requires of film viewers little more than their own basic understanding of the world and their natural perceptual faculties.

The distinction to which I am pointing—that between moving from the film world to our world in an attempt to understand the latter by means of the former, and bringing our experience and knowledge of our world to bear on our film viewing experiences—corresponds to a fundamental distinction between two ways in which films convey content. Films can convey content indirectly or directly. In the first case, they are *representational*; in the latter case, they are *presentational*. To be a representation is for some object to point beyond itself to some content. This appears to be the traditional understanding of what films do. It is this very contention that I want to challenge in the present investigation. I will argue that films are essentially presentations of perceptible content, which content is identical with the film itself. That is to say, films do not essentially present any content beyond themselves, beyond the perceptible content out of which they are composed.

Films are therefore *opaque*. We do not *see through* them to objects or scenes in the world—they do not give us perceptual access to the actual world. A cinematic image of James Cagney does not give us perceptual access to Cagney himself. It does not allow us to *see* Cagney. Nor is a cinematic image to be understood primarily as an image of Cagney—a
representation or depiction of the actor—insofar as the image is understood in the context of the set of images from whence it was taken (that is, the particular film in which the image plays as essential function). On the contrary, films present themselves. They present their individual parts—sequences, scenes, shots, reframings, particular perceptible elements within shots including written text, plus various auditory elements, both diegetic and nondiegetic—which parts combine in the presentation of the unique cinematic work. It is this presented content that film viewers engage. Thus, it is this content, and nothing else, out of which films are essentially constituted.

I do not deny, however, that films can be (and usually are) used to represent content beyond themselves. Notice that this is a very different claim than the one according to which films are essentially representational. For something to be essentially representational is for it to present (or represent) content different from that of which it is constituted. This content, not being a proper part of the film itself, is thus indirectly presented. The function of indirectly presenting content must be fundamental to the film itself for the film to be appropriately classed as essentially representational. I think, however, that the notion of a film indirectly presenting content—which content is not a proper part of the film itself—as an essential part of what it is, is seriously problematic. The mistake of such a characterization is grounded in a more fundamental failure to adequately address the question of the nature of film. In short, as I will argue, to characterize films as essentially representational is to seriously misunderstand what kind of a thing a film is. I will argue that films may acquire the ability to indirectly present content as an ancillary function, but they are essentially presentations. Films may serve as representations, but only if we use them as such.
This brings us to perhaps the most important question in the philosophy of film: ‘What kind of a thing is a film?’ This question is also the most challenging in the discipline because it is largely unclear what it demands of us, and hence, which mode of analysis we ought to undertake to answer it. The seeming intractability of the question might appear deceptive because it may very easily be confused with the very similar, though possibly different question ‘What is a film?’ This second question is simple if one desires nothing more than an enumerative definition. In response to a request for an enumerative definition I could propose, without hesitation, the following: “*The General* is a film, *Rear Window* is a film, *Sanshō dayû* is a film, *The Wages of Fear* is a film,” and so on. If an appropriately robust enumerative definition of film is all that is required of one addressing the first question, ‘What kind of a thing is a film?’ then philosophers would be better served concentrating on other questions in aesthetics. But of course, the question is an ontological one, requiring an essential definition, and is thus perfectly suited for the discerning eye and mind of the philosopher.

Is the question of what kind of a thing a film is asked in the spirit of pure metaphysics? Perhaps, but most recent film theorists and philosophers of film have, with good reason, been content to set aside deeper metaphysical worries (e.g., issues relating to a Grand Cinematic Theory that is sought to explain everything needed to be explained in terms of a single, unified theoretical framework) about the nature of film in favor of more manageable (though by no means simple) questions about, e.g., cinematic narration, empathetic engagement with film characters, and the assertoric dimensions of non-fiction films. A single Grand Theory may in the end be necessary, but it is not apparent that we must start from this perspective. Perhaps it is an aesthetic question regarding, for instance, the
aesthetic potentialities of photographic depiction. While questions pertaining to the artistic import of cinematic works are surely important for any philosophical investigation into the nature of film, the intractability of satisfactorily defining art and artworks—and of identifying and explicating aesthetic properties—suggests that grounding the question of the nature of film qua film on questions of aesthetics is unwise.

The cinema is strongly rooted in optical and auditory technologies, so an approach to examining the nature of film might feasibly be grounded in questions concerning technology. This appears somewhat more promising. Of course, no film is possible without a sufficiently sophisticated technological system. The majority of our most beloved films would not have been made without photographic technology, and contemporary, digitally produced works—some of which rely heavily on computer-generated images (CGI)—are the products of cutting-edge advancements in digital technology. The question with which we are confronted is: To what extent does knowledge about how a film is made tell us anything about what a film is? If the nature of film qua film is to be understood solely in terms of its mode and means of production, then the answer of course is that the question ‘What kind of a thing is a film?’ is synonymous with the question of how a film is made. But it ought to be clear that questions relating to the dynamics of cinematic production (which includes considerations economic, political, sociological, technical, et cetera) are different than the basic ontological question (viz., “What kind of a thing is a film?”) that confronts the philosopher of film. First, even absent an answer to the ontological question posed above, there is reason to suppose that a film is a specific, identifiable kind of thing, from which (by

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2. Readers interested in the technical and aesthetic dimensions of digital cinema are well-served consulting Berys Gaut, _A Philosophy of Cinematic Art_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), especially chap. 1-2.
means of necessary and sufficient conditions) we can distinguish other kinds of things.\(^3\)

There is no single way to make a film, and thus no single process of cinematic production, and no particular technological apparatus, with which to identify films. So, for instance, one cannot identify the nature of films with the process of photographically or otherwise capturing images of the world because, of course, many films contain do not contain, strictly speaking, pictures of the world: Such films include hand-drawn animated films, digitally rendered animations, and also films created through less traditional means such as applying paint and other materials directly onto film stock (e.g., Stan Brakhage’s *Mothlight*, produced by applying various objects such as moth wings, leaves, twigs, and flower petals to a clear strip of film, which is then run through an optical printer), and flicker films\(^4\) (such as Peter Kubelka’s *Arnulf Rainer*).

In addition, we ought to consider the perceptual and cognitive engagement of the filmic spectator—e.g., ought we say that something is a film if, and only if, it is experienced in a certain way? It appears that we run into a similar worry here as we did concerning questions of technology. The manner in which we attend to films, how we take up and understand cinematic content, is crucially connected to the nature of the films themselves. But of course, how we experience films is a matter essentially dissimilar from that concerning the nature of the films with which we engage.

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3. Although it is a question that greatly interests me, I will not in the present investigation attempt to supply the alluded-to necessary and sufficient conditions. Another important question that will have to be set aside for the time being is what distinguishes a film from similar artifacts such as television shows and video games.

Perhaps deciding on a starting point for our investigation into the nature of the film is not as problematic as the above discussion portrays. For simplicity’s sake, let us begin by addressing what film viewers common take films to be. We refer to them variously as “movies” or “moving pictures” or “motion pictures”. This simple starting point—that is, conceiving of films as moving pictures—is attractive because it is perfectly in line with our intuition about the nature of films, and because it makes no explicit reference to the controversial metaphysics of Grand Theory, to aesthetics, to technology, or to subjective elements of spectator engagement. However, Noël Carroll points out that since not all films are constructed out of pictures, we ought to drop the phrase ‘moving picture’ and replace it with ‘moving image’. To restrict our account to moving pictures would be to exclude a priori many works that are generally considered to be films, such as the aforementioned flicker films and many works of the abstract and avant-garde traditions. It is this move, from talk of pictures to talk of images, which ought to, I suggest, signal our true starting point.

Thus, a film is a type of image.\(^5\) An image is a presentation of perceptible content, where by ‘perceptible’ I mean to include both sensible and intelligible content. Images are to be understood as nothing over and above the perceptible content that they present. What kind of an image is a film? In order to answer this question, we must differentiate the various kinds of images, i.e., the various forms in which they appear. Some images are natural and others are artificial. A natural image is entirely the product of natural processes. That is to

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\(^5\) We must keep in mind that in speaking of the ‘moving image’, Carroll was primarily interested in delineating the class of objects that includes television shows and commercials, video games, music videos, smart phone apps, Flash Animation, as well as films. Carroll’s insight points to three important facts about investigations into the nature of film: (1) that not all films are constructed out of pictures, (2) that not all films are shot on film, and (3) that films are sufficiently structurally similar to the other species of moving image to warrant subsuming them under a single categorial moniker. Though all of what I write in this investigation ought to be understood as applying to, e.g., television shows, and much of what I discuss will apply to the other species of moving image, I will nonetheless center my analysis on films.
say, we can fully explain the appearance of natural images by means of the laws of nature and without making reference to the deliberate activity of conscious agents. An artificial image is produced, either intentionally or accidentally, by a rational agent. Furthermore, many images present sensible content and may do so by means of any or all of the five sense modalities. Thus, there are visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory images.

Lastly, some images are static, whereas others are energetic. Static things are essentially inactive. Static images cannot change and remain the same—the presentation of perceptible content is utterly fixed. Photographs, paintings, etchings, sketches, and graffiti are static visual images. Each is a kind of visual image, and none essentially involves change. Of course, static visual images suffer changes. Someone might damage a painting. A photographic print left in the sunlight will bleach. We can expect weather to diminish the vibrancy of graffiti. But paintings, insofar as they are visual images, are inactive—such images do not of themselves change in any way. Although such images can suffer various sorts of change, they are not themselves the source of these changes, and to the extent that the changes it suffers affect the image itself (as opposed, say, to changes in its position in space) then those changes destroy the image.

Something is energetic just in case it involves, as part of what it is, some kind of activity (that is to say, it either involves movement, alteration, growth, diminution, or some other sort of change). Energetic images essentially involve the potential to change. This does not mean that such images have the capacity to change themselves. They are not (or at least

6. An accidentally produced artificial image will nonetheless be bound within structures of intention, so in explaining how it was produced we must make reference to the fact that various conscious agents engaged in deliberate activity contributed causally to the production of the image. As an example of an accidentally produced artificial energetic image, suppose someone intentionally drops their video camera on the ground in order to prevent their child from running out into the street, and suppose the camera starts recording the changing scene in front of the lens. Later, the family watches the footage on their television.
need not be) alive. But neither does it mean that the potential for change is derived from something other than itself (what produces it, say). Rather, the capacity to change is a function of the fact that energetic images are temporally extended and constituted out of parts that are themselves images. Films and video games, as examples of energetic visual images, are essentially energetic: Insofar as they are energetic images, they essentially involve activity. The most obvious way in which this is apparent is the fact that films and video games almost always involve progressions of visual images that are readily interpreted in terms of motion (i.e., seen as depicting movement).

To sum up, films are images because they are necessarily presentations of perceptible content. We are now prepared to identify what kind of image films are. They are of course intentionally produced by rational agents. They are energetic insofar as they involve, as part of what they are, some kind of activity or change. And they are specifically visual images because films must be constituted out of visible content, although they may also have other sorts of perceptible content (such as soundtracks) as proper parts.
CHAPTER 3

CINEMATIC MOVEMENT AND ILLUSION: ON WHAT FILMS CAN AND CANNOT DO

The above conception of the energetic visual image seems consonant with our pre-theoretical understanding of cinematic images as “movies” or “moving pictures”. But I stated above that we ought to follow Carroll in shifting our focus away from an undue concentration on pictures and toward images. But I think the appropriate object of study, namely films, television shows, and their conspecifics, ought to be conceived as ‘energetic images’ rather than ‘moving images’, for the reason that, strictly speaking, films do not move at all. Films are not moving images. They are energetic images, so they do in fact, and essentially, undergo change. A film is a detached display of perceptible content borne by light, a patch of light (traditionally) projected onto a screen. This means that when we watch a film, we are fundamentally viewing perceptible content by means of a patch of light. A film is not just an undifferentiated, nondescript, patch of light. The patch of light that conveys a film is, rather, formed and full of content, and essentially undergoes (or has the potential to undergo) change. What we see when viewing a film is essentially a change in patterns of light over time.

According to the traditional conception of movement, a thing \( O \) moves if, and only if \( O \) is at place \( P_1 \) at time \( T_1 \), at place \( P_2 \) at time \( T_2 \), it traverses all of the places in between, and \( P_1 \neq P_2 \) and \( T_1 \neq T_2 \). Motion, therefore, involves an enduring thing changing its actual spatial location. Why is it that films do not move? Furthermore, why is it that we seemingly cannot help but see movement when viewing a film? Only concrete objects can move.
Physical light is concrete and can move, for example. The perceptible contents conveyed by physical light, on the contrary, are abstract objects and thus cannot move. Although the films we perceive are almost entirely a function of physical light emitted by, or reflected off surfaces of, physical objects, neither physical light nor surfaces nor physical objects are proper parts of films. So films are not moving images because they are not the kind of thing that can move. They are, on the other hand, energetic images because they are the kind of thing that can undergo certain kinds of change, which change registers as alteration of form, and, ultimately, a change in perceptible content. It is this alteration of form and change in perceptible content that we as filmgoers perceive, and it is this alteration of form and change in perceptible content that we naturally see as movement.

I do not wish to give the impression that Carroll, by using the term ‘moving image’, believes that films, television shows, and the like are capable of movement in the aforementioned sense. On the contrary, a moving image in Carroll’s sense “belongs to the class of things from which the impression of movement is technically possible,” which is perfectly consonant with what I have said thus far. Use of ‘energetic image’ is preferable to ‘moving image’ because it allows for the characterization of films as images that give the impression of movement, and also as that which can undergo other alterations or changes in form.

Gregory Currie points out that movement in the cinema has commonly been characterized as illusory. Illusions appear either where a spectator is prompted to construct a moving picture out of discrete static images, or where a set of static images is projected at such a rapid pace that we cannot help but perceive movement illusorily, or where the realism

or vivacity of images cause us to perceive (what appears to be actual) movement where there is none, irrespective of our beliefs to the contrary. But Currie thinks that cinematic movement is decidedly real and in no way illusory: Films give us “real movement, really perceived.”

He does not think that a cinematic image is a concrete object capable of movement through space. That is, films do not move in the sense defined above, “unless, due to some mechanical failure, the projection equipment starts to shift around,” but of course this is not what we mean when we speak of films as moving images.

Cinematic movement, according to Currie, is a “response-dependent” property of films, in the same sense that colors are secondary properties of objects. He thinks that response-dependent movement is real movement because it supervenes on basic physical structures. In the case of films, movement-depicting cinematic images supervene on light particles. Thus, Currie thinks that it is mistaken to characterize cinematic movement as illusory, hence unreal, for the same reason it would be a mistake to characterize colors as likewise unreal.

Currie admits that he has not sought a strong positive argument for the claim that cinematic movement is real. Instead, he couples the aforementioned considerations for his movement thesis with a challenge to those who would deny that films contain movement as a proper part: It is obvious, Currie thinks, to anyone who views a film that it contains movement as a proper part, so the burden must be on the skeptic to provide an argument against the movement thesis. The skeptic has two options—either she can defend an illusion

9. Ibid., 35.
thesis against the reality of cinematic movement, or she can defend the claim that cinematic movement is unreal by other means, that is, without recourse to an illusion thesis.

I have argued that apparent cinematic movement is merely that—apparent. Am I committed to the view that film viewers are under an illusion when engaging with films, a perceptual illusion according to which we seem to perceive movement when viewing films irrespective of our beliefs to the contrary? The answer is ‘no’. When viewing films, we know we are engaging with images capable of undergoing change and of depicting various things. One of the things films are capable of depicting is movement. Cinematic depiction is unique because film alone of the depictive arts is essentially temporal. But we are under no illusion in which we cannot help but perceive actual movement, an illusion comparable, e.g., to the Müller-Lyer illusion. What we actually perceive is an image of moving things, or rather we see the depicted objects and characters moving therein. But this simple film viewing experience is single-layered. We see, literally, only one thing—the image, full of content—and what we see is an image of things moving. Such experience does not involve any illusion. For, (1) the image that we view is not capable of moving (as part of what it is) but is capable of depicting movement (that is, presenting images of objects in motion as part of its content); (2) we do not usually believe that we are seeing actual movement; (3) we do not perceive what appears to be actual movement irrespective of our beliefs to the contrary; and so (4) there is no conflict between what we actually see and what we believe we see.

10. The Müller-Lyer illusion presents lines of equal length but due to arrows of opposing direction placed at the ends of the lines, we cannot help be see them as differing in length. Upon measuring the lines we know that they are of equal length, but our perception of the lines as unequal in length upon removing the measuring device is “cognitively closed”, or unaffected by our beliefs.
Currie points out that illusory experiences put “pressure” on our beliefs.\(^\text{11}\) It is difficult to maintain our belief in the identity of the length of the lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion because it is just plainly apparent that the lines are of unequal length. This tension between belief and perception can be at the same time frustrating and fascinating. We have no such experience when viewing films depicting movement. A cinematic perceptual illusion with respect to movement would appear when a film viewer seems to perceive actual movement, and yet her belief in the absence of actual movement has no effect on the perception. But we do not seem to perceive actual movement when viewing films—our belief is consonant with our perceptual experiences. There is no tension between perception and belief, and thus no illusion.

However, is it not the case that if I see an image as depicting movement, then I am somehow perceiving movement? The answer to this question is not obvious. On the one hand, if I am perceiving something that is not capable of movement, as I have argued is the case with films, then it seems I cannot be perceiving movement in any sense. But on the other hand, in order to experience a film that depicts movement as depicting movement, I must, it seems, have an experience at least somewhat like the experience of perceiving actual movement. I must, therefore, *perceive movement without perceiving anything that moves*. We will return to the distinction between actually or literally seeing something and seeing an image of that something in a later section of this paper. In that section, I will seek to drive a wedge between actually or literally seeing something and seeing an image of it. I literally and immediately see a cinematic image, and I literally and immediately see the content of the

image, but concrete movement is not part of this content. I perceive a non-moving, yet energetic image. The experiences of literally seeing something and seeing an image of it are certainly related, as we will see, but must in the end be distinguished.

So the film viewing experience is decidedly non-illusory. My argument against cinematic perceptual illusion also strikes at the heart of Currie’s view that cinematic movement is real. To see an image of something moving is not thereby to perceive an actually moving thing, just as to see an image of a person is not thereby to perceive an actual person. Nor is the experience of seeing an image of something moving an illusory experience. At the same time, it is undoubtedly the case that in order to see an image of something moving, the image must undergo some sort of change, some change in perceptible content corresponding to change in the formed light projected onto the screen. But to undergo change is not necessarily to move through space over time. Given that a cinematic image is an abstract rather than a concrete object, it is not capable of such change, and thus, cinematic movement is not real.

Our investigation into the nature of the cinematic image has led us to challenge the notion that energetic images are capable of actual movement (even though they are capable of undergoing other sorts of change), and to reject both the cognitive and perceptual illusion theses. We must now turn our attention to the nature of presentation. We must ask what it means for an image to function essentially as a presentation of perceptible content, and we must distinguish the presentation thesis from the representation thesis.
CHAPTER 4
ON THE NATURE OF IMAGES:
THE PRESENTATION THESIS

Two implications of the characterization of films as energetic visual images (i.e.,
presentations of perceptible content, necessarily visual, and capable, as part of what they are,
of undergoing some sort of change) is that they are essentially presentational and opaque.
The categorization of films as essentially presentational and opaque is intended to serve as a
contrast to the view according to which films are essentially representational and cinematic
images are essentially transparent. We will discuss the notions of opacity and transparency
as they apply to cinematic and photographic images in due course. In the meantime, I would
like to examine the opposing notions of presentation and representation. I will defend the
view that films are essentially presentations, and explain my reasons for denying that films
are essentially representations. Nevertheless, I will deliberate on the importance of
representation, in particular on our ability and desire to create objects that serve to represent,
and defend what I think is the most plausible and practicable definition of representation.
Although I think philosophers of film would be well advised to give up on the notion that
films are essentially representational, I hope to provide an account of representation that will
appear attractive and workable to those who nonetheless believe it plays an important role in
how we interpret and understand films.

An image, as I am defining it, is a presentation of perceptible content. This content is
at times purely sensible content, presented in one or a combination of the five sense
modalities, or is purely intelligible content, but it is usually some combination of both.
Insofar as a film is a kind of image—viz., an energetic visual image—a film is a presentation of perceptible content. To argue that a film is essentially a presentation of perceptible content is to state at the same time that it is not essentially a representation. Thus, I am arguing that the characteristic of presentation, understood as an essential feature of an image, is not compatible \textit{qua} essential feature with the characteristic of representation. It may not be obvious that this is so, or why it need be so. One might wonder why an image may not be defined as a presentation of perceptible content, and also defined as representational, the representing occurring \textit{by means of} the presented content. In fact, this seems to be the more or less standard understanding of representation.

Presumably no proponent of the representation thesis would deny that representations \textit{present} content to spectators. Of course, according to this view, images represent content by means of the presented content out of which they are constituted. Some sort of presentation, full of content, will occur when a spectator confronts an image or object understood to be representational. But what is most important in determining the essence of an image—whether representational or presentational—is what the image is or does (e.g., whether it \textit{is} a representation or \textit{performs} a representational function), and not primarily how we experience it or use it. Some image or object, then, \textit{is} a representation if, and only if, it \textit{performs} or \textit{fulfills} a representing function essentially, that is, irrespective of the manner in which it is used or perceived. On the other hand, some image or object is a presentation if, and only if, it functions essentially to present some content. And I think that images are constituted out of the content that they present.

The view according to which images and objects are essentially representational, that they function essentially to represent some content beyond themselves, does not at all seem
The trouble with this view is that there appears to be no non-problematic way of characterizing images as essentially representational. Images and other possibly representing objects cannot represent irrespective of agential use or intention. Another way of putting this is that only rational agents can represent. Paintings, novels, statues, and films can no more represent content beyond themselves as an essential function than they can form intentions, acquire beliefs, or act on desires. To conceive of images and objects as essentially representational is, I think, to commit a gross anthropomorphic fallacy, one that I think is best combated by characterizing paintings, novels, statues, films, and the like, as essentially presentational. According to this latter conception, an image is capable of presenting content irrespective of agential use or intention because it is constituted out of perceptible content. An image is therefore able to present content because it is, essentially, full of content: Images cannot but present perceptible content. My claim regarding representation is that only intentional agents are capable of representing, and they do so by using works of art and other objects to represent.


13. Arthur Danto argues that the philosophical urge arises around the same time as the representational urge, both of which appear to be uniquely human. He states in Transfiguration, “My thought is that philosophy begins to arise only when the society within which it arises achieves a concept of reality. To be sure, any group of persons, any culture, acquires some set of concepts or beliefs that define reality for it, but that is not the same as saying that they have a concept of reality: that can happen only when a contrast is available between reality and something else—appearance, illusion, representation, art—which sets reality off in a total way and puts it at a distance” (78, my emphasis).
Proponents of the representational view might respond that they are not anthropomorphizing works of art and other representations, that they do not think a representation is capable of performance in the robust sense in which a human agent is. Particularly with respect to pictorial representations such as films, they contend in the face of strong objection that representations are essentially representational. This essential representational feature is related to likeness or resemblance, and is thus configurational and pictorial as opposed to performative. According to this view, an image pictorially represents something to the extent that it appreciably resembles it. A painting or sketch of one’s beloved dog pictorially resembles or depicts the dog insofar as it resembles or presents a recognizable likeness of it. Therefore, the proponent of the representational view thinks she can reasonably characterize paintings, sketches, photographs, and films as essentially representational because these images essentially are likenesses, and thus cannot but represent the content they serve to depict. An energetic image of Jean Arthur cannot but represent her because such an image cannot but resemble her.

While some philosophers have fought against the notion that resemblance is relevant for depiction—or at least have rejected the notion that it is sufficient for depiction—others have argued, on the other hand, that it is necessary for depiction, even if not sufficient. For

14. Defenders of the recognition view of depiction (X represents Y if, and only if, X triggers one’s Y-recognition system and thus enables one to recognize X as an image of Y) would certainly repudiate the suggestion that they are anthropomorphizing representations. See, for instance, Currie, Image and Mind; Carroll, “Concerning Uniqueness”; and especially Flint Schier, Deeper Into Pictures: An Essay on Pictorial Representation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

15. Nelson Goodman is representative of this view. See Goodman, Languages of Art, especially 3-10.

these philosophers, it is clear that resemblance must play some role in depiction—after all, for something to function *pictorially* (as opposed to symbolically) as a representation it must present in some sense a likeness of what is represented—even though determining the particular features by means of which pictorial representation is achieved has proven especially challenging.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, successful recognition of depicted content is usually thought to depend upon prior knowledge the depicta’s visible properties, whether of some particular individual or some generic kind.\textsuperscript{18}

Has the debate between proponents of the presentation view and the representation view descended into a semantic dispute? Why might this be the case? If the proponent of the representation view claims that pictorial representation is synonymous with depiction, which is synonymous with ‘a picture of…’, then she might in fact be arguing for the presentation view that I favor, but just not using her words carefully. If so, then there is no quarrel. But I do not think that this is the case. The differences between the presentation and representation views lie much deeper than what appears above to be a tractable verbal dispute. It comes down to (1) determining the best way of characterizing representation, and (2) developing the most appropriate definition of ‘image’.

I offer a challenge to the proponent of the representation view: (1) To make sense of the claim that images are capable of representing outside of agential use and intention, and

\textsuperscript{17} Manns, “Representation,” 283, argues that in determining what a given depiction serves to pictorially represent, we cannot hope to pinpoint every respect in which the depiction resembles the depicta. Instead, Manns declares, “when the resemblance between one object (creature, idea) and a second is in question, before we proffer an answer we must be clear about what aspect it is which is being singled out for comparison” (ibid.). Thus, he thinks that those features that are relevant for resemblance will vary based on context. Novitz, “Picturing,” 151, states, “There is no fixed set of characteristics in virtue of which resemblances are invariably asserted.” Dominic Lopes discusses some of the challenges that have faced those attempting to define pictorial representation in the first part of his *Understanding Pictures*, 15-36.

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Hopkins, “Explaining Depiction,” 432; and Schier, *Deeper Into Pictures*. 
(2) to deny that ‘image’ is best defined as nothing but the presentation of perceptible content, and thus essentially presentational. If the challenge cannot be met, then the notion that images such as photographs, paintings, and films cannot but represent content insofar as they resemble said content, is false. Likewise, if the proponent of the representation view is unwilling or unable to deny that an image is merely a presentation of perceptible content, then my contention that an image cannot but present the perceptible content out of which it is composed will stand. This will go a long way toward establishing that images present content irrespective of agential use or intention, that images cannot represent irrespective of such use or intention, and therefore, that depiction and representation must be distinguished.

Is it necessary to distinguish depiction and pictorial representation? Depiction has traditionally been conceived of as a species of representation, viz., as involving pictures that function as representations in virtue of their pictorial properties and their resemblance to their depicted content. Contrary to the prominent view, I think that it is a mistake to treat ‘depiction’ and ‘pictorial representation’ as synonymous. This is because depiction, I think, is best understood primarily in terms of the presentation of perceptible (in this case, visible) content, and hence in terms of presentational properties, not representational features (which are accidental, and hence subsidiary). Depictions are standardly identified with pictures. The fundamental identificatory stamp of a picture is what it is a picture of. That is to say, insofar as every picture is a picture of something, every picture functions to present some content, which content is recognized or interpreted or seen as what it presents. But to claim that a picture is a picture of something is to say nothing regarding what the picture represents. For example, in telling me that you have a picture of Spencer Tracy, you are telling me no more than that you are in possession of a picture whose perceptible content presents a recognizable
image of Spencer Tracy. In addition, a photograph of one’s grandmother that sits perpetually unviewed in a photo album is always a picture of one’s grandmother, as long as its perceptible features remain intact. But to the extent that it remains neglected and unseen, it cannot serve a representational function; this is because the photograph is never used to represent. To conflate ‘depiction’ and ‘pictorial representation’ is to confuse what a picture presents (what it is) with what it represents.\(^\text{19}\)

It appears natural for us to use pictures as representations, and it obvious to some that in virtue of this, it is inevitable that depiction will unquestionably be categorized as a species of representation. But this does not establish that pictures are primarily or essentially representational even though they resemble their depicted content. Recognized resemblance allows a viewer, among other things, to see what a picture is a picture of. It may seem to follow from this that we do in fact go beyond the depicted content. To see what a picture is of is seemingly a more robust activity than merely attending to the apparent visual features of the image—to see a picture is one thing, to recognize and have in mind what it is of is another thing (or so it may seem). I do not think that this is essential to picture viewing. To recognize, e.g., that a painting depicts a house is not thereby to be brought cognitively, affectively, doxastically, and/or imaginatively in contact with some ‘house’ content beyond the image. To portray the picture viewing experience in this way does not seem to leave anything unexplained. One just sees the image as a house and attends to that perceptible content. I view one of Yue Minjun’s paintings and I see an image of a rapturously smiling man. Period. There does not seem to be anything in my phenomenological experience that

\[^{19}\text{Much of this analysis is indebted to the work of David Novitz. See Novitz, “Picturing,” especially 146-49. We agree on two major points: (1) That }X\text{ is a representation only if it is used as a representation; (2) that the phrase ‘a picture of…’ denotes what an image depicts or presents, not what it represents.}^\]
needs explaining. This experience, common as it is, seems to suggest that depiction is not essentially a form of representation. It is rather, the core of pictorial presentation.

David Novitz correctly points out that there is no ambiguity in the phrase ‘a picture of…’. To believe that ambiguity is present in this phrase (between what kind of picture it is and what the picture represents) is to fall prey once again to the error of confusing what a picture presents (or depicts) and what a picture represents. The phrase ‘a picture of…’ is a one-place predicate denoting a picture’s pictorial properties; it will not serve intrinsically as a representational designator because the representing relation is not determined in any universal sense by a picture’s pictorial properties. I might decide to use a picture of $X$ to represent an actual $X$, and my decision might in this instance be determined almost entirely by the resemblance between the image and the depicted object. But this might not be the case. I may decide to use a picture of $X$ to represent anything. We must be careful to differentiate what in the present case is an essential, or universal, feature of the representing relation, and what is an accidental feature of this particular instance of representing. That the representing relation is determined by agential use or intention is universally determinative of representation, and it is this feature that determines whether or not in the present instance my act is one of representing. My decision to use a recognizable image of $X$ to represent an actual $X$ might be a matter of convenience or expediency, or perhaps an overriding aesthetic preference for likeness over abstraction—it is in no way essentially determinative of the representing relation. This distinction between what is fundamental, and hence determinative, of the representing relation, and what is accidental to it, points once again to the necessity of distinguishing depiction from representation.

20. Ibid., 146.
There is, perhaps, another avenue available to the proponent of the representational view by means of which to argue against the contention that images are essentially presentational. The defender of the representation view might declare that representation is in fact a matter of agential use and that images such as photographs, films, paintings, and sketches are nevertheless essentially representational. It is this very intention on the part of the artist that makes a given work of art a representation—not contingently or accidentally representational, but essentially so. In other words, in creating a work of art to serve as a representation of some content, the artist just is creating a representation. If, on this view, something just is a representation if it is created as such, the question of whether or not it is used as a representation may be a relevant question, but not for determining the nature of the work itself.

This view has considerable force behind it, in no small part because it appears to be a common way of understanding the representational nature of works of art. Logically speaking, if one creates a representation, then what one has created is a representation. But I think in the end this account of representation does not succeed in establishing that films and affiliated works of art are essentially representational. The main problem lies in making sense of the relationship between the intentions of, say, the director of a film (assuming that the director is the dominant artistic and ideological driving force, the auteur), and the presented content of the film. It would seem that if the director’s intentions were effective in establishing the representational nature of his film, those very intentions must in some way become part of the content of the film, or they must at least function in some fundamental sense to inform the presented content.
It is not clear what this would amount to. Presumably the intentions of the director involve a complex of propositional attitudes regarding desired ends and the means of bringing the desired ends about, and of course a set of actions enacted to bring about the effective resolution of those ends. But none of this seems to have any bearing on the nature of the cinematic image *qua* image, which is our question. It speaks more to the relationship between creator and creation, or to director and audience, or to film and audience, than it does to the essential characteristics of the film. Intentions seem to be about as effective in determining the nature of objects as beliefs or desires, which is to say, e.g., in the case of films, not very much.

If intentions are causally determinative of the nature of created images such as films, it seems this principle ought to apply to any other object created with the intention that it be used as a representation. Suppose I manufacture a hammer and along with its standard use as a nail-driving implement, I intend for it to be used as a representation of the alienated worker in a capitalist society. Is there any reason to think that the hammer is, based on the intentions of its manufacturer, essentially representational? I think the answer is no. This is because we understand that the essential function of a hammer is not subject to agential caprice. A nail-driving implement is not transformed into a representation because its manufacturer desires or intends for this to be the case.\(^{21}\)

There is another way to make sense of the relationship between the director’s intentions and the presented content of his film. It may not be the case that the director’s intentions become part of the presented content of the film itself. However, it may be true

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\(^{21}\) Remember that I am speaking here about essential function. Of course the hammer would represent the plight of the proletariat in a capitalist society, but only in a subsidiary fashion, and only inasmuch as it is so used. The hammer in question is still essentially a nail-driving implement.
that the film viewing experience of spectators is bound up with the intentions of the director, and the film is thus necessarily viewed as a representation. In this instance, it is not that the audience is merely using the film as a representation. Rather, they are viewing a film that they understand to be essentially representational. So, while the director’s intentions might not serve to transform the content of the film, they might instead function to alter the viewing experience of the audience.

It ought to be clear why this response does not succeed. First, it seems safe to say that most film viewers are positively oblivious to the representational intentions of filmmakers. It appears to be an empirical fact that the representational intentions of filmmakers at no point enter into the film viewing experience of the average film viewer. Second, it seems just as safe to say that many filmmakers create works of cinema without any explicit representational intention. A director-for-hire at the helm of a neglected studio project probably intends little more than to complete the film on time and under budget. Third, the representational intention gleaned from a film might be thoroughly contrary to the actual intentions of its director. In this instance, the film is interpreted as representing X, the director intended for her film to represent Y, and thus her intentions again play no discernible role in viewing and understanding the film. In all three cases, it is clear that the film is representational only insofar as it is used by spectators as such. There appears to be no non-problematic way of characterizing films and related images as representational apart from agential use, and as other than a subsidiary function.

I hope at this point to have provided sufficient support for the claim that X is a representation if, and only if, it is used as a representation. And insofar as X is used as a representation, it functions as a representation only contingently. I also hope to have
established that ‘depiction’, contrary to the prevailing view, is not best conceived of as synonymous with ‘pictorial representation’. I have argued, in opposition to this view, that depiction is best understood as a mode of pictorial presentation. To say that \( X \) depicts \( Y \) is to say that \( X \) is a picture of \( Y \), which in turn is to say that \( X \) presents perceptible content that is recognizable or understandable or seen as of \( Y \). This analysis of depiction is not yet sufficient. It is not yet clear what it means for an image to present content, but some of what I have stated above points us in the right direction. I have argued that an image (whether visual, auditory, tactile, olfactic, or gustatory) is a presentation of perceptible content, and that an image is nothing over and above the content it functions to present. A challenging question presents itself: By what means are we to determine what content images present?

The question is of course a metaphysical question regarding the nature of images. Given that images are essentially presentations of perceptible content, we are led to the related questions of \textit{how} pictures present content and \textit{what} content a given image presents.\footnote{22} These are especially challenging questions, and I do not have the space here to address the many associated issues surrounding them. A few preparatory words will, I think, suffice for my present purposes.

\footnote{22. It seems, however, that we cannot help but think about these metaphysical questions in light of an epistemological inquiry: How am I, as viewer of an image, to determine what content the image serves to present? The epistemological question is perhaps more pressing, for the following reason. The simple, but unhelpful (and possibly circular) answer to the metaphysical question is that an image presents the content out of which it is composed. Out of what content is the image composed? Well, whatever content the image functions to present. We can see the difficulty. In order for us to be in a position to provide a satisfactory (and non-circular) answer to the metaphysical question, presumably we must mark out a procedure by means of which we can come to know, given a particular image, what content it serves to present. This is no easy task, as it is bound up in the first instance with all of the difficulties associated with attempting to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for depiction. But given the work completed thus far toward distinguishing depiction and pictorial representation, and thereby setting depiction on a more secure footing, I think we have reason to hope that a satisfactory answer is forthcoming.}
Perhaps, in order to address these questions, it will be easier to begin with what fictional films do not serve to present. Fictional films do not primarily present images of the actual world, the real world in which you and I and Pedro Almodóvar live. Photographic films and some digitally produced films are necessarily composed out of images of the actual world. This is undoubtedly one of the more extraordinary facts about films. But once an image functions with other images as constitutive elements of the fictional world of a film, the ostensibly veridical image becomes transformed, and thereby serves to depict a created fictional world. Montage, for instance, has often been viewed (particularly among the early Soviet filmmakers such as Eisenstein and Pudovkin) as the central transformational tool in the filmmaker’s toolbox, because the juxtaposition of images has the seemingly magical ability to produce fictional meanings, characters, and events. This is not to say, however, that montage is necessary for transforming images of reality. A film such as Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, which relies almost exclusively on long takes, exquisite framing, and mise-en-scène for cinematic effect, presents a fictional world as convincing and engrossing as anything Eisenstein or Vertov produced.

It appears as though I have identified the central dichotomy constituting the presentational capacities of fictional (photographic) films. One the one hand, filmmakers capture and use images of the actual world, which images (divorced from the total cinematic context) serve to present objects, persons, and scenes from the real world. For instance, a single frame from Max Ophüls’ Letter From an Unknown Woman divorced from the relevant context may be seen as a photographic image of Joan Fontaine and Louis Jourdan dressed in costume on a film set. But on the other hand, as soon as this real-world image is combined with others, configured into a significant sequence, and thereby used to construct a fictional
film, we have a completely different realm of presentation: We have the presentation of a
fictional world. Take the image of Joan Fontaine and Louis Jourdan, and in conjunction with
many other images, compose a fictional film. We are then presented with images of Lisa
Berndle and Stefan Brand strolling along the snow-covered streets of 1900s Vienna.

In order for a fictional photographic film to present content that is understood as
constituting images of a fictional world, perceptible content must be presented by the real-
world images out of which the former is composed. In other words, if a fictional
photographic film is to be characterized as constituted out of transformed images of the
actual world, those real-world images must function to present content, which content is
subsequently transformed. This may strike one as paradoxical, and rightly so. I spoke earlier
of the magical qualities of films, and this characterization is not far off the mark. What
causes consternation among films theorists and philosophers is that the transfigured content
of the real-world images remains recognizable in its original form. Images of the actual
world do not become transformed so as to be unrecognizable. There are certain important
respects in which the image of Joan Fontaine and Louis Jourdan and that of Lisa Berndle and
Stefan Brand are (visually) indistinguishable. But there is another sense in which they could
not be metaphysically (not to mention semantically) more distant: They depict completely
different worlds. And while a fictional photographic film cannot shake off its real-world
foundation, a film such as Letter From an Unknown Woman is best understood as presenting
only a fictional world.

The overlapping of worlds is an almost inevitable source of confusion. It is thus that
much more important to distinguish what content belongs to images of the actual world, and
what belongs to images out of which the fictional world is composed. However, it is less
important at this juncture to make this distinction as it is to point out that the presented content of any fictional photographic film will necessarily involve an overlap between the content of images of the actual world and the content out of which the fictional world is constituted.

I shall not say more here regarding what films function to present. It is certainly the case that each individual film functions to present a unique set of content, so it is not my task to enumerate the presented content of each and every film. Moreover, it is probably the case that no single film can be completely analyzed in terms of its presented content. What I have done here is to begin laying out the framework by means of which we can determine what a given film serves to present—not, again, a framework by means of which to enumerate the entirety of a film’s presented content, but at least a sufficient identification of the presented content that informs our viewing of it.

In the foregoing paragraphs, I have established that images are essentially constituted out of perceptible content. Some of that content is derived from the actual world—photographic images are taken from the actual world and used—transformed—to construct a fictional world. The transformed images—transformed by means of editing techniques such as montage—function in the context of a sequence of images out of which the film world is constituted, and thus present content derived solely from the fictional film world. Much more needs to be said regarding the method and content of presentation, and I hope to do so in a future investigation into the nature of images.

It ought to be clear at this point that the presentation thesis is substantially different than the representation thesis. Corresponding to this difference is the distinction, too often overlooked in the philosophy of art, between depiction and pictorial representation. However,
the distinction between the presentation thesis and the representation thesis will not be fully clear until we understand what I have in mind by representation. What does it mean, for instance, for a film to function as a representation only to the extent that it is so used? It is the question of the nature of representation to which we now turn.
CHAPTER 5

ON THE NATURE OF IMAGES:
REPRESENTATION AND THE SEARCH FOR A
SUBSIDIARY FUNCTION

I have argued that presentation and representation, *qua* essential function, are mutually exclusive. An image constituted out of perceptible content functions essentially to present that content, which is to say, it presents itself. I have also argued that we cannot make sense of representation irrespective of agential use. Thus, something is a representation if, and only if, it is *used* to represent content beyond itself. To argue that representations are capable of representing content beyond themselves outside of agential use is to commit an anthropomorphic fallacy.

Insofar as intentional agents are capable of using objects and images to represent content, representation is still a viable concept in virtue of which we can understand our relationship with the world, particularly our relationship with images. What, then, does it mean to use an object to represent something else? In what relationship does an image stand with respect to something else when it is used as a representation? It is to these and other, related, questions I now turn my attention.

I think that representations are objects that indirectly convey content. This definition requires elaboration. It is important to get clear on exactly what constitutes representation for two reasons. First, I have argued that images are essentially presentations, and hence not representations, and it will be helpful to get clearer on why this is so via a more detailed characterization of representation. Second, while not all philosophers of film agree on what
representation is, practically all of them believe that films are essentially representational. In order to understand why these philosophers believe that films are essentially representational—and in what ways their accounts differ from mine—we must first elucidate their respective accounts of representation simpliciter.

So what is representation? As in the question pertaining to the nature of film, it is helpful to know beforehand how to go about answering this question. I see three possible forms that this question may take.

First, one might ask what it means for some object $O$ to be a representation. To ask this question is to assume that ‘representation’ is a noun denoting a class of objects with a particular nature. So one might claim that something is a representation if, and only if, it has or exhibits features $F$, $G$, and $H$, e.g., resemblance to some extra-pictorial content. I have questioned the validity of this approach in the previous section. Second, one might interpret the question as calling for an explanation of the particular relation a representing object stands with respect to what it represents. So something is a representation if, and only if, it stands in relation $R$ to some content beyond itself, not, according to this interpretation, insofar as it exhibits a particular set of features (excepting the feature that it stand in relation $R$ to that which it represents). Lastly, one might account for the nature of representation in terms of agential use. That is, according to this approach, some object $O$ is a representation if, and only if, it is used by some agent for a determinate representing purpose. A representation in this sense need not exhibit particular, identifiable properties, and although this latter definition may require some representing object to stand in a certain relation with respect to what it represents, this relation is possible only via agential intention or activity.
I do not mean to assert that these interpretations of the question—the question of “where” the representing occurs—are mutually exclusive. If some philosopher were to argue that a painting must stand in a certain relation to some content beyond itself in order to represent that content, she would not thereby be barred from, at the same time, building into her definition a necessary condition that makes reference to configurational features of the painting. One might even think that representation occurs if, and only if, some object $O$ with features $F$, $G$, and $H$ (the first sense enumerated above), stands in relation $R$ to some object $P$ (the second sense), insofar as some agent $A$ uses $O$ for a certain determinate purpose $X$ (the third sense). My preferred conception of representation, which I have already introduced, and for which I will argue in due course, is not as demanding as this tripartite account. Nor does my account run into the difficulties (or outright absurdities) of those views that incorporate pictorial features as necessary conditions of representation. I argue that representation is essentially a matter of use, which use puts the representing object in a certain relation to the represented content.

We have not yet told the whole story with respect to representation. While it is a matter of agential use, a representing object still stands in some relation to some content beyond itself. Representation is in fact a tripartite relation involving a representing object (the object used to represent), a represented object or content, and most importantly a representing agent according to whose intentions the representing is made possible. Although representing is fundamentally something that agents do (and is therefore unachievable without agential action and intention), any worthwhile account of representation must detail the relation between the object by means of which we represent, and the object or content that is represented.
Browsing through the literature, one finds that almost every writer on the subject characterizes films as representations—that is, as essentially representational—and usually representational works of art. In many cases, this characterization appears to be little more than an implicit assumption or a passing nod to an apparently evident fact. Lack of definitional clarity on the subject is troubling. Such oversight serves not only to obscure the importance of the issue of cinematic representation itself. It also, no less, leaves one in unstable theoretical territory with respect to, e.g., the film viewing experience. One will be unable to make any headway on the question of what we do with films—that is, how we engage or experience them—if the nature of the film itself remains a mystery. It is not uncommon to find references to actors representing characters, or to filmmakers photographically representing profilmic events, or to films representing fictional worlds; it is just as common to encounter silence regarding the nature of representation where a detailed account of the nature of this relation ought to be found.

There are many possible reasons for this omission. One is that perhaps it is just so obvious that films are representations, and that a rigorous account of what this means is unnecessary. Perhaps it is believed that the ‘film as representation’ thesis requires about as much justification as the claim that films are composed of visual imagery, or that editing is an essential instrument in the filmmaker’s toolbox. While there may be certain cinematic principles the philosopher can accept as axiomatic (and certain basic facts about the productions of cinematic works that she ought to take for granted), representation is surely not of this kind. There are too many questions concerning the ontological, epistemological, and practical dimensions of representation that remain unsettled.
Confidence in the claim that films are essentially representational (or conversely in the claim that they are *not* essentially representational) must appear alongside, or must be the result of, a clear conception of what representation is. Declaring films to representational only begins, rather than settles, the investigation. With the bit of ground-clearing achieved up to this point, we are in a position to sketch the positive account of representation I will defend.

I think there are three *desiderata* that ought to be met if an account of representation is to be accepted. The first is that *the activity of representation* be conceived of as involving a relation between at least two objects: That which is used by an agent to do the representing, and that which is represented. It is clear, I think, that to speak of something being used as a *representation*—to speak of some object being used to represent—while at the same time denying that it represents something is absurd. That is to say, ‘a representation’ denotes not merely (or not primarily) an object but rather a way in which an object is used. To be a representation just is (minimally) to be used to present content beyond itself.

The second *desideratum* is that a representation must represent something real or actual. This claim may appear to some to be obvious, but its apparent obviousness depends on what one takes to be real or actual. The viability of the second *desideratum* will depend on what one believes to be the possible objects of representation. The question of what a given

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23. Rather, as we shall see, ‘representation’ must at least be defined as a two-place predicate term, as it is possible that, in its denotative capacity, a representation might refer to itself. Usually, I think, the representing relation will involve some object being used to represent some other object.

24. As stated above, to say that *X* represents *Y* is not to say that *X* is capable of performing the robust representational relation irrespective of agential use and intention. It is appropriate to speak of, say, paintings representing objects or scenes only because the representing relation has been transferred, so to speak, from the representing agent to the painting.

25. I speak of “something” here in a very loose sense, as referring to persons, objects, institutions, states of affairs, ideas, emotions, et cetera.
object represents is in a sense just as important as the question of whether or not the object is representational *per se*. So to say that object $O$ is used to represent content $C$, is to say on the one hand that $O$ is a representation, and, on the other hand, it is to say that $C$ is a possible object of representation, something about which one may be mistaken. This will have repercussions for the question of the possibility of representing fictional characters and worlds. To anticipate, I will argue that fictional characters are not possible objects of representation, at least to the extent that they are *created* and directly *presented* by a work of fiction. A film, for instance, cannot concomitantly bring a fictional character into existence and represent that character.\(^{26}\) But a film does present images of fictional characters by means of which we are granted access to them.

The third, and perhaps most crucial, *desideratum* of an account of representation is that it make reference to human intention. To conceive of representation without reference to the role of human intention is, I think, incoherent. The representing relation (between representing object $O$ and represented content $C$) is put into place solely in terms of practical, expressive, or aesthetic purposes, which purposes are decidedly *ours*. In other words, while the representing relation is commonly understood as holding between a representing object and the content it represents, this relation is possible only to the extent that it is initiated by an agent via her desires and intentions. It is appropriate to speak of objects (metaphorically) as *being* representations, or of them *performing* a representational function, but these objects must be understood as carrying the weight of human intentions. There would be no representation if intentional agents did not exist. Moreover, most representations are

\(^{26}\) This is the case only in the non-denotative sense of representation, the sense that I think is most important for our appreciation and understanding of works of representation art.
manufactured objects, and most of these artifacts are created specifically to serve one or another representing purpose.

To begin, I think the first necessary condition for representation is this: (1) $A$ represents $B$ only if $A$ is used to stand-in or serve as a proxy for $B$. Thus, whenever we are considering the nature of representation, we are necessarily considering the representation itself ($A$), and that which it represents ($B$). Presentation, on the other hand, always involves only a single object—the presentational image or object. A presentation presents perceptible content—it is constituted out of its perceptible content—so this representing relation is absent. The representing relation involves a “directing to” or a “pointing at” or prompts a “dwelling in”, and thus usually requires concrete separation between that which represents and that which is represented. It seems that perhaps a representation cannot represent itself. Insofar as denotation is a species of representation, it is certainly the case that, e.g., a sentence can be self-referential. It might even be the case that films, for instance those of Godard, can be self-referential in the sense of betraying their own artifice. But denotation is only one way to understand representation; some objects used as representations are not best understood as denotations. The manner in which we use films as representations, for instance, cannot be reduced purely to a denotative relation with content beyond itself. These images, which serve a more robust representational function than pure denotations, cannot represent themselves in this more robust sense. I will explore this notion in more detail below.

This necessary condition is far from sufficient. What else must we add to the account in order to sufficiently elucidate the nature of representation? I suggest we add the second necessary condition, the notion that (2) a representation, in its capacity as a stand-in or a
proxy, must also bring any appreciator, viewer, or consumer of it cognitively, affectively, doxastically, and/or imaginatively in contact with what is represented. In other words, a representation cannot function sufficiently in its capacity as a stand-in or a proxy if it does not somehow serve to facilitate an appreciator, viewer, or consumer’s cognitive, affective, doxastic, and/or imaginative engagement with what is represented. A representation is used as an indirect means to convey content, and it can do so only insofar as it functions to bring an attentive spectator in contact with that content.

This characterization of representation, as involving objects standing-in or serving as proxies for other objects, in which capacity they bring engagers into contact with indirectly conveyed content, seems to imply that representation is a matter of achievement, a question of success or failure. Must some object \( A \) actually succeed in bringing an attentive spectator in contact with another object \( B \) in order to serve as a stand-in or proxy for \( B \), and thus represent it? There is a sense in which representation necessitates achievement of ends. In this sense, a representation becomes a means to its desired ends only once the end is in fact achieved. Otherwise, the intended representing object appears as a more or less compelling presentation of perceptible content. To represent is to perform an action (or in the case of the object itself, to serve a function), and the action (or function) is performed (or fulfilled) only if it is successfully undertaken.

On the other hand, representation is intimately bound up in use, intention, and in some instances interpretation. For \( R \) to represent \( O \), some person \( P \) must use \( R \) to represent \( O \) with some specific purpose in mind. This purpose may be to successfully bring another person cognitively, affectively, doxastically, and/or imaginatively in contact with some content beyond \( R \), but lack of success in this arena does not negate the original intention, and
likewise does not seem to render the original act non-representational. So there is another
sense in which the intention to create an object or representation—something to be used for
representational purposes—is sufficient for representation. The fact that some object was
created so as to represent, and that one is using the object to represent, seems sufficient.
Actual success in bringing a spectator in contact with the represented content seems
unnecessary. So rather than stipulating that a representation must successfully facilitate
contact with represented content, we ought to say that it must merely function for the sake of
bringing about this contact.

Thus, I think it is a mistake to require of some object that its status as a representation
be established in terms of designative success or failure. The following considerations will, I
expect, support this claim. It seems safe to say that most artists, especially those working in
the pictorial arts such as painting and film, intend for their works to be consumed or
understood or appreciated as representations. This is because paintings, films, and the like are
created out of an artistic impulse to communicate or express something or other. It is not
inevitable that what an artist intends to represent with a work of art will be grasped by her
audience. We confer representational status upon objects for many reasons, only one of
which is that an audience interprets or uses the film as a representation (and which reason is
sufficient by not necessary for representation).

For instance, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom presents the
utterly depraved world of a group of fascist libertines—the world of de Sade savagely
recreated for twentieth century audiences—and the film is most commonly seen as a
representation of the excessive evils of the Italian fascists under Mussolini. This latter fact is
an important one about our experience of Salò, important in the sense that many viewers
cannot but see it as representational. It is no less significant that Pasolini intended his film to function allegorically. For this latter reason, I think it is correct to say that Salò would function as a representation of Italian fascism even if not one spectator saw it or used it as such.27 Some works, particularly works of art can appropriately be conceived of as representational even if no audience is around to use it as such. The very fact that a work of art is used by its creator to represent, and that it is created with an eye towards a representational function, is sufficient for categorization as representational.

Another reason to deny that designative success or failure is necessary for representation is that not all acts of representation involve representing to another person. I cannot succeed in intentionally bringing another person cognitively, affectively, doxastically, and/or imaginatively in contact with some represented content if my intent is decidedly individual. It is perfectly plausible for someone to use an object to represent some content to herself28. There is no reason to think that the intentional user of a representation and the directed target of a representation (that is, the person directed beyond the representation to the represented content) cannot be the selfsame person.

Given the previous discussion, we can now add the third necessary condition for representation: (3) A represents B only if A is used to fulfill, or interpreted as fulfilling, (1) so as to accomplish (2).

One might think, contrary to the above consideration, that representation always involves (at least) two persons. For instance, I may use Picasso’s Guernica to represent to

27. This is not to say that the nature of Salò qua energetic visual image necessarily conforms to our experience of it, nor to the intentions of its creator. While it might be inevitable that Pasolini’s controversial film will be used as a representation, its primary function is to present perceptible content, not to point a viewer beyond its images to that which is (contingently) represented.

28. I am not thinking here in terms of the sort of private language Wittgenstein argues is impossible.
myself the ineffable horrors of war. That is, I may interpret the painting as serving this representational function, or I might empathetically engage with sufferers of war by means of dwelling in the perceptible content of Picasso’s painting. But, so this objection goes, it is rather the case that Picasso is representing to me, by means of the painting, the unutterably devastating effects of war. So even in this case, (at least) two persons are involved in the representation. What this objection misses is that not all objects used as representations are created to be so used (as Picasso’s Guernica undoubtedly was), and on top of that, not every representation must be an artifact. For example, a criminal might use salt and pepper shakers to represent to himself the positions of security guards protecting a bank targeted for robbery, or a child might use a tree stump to represent to himself a bear in a game of make-believe.29 Shall we say that the manufacturer of the salt and pepper shakers is representing the security detail at a bank he does not know exists? Or shall we say that God or nature participates in the child’s game of make-believe as a representing agent? This is, of course, ridiculous. In each case, the representing object is not intended to be used as a representation prior to the identified representing act, and the act itself is a purely individual act. Thus, the appreciator, viewer, or consumer referenced in the second necessary condition need not be different than the person doing the representing.

The objector might claim that my reply fails to address her central point: Representation involving a tree stump may not involve two persons, but this is not germane to the discussion; any encounter with Guernica is, on my account, necessarily bound up with the actions and intentions of Picasso. Is it the case that every encounter with an artifact that is produced so as to be used as a representation involves being represented to? I suppose that to

29. See Walton, Mimesis as Make-Believe, 37-43.
the extent that my encounter with an artifact involves recognition of its creator’s intentions, and insofar as my contact with its represented content is acknowledge as being directed by and aligned with the artificer’s intentions, the represented content is being represented to me.\textsuperscript{30} We must not misunderstand what I mean by the notion of “being represented to” in these instances. Picasso created his painting in order to represent content to viewers, and when I view it I am therefore viewing a representation, because his representing intentions are still alive in the work. I acknowledge that these intentions may play a part in animating my cognitive, doxastic, affective, and/or imaginative encounter with the painting and may help me to grasp the content it represents.\textsuperscript{31} Beyond this, I may use a particular artifact to represent anything that I desire and anything that is a possible object of representation. The content that I represent in this case may or may not correspond to anyone’s intentions other than my own, and in this sense, I am representing the content to myself, for myself. Of course, I cannot completely divorce my intentions and actions from the creator of the work (I am engaging her work, after all). This secondary connection to the creator of the work, however, bears little on the intentions and desires upon which I work in representing content to myself.

This act of representing to myself, particularly as it appears in engagement with works of art, is most often a matter of interpreting the work as either (1) used by the artist to

\textsuperscript{30} Of course, one may be completely unaware of the author of a work’s actual intentions, though this is not usually a problem because such intentions are typically discernible by means of attending to a work’s perceptible content. It is no less true that one can legitimately interpret a work as representing something even if one knows (or is justified in believing) that the author did not intend her work to represent that content. I think it is usually enough that a work is recognized as being intended by its creator to represent something, which something is usually apparent in the work’s content.

\textsuperscript{31} Of course, Picasso’s intentions might play absolutely no role in my encounter with his paintings. I may not know, e.g., who Picasso was, or what his intentions were, or I may understand his intentions but fail to comprehend how they inform or how they appear in his paintings.
communicate or express something or other, or (2) as intended by the artist to be used by appreciateors as representations. Note that to interpret something as a representation is not to identify it as essentially representational. The interpretation may take the form of identifying its intended use in a representing relation (based on authorial intention, cultural practice, et cetera), or of bestowing upon it a representational application in terms of one’s own purposes. We have not, in so doing, made an ontological claim about the representing object, that is to say, no claim other than that it can serve as a representation. In particular, we have not made reference to the formal or aesthetic features of the representing object. In so small part, this serves to emphasize the fundamentally arbitrary nature of the generalized representing relation. Unlike depiction wherein a “standard of correctness” must be employed in order to determine, with respect to properties internal to the object, whether or not some image \( X \) depicts \( Y \), representation as I have heretofore characterized it employs no such standard.\(^{32}\) Although configurational or pictorial properties play no fundamental or constitutive role in determining the representing relation, they do play a prominent subsidiary role in establishing which objects are used to represent which content. In fact, this subsidiary role appears so central to representation that it is commonly (thought mistakenly) understood as its determining factor.

We have arrived at the following definition of representation: \( A \) represents \( B \) if, and only if:

1. \( A \) serves as a stand-in or proxy for \( B \),

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\(^{32}\) See Abell, “Cinema as a Representational Art,” 275. Of course, the two necessary conditions for representation that I have identified thus far constitute what might be called an “external standard of correctness,” external because it makes reference to how we use representations.
2. *A*, in its capacity as a stand-in or a proxy, functions so as to bring any appreciator, viewer, or consumer of it cognitively, affectively, doxastically, and/or imaginatively in contact with *B*, and

3. *A* is used or created by a rational agent to fulfill (1) so as to accomplish (2).

Each condition is individually necessary for representation, but are they jointly sufficient? I think we need one more condition to render the definition sufficient. This further condition is necessary to establish that not all acts of representation are best understood as purely denotative. The relation between a denotation and its denotatum shares certain features with this more robust account of representation involving works such as films. First, the relation between a denotation and its denotatum is a relation between two things. Second, the former is understood as a stand-in for the latter. Denotation occurs when a referring expression or denoting object serves as a proxy for a (necessarily or contingently) absent content. Third, the referring expression or denoting object picks out the denotatum, and in so doing, points one to the denoted content, as an ostending finger might direct one’s attention beyond itself to the indicated object or state of affairs.

This definition of denotation ought to sound familiar because denotation is a kind of representation. But I think that some representation is a more robust relation than pure denotation. Essential to the robust sense of representation is the condition that the content indirectly presented by a representing object must be experienced *as represented by that object*. What I mean by this is that in experiencing objects as representations, we are at one and the same time attending to the formal properties of the representing object (e.g., a painting) and engaging the represented content (a brook and a mill *as* represented by the painting). These are not merely concomitant experiences in which the mind separately participates. It is rather a single, non-separable experience in which we, (1) attend to the formal properties of the representing object, (2) understand the representing object as
functioning representationally—we interpret it or use to so function—and (3) apprehend and attend to the represented content as part of (1) and (2). The represented content appears as though part of the presented content of the film, not existing outside and separate from the film. This is not because the content actually is a constitutive part of the image itself (I am merely *using* the film to represent the content); the content, rather, becomes a constitutive part of my experience of the image, and thus appears as though constitutive of the image itself.

So, to my account of representation we must add a fourth necessary condition: (4) The indirectly presented content $B$ (the represented content) is experienced cognitively, affectively, doxastically, and/or imaginatively by means of attending to the directly presented content of $A$ (the representing object).

To experience content by means of a representation is not the same thing as to experience that same content as merely prompted by the representation. We can distinguish among the experiences of attending to content prompted by the thing itself (e.g., a particular person as opposed to a photograph of that person), prompted by nothing in particular (e.g., spontaneous imaginative engagement with some content), and prompted by a representation (e.g., thinking about the plight of 19th century Russian peasants as prompted by Gogol’s *Dead Souls*). This latter experience does not, I think, accurately capture what I have in mind when I speak of experiencing content *as represented by* some object. On the one hand, the experience of being prompted to consider the plight of 19th century Russian peasants when reading *Dead Souls* involves two related, though independent experiences—reading a novel and thinking about the lot of Muzhiks. In this instance, the novel is best understood as functioning primarily as a denotation. On the other hand, the experience of attending to
content represented, say, by a film is unified and interconnected. One experiences the represented content as part of one’s experience of the film, and one’s experience of the film as bound up in the content. For instance, the experience of addressing the question of freedom of the will as represented in *Blade Runner* is necessarily a different experience than addressing the same question while reading Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The question is the same, but the manner in which the question is addressed is essentially different.\(^{33}\)

Let’s consider the following circumstances. Julia is viewing Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*. She finds the film engrossing but opaque, and at times, infuriating. She is determined to understand the film, to arrive at an interpretive framework that will illuminate the enigmatic world of Bergman’s film. It occurs to Julia, through no small mental effort, that Bergman is exploring, among other things, the question of personal identity. Having just completed a seminar on agency and personal identity, her attention begins to wander away from the film and toward a particularly challenging book she read in the course. She becomes so preoccupied with various worries over diachronic identity of personhood that she is no longer viewing the film. In this case, Julia’s current preoccupation with this important philosophical worry is prompted by *Persona*, but is not thereby experienced as represented by Bergman’s film. The experience of attending to some content, taken in itself, is more or less indifferent to that which prompts it—whether a classic of Swedish art house cinema or some vivid memory from a philosophy course. What is important in such circumstances is the content attended to—the prompter is effectively left behind. Engaging that same content

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\(^{33}\) The experience of attending to the question of freedom of the will is necessarily different when viewing *Blade Runner* and reading *Frankenstein* because the content with which the question is bound up—and our experience of attending to the question—is necessarily different. This is not merely because the former is a film and the latter is a novel. Two films, say *Blade Runner* and *Vertigo*, will necessarily prompt different representational experiences of the question of freedom of the will, even thought they are used to represent the same content. This is because the content is different and thus the attendant experience will be different.
as represented by some object $O$ is essentially bound up with appropriately attending to $O$ as a representation. And this experience, I think, is not well understood in terms of denotation.

The presentation thesis has, I suspect, been sufficiently distinguished from the representation thesis. I have provided in this section an account of representation that is simultaneously useful for understanding the manner in which artists and audiences understand and appreciate works of art, and is true to the nature of photographs, films, and other kinds of images. I would now like to turn my attention to a number of competing views of representation offered by some major philosophers of art and film. By indicating some prominent strategies employed to handle photographic and cinematic representation, I hope to provide a useful picture of the theoretical landscape, and then utilize this backdrop to contextualize and bolster the case for my preferred accounts of representation and the nature of films.
CHAPTER 6

SOME COMPETING ACCOUNTS OF CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION

One view of cinematic and photographic representation which has deep roots in the philosophy of film is what Carroll as termed the “re-presentational theory”. Carroll outlines the theory as follows: “For any photographic or film image \( x \) and its referent \( y \), \( x \) represents \( y \) if and only if (1) \( x \) is identical to \( y \) (in terms of pertinent patterns of light), and (2) \( y \) is a causal factor in the production of \( x \).”\(^{34}\) This theory, most notably defended by André Bazin and Stanley Cavell, relies on resemblance to account for representation, where photographic or cinematic resemblance is supposed to maintain an identity relation between an image and its referent.\(^{35}\) According to proponents of the re-presentational theory, an identity relation is thought to hold between photographic and cinematic images and their referents because the latter are directly causally responsible for the former. Thus, photographic and cinematic images are held to be essentially different from other images capable of resembling, hence representing, their referents such as paintings, which do not depend on a direct causal relationship between image and referent. Paintings represent while photographic and cinematic images re-present, or *present again*.\(^{36}\)

Bazin gives what is at the same time the most straightforward and most audacious statement of the re-presentational theory: “The photographic image is the object itself, the

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35. Ibid., 37.
36. Ibid.
object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.” Bazin’s claim is famously controversial. If we are to take Bazin at his word, he appears to argue that a photograph is capable of being a sheet of photosensitive paper and a human being, a motorcycle, a city street, or the surface of Mars, in direct contradiction to all known physics and biology. Although I think that, ultimately, we ought not understand his claim in such a destructively literal sense—to mean, e.g., that a photograph of Carole Lombard is literally the woman in the flesh—we must be careful not to diminish the strength of his claim. Bazin uses the language of identity, and characterizes photographs as re-presentations, because the photographic and cinematic mechanism facilitate a “transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.” Thus, the special causal relationship between a photographic or cinematic image and its referent is facilitated by the remarkable machinery of the cinema.

Cavell, on the other hand, is more reticent than Bazin to expound the representational thesis in such stark terms. According to Cavell, “A photograph does not present us with “likenesses” of things; it presents us, we want to say, with the things themselves.” As with Bazin, we ought not read Cavell as claiming that a photograph is literally what it appears to depict. He argues nevertheless that insofar as photographic and cinematic images are formed automatically—that is, absent the human agent as the efficient cause of reproduction—they are capable of reproducing the world, a reality that is “present to me while I am not present to it.”

38. Ibid., 14.
40. Ibid., 23.
cinema is “a spectacle that is unaware of our existence.”41 Films, by means of re-presenting reality, satisfy the spectator’s desire to view the world unseen. There is sense—according to the account of film viewing offered by Cavell—in which film viewing is an illicit, almost voyeuristic, event wherein the spectator, sitting quietly and alone in a dark room, uninterrupted and unselfconsciously witnesses the unfolding of a world.

Carroll offers a number of arguments against the re-presentation view. For instance, he argues that the re-presentationalist claim that identity of patterns of light between an image and its model delivered to a station point is not sufficient for representation because disparate referents may send out identical patterns of light. The re-presentationalist, for her view to hold, must be able to tell us which model a particular image re-presents. The answer cannot be something like “whichever one was the efficient cause of the image”, because we could imagine a case in which a photograph is produced by superimposing three different images depicting three different models, each of which gives off identical patterns of light.42 In this case, the single photograph would not have a unique referent that served as its efficient cause, and thus presumably would not re-present anything. Carroll also states that a photographer, using lenses of differing focal lengths, could produce a set of images each of which are identical (in the pertinent sense defended by the re-presentationalists) to a single referent, but that are not identical to each other. If photographs $X$, $Y$, and $Z$ are each identical with referent $A$, then each image must thereby be identical with the other two. But Carroll points out that the patterns of light delivered by photographs taken with 9mm lenses, 17mm


lenses, and 100mm lenses, respectively, will be quite different. The re-presentation thesis appears doomed.\textsuperscript{43}

There are other reasons, beyond Carroll’s ingenious counterexamples, for rejecting the re-presentation thesis. I will explore some of these issues more thoroughly when I discuss photographic and cinematic transparency and opacity, but the following will suffice to bury the re-presentation view. First, the re-presentation thesis as offered by Bazin and Cavell is much too strong because it is based on a mistaken view of photographic automatism.\textsuperscript{44} While the production of a photograph might in certain senses (and in certain hands) rely on automatic processes more than, say, the production of a painting, it is nonetheless importantly, and often thoroughly, infused with a photographer’s intentions. Photographers choose not only which scene to capture, but they have control over choice of lens, depth of field, angle of capture, aperture, f-stop, filter, movement or stasis of camera; and this is not to mention the great amount of control a photographer possesses, while working in the darkroom, to manipulate the appearance of a photograph. With this vast arsenal of creative tools at the photographer’s disposal, it is often more appropriate to speak of him ‘making’ rather than ‘taking’ photographs. Moreover, the very fact that many photographers have radically different, yet equally recognizable styles seems to prove that photography is not (or need not be) an automatic process from which human intervention is absent.\textsuperscript{45} If it were the case that photographers had relatively little or no control over the appearance of photographs,

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 40.

\textsuperscript{44} Indeed, Bazin and Cavell sometimes speak as if the human element in picture making is thoroughly incidental to the appearance of the final product. For instance, Bazin believes that photographs are remarkable because “an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man,” and Cavell argues that photography achieve automatism “by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction.” See Bazin, “Ontology,” 13; and Cavell, The World Viewed, 23.

then they would be limited to creating photographs for purely documentary purposes. The art of photography would be reduced to the practice of pictorial documentation, as the expressive and aesthetic possibilities of photographic production would be eliminated in favor of material reproduction.⁴⁶

A further reason for casting doubt on the re-presentation thesis is that it characterizes representation (or at least photographic and cinematic representation) as a merely two-part relation—that between an image and its model or referent. Without the influence of human intentionality there can be no representation. Without subjective desires and concerns conferring a representational teleology upon objects, there remain only objective facts concerning these objects (both representing and represented). There may still exist likeness and similarity, but these features are neither necessary nor sufficient for representation. Representation is a three-part relation. On the re-presentation view, something is a representation if it re-presents its model or referent, and photographic and cinematic images, on this view, re-present purely in terms of causal relations and identical patterns of light. According to the proponents of this view, representation is not something we do, but rather something images do, or rather, something that images are. But an image is not essentially a representation. And we have already noted the absurdity of conceiving of images as capable of such uniquely and robustly human activities as representing. Images, I think, function essentially neither as a stand-in or a proxy nor as a re-presentation of something. Images are

⁴⁶. This is not to say that photographs would no longer capture our attention. It would still be the case that photographs, especially of persons and places long past, would be greatly important to us. It is just that photographs would no longer be important as carriers of expressive or aesthetic properties. Cavell claims, “I have sometimes felt [a hesitation] toward regarding the movie as an art at all, its effects being too powerful or immediate to count as the effects of art.” See Cavell, The World Viewed, 103. While the re-presentation thesis might cast doubt upon the cinema as an art, it does not question the immediate forcefulness of photographic and cinematic images.
fundamentally presentations of perceptible content, and only accidentally or secondarily represent. The re-presentation thesis may serve as a plausible account of photographic and cinematic depiction (if it can answer Carroll’s various challenges), but not as an account of representation.

Another view of representation, one strikingly dissimilar from that defended by Cavell and Bazin, is the account offered by Nelson Goodman. Goodman’s theory can be summed up in his well-known dictum: “Denotation is the core of representation.”\footnote{Goodman, \textit{Languages of Art}, 5.}

Goodman’s account of representation is forcefully opposed to the re-presentation thesis. He argues that representation is purely conventional. Not only are pictures conventional in their representational function, but they serve this function in the context of a system of symbolic reference. According to Goodman, “To represent, a picture must function as a pictorial symbol; that is, function in a system such that what is denoted depends solely upon the pictorial properties of the symbol.”\footnote{Ibid., 42.} We cannot say what a picture denotes (or, e.g., whether or not the picture is ‘realistic’) until we know in what system of symbolic reference the picture is situated. A picture might be realistic in one system, but not in another. And such determinations are not to be made in terms of the pictorial properties of the image. Pictures, in Goodman’s view, function as do descriptions, which organize the world around us under denotative labels. The organizational properties of representations in no sense require that pictures resemble to any degree that which they denote: “almost anything may stand for almost anything else.”\footnote{Ibid., 5.}
We can see immediately that my preferred view of representation shares certain features with Goodman’s semiotic account. For instance, we agree that resemblance or likeness is unnecessary for representation (though I have argued that it plays a very important subsidiary role in determining what we use to represent), and I agree with his claim that “almost anything may stand for almost anything else.” We differ to the extent that I stop well short of offering a complete semiotic account of representation. Furthermore, as I discussed in detail in the previous section, I think that some representational uses are not well understood as denotive. I will address a further point of contention with Goodman’s view when I discuss the possibility of fictional representation later in the paper.

Given the general view of representation that I have presented, it seems perhaps that I am committed to a view similar to Goodman’s, but with the added proviso that representation be understood principally as an expression of human agency. So is it the case that “Denotation is the core of representation?” Ought we to understand representation primarily in terms of a denotative relation that holds between a representing object and the content it serves to pick out or point to? Recall that a representation on my view is an object that functions as a stand-in or a proxy for some other object or content, and that serves to bring an appreciator or consumer somehow (viz., cognitively, doxastically, affectively, and/or imaginatively) in contact with that object or content. A representation is characterized as something that indirectly presents content—which content is not to be understood as a proper part of the representation itself—and thus points one beyond itself. This account of representation appears to conform in certain important respects with a traditional conception of denotation. On the traditional view, denotation may be defined as a referring relation between a word, proposition, or object and the content it functions to pick out. On
Goodman’s view, and on the view that I have heretofore defended, a representation does not, properly speaking, have a ‘literal meaning’ or a particular content that it serves essentially to pick out. But it does function, in its capacity as a stand-in or a proxy, to pick out and point to some content.

So perhaps I differ from Goodman only in stopping short of providing a robust semiotic system of representation. I think this is in fact not the case. In the previous section I argued that some representation is best understood as a more robust relation than denotation. The key difference is that a denotative phrase or image serves exclusively to point beyond itself to the denotatum. The denoted content—and the referential expediency of such a denotative relation—is thus more important than the denoting object. This is often not the case with an object used to represent, particularly insofar as the representing object is a work of art. A work of art may be appreciated to the extent that it is illuminative of some aspect of the human experience. If so, our intellectual and aesthetic pleasure is not related directly to the content represented; it is, however, a direct result of the work that speaks so powerfully about our world. The represented content is engaged, but the representation is cherished.

Thus, I think it is a mistake to characterize representation as a species of denotation. A further distinction between the denotative referring relation and representation will, I hope, compellingly establish the validity of my account. I argue that we cannot use an object to represent itself. A painting may be used to represent a painting, a film a film, and a novel a novel, but each work cannot represent itself. An image functions essentially to present the content out of which it is constituted. Another way of stating this is that an image functions essentially to present itself. I have also argued that representation and presentation are mutually exclusive functions qua essential functions of images. Thus, if an image functions
essentially to present itself, it cannot at the same time represent itself. There is just no way to make sense of an image, so characterized, representing itself.

That is, unless we characterize representation as a species of denotation. Although something cannot represent itself, it can refer to itself. The sentence ‘This sentence is false’ refers to itself, and we can imagine a similarly self-referential painting. But we ought not adopt Goodman’s view because it follows from his account that images can represent themselves. I have given sufficient reason for preferring my view over Goodman’s view, and furthermore, we can on my view conceive of images as referring to themselves without thinking that they must at the same time be representing themselves. The relations are essentially different.50

50. Arthur Danto emphasizes that representation is best characterized in terms of aboutness, and not in terms of resemblance or reference. The suggestion is that representation need not be conceived as a relation between a representing object and some represented content—it need not be thought a relation at all. That the concept of representation necessitates no reference at all to an originating object or denoted content ought to be, in Danto’s view, fairly clear (Danto, Transfiguration, 66ff. Danto makes a further distinction between “true” and “false” imitations. A true imitation, “(1) it denotes what it is of, let this be o; (2) o enters into the explanation of the imitation; and (3) it resembles o” (Ibid., 70). A false imitation is false only in the sense that it does not denote some actual object in the world, not in the sense of appearing to be an imitation but actually being something else. It is important to Danto’s analysis that a “false” imitation is in a very important sense as real as a “true” imitation, though this distinction is less important for my analysis.). We encounter imitations or representations—that is, objects we would unequivocally refer to as such—that depict fictional characters, or that represent specific individuals or actions with no known referent in the world every day. This was recognized as far back as Aristotle, who pointed out that what separates the poet from the historian is that the poet commits her energies to representing universals rather than particulars, to representing a certain kind or person or action, but no one actual, pre-existing individual (cf. Aristotle, Poetics, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 51b5-10). Hence, Sophocles’ plays represent Oedipus to the extent that they are about him, but we need not worry that the plays do not resemble or denote some particular, actually existing person.

The mistake, Danto contends, that is made by those who believe that every imitation or representation must have an originating object or denoted content, is in thinking that representation and imitation are exclusively extensional concepts. In other words, Danto wishes to disabuse his readers of the (he thinks) prevalent, yet misguided contention that imitations or representations must be imitations or representations of some particular, identifiable content, which content must be in some way or another beyond or independent of the imitating or representing object. This is not to deprive representation of its denotative function. Danto merely wishes to point out that representations and imitations have an historically recognized and aesthetically fruitful, non-denotative function. To this end he mobilizes Frege’s distinction between sense and reference, and identifies a corresponding distinction between two senses of representation, viz., internal and external representation. Representation in the internal sense makes reference to the content of the picture or imitation—
Perhaps the most provocative analysis of representation is offered by Roger Scruton. We observed above that Cavell had expressed worry over the automatic, mechanical nature of the photographic process. He had speculated that perhaps it functions too autonomously from the photographer’s intentions to be capable of producing works of art, though he seems in the end to have avoided this conclusion. Scruton, however, thinks that the nature of the relation between photographic and cinematic images and their real world referents positively compels us to this conclusion—photographs and photographic films are not works of art. His account of representation is controversial and has become a popular locus of attack for philosophers of art. It is easy to refute straw man versions of Scruton’s account, and it is likewise tempting to combat Scruton in the realm of the straw man, in no small part because his thesis appears at first glance to be just plain wrong, and perhaps even not worthy of serious consideration. But his startling thesis is articulated in utmost seriousness, and is supported by a clever argumentative strategy. This strategy has proved to be, not as one might think easily refutable, but actually rather difficult to adequately repudiate. As some philosophers have undoubtedly discovered, it is easier to know that Scruton must be wrong than to know exactly why his argument does not suffice to establish that films and photographs are not works of art.

It is necessary in the present investigation to analyze Scruton’s reasons for thinking that films and photographs are not works of art because such analysis will illuminate his conception of representation. Scruton makes the claim that photographs and films are not (and cannot) be representations because they are not (and cannot) be works of art.

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in this sense, Danto asserts, “representation-of” is very similar to “picture-of”. The external sense of representation, of course, is characterized in terms of denotation.
Photographs and films cannot be works of art because they cannot manifest aesthetic properties, and this is because photography is a mechanical process capable only of producing appearances with purely documentary value. Scruton points out that painters also produce appearances, but they do so as the realization of a set of intentions. Photographs present appearances, but Scruton thinks they are incapable of conveying the mind of the photographer by means of these appearances.\(^5\) Photographs and cinematic images are deeply causally related to their subjects, whereas paintings are intentionally related to them in a way unavailable to photographs and photographic films.

On Scruton’s view, something is a representation insofar as it is capable of communicating thoughts and expressive intentions by means of presenting appearances, which appearances function to trigger a spectator’s capacity to recognize the representation’s subject. He argues that “something is a representation only if it is capable of carrying a reference to its subject without merely standing as a surrogate for it.”\(^5\) Although this conception of representation is rather narrow in its requirement that a representing object express the mind of its creator, it does not seem to be wholly idiosyncratic. It is, however, unsettling in its implications for photographs and photographic films.

It is important to note that Scruton discusses only ideal forms of paintings, photographs, and films—ideal in the sense that they are reduced to their essential elements. This sort of essentialism allows him to determine what, e.g., a film fundamentally is and does. Also, it enables him to identify accidental features of films, those seemingly genuinely cinematic aspects, but that in fact are borrowed from other species of art. According to


\(^5\) Ibid., 591.
Scruton, “The ideal photograph also yields an appearance, but the appearance is not interesting as the realization of an intention but rather as a record of how an actual object looked.” Ideal photographs and films, on Scruton’s view, are produced entirely absent the creative intervention of photographers and filmmakers. What does this mean? Presumably, it means that in producing photographic or cinematic images, photographers and filmmakers avoid any choice (e.g., in terms of lens, depth of field, aperture, f-stop, filter, et cetera) that effectively distorts the appearance of reality. This Scrutonian cinematic ideal appears consonant with the purely “cinematic” work championed by Siegfried Kracauer, one that presents the unstaged and uninterrupted “flow of life”. These works, in Kracauer’s view, become uncinematic to the extent that they eschew the essentials of the cinema and as a consequence borrow techniques from other art forms.

It may seem that Scruton is illegitimately stacking the deck in his own favor to the extent that he centers his attack solely on the representational prospects of ideal photographs and films. If representations necessarily express thoughts and intentions, and ideal photographs and films necessarily cannot express thoughts and intentions (though perhaps non-ideal photographs and films do express thought and intention and to that extent are representational), then the issue is settled and Scruton emerges unscathed—photographs and films are not representations and not works of art. But of course, most films and photographs are not ideal in Scruton’s sense. Are non-ideal films and photographs representations on

53. Ibid., 579.
54. Ibid., 578-79.
56. It is not entirely clear to me that ideal photographs or films are possible. If Scruton means by an “ideal” photograph or film one produced whereby any human intervention avoids distorting the appearance of reality, then Scruton’s ideal photographs and films must be granted as possible. If he means photographs or
Scruton’s view? The answer in most cases is ‘yes’, but only because these non-ideal works borrow representational features—such as cinematic editing and various methods of digital enhancement—borrowed from painting and drawing, and similarly aligned arts. He claims that “when the photographer strives toward representational art, he inevitably seems to move away from that ideal of photography which I have been describing toward the ideal of painting.” Any move toward interventions such as editing signals a move away from the ideal of photography and film. So, Scruton does not believe that the existence of non-ideal photographs and films serves as a counter to his argument, but shows, he thinks, that mechanically produced images acquire representational features only when they move away from their essential forms. That is, photographs or films become representations only when they strive to be paintings.

Scruton’s account of representation hits the mark, I think, in two very important respects. First, representations *qua* works of art that express thought and intention are to be taken very seriously as representations. Scruton echoes something I claimed earlier when doubting the soundness of Goodman’s view. He says that “an aesthetic interest in the representational properties of a picture must also involve a kind of interest in the picture and not merely in the thing represented.” I claimed that an interest in a work of art as a representation is an interest, on the one hand, in the represented content *as represented by that work*, and on the other hand, in the representation itself insofar as it is illuminative with films produced absent any creative intervention whatsoever, then it seems the ideal version of these images are not possible. Cf. Abell, “Cinema as a Representational Art,” 273-74.

57. Scruton, “Photography and Representation,” 594. See also Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 61: “take all films which, from The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari to the Japanese Gate of Hell, are palpably patterned on paintings: it is true that they ignore unadulterated reality, reality not yet subject to painterly treatment” (emphasis added).

respect to the represented content. Furthermore, Scruton and I agree that conceiving of representational works of art purely in terms of reference is mistaken.

The agreement ends there. It seems incontestable that photographs and films carry aesthetic interest. In other words, it seems clear that our aesthetic interest in photographs and films is an interest in the images themselves, and not an interest in the transparently presented subject of the image. This follows directly from the definition of image defended in this paper—an image just is a presentation of perceptible content. Insofar as we are aesthetically interested in the presented perceptible content out of which a photographic or cinematic image is constituted, we are aesthetically interested in the images themselves. But, it might be countered, do we not in fact commonly find the subject of a photograph aesthetically pleasing? I marvel at the grandeur of the Grand Canyon while viewing an image of it, not the rectangle of photosensitive paper in my hand with the smudge on it. When viewing an erotic photograph, we are aroused by the subject of the image, it seems, not the image itself.

The answer to this objection depends, of course, on what it means to see something. If I am seeing—that is, actually, literally seeing—the seductive subject of the erotic photograph then this person is the primary focus of my erotic interest. If I am literally seeing subject $S$, then it cannot be that I am merely viewing an image; the experience is more complicated than that. But if, when viewing a photograph, I am seeing nothing beyond the presented content of the image, that is a different story altogether. I must postpone this discussion for the time being. I will discuss below the transparency of photographic and cinematic images, at which time the question of what we see when viewing these types of image (and what it means to see *per se*) will become especially pressing. In the meantime, I must reiterate that viewing a
visual image is not a matter of viewing the image itself, and then subsequently attending to its content. The image is its content. So, to be aroused by an erotic image is not to be turned on by a sheet of photosensitive paper or a collection of pixels on a computer screen, but rather by the content of the image. To anticipate the postponed discussion of what we see when viewing photographs and films, I think that to the extent that we are actually seeing only the content out of which the erotic photograph is constituted, we are not thereby affected by the actual referent of the photograph.59

Moreover, as Dominic Lopes argues, the fact that we believe that something is an artwork is reason to think that it is so. This is not to defend a definition of a work of art according to which $X$ is a work of art if anyone does (or perhaps conceivably could) think it is a work of art. However, the fact that practically every person who takes films seriously believes that they are works of art is good reason to likewise believe this to be the case. It seems that the mistake of thinking that something is a work of art when it actually is not would be a difficult one to make. Additionally, finding something aesthetically pleasing is good reason to think that something carries aesthetic properties.60

Scruton’s response to this argument is apparent. He is not denying that we often find photographs and films aesthetically pleasing. His point is rather that such aesthetic interest does not stem from the unadulterated photographic or cinematic features of photographs and

59. There is, no doubt, an air of paradox here. I have never (actually, literally) seen Cary Grant, but I would not hesitate in my assent to the proposition “Cary Grant is handsome”. Strictly speaking, on my account, I ought to say something like the following: “I don’t know whether or not Cary Grant is actually handsome because I have not literally seen the man in the flesh. I have seen images of him, and if they are any indication, then I suppose he is handsome. But who knows, maybe I would change my mind if I actually saw him.” I would rightfully receive a perplexed look in return upon uttering this, but it is what I ought to say, strictly speaking, on my view.

films. It is an empirical fact that we find photographs and films aesthetically interesting. But Scruton thinks he has shown that such interest is found in the subjects photographed or in ancillary features of the images borrowed from painting or drawing.

This response, and Scruton’s account generally, is safe so long as we accept his version of photographic and cinematic essentialism. To accept Scruton’s claim that photographs and films cannot be representational works of art, we must give assent to the claim that the photographic and cinematic processes function essentially to produce transparent presentations of appearances, that these appearances are bereft of expressive capabilities, and that any move away from this practice is a betrayal of the photographic essence.

Scruton’s claim is not a normative one, and he has not adopted some version of what Noël Carroll has termed the Medium Specificity Thesis. Rather than claiming that photographers and filmmakers ought to eschew representational features of painting and drawing, he is making an ontological claim about photographs and films. In particular, he is claiming to describe the essence of photographs and films. To see this, Scruton asks us to consider the following. Take a photograph or a film and remove any semblance of creative intervention on the part of its maker. What we have remaining is still a photograph or a film, precisely Scruton’s ideal photograph or film. Now consider a painting; as soon as we prevent the painter from suffusing her work with intention, it seems that we no longer have a

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61. The Medium Specificity Thesis holds: (1) that each genre of art is associated with a particular medium (or with a related set of media, e.g., sculpture), (2) that each art form “has a range of representational, expressive, and/or formal capacities,” i.e., each genre is best at presenting a certain type of content determined by its medium, (3) that artists, in producing their works, ought to be guided by the normative standards determined by their respective medium, and (4) in saying that all works of a certain genre ought to conform to standards set by its medium, the proponent of the medium specificity thesis is saying that all and only works that do so conform are good works of their kind. See Noël Carroll, The Philosophy of Motion Pictures (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 35ff.
painting, at least not what we normally consider to be a painting. If so, it appears as though Scruton has hit upon an essential difference between photographs and films on the one hand, and paintings and other representational arts on the other—the former are essentially causally related to their model, the latter essentially intentionally related to their model.\(^62\)

We can see that it is much simpler to believe with conviction that Scruton is wrong about photographs and films than it is to identify the source of his error. How are we to proceed from here? One approach to a possible refutation of Scruton’s argument was developed by Lopes. Lopes agrees with Scruton that photographs and films are transparent—i.e., that to see a photographic or cinematic image of \(X\) is literally to see \(X\). On Scruton’s view, if photographs and films serve as “conduits for aesthetic interest”—that we experience the aesthetic properties of objects seen in or through photographs—then seeing a photographed object must in some sense be identical to seeing the object itself.\(^63\) Lopes argues that this is incorrect. On his view, seeing something in or through a photograph or film is exactly *not* to see something the same way one would see it face-to-face. Why? Simply because the former involves *seeing in or through a photograph or film*. In this sense, our interest in photographs and films is a matter of seeing objects in or through the images themselves, which experience is not the same as holding an interest in the object itself.

Scruton might respond that the experience of seeing something in or through a photograph is different than seeing it face-to-face only to the extent that the photographer distorts the appearance of reality through infusing her image with intentionality. An ideal

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62. This conclusion depends of course on whether ideal photographs and films are possible, a claim I think is debatable. If they are not possible, then removing the human hand from cinematic and photographic production yields something similar to the case with the painting—precisely, nothing at all (or at best unformed raw material).

photograph, Scruton might say, will give us an experience identical to seeing something face-to-face.

This cannot be right. To argue thusly, Scruton would have to claim that the ideal photographic and cinematic processes are so adept at creating undistorted images of reality as to produce incorrigible illusions. It is doubtful that photographic and cinematic images are illusionistic in any sense, but they are certainly not illusionistic in this absolute sense that Scruton’s account appears to compel us. Except in certain rare cases, most human beings appear to be positively fluent when it comes to identifying objects as presented in images of various sorts, as opposed to identifying the object encountered face-to-face. As Lopes claims, the experience of viewing something by means of a photographic image is undoubtedly different than the experience of viewing the same object in the flesh. Lopes argues, “The interest to be taken in seeing a photograph as a photograph is necessarily identical to the interest one may properly take in seeing the photographed object through the photograph. This is consistent with taking an aesthetic interest in seeing the photographic surface and its formal properties.”

Thus, according to Lopes, Scruton errs in thinking that photographs are invisible to spectators rather than merely transparent (i.e., something that we see, but look through).

Lopes’ argument is certainly a step in the right direction. He is correct in calling attention to that aspect of our photograph and film viewing experiences wherein we attend first and foremost to the image itself, as opposed to the real world referent of the image. The experience of visually attending to a photographic image of Jeanne Moreau involves attending primarily to the perceptible properties of a photograph, not to the French actress in

64. Ibid., 442.
the flesh. That said, I cannot fully support Lopes’ analysis, for the reason that photographs are no more transparent than they are invisible. In my view, images are necessarily opaque, and thus photographs and films are also opaque insofar as they function essentially to present the perceptible content out of which they are constituted. Lopes is correct to indicate that viewing the content of a photographic or cinematic image irreducibly involves the experience of a photograph or a film. His mistake, I think, is to argue further that the perceptible content that we engage when viewing a photograph or film is encountered in or through the image, rather than being the very content by means of which we identify the image as this or that image.65

Catharine Abell provides another counterargument to Scruton. I noted Scruton’s contention that although films are essentially incapable of representation qua film, they are perfectly suited to the recording, in essentially documentary fashion, of theatrical representation—i.e., they capably present real world appearances. And insofar as films are transparent (or, rather, invisible as Lopes describes Scruton’s view), the experience of seeing a cinematic presentation of a theatrical performance is just like seeing the performance face-to-face. If we add to this Scruton’s contention that photographs necessary exhibit a high degree of accuracy, we can conclude that films necessarily present only what was before the

65. The distinction between the views of Scruton, Lopes, and myself can be traced thusly: Scruton believes that when attending to the content of a photographic or cinematic image, we are attending to the appearance of the referent of the image—photographs and films on this view are invisible; Lopes thinks that the experience of attending to an image of X involves actually seeing X, but also involves a visual experience of the image through which X is seen—photographs and films on this view are transparent; I think that the content of a photographic or cinematic image is identical to the image itself, therefore we see only the image itself, not its real world referent—photographs and films on this view are opaque.
camera. Abell believes she can show that, even given Scruton’s assumptions and the implications thereof, films are capable of representational effects.

First, Abell borrows from Lopes the distinction between primary and secondary depiction (in the case of films, the difference between, respectively, e.g., Charles Foster Kane and Orson Welles). She argues that the cinema is capable of representing Kane in a certain way without thereby representing Welles in this way. In a pivotal scene from *Citizen Kane*, shot from an extreme low angle, Kane is speaking with his friend Jedediah Leland and appears to tower over him. Since Abell is assuming with Scruton that cinematic images necessarily depict their profilmic referents accurately, this shot from *Citizen Kane* accurately represents Welles as being about as tall as Joseph Cotten (who plays Jedediah). But this selfsame shot also represents Kane as positively looming over Jedediah. Kane is depicted as being significantly larger and more threatening than Joseph Cotton, Jedediah Leland, and Welles himself. This, Abell argues, shows that films are able to exhibit aesthetic properties not explicitly contained in their profilmic referents, without radically distorting the appearance of reality, and without borrowing representational techniques from painting or drawing.

Robert Hopkins offers an intriguing analysis of cinematic representation that might serve as a further argument against Scruton’s radical account. Hopkins agrees with Scruton that films are produced by photographing theatrical representations. Hopkins states, more specifically, that photographically-based films are “two-tiered” representations, meaning that

67. Ibid., 283.
they are photographic representations of theatrical representations. He assumes, unproblematically on his view, that the photographic process functions essentially to produce representations. Hopkins then suggests that in many cases we experience what he calls “collapsed seeing-in”. In collapsed seeing-in, the first level of representation—the theatrical representation—“collapses” and we see what appears to be a photographic representation of the fictional events narrated in the film. To create *Vertigo*, Alfred Hitchcock produced a photographic representation of James Stewart and Kim Novak, who in turn theatrically represented the actions of John Ferguson and Madeleine Elster/Judy Barton, respectively. According to Hopkins, our basic encounter with *Vertigo* as a two-tier film would involve engagement of the spectator with both levels of representation. To state things a bit roughly, we would see a photographic representation of James Stewart and Kim Novak pretending to be fictional characters. But in collapsed seeing-in, the experience of profilmic pretense disappears, and we see instead what appears to be a photographic representation of, e.g., Ferguson boldly leaping into San Francisco Bay to rescue Madeleine.

In this sense, two-tier films produce an illusion comparable to a *trompe l’œil*.

Hopkins is not convinced that the experience of collapsed seeing-in is the dominant form that our film viewing experiences take, nor is it very common on his view, though it is certainly possible. He also thinks that it is possible for one’s experience of a two-tier film to flip back and forth between collapsed and non-collapsed seeing-in. If Hopkins is correct about this, then films (and perhaps still photographs) prompt a viewing experience unavailable to observers of the profilmic events photographically captured for use in the film. In other

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69. Ibid., 151.
words, films allow perceptual or epistemic access to fictional worlds not facilitated by direct perception of theatrical representations. This shows that aesthetic interest in a photograph is not reducible to aesthetic interest in the photographed subject.

Abell is certainly correct that films are capable of depicting objects as different than they would appear face-to-face. Hopkins suggests that films might prompt us to experience cinematic representations as depicting fictional rather than nonfictional, profilmic subjects. This, I take it, is relatively uncontroversial. What Lopes and Abell have shown is that one can play Scruton’s game—that is, grant his working assumptions about photography and film—and still develop strong arguments against his account of representation. This is not to say that in the end I endorse any one of the accounts of representation offered by Abell, Lopes, or Hopkins. I disagree with them to the extent that they conceive of films as essentially representational. But their arguments are instructive in the manner in which they neutralize Scruton’s account. By granting his assumptions about the accuracy of the photographic process, and the existence of ideal versions of photographs and films, these philosophers avoid attacking a straw man variety of Scruton’s view. Instead, they undermine his position from within, so to speak.

I believe that Scruton’s account falls short as soon as he characterizes the photographic and cinematic mechanisms as do the re-presentationalists discussed above—as capable of producing only transparent images, which are somehow identical to their referents, and function only to present their appearances. And I think his account is questionable inasmuch as it is arbitrarily narrow. Why limit representation to what only works of art are capable of? Or better yet, why collapse the usual distinction between ‘representation’ and ‘work of art’ when there is no reason to think that these concepts are
coextensive? It is clear that many works of art can be conceived of as representational in some sense, but it is just as clear that many items commonly thought to be and used as representations are not works of art. If I am right about the nature of representation, then anything might be used to represent anything else.

An alternative view of representation that, like Scruton’s, might legitimately be called ‘revisionist’, is proposed by Kendall Walton. Walton desires to elucidate the “foundations of the representational arts” and tells us, “A quick survey of its frontiers shows the notion of representational art to be especially problematic.” His belief that no account of representation heretofore offered and defended is satisfactory leads him to “carve out a new category”, one that appears on the one hand to hold some plausibility, and on the other to be unappealingly unorthodox.

Walton asserts that films and other representational works of art (or just “representations”) function essentially as props in games of make-believe. Props, in Walton’s sense, serve as prompters in our imaginative activities. In particular, props generate fictional truths, or propositions that are true either in the world of a work of fiction, or in the game one plays with the prop, or both. Walton cashes out fictionality in terms of “prescriptions to imagine”. For instance, viewers of Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* are prompted to imagine that Durga steals a necklace from an acquaintance, to the extent that the film makes this fictional.

A prop is a representational work of art insofar as it generates particular fictional truths, and functions essentially to prompt particular imaginings. Walton points out that a tree stump, for instance, might very effectively serve as a prop in a game of make believe,
but the fictional truths it prompts us to imagine are determined solely by the stipulated rules that govern the game. In other words, the stump qua stump does not prompt one to imagine *this* or *that* particular fictional truth on its own. A representation, on the other hand, functions to prompt particular truths (e.g., Tom Sawyer appears as a spectator at his own funeral) as a consequence of its formal and aesthetic features, and thus requires no particular game to be played with it in order for its constitutive propositions to be fictionally true. As Walton puts it, “It can be something’s function to serve as a prop even if it never actually does so, even if the relevant game is never actually played.” This, of course, is the case only if the prop in question is a representation in Walton’s sense, as it would make little sense to say that a tree stump functions as a prop outside the context of a game of make-believe. Depictive representations—of which films are paradigm examples—serve as props in specifically visual games of make-believe. They function not only as prompters of imaginings, but also as the objects of imaginings. So not only is it fictional in the world of *Citizen Kane* that Kane publishes a “declaration of principles”, it is fictional in the game that we play with Welles’ classic film that we see Kane proudly displaying the published declaration.

At a certain level, Walton’s account of depictive representation appears quite traditional. A rough-hewn version of a traditional interpretation of Walton’s view would be something like this: “Something is a representation only if it functions so as to prompt one to

71. It does prompt us to imagine, e.g., that a ferocious bear is blocking our path, but only because we *use* the stump as a prop in a game of make-believe in which stumps “count as” bears. The particular features of the stump contribute to the game only insofar as we pick out those features upon which to hang our imaginative activity.


73. Ibid., 52.
imagine propositions about it that are not literally true of the object in question.” For instance, a toy baby doll is a representation because it functions to prompt one to imagine of it that it is a real, flesh and blood baby even thought it is merely formed plastic. Seurat’s *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* prompts one to imagine that one is actually seeing a couple taking an idyllic stroll on the Seine, even though one is only literally seeing paint applied to a canvas, and thus is representational in Walton’s sense. Finally, think about our experience with films. We might think that Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* represents Delphine Seyrig because we seem to see the actress (we see an image of her) while not actually seeing the woman in the flesh. This interpretation of Walton’s account is traditional inasmuch as it is a version of the resemblance or likeness view of representation. Walton’s account is stands out due to his placing emphasis on the imagination.

Walton, however, is unsatisfied with traditional accounts of representation. Although his account shares some features with what I see as a pre-theoretical notion of representation—that of somehow prompting an experience as of an object without actually being that object—it is revisionist in that he defines a representation as something that functions as a prop in games of make-believe.

For Walton to convince us that something is a representation only if it functions as a prop in a game of make-believe, he must make a strong case for the contention that our standard mode of engagement with works of art is in the context of pretense or make-believe. In short, he must convince us that to read a novel, view a film, or appreciate a painting is to play a certain structured imaginative game, to engage in a more or less elaborate pretense. Walton introduces the analogy between game playing and engaging with works of art by asking us to consider the manner in which children participate in pretense when playing with
toys or playing games such as “Cops and Robbers”. This involves, at the very least, make-believe, imagination, and some set of rules, which rules govern the pretense and determine what is fictional in the world of the game. This analysis is, Walton thinks, to be extended to explain our engagement with all works of fiction. According to Walton, “That make-believe (or imagination, or pretense) of some sort is central, somehow, to “works of fiction” is surely beyond question.”

This is a remarkable claim. It is certainly not beyond question that make-believe or pretense or imagination is central to our engagement with representational works of art. In fact, I think none of these is necessary. It is unnecessary that we imagine anything when reading novels, viewing paintings, watching films, attending an opera, or engaging with other works of art. Even so, I do not wish to deny that the imagination is commonly engaged when reading novels. I do, however, reject the notion that we usually imaginatively engage films. Now for Walton to include the imagination in his analysis of our mode of engagement with certain representational works of art is not obviously problematic. What is contentious is his assertion that imagination is somehow synonymous with make-believe or pretense. For instance, while there is no certain enumerated list of what one must be doing in order to be genuinely reading a novel, there seems to be no good reason to think that what one is doing is playing a game or pretending to do anything. I may read a vivid description of a certain landscape, or attempt to comprehend a character’s motivations, or perceptually imagine the physical characteristics of the villain or the pain felt by the protagonist, but none of this is best described as playing a game or engaging in pretense.

74. Ibid., 4-5.
This is not to preclude the possibility that one might engage in pretense when, say, viewing a film or reading a novel. For example, I might decide to pretend that the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* are real flesh-eating wretches, and to react to their appearance in the film as I might to an actual zombie outbreak. Suppose further that a friend and I play a game according to which the person with the most convincingly fearful response ‘wins’. In such a case, we may rightly call the film a ‘prop’ in a game of make-believe. But of course, playing this particular game, or any game for that matter, is not a necessary component of our engagement with this or any other film. If anything, to use this or any other film as a prop in the robust sense detailed in the *Night of the Living Dead* example is to misuse the film. In particular, it is, presumably, to fail to actually attend to the perceptible content out of which George Romero’s zombie classic is constituted.

Walton might counter that the games of make-believe we play with representational works of art are rarely as explicitly detailed and agreed upon as my zombie-response game. So Walton might agree that to use *Night of the Living Dead* in the above sense would indeed be to misuse it. What is distinctive about representations on Walton’s view is that insofar as they generate fictional truths, they provide the rules and structure of their own games. Thus, we will be not necessarily be explicitly aware of the games we play with representations, though, Walton would contend, we do in fact play them. In response, I think that to say we are not always aware of the games we play with representations does not lend support to this supposed fact of our engagement with them, and in fact, seems to reinforce the claim that we do not play games. It is difficult to envisage someone pretending to be a ferocious monster—or reacting fearfully in response to one—without being aware of this fact. Furthermore, it is unlikely that one could be playing a game as complex as the one’s Walton thinks we play
with representational works of art without being aware of it. It seems to be essential to the concepts of pretense, make-believe, and imagination that, insofar as one is engaging in them, one is aware of this fact. To claim that someone is imagining \( X \) but is unaware of this fact is surely as nonsensical as saying that someone is, at the same time, in pain and unaware of the pain.

Noël Carroll argues against the pretense view via Walton’s claim that our emotional engagement with representations, had within the context of games of make-believe, must be pretend or fictional or quasi-emotions.\(^{75}\) First, Carroll points out that our emotional responses when viewing films, particularly horror films, seem to be unambiguously genuine, and, moreover, involuntary. The commingled feelings of horror, disgust, and hopelessness experienced when viewing *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* seem to be authentic emotions, largely outside of our willful control. Carroll states that according to the pretense view I have a legitimate choice whether or not to cry while viewing Bresson’s *Au hasard Balthazar* (i.e., I had the choice whether or not to play the *Au hasard Balthazar*-authorized game of make-believe), but this is certainly false.\(^{76}\) The pretense view thus is unable to accurately account for our emotional responses to film.

Carroll also points out that in many pertinent senses, the experiences of reading nonfiction books and of viewing documentaries is similar to the experiences of reading fiction books and viewing fictional films. If so, why not extend the game-playing theory to our engagement with nonfictional written and cinematic works?\(^{77}\) Moreover, one could claim


\(^{76}\) Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 74.

\(^{77}\) Ibid., 75.
that insofar as viewing films is like our experiences in waking life—that is, insofar as film viewing is parasitic on perceptual and cognitive faculties used in everyday engagement with the world—why not say also that our experience of real world ‘narratives’ involve game-playing or pretense? The question of course is where to limit the extension of the analogy with children’s games of make-believe. Walton is comfortable analogizing engaging with representational works of art and playing children’s games. I have given several reasons for rejecting this extension.78

Walton might justifiably make that claim that one could use a representational work of art as a prop in a game of make-believe—as I say that one might use a given work to represent some content beyond itself—but this does not warrant the further claim that paintings, novels, sculptures, films, and the like, which generate fictional truths, are essentially representational. As an account of representation, I think the pretense or game-playing view is untenable.

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78. In this sense, Walton’s account of representation in terms of games of make-believe is too broad, since he extends the notion of game-playing beyond its appropriate boundaries. In another sense, his account of representation is far too narrow in that he limits ‘representation’ to ‘works of (representational) art’ or ‘works of fiction’. There is no justifiable reason to remove nonfictional works and works of non-art from the realm of the representational.
CHAPTER 7

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION AND
FICTIONAL ENTITIES

The final view of representation I will discuss—the “stand-in/proxy” view—shares with my view an important feature, viz., that representations are to be conceived of as serving as stand-ins or proxies for some object or content. But the stand-in/proxy view is problematic in that it leads to some untenable conclusions regarding the possibility of representing fictional entities. The view, which focuses primarily on pictorial representation, and among whose most prominent defenders are Noël Carroll and Gregory Currie, is in line with what I have previously referred to as the “pre-theoretical” or “traditional” view of representation. Roughly speaking, according to this view, $X$ pictorially represents $Y$ if, when viewing $X$, I seem to have a visual experience as of $Y$, where $X \neq Y$. If I have a visual experience as of Monica Vitti while viewing Antonioni’s *L’Avventura*, and I am not actually seeing Monica Vitti, then *L’Avventura* represents Monica Vitti. *L’Avventura* presents a recognizable likeness or proxy for Monica Vitti, and thus represents her. The stand-in/proxy view, while similar to my view in some important respects, differs from my view in that it holds representation to be fundamentally a matter of resemblance; and insofar as resemblance is a non-arbitrary feature of pictures, proponents of the stand-in/proxy view hold that pictorial representations are essentially representational.

Carroll develops his conception of the stand-in/proxy view of representation explicitly in response to the re-presentational view—that is to say, as an alternative to this mistaken view. According to Carroll, rather than *presenting again* the appearance of an
object, representational pictures “produce a recognizable proxy for its model.”

Furthermore, re-presentationalists such as Bazin and Cavell appear to diminish the representational scope of films by centering their theoretical attention on what Carroll refers to (borrowing language from Monroe Beardsley) as “physical portrayal.” Films physically portray things in the world that are identifiable by singular terms: In this sense “Psycho represents Anthony Perkins rather than Norman Bates – it was Anthony Perkins who served as the source of the image.” Additionally, cinematic images are capable of representing classes or types of objects. An image from Psycho may function to represent a man, rather than this particular man, Anthony Perkins. Finally, films provide nominal portrayals of fictional characters. Thus, according to Carroll, “A shot that physically portrays Anthony Perkins in Psycho depicts a madman while also, given its place in the context of the story, it nominally portrays Norman Bates.” In its capacity as a nominal portrayal, a cinematic image stands-in for or serves as a proxy for something other than that which caused the image to come into being.

Currie states that films are essentially composed of pictures. Pictures are essentially representational. Therefore films are essentially representational. On his view, something is a pictorial representation of X only if it triggers one’s capacity to visually recognize X. In this way pictorial representations are essentially dissimilar to linguistic representations or

80. Even so, it seems that Carroll would argue that the re-presentationalists misconstrue the manner in which photographic films physically portray their referents. According to Carroll, a film physically portrays its referent by means of producing a “recognizable proxy” for it, whereas the re-presentationalist believe that films somehow present (again) the referent itself.
82. Ibid., 47.
referring expressions, to the extent that my ability to recognize Henry Fonda does not of itself facilitate my ability to recognize that the proper name ‘Henry Fonda’ represents Henry Fonda.\footnote{Currie, \textit{Image and Mind}, 7.} Whereas, on this view, my ability to recognize Henry Fonda may be acquired by means of viewing pictures of him, which in turn equips me to recognize the man in the flesh, and vice versa. The process of acquiring the ability to recognize Henry Fonda involves the attainment of a single skill, not two skills corresponding, respectively, to face-to-face recognition on the one hand, and pictorial deciphering on the other. Contrary to the claims of adherents to the re-presentation thesis—and to those of proponents of the transparency thesis such as Walton and Scruton—Currie and Carroll argue that pictorial representations enable only epistemic, and not perceptual, access to represented content.

Moreover, Carroll contends that the stand-in/proxy view is an improvement over the re-presentation view in terms of the manner in which it handles the possibility of representing fictional characters and worlds. Carroll believes that films are capable of representing fictional characters and worlds. He points out that while the primary purpose of photographs in our culture is documentation, the primary purpose of films in our culture is usually thought to be fictionalization. The re-presentation view, on Carroll’s assessment, fails to recognize that, e.g., what is most relevant for our engagement with \textit{Citizen Kane} is that it represents Charles Foster Kane, not Orson Welles.\footnote{Carroll, “Concerning Uniqueness,” 45.} If it is the case that photographic and cinematic images are somehow identical to their models—if re-presentational images allow perceptual access to the appearances of real entities—it must be that photographs and films are
incapable of representing fictions. If so, Carroll maintains, “Films seem to become records of actors and actual places; their fictional referents dissolve.”

Carroll and Currie agree on the primary function of a pictorial representation: It functions as a stand-in or proxy for some content, and it does so by appreciably resembling, and triggering our capacity to recognize, its referent. But contrary to Carroll’s claim that films can represent fictional characters and worlds, Currie argues that they represent only actual objects and places. Concerning the possibility of representing Orson Welles’ character from *The Third Man*, Currie states, “the problem is that, at least in typical cases, there are no such things as those characters and events, and so there are no relations, representing or otherwise, between the movie and fictional things. And so our image is not, after all, a picture – or any other sort of representation – of Harry Lime.” The question for Currie is how his account handles our experience of fictional films given his contention, (1) that films are essentially pictorial and hence essentially representational and (2) that films are incapable of representing fictional characters and worlds.

Currie suggests that perhaps the closest we can get to describing our experience of fictional films “without saying something false” is to state that “cinematic and other images function pictorially to *present* fictions.” However, this is helpful only if Currie is able to tell us how images, which essentially represent real world content, are able to present fictional content. Admittedly, this picture painted by Currie is rather unrevealing of his complete view. Strictly speaking, it is neither the case that cinematic images represent fictional content

85. Ibid., 46.
87. Ibid., 11 (my emphasis).
nor that they present fictional content. Currie’s way out of this apparent conundrum is to posit the imagination as an essential element in our film viewing experiences. His claim is that if we can engage the perceptible content of cinematic images via the imagination, we can experience fictional films appropriately as coherent narrative structures presenting imagined worlds. The imagination, in this capacity, serves as an experiential bridge from the real to the fictional.

I will not dedicate too much space here discussing Currie’s view of the role the imagination plays in our film viewing experiences. A more complete discussion will appear in chapter nine. A brief word will suffice to complete the discussion of Currie’s view of cinematic representation. Let us consider the relationship between Orson Welles and the character he portrays in The Third Man, Harry Lime. On Currie’s view, The Third Man represents Orson Welles, not Harry Lime. Orson Welles is represented as appearing a certain way by means of the images out of which The Third Man is constituted: He is tall and has a round face; he has brown hair and eyes; he has a commanding baritone voice; he wears a heavy jet black coat and a black fedora. This is what we literally see when viewing The Third Man, according to Currie. What we imagine, on this analysis, is that there is a certain fictional character named Harry Lime who is a master criminal, who lives in postwar Vienna, and who exhibits the identical perceptible features exhibited by Welles. Absent such imaginative activity, Currie thinks, our experience of Harry Lime collapses into the viewing of representations of Orson Welles acting in front of Carol Reed’s camera.

Is Currie correct in his assessment that films cannot represent fictional characters. Or does Carroll argue correctly that what is most important about fictional films is that they do
in fact represent fictional characters? I agree with Currie that a representation must stand in
the requisite representing relation with something that actually exists, and thus cannot
represent fictional characters. I want to push back, then, on Carroll’s criticism of the re-
presentation thesis in terms of its inability to account for fictional representation. He claims
that what is relevant about our viewing of Citizen Kane is that it represents the fictional
character Charles Foster Kane rather than the actor/director Orson Welles. While it is
undoubtedly true that what is most relevant for our viewing of Citizen Kane is the character
Kane, I think it is nonetheless mistaken to think that the film represents Kane. Furthermore, I
think that Carroll’s employment of nominal portrayal fails to establish that films can
represent fictional characters. Why?

Remember that Carroll believes that a representation functions as a stand-in or a
proxy for something else. So, if he thinks that Citizen Kane represents the character Kane and
not the actor Welles, he must think that Citizen Kane functions as a stand-in or a proxy for
Kane. But how is this possible if Kane does not exist? Well, is it the case that Kane does not
exist? Kane exists, we might say, only as given in the determinate set of images (visual and
auditory) out of which Citizen Kane is constituted. He subsists as a nexus of energetic images
and the set of propositions these images generate. There is nothing beyond this set of images
that (a) can be represented and that (b) is the fictional character Charles Foster Kane. Objects
used as representations represent content beyond themselves, and thus cannot represent any
of the content out of which they are constituted. As I have argued, something cannot, in its
functional role as a representation, represent itself or any subset of its constitutive content. If
this is so, then Citizen Kane cannot represent Charles Foster Kane, because he is part of the

89. There is a caveat, however, to this claim that I will discuss in due course.
content out of which the film is composed. An image of Kane cannot be used to represent Kane, because, for all intents and purposes, Kane is that image and that image is Kane.

Carroll might respond that the very fact of Kane’s non-existence points to the necessity of a stand-in or proxy. A stand-in or proxy serves its essential function in the absence of some other content to which it is related. What could be more absent than something that does not (actually) exist? Access to Kane himself is impossible, so he must be represented in order to be experienced. This response will not do. The language of representation appears to necessitate that something be represented; in other words, representation is a relation between a representing object and some object that is represented. *Citizen Kane* might be used to represent Orson Welles, but it is not clear how it could be used to represent Charles Foster Kane. What could this mean? It seems more exact to say that in viewing *Citizen Kane* we are engaging with Kane himself, in the only sense in which he exists, rather than a stand-in or proxy for Kane. This contention accords well with my view according to which films primarily and essentially present content. Kane exists as constituted out of a subset of the content of which *Citizen Kane* is composed.

Carroll might counter this by arguing that *Citizen Kane* represents Kane because it is about him and not about Welles.90 This response will not work either. Serving as a stand-in or a proxy is not a matter of being “about” such and such content rather than some other content. It is primarily a matter of depiction on Carroll’s view, not a question of narrative or of semantic content. Carroll and Currie agree that representation concerns likeness and the triggering of our recognitional capacities. It cannot be said that *Citizen Kane* presents a likeness of Kane because, again, the supposed “likeness” of Kane is Kane. An image from

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*Citizen Kane* can no more resemble Charles Foster Kane in the way that pictures are understood as resemblances than can Orson Welles—the man, himself, in the flesh—present a likeness of Orson Welles. An image of Kane cannot trigger our Kane-recognition system because there is no such person to recognize and thus no such system. Or, rather, there is no such system prior to our first viewing of *Citizen Kane*. Since we do not bring an ability to recognize Kane upon first viewing the film, an image of Kane cannot *trigger* our Kane-recognition system, but rather *produce* it, which system we can bring to subsequent viewings of the film.

Perhaps Carroll could align himself with Goodman and Walton and claim that *Citizen Kane* is a Kane-representation instead of a moving image that represents Kane. What is the difference? According to Goodman, we must distinguish what an image is from what it represents. He states, “From the fact that *P* is a picture of or represents a unicorn we cannot infer that there is something that *P* is a picture of or represents.” And Walton asserts in the same spirit, “To be representational is not necessarily to represent something. Not all representations have objects.” That is to say, some object might *be* a representation without serving to *represent* anything. If Carroll accepts Goodman and Walton’s assertions, he could

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91. This must be understood in the appropriate sense of “presenting a resemblance”. One might think that nothing can more appropriately resemble Orson Welles than the man himself. Of course nothing looks more like Orson Welles than Orson Welles. But according to the sense of ‘resemble’ and ‘likeness’ that we are here addressing, one thing must resemble or present a likeness of something else. *Being Orson Welles*, and hence looking exactly like Orson Welles, functions in place of resemblance or likeness.

92. Cf. Dominic Lopes, “Imagination, Illusion and Experience in Film,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 89, no. 2-3 (1998): 350. Of course, we might know, e.g., what Orson Welles looks like and that Welles portrays Kane in the film. In this instance, we might bring to the film a sort of rudimentary Kane-recognition system. And in this instance, we might be in a position to claim that Kane resembles Welles, and vice versa, but not that Kane resembles Kane or that Welles resembles Welles.


claim that *Citizen Kane* is a Kane-representation (not a Welles-representation), and yet agree with Currie that the film does not represent Kane.

With respect to Goodman’s claim, it is not at all clear why he adopts the language of representation when describing what an image is a picture of. His analysis, according to which “Denotation is the core of representation,” seems to limit representation to something that images do, or rather to the relation to which images stand with respect to other content. What an image is of—that it depicts—seems to be an entirely different question. It is thus puzzling that Goodman would retain the label ‘representation’ for pictures that do not represent anything. A painting of Pickwick cannot represent Pickwick because Pickwick does not exist. At best, we can say, according to Goodman, that a painting of Pickwick is a “Pickwick-representation”, a one-place predicate that denotes what the painting is a painting of. He claims that ‘Pickwick-representation’ is synonymous with ‘Pickwick-picture’, but it unclear why this would be the case given his analysis of representation. It is nonsensical to claim that a picture $P$ represents Pickwick and at the same time that $P$ represents nothing. This is analogous to the claim that someone could be a thief without stealing anything, or that someone could be a person without exhibiting personhood. It would be wise for this reason for Carroll to reject Goodman’s analysis of the possibility of representing fictional entities. But even were Goodman’s analysis to hold up under scrutiny, adoption of it would be in effect to repudiate the stand-in/proxy view, the very view that Carroll defends. In any case, Goodman is of no help to Carroll.

We saw above that Carroll separates the representational capacities of the cinema into three disparate functions: physical, general, and nominal portrayal. On Carroll’s view, films nominally portray the fictional characters that inhabit them. Perhaps appeal to the capacity of
films to nominally portray fictional characters will salvage his account of cinematic representation. Carroll maintains that cinematic devices such as voice-over narration, non-diegetic text, and editing “establish that the objects, persons and events shown in the image “stand for” particular objects, persons and events other than the ones that caused the image.”95 It is not clear to me why Carroll couches the issue in these terms. Presumably he means to argue that the objects, persons and events in the cinematic image ‘represent’ objects, persons and events other than the profilmic referents. Is he saying that the fictional characters and events shown in the images stand for nonfictional objects and events that were not causally efficacious in producing the image? Or is he arguing that the images themselves serve to represent fictional entities and events? Is Carroll claiming that, e.g., Charles Foster Kane somehow represents (i.e., “stands for”) Orson Welles? Or is he arguing that in viewing films, depiction of fictional characters is more prominent in our experience than depiction of nonfictional referents? It is not clear what Carroll wants to say here because he problematically moves back and forth between speaking of images as standing in for content and describing depicted characters and events as serving as proxies for content. I think one of the difficulties Carroll is facing here is that he does not tell us what a fictional entity is. If he cannot tell us what a fictional entity is, it is doubtful he will be able to tell us what is entailed in the representation of fictional entities. Can we accept from him the answer that X represents fictional entity E to the extent that it “stands for” it? No, at least not unqualified. If E is a fictional entity and does not exist, how can X stand for it? If E is a fictional entity and does exist, in what sense can something exist and be fictional? Carroll must supply answers

to these questions. Unfortunately, he does neither, and thus we are offered an incomplete account at best.

This brief passage from Carroll is a good indication of how messy things become when we begin speaking of fictional representation. If fictional characters do not exist, it becomes difficult to ascertain just what a representation of a fictional entity serves to represent. Nominal portrayal seems to be of an essentially different kind than physical and general portrayal. It appears mistaken to collect them into a single group as species of representation.

Perhaps another source of the confusion is Carroll’s failure to adequately distinguish depiction from representation. Carroll says: “A shot is a nominal portrayal of a person, object or event when it represents a particular person, place or thing different from the person, place or thing that gave rise to the image.”96 How can a shot represent a person, place, or thing other than that which gave rise to the image? On my view, an agent uses the shot to represent some other content, for some determinate purpose, which content must exist such that it can be represented. On Carroll’s view the shot serves as a stand-in or proxy for some person, place, or object other than that which gave rise to the image. But as I have argued, there must be some constraint on what an image can represent. Once again, Carroll must tell us how a cinematic image might serve as a stand-in or proxy for a fictional character. He might claim that a film does not represent a particular character, but rather depicts that character. He might argue that Citizen Kane depicts Charles Foster Kane while it represents Orson Welles, and that what is most important about our immediate experience of the film is what it depicts, not what it represents. This, I think, would ease the tension in Carroll’s

96. Ibid.
account. But he has not left himself this option, insofar as he collapses depiction and pictorial representation into a single concept.

Of course, Carroll might retort that the entire point of his analysis is that pictorial representation just is depiction. To state that Citizen Kane represents Charles Foster Kane is as problematic as is the claim that Kane depicts Kane, which is to say, not in the least. This reply, while it might succeed in making sense of the possibility of cinematically presenting fictional characters, would commit Carroll to an utter rejection of his initial position, according to which a representation serves as a stand-in or a proxy for something else. This, that is, only if I am correct in my contention that depiction is primarily a matter of the presentational properties of an image. If not, Carroll has available to him it seems one final move: He can claim (1) that Citizen Kane represents Charles Foster Kane because, (2) it depicts Kane, which depiction (3) serves as a stand-in or proxy insofar as it (4) appreciably resembles the fictional character Kane. I suspect it is clear what the response to Carroll is. It is apparent that Carroll’s position is doomed because he is unable to tell us, in spite of everything heretofore stated, why an image that appreciably resembles something else must, in its capacity as a resemblance or likeness, stand-in for what it resembles, and in what sense a representation can stand-in for a fictional character.

This is not to say that I align myself with Currie. Currie is correct to argue that films cannot represent fictional objects, but his explication of the film viewing experience, which is established to account for our engagement with fictional characters, badly misdescribes that very experience. His praiseworthy refusal to adopt an erroneous view regarding fictional representation is offset by his espousal of a perilously flawed description of the film viewing experience.
But if fictional characters cannot be represented, and our experience of them is not mediated through the imagination, what is the nature of fictional characters and our engagement with them? I do not have the space here to develop and defend a robust ontology of fictional entities, a realm of analysis wrought with controversy. The following, I think, will suffice to distinguish my view concerning the possibility of representing fictional entities from those of Currie, Carroll, and Goodman.

I think that insofar as films are essentially presentations of perceptible content, fictional films function to present fictions. In other words, the fictionality of fictional films is given by means of the perceptible content presented by the film itself, and not in what it represents nor in some special mode of imaginative engagement. I accept a view suggested by George Wilson, one that he ultimately rejects: “fictional characters, their actions and circumstances, are somehow created by—come into being with—the construction of the work in which they occur. Hence, in some important sense, fictional objects and events really do appear to have some kind of respectable existence.”\(^{97}\) The fictionality of cinematic characters and worlds is established by films and filmmakers, through the process of producing cinematic images and editing them into a determinate and meaningful sequence. A single static photographic image considered on its own might depict Cary Grant on set acting in front of Howard Hawks’ camera. This same image now regarded as a constitutive member of the set of images of which *His Girl Friday* is constituted—this image of Grant perceived and understood in the context of this unique sequence of images—is seen as an energetic image of an unscrupulous newspaperman named Walter Burns. This fictional character (and

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the fictional milieu in which he finds himself) “comes into being” with *His Girl Friday*. The unique set of energetic images that signals the genesis of Walter Burns functions essentially to present perceptible content to audiences, which content is seen immediately and understood effortlessly by spectators as fictional.

So fictional films cannot, I have argued, represent fictional entities, since a representation must represent some actually existing object, and fictional characters and worlds do not exist. I then adopted George Wilson’s suggestive claim that fictional characters and worlds somehow come into existence upon creation of the significant array of images out of which a given film is constituted. Given these two claims, it seems that fictional characters and worlds do in some sense exist, albeit not in a manner appropriate for representation. Why are presented fictional entities beyond the realm of representational possibility? Well, a possibility concerning the representation of fictional entities does in fact suggest itself at this point as a possible objection. If filmmakers are able to give birth to fictional characters and worlds by means of cinematic production, and if therefore fictional characters “really do appear to have some kind of respectable existence,” I seem compelled to accept that fictional characters must in some sense be possible candidates for cinematic representation. In other words, if representational use is constrained by reality, and fictional characters upon creation enter the realm of the real (even if only in some limited sense), then fictional characters must be included as possible subjects of representation.

I grasp this consequence of my view—that fictional entities are in fact possible subjects of cinematic representation—and see it as an acceptable implication of my view, rather than a troublesome objection. Let me explain, as this requires qualification. In spite of the above sentence, I stand by my claim that fictional characters cannot be represented, but
this claim must be understood as making reference to fictional characters that have not already been brought into existence by means of some medium or other. A work of art cannot concomitantly create and represent a fictional character. That is, a film cannot at the same time bring a fictional character into existence and serve as a stand-in or proxy for it. A fictional character that does not exist prior to the production of a film cannot, given its nonexistence, serve as a subject of cinematic representation. Once created, the character may then so serve, but not by the film that serves as its creator because, for all intents and purposes, the film (or, at least, a subset of the imagery that constitutes the film) is the character. If the identity of a fictional character is determined entirely by means of certain features or aspects of a certain film, then this film, in its capacity as a representation, must represent content beyond itself. This effectively disqualifies a fictional character from being represented by the work that brings it into existence.

Thus, I think Carroll is mistaken in thinking that *Citizen Kane* represents Charles Foster Kane. Welles’ film depicts Kane, no doubt—Kane is as essential part of the presented perceptible content out of which *Citizen Kane* is constituted. On the other hand, e.g., one could legitimately interpret Howard Hawks’ *The Big Sleep* as representing the fictional character Philip Marlowe. Raymond Chandler’s rakish private eye was brought into existence in novel *The Big Sleep*, and thus might serve as the subject of representation for a spectator of Hawks’ film.98 The film version functions essentially to present energetic images of a fictional world involving a private eye named Marlowe and a complex extortion/murder plot, but the film may legitimately be used to represent the world created by Chandler (whose

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98. It is no less possible for a viewer to use the depiction of Marlowe in the film version to represent the literary character created in Chandler’s novel, even though the novel was written seven years before the film was shot. This is especially probable if one has seen the film prior to reading the novel.
novel may be used to represent, say, 1930s Los Angeles, but not Marlowe). *Citizen Kane* does not and cannot represent Kane. He is created with the film and the film presents him. Once created, Kane then becomes a potential subject of representation. For instance, say I desire to produce a graphic novel featuring my favorite characters from the Golden Age of Hollywood, and I choose Kane as my protagonist. This graphic novel may be used to represent Kane, because it could serve as a stand-in or proxy for the fictional character previously begotten by Welles, and thereby effect a cognitive, affective, doxastic, and/or imaginative connection between consumer and film.
I have argued heretofore that films, to the extent that they are a kind of image—namely, an energetic visual image—are essentially presentations of perceptible content. They are energetic images as opposed to moving images because they are not the sort of thing that can move (although they can present us with images of movement), and they are visual images because they necessarily contain visual content as a proper part. Furthermore, films are essentially presentations of content, and therefore do not function primarily to represent anything beyond their constitutive content. But they may be, and certainly are, used to represent in the sense that they function as stand-ins or proxies that serve to bring viewers cognitively, affectively, doxastically, and/or imaginatively in contact with their represented content—even if one’s attempt to bring about such contact is unsuccessful. But insofar as the requisite contact is successful, I have argued that engaging represented content is a matter of experiencing that content by means of and as it is represent by the considered representing object. So, representation is a relation necessarily involving a representing object, a represented content, and a human intention to represent. In its capacity as a representation, some object must represent something actual, and so cannot at the same create and represent some fictional character or world.

Before I conclude the discussion of the nature of the cinematic image and its capacity to serve as a representation, I must consider a final feature of the cinematic image, viz., its opacity. The claim that a cinematic (or photographic) image is opaque entails that in
attending to its presented perceptible content, one attends only to the perceptible features of
the image itself, and thus sees nothing over and above the image. The opacity thesis contends
that a cinematic image functions rather more like a painting in its presentation of content than
like a window through which one’s gaze travels in apprehending content. This is not
necessarily to make the case that a film has a definite surface—as with movement, a film is
not something that has a proper surface. The opacity thesis, on the other hand, holds that we
attend to energetic visual images as if they have surfaces from which perceptible content
jumps out at us, as opposed to windows or other transparent surfaces that must be traversed
in order to comprehend the content contained in or beyond it.

The opacity thesis contrasts with the transparency thesis. The transparency thesis
holds that to see a photographic or cinematic image of \( X \) is literally to see \( X \). This thesis is
defended by, in one form or another, Bazin, Cavell, Lopes, and Scruton. But the author
whose work has sparked the most heated critical discussion on the question of photographic
and cinematic transparency is Kendall Walton. Stated in the schematic manner presented
above, the transparency thesis appears to square with our intuition about depiction, and thus
appears to carry a certain prima facie plausibility. For instance, let us consider the view
defended by Currie and Carroll according to which depiction is defined in terms of the
triggering of our recognitional capacities. If I recognize some person or object in a picture—
if the picture somehow causes me to have a visual experience as of that person or object—
there is a sense in which I must be seeing that thing. If I am viewing Robert Frank’s
photograph *Men’s room, railway station—Memphis, Tennessee, 1955* then I must in some
sense be seeing a man having his shoes shined. Even with paintings, it seems strange to say
that I am attending to what is depicted in Matisse’s *Odalisque with Arms Raised*, but that I
am not in any sense seeing a nude woman reclining on a chair. Proponents of the transparency thesis also believe that “in some sense” we see the objects and events depicted in photographs and films. They advise us not to underestimate the strength of their claim. Walton in particular warns against taking his thesis too lightly. He says: “I am not saying that the person looking at the dusty photographs has the impression of seeing his ancestors….My claim is that we see, quite literally, our dead relatives themselves when we look at photographs of them.”99 The sense in which we see objects and events when viewing photographs and films is, according to Walton, a literal one.

Walton intends to communicate a rather robust claim about our visual experiences of photographs. It is quite startling to read in “Transparent Pictures” that we literally see now-deceased relatives when viewing photographs of them. We must ask of Walton’s analysis whether it commits him to the even stronger, evidently absurd, claim that a photograph of X literally is X. Why might this be the case? Recall that the transparency thesis holds that to see a photographic or cinematic image of something is literally to see that thing. If one literally sees something, it seems to follow that what one literally sees, literally is that something: To see X is presumably to see X. Thus, to see Katharine Hepburn is to literally see a woman, in the flesh, with such and such determinate features. Therefore, on this interpretation of Walton’s claim, to see a photograph of Katharine Hepburn is literally to see her because the photograph literally is Katharine Hepburn.

This conclusion is profoundly irrational, and Walton cannot possibly accept it. Perhaps it is unfair to interpret the transparency thesis in this maximally strong sense.

Perhaps he ought to be read as making the weaker claim that to see a photographic or cinematic image $Y$ of $X$ is literally to see $X$, and that $X \neq Y$. Maybe, but the stronger claim, as Walton rightly points out, is seemingly not without its proponents. Recall Bazin’s claim that “The photographic image is the object itself.”\textsuperscript{100} But we must ask the question of Bazin’s assertion that we have asked of Walton’s: Can we charitably attribute to Bazin the position to which his claim appears literally to commit him? Ought we read Bazin as making the claim that a photograph of something just is that something?

I stated above that a charitable reading of Bazin yields a negative answer. But there is a reason to attribute to Bazin this strong claim when it appears downright unreasonable to ascribe it to Walton? Bazin, as noted above, perceived an identity relation between a photograph and its subject. Perhaps this warrants an attribution of the strong claim to Bazin. Although Bazin speaks of a certain identity between a photograph and its referent, he is not making the claim that a photograph is numerically identical to its subject, nor that it is a perfect, qualitatively indistinguishable duplicate. He speaks, albeit somewhat ambiguously, of photographs as “reproductions” to which the “reality” of their subjects has been “transferred.”\textsuperscript{101} Photographs and films are “objective”, according to Bazin, in the sense of reflecting or sharing in the reality of their subjects. He is not making the much stronger claim that the photograph is identical to that which is depicted. In the spirit of charity, I think, we ought to excuse, in our interpretation of Bazin, his rather misleading rhetorical flourish.

Insofar as Bazin can charitably be read as avoiding the implications of the stronger identity claim, we ought likewise to interpret Walton’s position on photographic and

\textsuperscript{100} Bazin, “Ontology,” 14.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 13-14.
cinematic transparency as appropriately tempered, and hence, defensible. In his discussion of Bazin’s controversial position, Walton states, “Perhaps we shouldn’t interpret Bazin’s works literally. But there is no readily apparent nonliteral reading of them on which they are even plausible.” This is an intriguing claim. If we read Bazin and Walton with a charitable eye, we see that Walton himself provides us with an “apparent nonliteral reading” of Bazin’s words. That is to say, I suggest we understand Bazin as arguing for a version of the transparency thesis, though one not quite identical to Walton’s position, at least one that avoids the absurdity of the strong identity claim. Of course, a consequence of this reading (of Bazin as aligned with Walton) is that Walton’s position on photographic and cinematic transparency is equally plausible or implausible, depending on whether we accept my charitable reading of Bazin or Walton’s understanding of Bazin’s position. And if we decide in the end to accept Walton’s understanding, we can end our discussion of the transparency thesis here, and declare victory for the opacity thesis. The principle of charity will not allow this—and my interpretation of Bazin argues against it—so we must press on. I agree with Walton that we ought to hold Bazin’s feet to the fire and critique his investigation into the ontology of the photographic image where appropriate. Thus, although Bazin makes the unfortunate claim that the “photographic image is the object itself”, a closer reading of his essay shows that his view is much subtler and more akin to the transparency thesis than Walton is willing to admit.

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Let’s turn our attention to Walton’s argument for the transparency thesis. Walton begins by observing that there are crucial differences between paintings and photographs. The essential difference is usually thought to lie in the extraordinary capacity of photographs for depictive realism. Consider Cavell’s contention that photographs appear more realistic than paintings because they present us with more than a mere “likeness” (a photograph “presents us, we want to say, with the things themselves”), or Bazin’s contention that photography is the realistic medium *par excellence* because it is the perfect realization of the capacity for creating likenesses and therefore has “freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness.”104 What is significant for Walton regarding photographic realism is not the relatively banal fact that photographs tend to be qualitatively more realistic than paintings. The crucial differences between paintings and photographs are metaphysical rather than, say, aesthetic. They relate to the causal connections photographs have to the world, in opposition to the intentional relation a painting has to a painter. According to Walton, “Photographs are pictures, to be sure, but not ordinary ones. They are pictures through which we see the world.”105 Thus, photographs facilitate perceptual as well as epistemic access to the world.

A photograph is always causally related to something in the world, and as a consequence, in Walton’s view, it is always a depiction of something actual. In this way, photographs are aids to vision and therefore give us perceptual access to objects and scenes. A painting, on the other hand, depends primarily on the intentions of the painter, and where realism is concerned, on her beliefs about the way the world is. Both paintings and photographs are counterfactually dependent on the world, but only photographs are so

irrespective of the beliefs of the picture-maker. For a painting to remain counterfactually dependent on the world, the painter’s beliefs must change so as to correspond to any alteration in the configuration of objects in the depicted scene.\textsuperscript{106} Given a photograph of $X$, we know thereby that $X$ exists, and had the photographed scene been different, the corresponding photograph would necessarily reflect the difference. A painting might echo the vicissitudes of a particular scene (i.e., depict it \textit{this} way now that \textit{that} change has occurred), but only as filtered through the beliefs of the painter. A painter might claim objective or documentary value for his painting, but if the painting depicts a three-headed person or a cryptozoological anomaly, we can conclude—based on the available evidence—no more than that the painter believed there to be a three-headed person or Bigfoot in the painted scene. A photograph of a three-head person or Bigfoot conveys to its viewers (if no monkey business is suspected) the existence of such specimen.

Counterfactual dependence on the array of objects in the world is necessary but not sufficient for transparency. Transparent pictures bring viewers in “contact” with objects in the world, but such contact, which is counterfactually dependent on the world, is not unique to photographs and cinematic images. In fact, Walton points out, preempting a possible counterexample, that such counterfactual dependence is not limited to visual images. He asks us to “imagine a machine that is sensitive to the light which emanates from a scene and that produces not pictures but accurate verbal descriptions of the scene.”\textsuperscript{107} These mechanically produced verbal descriptions of a scene are in certain ways just as accurate as a well-made photograph, and undoubtedly exhibit counterfactual dependence. But we do not want to say

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106. Ibid., 264.
107. Ibid., 270.
\end{flushright}
that these descriptions are transparent, that we can see through them, that they give us perceptual access to the world. In order to differentiate genuinely transparent pictures from mechanically produced verbal descriptions that exhibit counterfactual dependence, Walton must add a further condition. He states that examining transparent pictures, unlike reading descriptions, is akin to examining the depicted scene or object face-to-face. This is because, according to Walton, photographs and cinematic images preserve real similarity relations, whereas descriptions “scramble” them. We may very easily confuse a picture of a house with a picture of a barn, but it is unlikely that an attentive reader will mistake the word ‘house’ for the word ‘barn’ (and conversely, it is conceivable that someone might confuse the words ‘house’ with ‘hearse’, but it is unlikely that one would confuse a picture of a house with a picture of a hearse).  

The question of whether or not photographs and films are transparent is difficult to adjudicate, and this is so for several reasons. First, while I can agree with Walton that (a) (undoctored) photographic and cinematic images indeed display counterfactual dependence on the arrangement of objects in the world, and (b) they preserve real similarity relations, I do not think this compels us to conclude that photographs are transparent, and thus give us perceptual access to the world. These features succeed for Walton in distinguishing photographs from paintings, and thus play a non-incidental role in his argument for photographic transparency, but his argument ultimately rests on a challenge: Where do we draw the line between objects that give us perceptual access to the world and those that do not? Those who would repudiate photographic transparency must be able to argue

108. Ibid., 271.
convincingly that the line ought to be drawn elsewhere than between photographs and handmade pictures such as paintings, as Walton would have it.

Almost everyone would agree that we literally see objects through windows and various lenses, such as eyeglasses, magnifying glasses, microscopes, telescopes, and perhaps mirrors. And almost no one would argue that to see a painted depiction of something is literally to see that thing. There are certain cases in the middle that prove problematic, as we have seen with respect Walton’s challenge regarding photographs. Do we literally see the world through a closed circuit or live television broadcast? If so, why not say that we literally see through photographs? If not, why say that we see through telescopes and magnifying glasses? In order to answer these questions we must first understand what it is to ‘literally’ or ‘actually’ see something. It seems that we will be unable to sufficiently distinguish transparency and opacity with respect to pictures and other objects unless we understand what we mean by the verb ‘to see’. Isolating a univocal meaning of ‘to see’ is notoriously problematic. Wittgenstein tells us that “there are here hugely many interrelated phenomena and possible concepts,” associated with seeing.\(^{109}\) With respect to Walton, we would like to know in particular how he understands ‘literal’ seeing, and to what literal seeing is opposed.

According to Walton, not only do we literally see the objects we encounter face-to-face (e.g., a photograph \textit{qua} photosensitive paper), we also literally see objects and scenes through photographs. Is Walton claiming that to literally see an object face-to-face and to literally see it through a photograph are identical acts of seeing? They are categorized alike as ‘literal’ acts of seeing, so presumably this is what we ought to conclude. For Walton to say

that there is no difference between seeing something face-to-face and seeing it through a photograph would commit him to the strong thesis detailed above, according to which a photograph of X literally is X. We saw above that this conclusion is unacceptable and that we ought not interpret Walton as arguing for it.

A photographic or cinematic image is transparent on this view, but this does not entail that they are invisible. We encountered the distinction between transparent and invisible images above. To argue, as Scruton appears to have done, that photographs are invisible is to make the claim that to see a photograph of X is not just to literally see X, it is to literally see only X. On the other hand, as Lopes argues, and as Walton discusses, to see something through a transparent image is to see it through the image. That is, one’s visual experience of the depicted content is bound up with one’s visual experience of the photograph by means of which one has access to the content. Thus, Walton argues that seeing through photographs is necessarily mediated seeing, in the same way that seeing through a microscope or a telescope is mediated through an optical device. We must not lose sight of the fact that mediated or indirect seeing through photographs and other aids to vision is still, Walton thinks, a species of literal seeing. He thus identifies two kinds of literal seeing: Mediated literal seeing, in which some sort of optical device enhances our visual access to the world, and unmediated literal seeing, or face-to-face seeing, in which no mediating device is used.

There are two questions that arise at this point. First, ought we accept Walton’s distinction between mediated and unmediated literal seeing? And second, ought we accept

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110. Walton, “Transparent Pictures,” 252-53. Walton points out that it is possible for “mechanical aids to vision” to be invisible in any given visual experience, but this is not necessary, nor is it the usual case. Usually, e.g., when we see something through a mirror or a photograph, on Walton’s view, we are simultaneously aware of the object seen face-to-face (the mirror or photograph), and the object seen through it.
his extension of the class of mediated literal seeing to the photographic and cinematic realms? To the first question, we can respond in the affirmative. I agree with Walton that to deny that we literally see objects and scenes with the help of mechanical visual aids such as glasses and mirrors puts undue strain on our normal understanding of the concept of seeing. Regarding the second question of where to draw the bounds of literal seeing, I think Walton is mistaken in drawing the boundary to include photographic and cinematic images. I think that photographic and cinematic images are *opaque* rather than transparent—we do not see anything through these kinds of images, but see only the presented perceptible content out of which they are composed.

In order to argue effectively against Walton, I must explain how I understand the concept of seeing. What is involved in seeing, which excludes seeing through photographs and films? I think there are two principal differences between literal seeing—whether unmediated or with the aid of optical prostheses—and the experience of viewing photographic and cinematic images, which Walton calls *seeing through*. The first difference between the experience of actual seeing and the purported experience of seeing through is argued effectively by Carroll and Currie. According to Carroll, “Ordinary perception carries egocentric information about the relation of my body to the object of perception.”\(^{111}\) This means that if I am seeing some object, I can point by body toward the object. I can regard the object and orient myself with respect to it in the context of my environment. In addition, Currie avers that all seeing is perspectival: I cannot see unless I am seeing from a given and determinate perspective. He affirms, “I could not place myself in the world if I saw the world from no particular perspective. And from what perspective I see things depends on the

\(^{111}\) Carroll, *Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, 99.
location of my body [...] relative to the things I see.” The argument offered here by Carroll and Currie is that seeing is not simply a matter of phenomenology, but involves a more complex interaction of subject and environment. I am able to orient myself spatially with respect to a photograph of Paris, but I cannot orient myself with respect to Paris itself, because the image provides no egocentric information regarding Paris. It follows that I am not seeing Paris when viewing a photograph of the French city. It might be true that my visual experience of the Paris-depicting photograph is in some limited sense like the experience of coming into visual content with the city itself. But this fact of our visual engagement with photographic images in no way supports the contention that I am literally seeing Paris when viewing a photographic image of.

One might wonder how I could at the same time accept the necessary and sufficient conditions supplied by Walton for transparency, and yet reject the transparency thesis. Why think that photographs are counterfactually dependent on the world and that they display real similarity relations, and yet repudiate the thesis according to which we seeing objects and scene in or through photographs? The appropriate question to ask here is, rather, given that I accept the necessary and sufficient conditions supplied by Walton, what do I think he has established about the nature of photographs if not their apparent transparency? The answer is twofold, and both elements in my answer related to the manner in which photographs are to be distinguished from so-called “handmade” pictures such as paintings. First, I agree with Walton that we must conceive of the causal relationship between the world and a photograph of it, on the one hand, and the world and a painting of it, on the other. Although I think that a photographer’s intentions go a long way towards determining the appearance of a

photograph, photographs are to some extent determined by the appearance of the world. Paintings, I think it is clear, are much less dependent on the appearance of the world. Second, I think Walton has shown that the manner in which we acquire information about the world is different between photographs and paintings. Given a certain undoctored photograph, we can identify what appeared before the camera. This is decidedly not to say that photographs represent the world naturally and that paintings represent the world intentionally. It is to say, however, that the relationship between the world and the image is certainly different.

Now the question for Walton is where does transparency fit into this analysis. I have agreed with him that undoctored photographs are counterfactually dependent on the world and display real similarity relations. But is it at all obvious or apparent that in my agreement I am committed to the transparency thesis? I think the answer is most certainly ‘No’. The transparency thesis—or rather, the jump from counterfactual relations and real similarity relations to a literal seeing of the world—seems to be a non-sequitur. It does not matter in what way a photograph is related to the world: If I am viewing an image on the surface of a sheet of photosensitive paper, I can never literally be seeing anything other than that particular image. It positively strains credulity to claim that I could be seeing a jpeg on my computer screen, and claim that at the same time I am seeing a flesh and blood person, a person, in fact, who has been dead for decades (if, e.g., I am viewing an image of James Joyce).

To return to the subject of what it means to see, Walton responds to the above characterizations (particularly the one requiring provision of egocentric information) with an analogy. He points out that the ability to see evolved in humans because the environmental information it offers us, which includes egocentric information, is essential for survival. A
similar claim can be made for pain. We evolved to feel pain so as to avoid damage to the body and to prevent behavior that would lead to such damage. It does not follow, however, says Walton, that pain felt in the absence of bodily damage is not genuine pain. By analogy, he concludes that Carroll and Currie cannot argue that visual experiences that do not provide egocentric information are not instances of genuine seeing. Seeing, according to Walton, provides information about one’s environment, and photographs, as mechanical aids to vision, are able to provide such information, even though the information they provide is not necessarily egocentric.  

I am not sure if Walton’s response succeeds in lessening the force of Carroll and Currie’s argument against the transparency thesis. In any case, even if the argument in terms of egocentric information does not fully succeed, there is another argument against the transparency thesis that relies on a simpler, more intuitive understanding of what it means to see something. Berys Gaut asserts that a truly effective argument against Walton is possible only if the “ordinary sense” of seeing captures a clear or genuine distinction. If not, combatants on both sides of the argument will be able to declare victory by defining ‘to see’ in their own preferred way. According to Gaut, “the idea of seeing involves that of being in unmediated or direct contact with an object….For us, constituted biologically as we are, we see an object only if rays of light pass uninterruptedly from it to our eyes.”114 This conception of seeing provides an attractive, simple, and intuitive means by which to distinguish seeing with visual prostheses and seeing pictures such as photographs and paintings. We see objects through telescopes, microscopes, magnifying glasses, and mirrors


because light “passes uninterruptedly” from objects to our eyes, either through lenses or reflected off of mirrors. No such claim can be made for photographic and cinematic images. Sure, light travels from the surface of photographs and films to our eyes, but the same cannot be said for the objects and scenes that the photographs and films depict. In this way, Gaut seems to have provided a powerful answer to Walton’s challenge, a “physically necessary” condition for seeing. We can agree with him that “all pictures are opaque.”¹¹⁵

So much for the ontology of the energetic visual image. The attempt to answer the question “What kind of a thing is a film?” has been the central animating activity of the present investigation. This investigation, while at the same time being fundamental to my work in the philosophy of film, has also been preparatory for a related investigation into the nature of the film viewing experience. In the next section, I challenge the prevailing view that the imagination is necessary for the film viewing experience. This rejection, while serving primarily to accurately capture the nature of the film viewing experience, serves also as further support for the presentation thesis. I think that it is largely a consequence of the representation thesis that philosophers of film have concluded that the imagination is necessary for the film viewing experience.

¹¹⁵. Ibid., 396.
CHAPTER 9

THE FILM VIEWING EXPERIENCE: WHY WE SHOULD GIVE UP ON THE IMAGINATION

There seems to be a consensus among philosophers of film that the imagination plays an important, indeed essential, role in how we view films. In what follows, I will argue, on the contrary, that we almost never engage in imaginative activity when viewing films and, hence, that the imagination is inessential to film viewing. To this end, I analyze the competing accounts of Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie, Noël Carroll, and George Wilson, and offer good reasons for preferring my view. In particular, I will reject the notion that in order to avoid paradoxical responses toward fictional films we must engage in imaginative activity when viewing them.

Although there is no consensus on what the imagination is or what it is to imagine something, a common assumption is that imagining is a mental attitude had with respect to some object. Another common view is that not all imaginings are propositional attitudes and, moreover, that we typically do not evaluate imaginings either in terms of mind-to-world or world-to-mind fitness. That is to say, we do not judge imaginings on the basis of whether or not they are true or warranted or possibly satisfied or prudent or moral. The realm of the

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imagination includes, but far outstrips, the world as it is or as we would have it. I grant these assumptions.

In the recent literature, there are two generally recognized forms in which imaginings appear: propositional and perceptual imaginings. Propositional imaginings, on the one hand, are *imaginings-that*. Imagining propositionally involves attending to a proposition without asserting or denying it. Perceptual imaginings, on the other hand, involve attending to mental imagery without accepting or rejecting the imagery as accurate to reality. In what follows, I will work with these basic conceptions.

Before I explain why no imagining of any sort is necessary to make sense of film viewing, it will help to say a bit here about what I take a film to be and how I unpack the cinematic experience. Understanding the nature of the former is an important step toward deciding what is required for the latter. On my view, films are *energetic visual images*. They are energetic insofar as they involve, as part of what they are, some kind of activity or change. They are images because they present some form of perceptible content. And they are specifically *visual* images because films of course must be constituted out of visible content, although they may also have other sorts of perceptible content (such as soundtracks) as proper parts. I think that films are essentially *presentations* of perceptible content. Although films can be and often are *used* to represent content beyond themselves, they primarily present the perceptible content out of which they are composed, and are thus not essentially representations. Films are nothing over and above the perceptible content they

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117. Corresponding to each type of imagining is a further distinction between impersonal and personal imaginings. These distinctions are important but will play a minor role below.
bear (and in light of which they are constituted), and thus present nothing over and above themselves. ¹¹⁸

Moreover, I think that films are essentially *opaque*. The use of ‘opaque’ here is meant to contrast with the transparency thesis, according to which to see a cinematic image of, for instance, Lauren Bacall is literally to see Lauren Bacall herself. When attending to cinematic images, I think, we literally see nothing beyond the perceptible content of the image.

I think the film viewing experience consists of:

1. attending to the perceptible and intelligible content that constitutes a token of a film,
2. using perceptual and intellectual faculties in an ordinary way, and
3. responding directly—emotionally, aesthetically, intellectually, behaviorally, et cetera—to that perceptible and intelligible content, although,
4. these direct responses are tempered by an awareness that a film is being viewed.¹¹⁹

In viewing a film, we use our perceptual and intellectual faculties in an ordinary way, and we respond directly to the content out of which a film is constituted, because films—no less than persons, pets, Porsches, or palaces—are things in the world. That is, there appear to be no illusions unique to the cinema under which the viewer falls, no unique skill required of the film viewer, nor are there special attitudes taken by means of which the film viewer sees a film as full of content, rather than as merely light flashed upon a screen. The film viewing experience seems to be as immediate and automatic as our regular experience with any other object or event in the world. In both cases, the perceptual and intellectual faculties we use when experiencing the events, and the manner in which we use them, are the same.

¹¹⁸. The thesis here proposed is decidedly not the presentation thesis proposed by Gregory Currie wherein films present the real world of actors, sets, and props. See Currie, *Image and Mind*, 48-51. For a similar view according to which representation is a matter of agential use, see Novitz, “Picturing,” 145-55.

¹¹⁹. Though only a brief sketch, this analysis will suffice for my purposes here.
It may seem to some that I have overstated the case. After all, there are clear differences between seeing a cinematic image of something (say a car crash) and seeing the real thing. It is not my intent here to deny this obvious fact. Indeed, one of the most powerful reasons for rejecting cognitive illusionism—the thesis that films cause us to believe in the reality of what is depicted on screen—is that there are striking phenomenological and behavioral differences between seeing an image of something while sitting in a comfortable movie theater, and experiencing the real thing. For example, were we to actually see the hero tied up and placed on the tracks, we would run to him and untie him, rather than sit back and watch while contentedly munching on popcorn.

In my view, we use the same perceptual and intellectual faculties when viewing films as when perceiving and thinking about other things. The manner in which we use these faculties is also the same. What is different, of course, is the context of the viewing, which serves to temper our affective, intellectual, and behavioral responses. When viewing a film, we do not jump out of our seats and run at the screen in order to help the damsel in distress, because we know that we are in a theater with friends, viewing a film. Rather, one finds us sitting quietly in our seats awaiting the arrival of the fast-approaching hero, heart racing, eyes wide in anticipation and worry.120

One might think that in pointing to the essential difference between viewing cinematic images of events in a film and actually witnessing the events, I have effectively argued against my own stated position, and have shown the need to posit the imagination (or

120. Cf. Derek Matravers, “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” *Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (1991): 28: “people can be disposed to act without actually acting. Two factors (at least) often prevent our dispositions from being realised in action. The first occurs when our desire to act on a certain belief is not our strongest desire: we may feel compelled to do something more pressing,” and also, “We will not act on our dispositions if we do not know how to act on them.”
some other mental faculty) in order to account for the difference. I do not think this is the case, and the reason lies in the tempered quality of all our regular experiences. I have stated that our affective, intellectual, and behavioral responses to films are tempered by context. I think this is no less true of our experiences generally.

Were we to encounter a visibly angry silverback gorilla in the wild, the immediacy of the situation would shock most of us into a state of paralyzing fear. Given the prospect of our own violent demise, our response to the situation would be immediate and extreme, and were we to survive, the effects of the experience would not soon leave us. But when we encounter a large, intimidating gorilla at the zoo, with unbreakable glass between us, our experience is different, our reaction tempered by the context of viewing. There is little doubt that we would be at least somewhat startled, if not thoroughly afraid. Our hearts would begin to race and we would probably take a few steps away from the glass. But then we might smile, knowing that we are not really in any danger. Notice that both encounters actually occur in the world, but the context of each situation tempers our reactions. Now consider a situation in which we are viewing a documentary film about gorillas. It is unlikely that we would experience much fear, unless the documentary were about an especially ferocious band of gorillas, and the filmmakers shot the film so as to terrify. In any case, our hearts might still race a bit, and we might be intimidated by the gorillas. I think this experience is on a par with the previous two experiences, more or less tempered by context, but it is not, I think, an experience radically different in kind.121

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121. David Suits, “Really Believing in Fiction,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2006): 374, relies on a similar example in his superb paper.
What implications does this view have for an account of cinematic imagination? If our film viewing experiences involve the ordinary use of our perceptual and intellectual faculties, then we use our imagination as we do when experiencing anything else in the world. As I will argue below, neither perceptual imaginings nor propositional imaginings occur very often, nor are they necessary to explain either our film viewing experiences or our normal real-world experiences.

But if we are not usually imagining anything when viewing a film, what are we doing? Well, what do we do when we pay attention to anything? We actively engage with, and react to, the objects of our attention, assessing and responding to them intellectually, morally, aesthetically, et cetera. We ask questions about the course of film narratives and anticipate the answers. We respond emotionally to the film. We might, for instance, actively despise one character and cherish another, and we reflect on our own intellectual and emotional responses. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of what is going on when we view a film. It is, I think, however, a good indication of how active a film viewer is when attending to the perceptible content out of which a film is constituted.

None of the above activity is best described as either perceptual or propositional imagining. Though believing things, making evaluative claims, responding affectively, and engaging in self-reflexive activity may in certain instances involve imaginative activity, usually those practices do not. This may not be obvious, even in the case of ordinary experience. This is certainly not obvious to practically every philosopher of film. But contrary to prevailing accounts, I think that even in the case of film viewing, it is clear that we need not engage in imaginative activity in order to attend to the perceptible content of a
cinematic image, form beliefs about it, respond affectively to it, and in various other ways engage with the presented content.

Now that I have given a general sketch of the view I am advocating, let us turn our attention to some competing accounts of the role of imagination in the cinematic experience. I will examine the views of Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie, Noël Carroll, and George Wilson, explain why I think they fail to adequately describe that experience, and then discuss an animating concern, common to all four philosophers, which leads each to appeal to the imagination in their respective accounts.

We saw above that Walton’s view of representation was decidedly against the grain. He argued that \( X \) is a representation only if it functions as a prop in a game of make-believe, and in this capacity, serves to prompt particular imaginings, which imaginings are constitutive of the game we play with the representation. Walton’s justification for positing the imagination as an essential component of our film viewing experiences stems from his distinctive view of representational art. On his view, to play a game of make-believe with a film is to engage in a certain lively act of the imagination. If film viewers are akin to children playing Cowboys and Indians, then it seems that we must be imagining in order to appropriately view a fiction film.

What is fictional in the world of a film is the set of propositions generated by it. What we imagine when viewing a film, according to Walton, is a sub-set of these propositions, along with certain propositions that are fictional only in one’s own game of make-believe. Not all imaginings are propositional for Walton, but the imaginings prompted by films seem to be largely (if not exclusively) propositional, and to imagine a proposition is to do more with it than merely consider or entertain it. Although Walton leaves open the possibility that
all imaginative activity is about oneself, the propositional imaginings undertaken with respect to films appear in both impersonal and personal forms. Impersonal imaginings on Walton’s view are propositional imaginings about the world of a film. They are imaginings that x and y are fictional in the world of the film. Personal imaginings, on the other hand, populate the world of the games we play with films. It is fictional in the game of make-believe we play with Hitchcock’s *North By Northwest* that we see Roger Thornhill being kidnapped or that we see Eve Kendall hanging precariously from a precipice on Mount Rushmore.

I think that Walton’s account is flawed in two ways. First, the analogue of film viewing to the playing of children’s games seems unmotivated by the facts. Film viewing is much more powerfully akin to our experiences in waking life, and unless one is to argue that all of our experiences are moments in games of make-believe, Walton’s analysis leaves us incredulous. But, second, even were the game-playing analogy somehow plausible, Walton leaves us unconvinced (1) that our engagement with the propositional content of fiction films is a matter of imagining, and (2) that we must imagine anything about our own visual experiences of films.

Unfortunately, Walton is unable to give us a clear idea of what he takes imagining a proposition to be, beyond requiring that a prospective imaginer do more than merely entertain it. Insofar as imagining a proposition on Walton’s account is aligned with pretense and make-believe, it must be a more robust activity than entertaining or supposing. But bringing forth this implication of Walton’s view brings us no closer to understanding what imagining a proposition amounts to. Perhaps imagining a proposition is a matter of recognizing it as fictional in a work of art, or integrating it into the set of propositions out of which a game of make-believe is played. But neither this recognition nor this integration
process seems to be characteristic of genuine imagining. Rather, they involve our regular cognitive and perceptual faculties, e.g., belief and memory. Another possibility is that imagining a proposition (as opposed to entertaining it) is to form and attend to a mental image corresponding to the proposition. This indeed seems to be a genuine case of imagining, but Walton wisely avoids construing the imaginings that constitute games of make-believe as strongly perceptual.\textsuperscript{122} But at best, this latter point only serves to remind us that propositional imaginings are \textit{propositional}; we are still at a loss to explicate what it is to imagine a proposition in the context of a game of make-believe.

Walton’s view of the role imagination plays in our film viewing experiences is emblematic of a common problem with accounts in the philosophy of film of imaginative engagement with films. There is a tendency, as we shall see, to replace explanatorily suitable cognitive and affective stances, such as belief, with imaginative versions of them. The motivation for such moves seems to stem from a worry over the possibility of representing and emotionally engaging with fictional entities. I have suggested, and will develop further, a position according to which these concerns are not as problematic as these philosophers think, and in the end are not solved by positing the activity of the imagination.

Gregory Currie argues that imagination is akin to the simulative activities we engage in when attempting to arrive at the mental states of others. We do not employ particular theories of mentality in order to do this. Rather, according to Currie, we simulate another’s mental states by imagining being in the same position as that person with respect to sensory

\textsuperscript{122} That is, he avoids the absurd view according to which the imaginative activity undertaken in our engagements with films consists in attending to mental images prompted by, yet separate from, the perceptible content of the film itself. This view I call ‘strongly perceptual’. Walton does, however, subscribe to the view according to which we imagine propositionally (a) about the manner of our visual engagement with films, i.e., imagined seeing, and (b) about the content of our imaginings that constitutes the world of our games of make-believe, in which our seeing is part of the content. I call this view ‘weakly perceptual’.
stimuli, and then by seeing how we would respond were we actually in that position. In other words, we simulate the beliefs, desires, and other mental states of another by running them “off-line”, or absent the normal environmental stimuli and behavioral responses. Imaginary beliefs and desires have, Currie thinks, the same internal connections to other mental states as actual beliefs and desires, but different external connections.

Currie thinks that fictional, narrative films are essentially pictorial and representational. A representation, in Currie’s sense, represents something real, some real object or event. But most of us do not think that fictional narrative films represent real objects and events, at least not the profilmic events photographically captured for use in the film. According to Currie, “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.”123 This is why beliefs about fictions are, according to Currie, imaginary and not genuine beliefs. So, when viewing Howard Hawks’ *His Girl Friday*, for us to simulate the experience of Walter Burns (rather than of Cary Grant), we must imagine that the representation of the fast-talking man in the sharp suit we see onscreen is of an amoral newspaperman named Walter Burns. That is, we must simulate the beliefs we would have were Walter Burns a real man. These mental states cannot be said to run “on-line”, so to speak, because there is no such person as Walter Burns.

According to Currie, “My imagining is not that I see the characters and the events of the movie; it is simply that there are these characters and that these events *occur.*”124 Currie thus rejects what he terms the *Imagined Observer Hypothesis*—according to which we

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124. Ibid., 179.
imagine ourselves viewing the events of the film from within the world of the film—and accepts impersonal perceptual imagining as part of our film viewing experience. By “impersonal perceptual imagining”, Currie refers to imaginings prompted by essentially visual media (such as films or paintings), which do not include oneself as part of the imaginative content. He rejects Walton’s view that we imagine about our own perceptual experiences of depictive representations, and argues, rather, that our imagination is engaged with the content of our perceptual encounters.

This account of film experience vis-à-vis the imagination as mental states run “off-line” is an improvement over Walton’s. Currie dispenses with any notion of game-playing to explain our engagement with films, and he highlights the importance of our natural recognitional capacities in processing cinematic content. But there are problems with his analysis as well. I think that Currie’s account fails for the same reason as Walton’s—the attitudes we take with respect to films are not imagined, but real. And Currie contends that the imagination is singularly active when viewing films because he thinks the beliefs, desires, and other mental states prompted by films are run “off-line”, and thus are simulated, not genuine beliefs and desires. I reject his assumption. To claim that our filmic beliefs and desires are not caused by regular environmental stimuli is to fail to grasp the fact that a film is something in the world just like any other object, and hence is as capable of prompting beliefs and desires as anything else. To contend that the beliefs and desires we hold when viewing a film are disconnected from our normal behavioral outputs is to overlook the fact that our film viewing experiences are tempered by context in the same way as all of our experiences, and thus that our film viewing behaviors are not different in kind from all of our other behaviors. Our belief that the villain will get away with his evil deed, and our desire
that this not happen, are jointly connected to our behavior. It is just that this behavior is tempered by our knowledge that we are in a theater viewing a film. So while we might become visibly angry—we might become red in the face and begin to sweat—we do not run angrily at the screen in order to defeat the wicked character.

Currie is interested in the question of how we experience these characters and events. My suggestion is that, by attending to images of them, we come to hold certain propositional attitudes about them, and we come to respond affectively and aesthetically towards the film. None of this is best described as imagining. Nor need we imagine in the first place in order to see these images as of fictional characters. The fictionality of filmic characters and events is set up by the context of the images within the whole film. The film itself, and those who produce it, establish the fictionality of the characters and events independently of the imaginative activities of a prospective audience.

I think that we form genuine beliefs about characters and events while watching a film. Consider a normal viewing experience of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. We see images of Rick Deckard hunting replicants, and we form beliefs about his skill as a blade runner and his skepticism regarding the moral legitimacy of his endeavor. It does not seem correct to say that we are imaginatively believing things about Rick Deckard, that we are somehow running these beliefs off-line or simulating belief-like states. Rather, it seems clear that we are forming beliefs, in a completely conventional fashion. We just believe that Rick Deckard is a skilled hunter.125 We do not have to imagine that Deckard is an expert blade runner if we see images of Deckard at work and judge accordingly.126

125. Cf. Suits, “Really Believing in Fiction,” 371: “we react emotionally to stories because we do believe what stories tell us – not fictionally-believe, not make-believe, but believe in the ordinary way in which we
Noël Carroll points out that ‘imagination’ has become somewhat of a misfit concept in recent philosophical discourse. He refers to it variously as a “catch-all category of last resort” and “a mixed bag of faculties and mental functions.” Carroll believes (and I agree) that the philosopher of film who wishes to posit the imagination as a necessary element of our film viewing experiences must tell us (as precisely as possible) what the imagination is, or at least what she takes it to be. This is important, of course, because we must know what function(s) the imagination is supposed to perform before considering it as relevant to an account of the film viewing experience.

Carroll distinguishes among several concepts of the imagination that might serve this purpose. The first aspect of the imagination—and perhaps the most discussed in the history of philosophy—is the capacity for mental imagery. Carroll argues that reference to this capacity does not help us to distinguish, on the one hand, our engagement with works of fiction and, on the other, our engagement with nonfictional works. We might form mental images when reading a nonfiction book about World War II, but fail to when reading *Catch-22*, and vice versa. Similarly, this sort of imagination is neither necessary nor sufficient for viewing fictional films.

The second notion of the imagination discussed by Carroll is the *constructive imagination*, the most famous exposition of which is found in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. The constructive imagination is the mental faculty that unifies disparate or discrete belief anything at all.”

126. Lopes, “Imagination,” 343-53, shares with Currie the worry that if the imagination is entirely absent from our film viewing experiences, we cannot but see them as cinematic representations of nonfictional referents.

perceptual content and, thereby, generates the manifold of appearances. Carroll denies that this notion of the imagination is helpful, if what one wants to do is distinguish the film viewing experience from other sorts of perceptual experience. This is because, according to Carroll, if Kant is correct about the constructive imagination, then it is a ubiquitous feature of all of our perceptual experiences.128

For Carroll, the pertinent sense of the imagination in play when engaging with fictional films (and, more generally, with fictions) is what he terms the “suppositional imagination.” According to Carroll, “To entertain a thought or a propositional content as unasserted is to imagine it in the sense of the suppositional imagination.”129 So conceived, the suppositional imagination is a remarkably common feature of our cognitive life. Whenever someone entertains a thought, or envisions a possible outcome, or grants a premise for the sake of argument, one is, according to Carroll, engaging the suppositional imagination.130

Carroll believes that this notion of the suppositional imagination enables him to distinguish between viewing works of fiction and viewing works of nonfiction (fictions prompt us to entertain thoughts as unasserted, nonfictions prompt us to entertain thoughts as asserted). He also thinks it solves the (seeming) paradox of responding with genuine emotion.

128. Carroll is looking for a conception of the imagination that will illuminate the essential difference(s) between engagement with fictional and nonfictional films. The constructive imagination, Carroll thinks, is inadequate to the task. For fascinating recent attempts to account for aspects of our engagements with fictions by appealing to the constructive imagination, see William Seely, “Imagining Film: Seeing with the Mind’s Eye,” Philosophical Inquiry 27 (2005): 3-14; and Kathleen Lennon, “Imagination and the Expression of Emotion,” Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy 24, no. 3 (2011): 282-98.


130. Carroll writes: “Thought is here a term of art that is meant to contrast to belief. To have a belief is to entertain a proposition assertively; to have a thought is to entertain it nonassertively.” See Carroll, Philosophy of Horror, 80.
to what one knows to be purely fictional (and hence nonexistent). Rather than being fooled into believing in the existence of fictional entities (as the proponent of the illusion thesis would have it), or responding to fictions with quasi-emotions (as Walton would have it), we respond with genuine emotion to what we know to be fictional. But what we actually respond to is the content of the thoughts prompted by fictions. For instance, Carroll thinks that a person responds with genuine fear when viewing a film involving the Green Slime, not because she believes in its existence, but rather because she entertains (as unasserted) the proposition that the dangerous Green Slime is coming her way. Thoughts, Carroll argues, can effectively promote genuine emotions such as fear.

While Carroll’s account of the role of imagination in viewing films is well articulated and offers an attractive, straightforward criterion, I think it is nonetheless flawed. There are three different, yet converging reasons why the notion of suppositional imagining fails to accurately describe what is going on when we are viewing films. First, the concept of the suppositional imagination fails to adequately perform its intended function. It does not enable us to distinguish between viewing fictional films and viewing nonfictional films. Carroll distinguishes between belief and “thought”, the latter of which involves non-assertively entertaining propositions. He further distinguishes two kinds of thought: thoughts involving unasserted propositions (such as those that populate works of fiction) and those that involve asserted propositions (out of which nonfictional works are constituted). In distinguishing these different kinds of thought, Carroll believes he has identified two different stances by

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132. Carroll speaks in “Fiction” of “structures of sense-bearing signs”, by which he means novels, films, paintings, and various works of nonfiction. When speaking of ‘propositions’, I am not necessarily referring only to engagement with written propositions found in novels, poems, and written works of nonfiction.
means of which we engage with different kinds of works. On the one hand, he thinks the suppositional imagination is in play when we engage with fictional works. On the other hand, he claims that a different (and non-imaginative) stance is in play when we engage with nonfictional works. It seems, however, that Carroll has actually identified a single suppositional stance that we adopt when viewing fictional and nonfictional films. Thus, while Carroll does make a genuine distinction in pointing to the difference between believing and supposing, he does not recognize a further genuine distinction between two kinds of supposing (or, rather, it seems that what we have here is a distinction without a difference).

Carroll might respond that he has in fact pointed to a very clear difference between what he has called suppositional imagining and entertaining propositions as asserted, and that the distinction is genuine and warranted. In the former case, we are entertaining propositions expressed by or about a work known to be fictional, and in the latter, we are entertaining propositions expressed by or about a work known to be nonfictional. That, Carroll might argue, is why the former is an instance of imagining, and the latter not. In response, I must reiterate that Carroll has merely shown that the intentional object of our supposing might be different in different instances, not that the nature of the supposing is different depending on the nature of the original propositions. Carroll does think he has shown the consequent to be true (that the nature of the supposing depends on the nature of the prompting proposition), but supposing is supposing whether the proposition prompting the supposing has been uttered assertively or not. A fictional proposition is fictional because of its content, not its manifest manner of presentation.

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133. Carroll might get around this objection by insisting that all supposing is imagining, but of course, this would prove devastating for his analysis.
No less problematic, I think, is that Carroll has not described a kind of imagination so much as the faculty of supposing. In other words, I do not think that the suppositional imagination is best understood as a kind of imagining. The traditional notions of the imagination serve their purposes well, and should be preserved. Moreover, I think it is simply false that genuine supposing becomes suppositional imagining when the intentional object switches from nonfiction to fiction. Carroll is right to have noted that ‘imagination’ has served as a sort of ‘catch-all’ term denoting a host of cognitive, behavioral, and affective states by virtue of which we engage with fictional entities. I think that, unfortunately, Carroll’s analysis of the suppositional imagination perfectly exemplifies this catch-all approach to the imagination. The problem is that stipulated notions of the imagination, in a great many cases, serve as unnecessary proxies for a number of propositional attitudes and emotional states that, on their own, serve perfectly well to account for features of our film viewing experiences. For instance, I pointed out above that Currie replaces belief with imaginative or simulated belief, and we have seen that Carroll relies on the suppositional imagination instead of supposing. I think that the straightforward notion of belief works perfectly well to describe what a normal film viewer is doing when viewing a film, i.e., forming beliefs. And if it is true that a film viewer is supposing when viewing films, there is no reason to think that such supposing must be, or usually is, imaginative.

That said, let us grant Carroll his stipulated use of suppositional imagination. Is there any reason to think that this is, in fact, what we are doing when viewing a film? In the first place, it is not clear what this would amount to. It is not at all obvious, for instance, what it means to consider the perceptible content of a film as unasserted. Of course, Carroll intends for the asserted/unasserted dichotomy to correspond to, respectively, fictional and
nonfictional propositions given by a structure of sense bearing signs. But I think that Carroll is doing nothing beyond recognizing that some propositions are prompted by works of fiction, and thus are not necessarily veridical statements about real world objects or states of affairs, and some are not. It follows neither that we must merely suppose the propositions prompted by works of fiction nor indeed that we must imagine them in any way. Supposing suggests that we engage in hypothetical reasoning, and there is nothing immediately or necessarily hypothetical about works of fiction qua fiction.

From the foregoing analysis, we get the impression that Carroll’s account of the suppositional imagination requires that all perceptible content is conceptual. In the end, we must conclude that Carroll’s account of film viewing experience in terms of the suppositional imagination is mistaken because it leads to a bizarre view of the experience itself. Insofar as the dominant mode of our consciousness of film viewing involves attending to the content of our own thoughts, Carroll’s account implies an unacceptably subsidiary role for the perceptible content of the film itself. Rather than responding to the perceptible content of the film in a direct and regular manner, the cinematic images on Carroll’s account prompt thought, to which we attend, the result of which is a sort of internal filmic engagement that takes place independent of the film itself. I do not wish to deny that we do often attend to the content of our own thoughts when viewing films. I do, however, reject Carroll’s contention that attending to thoughts displaces attending to the perceptible content out of


135. Turvey points out that Carroll’s view posits ‘thoughts’ as mediating entities between film viewers and films. But it is clear to Turvey, as it is to me, that our film viewing experiences are, rather, quite direct. See Turvey, “Seeing Theory,” 433.
which a film is constituted as the dominant mode of film viewing. This argues against the view that attending to thoughts prompted by films must be a form of imagining.

George Wilson defends the *Imagined Seeing Thesis*, which is the claim that while we literally see the formed light projected upon the screen (and we literally see images of profilmic events), we imagine (actually) seeing them. While Walton thinks that film viewers take on the point of view from which a scene is depicted (they, in effect, place themselves within the fiction), Wilson thinks that the paradoxes generated by such a view are unacceptable. Thus, he adopts the Mediated Version of the Imagined Seeing Thesis, which states that we imaginatively see portions of a film world by means of transparent, moving, on-screen images that have been fictionally derived in an indeterminate manner for the purpose of filmic narration.\(^\text{136}\)

The Imagined Seeing Thesis stems from what Wilson calls the *Fictional Showing Hypothesis*. Film images, being mediated for the purpose of effective film world narration, function to prompt certain imaginings. According to Wilson, we do not actually see the fictional characters and events depicted in a film, and we do not merely view the images as slavish recordings of real world events edited together for no determinate purpose. Rather, insofar as a film is fictional and presents ostensibly non-existent characters and places, film viewers actively imagine that they are literally seeing\(^\text{137}\) the constituents of the given film world, presented to them by a fictional “shower”.\(^\text{138}\)

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136. “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.” See Wilson, *Seeing Fictions in Films*, 88.

137. Wilson states that film viewers imagine being in whatever perceptual contact the film prompts, so we also imagine hearing the characters and events depicted in a film. Ibid., 53.

138. For an earlier, more vivid description of imagined seeing, see Wilson, *Narration in Light*, 55.
Wilson does not adopt a view according to which we perceptually imagine the world of the film and then attend to those imaginatively produced images, which attending is imaginative seeing. He, like Walton, rejects strong perceptual imagining in favor of weak perceptual imagining—that is, rather than producing and attending to mental images, we imagine about our perceptual engagement with external images such as films. The soundness of his view depends primarily on the truth of two claims: (1) that we only literally see (images of) the profilmic events cinematically captured for use in the film, and (2) that films are essentially representational.

If films are essentially representational, then we must answer the question regarding what (fictional) films represent. They cannot, strictly speaking, represent things that do not exist, and we do not see fictional films as representing the real world of actors, sets, and props. Perhaps, as Wilson suggests, if we imagine seeing fictional characters and events, the worry evaporates. On my view the problem does not even arise. Films are presentational—fictional films present perceptible content that is seen, without the mediating influence of the imagination, as fictional. I do not, with Wilson, think that we literally see fictional characters. But we do see images of fictional characters, and it is unnecessary to imagine seeing a fictional character when viewing an image of a fictional character for the same reason that it is unnecessary to imagine seeing a real person when viewing an image of the person.\(^{139}\) The question here is what needs to happen so that our viewing of a fictional film escapes devastating paradoxes, in both theory and viewing. This seems to be a bigger problem for those who hold that films are representational. I have argued that the imagination adds

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\(^{139}\) Wilson does give a nod to the view that films set up the fictionality of characters and events, though ultimately he is skeptical of certain implications of this view. See Wilson, *Seeing Fictions in Films*, 62.
nothing to the film viewing experience, and that the principle of parsimony favors its exclusion in accounts of film viewing experience.\textsuperscript{140}

All of the philosophers discussed in the last section share a concern over fictionality, and I think it is this very concern, above all others, which leads each to posit the imagination as integral to, or at least very important for, our film viewing experiences. Films seem to give us some sort of perceptual access to persons, places, and events that do not actually exist. Not only that, they appear to give us this access by means of cinematically capturing images of things that do exist and events that did take place. If we imagine that certain characters exist and that certain events occur, all while viewing images that represent the real world, then we can avoid falling prey to certain paradoxes of fiction. Or so these philosophers think.

The difference between the view according to which fictionality is a problem to be solved by positing imaginative activity, and that according to which fictionality is not a problem and that the activity of the imagination need not be posited, is the difference between competing views of the nature of film. According to Currie, Carroll, and Wilson (and to a lesser extent Walton), the imagination functions as an experiential bridge from the real to the fictional. But, on my view, according to which films are presentations of perceptible content, no bridge is needed. According to my account, attending to a film becomes a matter of attending to its perceptible content. The imagination is unnecessary and is usually left out of the experience altogether.

I have argued for an approach to the film viewing experience according to which the imagination is an unnecessary, and mostly absent, feature of it. This account serves to

counter two prevalent, and I think mistaken, notions about films and the role the imagination plays in our engagement with them. First, it is often overlooked that films are works of the imagination, are constituted out of imagery, and thus do the work of imagining for us, so to speak, just as fiction films are works of fiction, and thus set up their own fictionality. It does not follow from the fact that films are works of the imagination that we must engage them imaginatively when viewing them. It is unnecessary to invoke the imagination when engaging a film as fictional.

Second, I have argued against the “mixed-bag” approach to the imagination, according to which various (often questionably stipulated) notions of the imagination serve to elucidate our film viewing experiences in place of other non-imaginative capacities or attitudes (e.g., the structures of belief). I have argued that the non-imaginative capacities and attitudes can account for the major features of our film viewing experiences. Thus, I think we can dispense with questionable, explanatorily unnecessary, notions of the imagination.
CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

Films are not representations. This is the central destructive view of the present investigation. Films, to the extent that they are images, are presentations of perceptible content. This is the central constructive view of my paper. The assertion that films and related images are not representations is certainly a controversial claim. I have thus taken much space to defend this claim, and in so doing, I have shown that while films and related images are not essentially representational, they may nonetheless serve a representational function. Hence, another positive claim here defended has been that films and related images are representational only inasmuch as they are used, by rational agents, to represent content beyond themselves. While this is not the central function of images, it may very well be the central mode of spectatorial engagement with them.

The error of characterizing images as essentially representational stems in large part from (with respect to visual images) the traditional understanding of depiction as a mode of pictorial representation. To conceive of depictions thusly is to conceive of the phrase “X is a picture of…” as synonymous with “X pictorially represents…” I have argued that depiction is best understood as a mode of pictorial presentation and involves only what a picture is a picture of, not what it serves to represent.

In characterizing the presentation thesis, I have argued that while it is probably impossible to enumerate the entirety of the presented content of a given image, we can effectively distinguish the content presented by a (photographic fiction) film that is ostensibly of the real world, and the content that is constitutive of the presented fictional
Photographic fictional films are composed out of transformed images of the real world, and while this species of film primarily presents the constituents of a fictional world, some of the real world content out of which the film’s images are composed survives in the finished product.

I then defined my preferred conception of representation as involving four necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. I argue that,

\[ A \text{ represents } B \text{ if, and only if:} \]

1. \( A \) serves as a stand-in or proxy for \( B \),
2. \( A \), in its capacity as a stand-in or a proxy, functions so as to bring any appreciator, viewer, or consumer of it cognitively, affectively, doxastically, and/or imaginatively in contact with \( B \),
3. \( A \) is used or created by a rational agent to fulfill (1) so as to accomplish (2), and
4. the indirectly presented content \( B \) (the represented content) is experienced cognitively, affectively, doxastically, and/or imaginatively by means of attending to the directly presented content of \( A \) (the representing object).

This definition, I think, serves two important purposes. First, it offers proponents of the representation thesis a practicable definition of representation, one that effectively illuminates our use and understanding of films and related images as representations. Second, it serves the first purpose without distorting the nature of cinematic and other images.

Next, I sought to challenge a number of influential competing views of representation. I argue that the evaluated positions fail either because they seriously miscalculate the extent to which photographers and filmmakers have control over the appearance of their created images (Bazin and Cavell), or they fail to acknowledge that not all representation is denotative (Goodman), or they lead to the conclusion that (ideal) photographs and films cannot be works of art (Scruton), or they critically misdescribe the nature of our engagement with works of representational art (Walton), or finally because they
are unable to account, in a non-problematic way, for the existence of fictional characters and worlds (Carroll and Currie).

In the next section, I argued against the view that fictional characters and worlds are possible objects of representation. That is, I argued that a work cannot at the same time create and present a fictional world or character, and represent that character. A fictional world or character is a possible object of representation only once it has been brought into existence, and only then by another work. Thus, while Citizen Kane cannot represent Charles Foster Kane, someone could very well produce a novel or painting that is used to represent Kane.

Moreover, I have argued that insofar as photographic and cinematic images are opaque, they are not transparent, and thus Walton’s transparency thesis is false. If one is viewing an image of $X$ it is straightforwardly false to say that one is thereby literally seeing $X$. Photographic and cinematic images function as epistemic but not perceptual conduits to the actual world. We can see through windows, glasses, telescopes, and perhaps even mirrors, but photographs, television broadcasts, and films do not offer transparent access to real world appearances.

Finally, I have developed an account of the film viewing experience that dispenses with the need for the imagination. I have argued that the experience of viewing a film is similar in many important respects to our experiences in waking life, and that straightforward notions such as belief and desire accurately capture the nature of the film viewing experience without thereby appealing to confused or explanatorily unnecessary conceptions of the imagination. I also argued in section IX that philosophers such as Walton, Currie, Carroll,
and Wilson believe that the imagination is necessary for the film viewing experience because they conceive of films as essentially representational.
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