

II

Imagination and Engagement with Fiction

5 Fictional Narrators and Normative Fiction-Making

Manuel García-Carpintero

Some fictions have explicit narrators, like Marcel in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Watson in the Sherlock Holmes stories, or the unnamed first-person teller in *Don Quixote*. Explicit narrators are less common in fiction films, but there are some—the late Joe Gillis in Wilder’s 1950 *Sunset Boulevard*, or Addison De Witt in Mankiewicz’s 1952 *All About Eve*. There is, however, a debate about covert fictional narrators in most or all fictions, assumed on Lewis’s (1978) account of truth in fiction. In this paper I’ll defend that many fictions, in literature, drama and film, have covert narrators, although they may well “fade into the background and have little or no significance for criticism or appreciation” (Walton 1983, 83). Nevertheless, Wilson (2011, 112) I’ll reject their ubiquity. I’ll rely on a constitutive speech act account of fictionality that I have argued for, to elaborate on two distinctions suggested by Wilson, and on that basis to defend effaced fictional narrators. I’ll start by contrasting Searle’s (1975) *mere pretense* view of fictions, with *dedicated representation* views; I’ll characterize the notion of *fictional narrator* at stake in this debate; and I’ll rehearse reasons why they are not ubiquitous. I’ll then offer arguments for default covert narrators (Section 5.2). In Section 5.3, I’ll elaborate on Wilson’s distinction between contents fictional “in the story” and those fictional “in the work”. I’ll close by developing Wilson’s “silly question” reply to the skeptics’ arguments against covert narrators (Section 5.4).

5.1 Fictional Narrators: Explicit, Effaced, Ubiquitous

Searle (1975) argues that literary fictions are constituted by *mere pretense*—by the simulation of representational activities like assertions, without any further representational aim (“MP” henceforth). They are not the result of *sui generis*, *dedicated representations* of a specific kind, *fictionalizing* as I’ll call it, on a par with assertion (“DR”).¹ Although some researchers (Alward 2009, Predelli 2020, Recanati 2021) endorse variations of Searle’s argument, most agree with Currie’s (1990, 17–8) and Walton’s (1990, 81–3) criticisms.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003139720-8

Currie and Walton argued instead that *invitations* or *prescriptions* to imagine define fiction, as invitations to believe define assertions.² They elaborate on the idea in different ways. Currie offers a speech-act approach to fictionalizing, taking intentions of a Gricean reflexive sort to be essential to them. Walton thinks instead of fictions as social artefacts with a specific representational function, that of being “props in games of make-believe” (1990, 51). I have defended a rapprochement of sorts (García-Carpintero 2013, 2019a, 2019b). I adopt Currie’s speech-act approach, but I take an institutional, functional view on fictionalizing, on which (like games) it is defined by norms; Wolterstorff (1980, 219–34), Lamarque & Olsen (1994), and Abell (2020) offer related views. The approach grounds a distinction between *constitutive* prescriptions to imagine that define fictions and merely *ancillary* ones, thus overcoming a difficulty with his account that Walton (2015) acknowledges. This will be crucial for addressing the arguments of skeptics about covert narrators in Sections 5.3 and 5.4.

Proponents of DR agree with MP that pretend assertions (questions, etc.) may play a role in the constitution of fictions. One of the goals for which we engage in pretense is that of conveying specific speech acts. This is how irony works at least in some cases (Walton 1990, 222; Currie 2010, ch. 8): we pretend to assert something only to assert the opposite. Similarly, fiction-makers convey fictional narratives by having actors pretending to perform the illocutionary acts literally conveyed by the sentences they produce (in drama or films), or—as Alward (2009) has it—by themselves “playing” the role of the narrator of their stories, the way actors play characters: “fictional storytelling is best viewed as a species of theatrical performance in which storytellers portray the narrators of the stories they tell” (*ibid.*, 321). In creating *Don Quixote*, Cervantes “plays” the first-personal narrator.³ But unlike MP, DR doesn’t incur an across-the-board commitment to what Matravers (1997, 79) calls the *Report Model*: “in reading a novel, a reader makes-believe he is being given a report of actual events. In other words, he makes-believe the content of the novel is being reported to him as known fact by a narrator”. According to DR, conveying the content to be imagined by pretending to perform ordinary speech acts is just tactics; on this view, the act might well be done directly.

Any characterization of fictional narrators should be based on uncontroversial cases of explicit narrators, in the Holmes canon, *Don Quixote*, or *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The notion can be articulated in several ways; I’ll offer one apt to understand the debate about effaced narrators I’ll be engaging with here. Kania (2005, 47) ascribes narrators two features: they are *fictional*, and they are *agents*. This doesn’t suffice to pinpoint this debate. Fictions also have (actual, or “implied”) authors, and they themselves (or rather their *fictionalized* avatars) may be the *agents fictionally* conveying the story *as fiction*.⁴ Our debate concerns whether the representational activities of actual fictionalizing authors

suffice to fix fictional narratives, without mediating reporting narrators when not explicit. The fictional narrators that this debate concerns are thus fictional *tellers*, fictive *assertors* in acts made with declarative sentences in verbal fictions (Walton 1990, 355; Wilson 2011, 18).

Currie (2010) offers an account closer to what we need: “Narrators [...] are beings about whom it is sometimes appropriate to ask such questions as: ‘how does he/she know about these things?’, ‘is he/she reliable?’, ‘what is the narrator’s point of view?’” (*ibid.*, 66). But we still need to narrow down this. As Urmson (1976, 153–4; cf. also Currie 2020, ch. 5) points out, we are frequently informed about the fictional world by what characters *presuppose*; and we can raise Currie’s questions about such presuppositions. Hence, his account doesn’t properly delimit our debate; for fictions without explicit narrators (or just storytelling narrators) may make presuppositions that convey information about the fictional world.

Williamson (1996) takes declaratives to convey by default the dedicated speech act he calls *flat-out assertion*, which is the act we perform when we represent ourselves as knowing what we say and as aiming to transmit such knowledge—for instance, when we answer questions about directions in the street, or tell our family over dinner about our day. This is what, fictionally, the explicit narrators mentioned above purport to be doing, and how we get from them the particulars of their fictional worlds.⁵ My proposal is thus this: *reporting narrators are fictional agents who fictionally produce flat-out assertions*.⁶ They purport to convey the specifics of fictional worlds by (fictionally) reporting on them, as does Watson. What is at stake is whether all fictions have fictional *reporting* narrators thus understood, including fictions lacking explicit narrators, or we may do with the *fictionalizing* act of the author when there is none. Now, fictional narrators may be (fictionalized avatars of) the real authors, as in *Don Quixote* and *À la recherche*, or covert narrators like Austen in the example discussed below (Wilson 2011, 114–5). Because of this, the debate is not about whether fictional narrators are real; all parties should agree that they may well be. It rather concerns *what they do*, i.e., whether authors in some cases merely fictionalize, or they always must do this by playing the role of a fictional *teller*, be it purely fictional or their fictionalized avatar.⁷

MP is usually understood as committed to ubiquitous narrators: fictions result from authors pretending to do the speech acts literally conveyed by the sentences they use, standardly flat-out assertions. Lewis’s (1978) account of “truth in fiction” does assume Matravets’ Report Model, and with it that all fictional worlds feature the reporting of their specifics “as known fact” (García-Carpintero 2022b). Other writers offer arguments to that effect, like Chatman’s (1990) “analytic” argument that any narration presupposes a narrator, or Levinson’s (1996, 251–2) “ontological gap” argument that anybody capable of conveying to us the character of a fictional world must be “on the same fictional plane”.

Kania (2005), Currie (2010, ch. 4), Gaut (2010, ch. 5), and Carroll (2016) show these arguments to be wanting.⁸ A declarative sentence can be literally deployed for purposes other than flat-out assertion, including fictionalizing given DR: “S, I suppose”; “S, let’s imagine” (García-Carpintero 2022c). Arguably, this is the way imaginings are invited in thought experiments (Davies 2010, 389–91). There might thus be fictions produced in this way (Walton 1990, 365). Wilson (2011, 32–3) illustrates it with “the production of certain hand shadows, a fictional story in which a certain hawk attacks and kills a hapless mole ... there is no obvious reason to postulate that the hand shadows are themselves the fictional product of some fictional activity of ‘showing-as-actual’ the elements of the depicted tale”.

Unreliable narrators pinpoint the case against ubiquitous fictional narrators.⁹ When Nabokov’s Kinbote in *Pale Fire* tells us that a Zemblan assassin intending to kill Zembla’s deposed king (Kinbote himself) accidentally killed the poet Shade, we are not supposed to take this to be true in the fiction. We know that the killer is in fact the insane Jack Grey who, wanting to kill the judge who put him away, mistook Shade for him.¹⁰ This fiction has an explicit narrator, and hence a good part of the character of its fictional world is communicated to us in accordance with the Report Model. We typically infer unreliability by an inference that can be reconstructed as Gricean indirection based on the author’s fictionalizing aims (Pratt 1977, ch. 5; Koch 2011, 60).¹¹ Given DR, fictions result from specific fictionalizing acts, and hence allow for specific indirection—as when the literal expression of gratitude in the newsstand’s declaration “thanks for not browsing our magazines” indirectly conveys the request not to browse them—specifically based on their constitutive goals. That DR allows for such explanations is one more piece of evidence in its favor, as argued below.

Cases like these prove that arguments for ubiquitous narrators are faulty. They establish that it is not generally true that “in reading a novel, a reader ... makes-believe the content of the novel is being reported to him as known fact by a narrator” (Matravers 1997, 79). This is not the case when it comes to the contents we infer in cases of unreliability. The unreliable narrators don’t report them, and there is no good reason to posit an underlying reporting agency: the fictionalizing acts of the fiction-maker suffice to explain their generation.

5.2 A Middle Ground: For Non-Ubiquitous Effaced Narrators

DR is consistent with there being only explicit narrators in fictions. Nonetheless, I’ll argue now that there is far more effaced fictional narration than skeptics allow. Any plausible argument for effaced narrators must appeal to specific features of fictions; Walton (1990) and Wilson

(2011) offer good reasons for the (default) presence of covert narrators. Wilson (2011, 116–7) addresses Kania’s (2005, 52) point that a fictional world “is just stipulated ... by the artist through the work”. This is true, but *how* does it happen? Walton’s (1990, 357, 365–7) account has literary fiction-makers standardly simulating the speech acts (flat-out assertions in particular) that would be made by means of the sentences they put forward—the crucial “props” in verbal games of make-believe. These assertions have assertors, explicit as in *Don Quixote*, implicit in *Pride and Prejudice*. The fictional world is thus standardly constituted by the fiction-maker “playing” a fictional narrator (Alward 2009, 321).¹²

A first motivation for covert narrators is phenomenological: it intuitively seems that third-person verbal narratives are reported to us (Wilson 2011, 116–7, 120–1, 136). As Wilson admits, this appeal to intuitions is controversial; but I share the feeling. I surmise that the impression of “transportation” or “immersion” in a narrative—the experience of “suspending disbelief” so as to become concerned with fictional scenarios as if they were part of the actual world, as if we were present in them—manifests it.¹³ We connive with the author’s fiction-making tactics by imagining ourselves in the shoes of the audience of the fictional narrator she is portraying, playing that role in a self-involving game of make-believe with *de se* content (Walton 1990, 58 ff.), thereby obtaining “information”.¹⁴

More significantly, these phenomenological impressions can be explained. In the literary case they are grounded on the fact that the default use of the declarative mood is to perform flat-out assertions. Other linguistic traits contribute to them: “in verbal narrations stories are usually presented in the past tense... [t]he past tense ... is the natural expression of the view that narrative representations inform the hearer reader about events that have happened in the past” (Zipfel 2015, 67). As Zipfel points out (*ibid.*, 70), the use of indexicals and proper names points in the same direction; cf. also Zucchi (2017, 96–9).¹⁵

On what I take to be the best semantic account of referential expressions like indexicals (including tenses), now standard in formal semantics and crucial for a good account of pretend reference in fiction (cf. García-Carpintero 2019c), those expressions trigger, in context, reference-fixing descriptive presuppositions. I said that we should avoid relying on presuppositions to argue for reporting narrators, because they are also triggered in other speech acts, directives, questions, and (given DR) fictionalizing; on their own presuppositions in fictions don’t thus tell against skeptics. The point I am making here is rather that the use of the past tense and other referential expressions in fictional utterances is meant to convey the impression of a fictional report on singular situations involving their fictional referents.¹⁶

A second argument for covert narrators appeals to the character of some of the inferences that help constitute fictional content. Jane Austen’s

Pride and Prejudice famously begins, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”. We soon realize that this is meant ironically; moreover, the “true” ironically conveyed message is meant to apply to fictional characters: no, Darcy is not really in want of a wife, as Mrs. Bennet’s and others’ prejudices assume him to be. Such inferences can be explained along the lines of the conversational implicature account that Grice (1975) suggests for irony: we realize that the story provides good evidence for its falsity, thus *prima facie* violating Grice’s Quality maxims. Such a derivation assumes someone who, fictionally, is putting it forward assertorically—a fictional narrator. This is an *internal* justification of the ironical character of the claim if, by assuming the Report Model, we construe it as a Gricean Quality implicature derived while conniving or “playing along” with a fictional narrator—by playing the role of her audience in a Waltonian game world.¹⁷

Currie (2010, ch. 3) takes up Lamarque’s (1996) distinction between internal and external perspectives on fictions. “The internal perspective on fiction is that of *imaginative involvement*; the external perspective, that of an *awareness of artifice*” (Lamarque 1996, 14). Perspectives are cast on objects, for some purposes. The objects in our case are fictions, representational artefacts; and the goals at stake are their proper interpretation. Adopting the external perspective means looking at the artefact as such (the *narration* or *sjuzet* as opposed to the *narrative* or *fabula* it conveys, cf. Pratt 1977, 23; Wilson 2011, 12), making interpretative inferences based on its features: on the title chosen for it, the order in which it is presented, etc. Adopting the internal perspective involves “examining the world of the story as if it were actual” (Currie 2010, 49), i.e., (I assume), being imaginatively immersed in the fictional world. Assuming that it includes a fictional narrator whose reports we are receiving, we derive implicatures along Gricean lines—realizing, e.g., that a claim assertorically put forward by that narrator cannot be true and must have been meant ironically on the basis that other aspects of what this same imagined narrator assumes manifestly contradict it (a Quality violation Gricean implicature). Austen’s disparaging attitudes towards such contemporary beliefs may afford additional external justification that it was meant in this way.¹⁸

Fictional films and drama are difficult cases for the effaced narrator view, as Wilson’s hand shadow example show; but I agree with him that we can also find covert narrators there, on the basis of the two previous arguments. Let’s start with the phenomenological point. We do use both media for assertoric purposes: think of live television and documentaries for films, and judicial reenactments for drama. We tend to take by default photographic images as transparent *traces*—belief-independent natural indicators of their contents, Currie (1999)—as the famously duplicitous flashback in Hitchcock’s 1950 *Stage Fright* illustrates.¹⁹

As Wilson (2011, ch. 6) argues, the phenomenological considerations can thus be extended to films (and drama), even if the case is less clear. We experience films as presenting the fictional world to us “directly” (with the “directness” of live TV), ignoring (“collapsing”, Hopkins 2008) the mediating staged performance of which the images are traces. At the theater the experience of imagining seeing the fictional events is even more direct, with no mediating imaginarily photographic representation. Brechtian distancing effects to undermine such imaginative immersion are easily ignored, as von Trier’s 2003 *Dogville* illustrates.²⁰

This point should be properly understood. Wilson (2011, ch. 3) famously defends the *Imagined Seeing Thesis* that we “imagine seeing” contents depicted in visual fictions—in fact a version of Wollheim’s and Walton’s views on what the former calls *Seeing-in*, cf. Stecker (2013), Curran (2016) and Terrone (2020) for elaboration and discussion. Wilson motivates the view by pointing out the intuitive contrast between contents of visual fictions that we “see”, as opposed to others that we infer but don’t “see”. Thus, a central part of what Almodóvar’s 2002 *Talk to Her* requires us to imagine is that Benigno rapes the comatose Alicia; but, unlike other plot features, we don’t “see” this but infer it from what we do see and hear.

One may take this intuitive distinction as supporting film narrators, who “show” us the fictional world—as Wilson (2011, 131 ff.) points out, we tend to reify them as “the camera”. But by itself this point doesn’t uphold them any better than the discarded arguments for ubiquitous narrators. Wilson’s distinction merely tells apart contents that are explicitly presented in visual media from others indirectly conveyed. The same distinction exists in verbal media. Assuming DR, contents explicitly presented in fictions for us to imagine, be they *shown* or *said*, may well be directly presented with fictionalizing force when they are not asserted by an explicit narrator; Wilson’s hand shadows attest to this. The phenomenological argument I mean is rather that, unlike in the hand shadows, the reasons above why explicit contents of literary fictions are by default not just *said* but *told* to us extend to fiction films and drama. For they also appear to visually present to us *in assertoric mode* a world, with its specific events, situations, and individual participants. They present to us a world of characters and events for us to fictionally see and get thereby transported to.

There are also in films cases that would provide a good basis for the second, implicature-based argument. A compelling one is offered by Wilson’s (1986, 123, 135–6) interpretation of Ophüls’s 1948 *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Most of what we see visually presents what the letter in the title asserts, but, as Wilson shows, that is also subtly undermined to some extent by what the visual presentation offers. For them to play against each other, it is natural to assume that both narratives, the partial one in the letter and the full one in the visual presentation

are—adapting Levinson’s notion in a quotation above, Section 5.1—in the same illocutionary plane.²¹

As Predelli (2020, 56, fn. 6) points out, arguments against covert narrators boil down to rejoinders to unconvincing arguments for them. I have offered some to my mind forceful considerations—even if defeasible, as unreliable narration and other phenomena show—for covert narrators in fictions in different media. Now, Gaut (2010, 215–7) develops an objection that other skeptics like Carroll and Currie have made. Covert narrators are fictional, hence part of the fictional world. Gaut argues that worries about how they know what they purportedly tell us cannot be dismissed as “silly questions” (Lewis 1978, 270; Walton 1990, §4.5), as Walton (1990, 361–3) and Wilson (2011, 122–5) do; for a *Realist Heuristic* that the interpretation of fictions assumes requires fictional events to be close enough to actual ones.²² I’ll present Gaut’s argument in Section 5.4, together with Curran’s (2019) apt elaboration. I’ll address them by relying on a distinction that I’ll present in Section 5.3.

5.3 Ancillary vs. Constitutive Fictional Imaginings

Curran (2019) discusses Wilson’s view that I endorsed, that fictional narrators in films fictionally present a documentary record of the fictional facts. She raises these questions (*ibid.*, 113) in support of Gaut’s skepticism: “how was such a recording made? How could there be a recording of events if the story is set in a time before the camera was invented? And, further, if we suppose that some naturally occurring camera is the source of the shots we are seeing, what are we to imagine about point-of-view shots? How can naturally occurring cameras get inside people’s heads?” Wilson retorts that similar “silly questions” can be asked for fictions with explicit fictional narrators, apparently undermining the objection: how can a dead person like Joe Gillis know what he tells us in Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard*? How could the fictional sources of the first-personal narrator of *Don Quixote* have had access to the reported events?²³

Curran (2019, 113–4) disagrees that hers are silly questions. As the term suggests, silly questions violate erotetic norms; they are not ones that “audiences generally ask”, or for which the fiction “supplies an answer” (Abell 2020, 95). But why exactly is this so? We need to go deeper into this to appraise the issue. Curran relies on Currie’s (2010, 59) notion of *lack of representational correspondence* (fn. 15). I’ll question her account in the next section, where I’ll provide my own. Let’s have in view some common examples. Black-and-white films present black and white situations, but the fictional world is not colorless; its chromatic character is just left indeterminate. It would hence be silly to ask how the represented world came to be deprived of color. American films about the Vietnam war have Vietnamese peasants speaking in English, but it

would be silly to ask how they learned it. A sturdy middle-age soprano sings Juliet's lines in Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette*, but it would be silly to ask how Juliet learnt to sing like that, or why she looks so old. It would be silly to ask how a soldier like Othello came to speak such an ornate English.

On Currie's account, we do imagine the fictional world as black-and-white, having English-speaking peasants, a singing, sturdy middle-aged Juliet, and Othello as a master of poetic English. But these features do not correspond to how the fictional world truly is. Currie (2010, 81–2) appeals to this “lack of representational correspondence” to resist covert narrators: “to understand the narrative, we have to process its sentences as if they were asserted; but this does not mean that it is part of the content of the narrative that it is asserted”.²⁴ We should distinguish, he says, between two different imaginative projects when engaging with fictions, “one of which is basic and the other merely instrumental” (Currie 2010, 81). Wilson (2011) says that the presence, nature and whereabouts of a recording device are “fictional *in the work*”, but they are not “fictional *in the story*” (*ibid.*, 125)—but, in contrast with Currie, in defense instead of covert narrators. Along related lines, in support of ubiquitous narrators Predelli (2020, 47) distinguishes from the *storyworld* what he calls its *periphery*. Chasid (2020) has a similar distinction between *imagining* a content in an imaginative project, and *positing* it as constituting its fictional world.

I surmise that these distinctions are extensionally coincident with my own between *ancillary* and *constitutive* imaginings (García-Carpintero 2019a). They are intuitively well-motivated, but they require theoretical elaboration. This is clearly needed for our purposes, to establish whether the distinctions support Currie's skepticism on covert narrators, or rather Predelli's and Wilson's sympathetic take on them: as just noted, their distinctions are enlisted in supports of these *prima facie* inconsistent views.²⁵ Without going into the specifics of my view, I'll summarize now what I'll need of it to later address these concerns in Section 5.4.

Both *a(ncillary)-* and *c(onstitutive)-imaginings* are *propositional* attitudes—what Stock (2017, 4–9) aptly calls “f(iction-related)-imaginings”. Both are mandated by norms that appraise fictions; both are thus *prescribed* by fictions, in Walton's (1990) inchoate sense. In the constitutive-rules view of representational practices I support, the difference lies in that *c*-imaginings are prescribed by the *constitutive* rules that define the fictionalizing language-game, while *a*-imaginings are prescribed by ancillary *regulative* rules (García-Carpintero 2019a, 2022d). Constitutively, fictionalizings prescribe an imaginative project with a content that we can think of as a sufficiently well-defined *fictional world*. Constitutively, the fiction that results from the fictionalizing act is to be appraised *vis-à-vis* how good the project is for the intended audience, given its content.

The constitutive-regulative distinction is a mark of constitutive-rules accounts. It theoretically elaborates Currie's (2010) suggestion that "basic" imaginings (c-imaginings) are those required to imagine "in accordance with what is true in the fiction"; while "instrumental" imaginings (a-imaginings) are those otherwise needed, "to understand ... the narrative" (*ibid.*, 81) or for other purposes. To illustrate, f-imagining propositions fictional in a story S_2 embedded in another S_1 (Currie 2010, 71) is ancillary to f-imagining the world of S_1 , but such propositions do not necessarily constitute it. Imagining as an unreliable narrator like Kinbote entreats us to do about Shade's death is ancillary to f-imagining *Pale Fire's* fictional world: we need to imagine the proposition to understand what he tells us. But only *that Kinbote asserts* what he does is true in the fiction.

Garden-path fictions like Hitchcock's *Stage Fright*, Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, or Lynch's 2001 *Mulholland Drive* offer further illustration, showing why both ancillary and constitutive imaginings are "prescribed by fictions" in an inchoate sense. Audiences are meant to temporarily imagine that Charlotte killed her husband (*Stage Fright*), that there are talking rabbits (*Alice*), and that Betty/Diane is a first-rate actress seduced by Rita/Camilla (*Mulholland Dr.*). By the end they should know that those contents don't characterize their fictional worlds; they are, respectively, Jonathan's lies, Alice's and Diane Selwyn's dreams. What makes it the case that only *that Jonathan falsely reports that Charlotte visited him after killing her husband* and *that Diane dreams that she (as Betty) is a great actress loved by Rita/Camilla*, but not *that Charlotte visited Jonathan after killing her husband*, nor *that Betty is a great actress loved by Rita*, are part of the content of these fictions?

These are *metasemantic* questions about the fictions, i.e., about how their meanings are fixed (García-Carpintero 2022c). Answers have on my view two complementary sides. First, (a) missing the point that the first segment of *Mulholland Drive* is just a dream of Diane Selwyn, whose real situation is shown in the final half an hour, renders a bad, wrong interpretation of the film.²⁶ It makes unavailable the film's artistic ambition of making a Platonic indictment of classic Hollywood films—whose techniques and mores the dream part reproduces: "A great deal of art, perhaps most art, actually is self-consoling fantasy, and even great art cannot guarantee the quality of its consumer's consciousness" (Murdoch 1997, 370). Second, (b) there are good explanations for why the work prescribes imagining content that does not constitute the fictional world (Walton 1990, 183). It puts audiences in the shoes of Diane, helping us to empathize with fantasists to better appraise their indulgences from a morally adequate viewpoint. It leads us to pay closer attention to the artefact, helping us to understand it better, and to enjoy a better aesthetic experience in so doing. I trust the reader can elaborate on the

dual (a)–(b) account for other cases (cf. also Abell 2020, §§4.3–4.4). Discordant narration and unreliable narrators offer additional illustrations: (a) gullibly accepting Kinbote’s account of Shade’s killing provides for an inadequate imaginative project to appraise *Pale Fire*’s fictionalizing proposal; (b) there are good independent explanations why readers are required by the work to imagine it, along the lines already canvassed.

The explanations why the a-imaginings are prescribed mentioned in the (a)-part mention the disvalue of the relevant imaginings relative to the constitutive appraisal of fictions *as such*; a constitutive rules account like mine theoretically develops this idea. The (b)-part mentions values relative to which we appraise fictional works other than those that fix what is true in the fiction they convey. Both sets of appraisals are consistent. Fictional works are complex artefacts. They have a fictional content constituting a fictional world, but they may also have non-fictional, assertoric import (as suggested for *Mulholland Drive*) that contributes to their overall value. They have a “text” (Currie 1991), also typically a source of aesthetic value; considerations regarding it would go into the (b) side for Othello’s verse, the sturdy soprano and her singing, or the English-speaking of Vietnamese peasants.

I have cashed out the (let’s call it thus) (a)–(b) account of ancillary imaginings as a source of silly questions in terms of my constitutive rules view. However, the explanation I am offering can be accepted without subscribing to my ideology, by anybody who—like Walton (1990), Currie (2010, 2020), Friend (2012), or Abell (2020)—agrees that how fictions should be properly appreciated is paramount in understanding them; however, this is theoretically articulated. I will now defend on this basis covert narrators against Gaut’s argument.

5.4 Silly Questions about Fictional Narrators

I will now rely on the preceding account of the ancillary vs. constitutive distinction to define *silly question* and appraise the Gaut-Wilson debate. Gaut’s argument can be construed thus: (i) Covert fictional narrators would be characters in the fictional world. (ii) Their presence there raises questions about their standpoint and access to the fictional facts that are not silly. (iii) No adequate metasemantics can ground answers to such questions. (iv) There are no covert narrators. The account of narrators in Section 5.1 endorses (i). In Section 5.2, I gave reasons against (iv). (iii) is consistent with my definition of silly questions below. But the argument is at least abductively compelling. In response, I’ll argue against (ii) in what follows.²⁷

Gaut’s (2010) grounds (ii) on the “heuristic principle that when we interpret fictional worlds we should attempt, other things equal, to render them as like the real world as we can” (*ibid.*, 212). Gaut’s objection is that this heuristic establishes that, if there are covert narrators, Curran’s

questions quoted in the first paragraph of Section 5.3 are not silly and should have answers. I pointed out then that facts about explicit narrators make Gaut's claims doubtful. To reject them, I'll now offer an account of silly questions that generalizes the (a)–(b) scheme in Section 5.3.

To motivate it, I'll first critically engage with two faulty characterizations by Curran. Curran (2016) defends Walton's and Wilson's take on the debate: she claims that “[w]hile I think the realistic heuristic is, in general, a sound one, it seems that it should apply only to what is true in the story, and not to the audience's ‘metafictional’ imaginings” (*ibid.*, 112). But this is not true in general, for some “metafictional” imaginings can and should be developed through the heuristic. Bergman's 1966 *Persona* requires of competent viewers the metafictional imagining that the film's content is meant to be imagined; the “Brechtian distancing” breakdown of the film in the second part, anticipated in its prelude, and the intrusion of a filming crew are telltale indicators (Carroll 2016, 121–2). But given the central role of such metafictional contents in the imaginative project that the film proposes, adequate metasemantics support the application of the Realistic Heuristic to infer more detail. We are thus entitled to identify the child we see in the prelude with the director, as a storytelling narrator; and to interpret the famous merging of the faces of Liv Ullmann and Bibi Andersson as an invitation to imagine the characters they play as two different projections of his psyche (cp. Wood 2013, 186–205). Thus, the fictional vs. metafictional divide doesn't isolate contents that it is legitimate to inferentially enrich through the Realistic Heuristic.

Curran (2019, 113–4) relinquishes this reply to Gaut and develops instead an argument *for* Gaut's view. As anticipated, she relies on a new generalization based on Currie's (2010) notion of *lack of representational correspondence*: “we can explain why the questions one could raise [...] are inappropriate ones to ask. A question is a silly one [...] to ask, provided the answer is not found within the terms of the fiction but instead is explained by the nature of the genre of the artwork and its associated conventions ... It is not given as true *in the fiction* that Othello is a fine poet or speechmaker: this is a feature of how Othello is represented due to the artistic requirements of Shakespeare's plays”, Curran (2019, 112).²⁸ In contrast, “Wilson would have [...] that it is true in the fiction that there is a recording of the story events or fictional facts. [...] once we suppose that the implicit narrator [...] is part of the fictional world, it is reasonable to fill in the implications of its presence there. And when we do, we get tangled up in the embarrassing questions about the cinematic narrator that we have rehearsed” (*ibid.*)

The generalization that Curran derives from Currie's notion is in my view as unwarranted as the earlier one. Silly-question prompters

may be “part of the fictional world”, as much as covert narrators. Inspector Lestrade is part of the world of the Holmes stories, and he has a blood type; but questions about his blood type are inadequate because no metasemantics can support definite answers to them (Lewis 1978, 270).²⁹ Stock (2017, 54) discusses cases like why Tintin doesn’t get old, or Wodehouse’s Wooster doesn’t have cirrhosis. We may imagine different explanations for Wooster’s health and Tintin’s eternal youth; perhaps they have aging- and cirrhosis-preventing genes, or a hidden amulet. But no such imagining can be taken as definitely part of the fictional world. Unlike black-and-white environments or verse-speaking, these silly-question-generating subject-matters (Lestrade’s blood type, Tintin’s age and Wooster’s liver) are “part of the fictional worlds”.

On the (a)–(b) account illustrated in Section 5.3, silly-question generating imaginings are prescriptions to imagine by fictions which (a) do not add to the content relative to which the value of the imaginative project proprietarily proposed by the fiction is to be appraised and (b) can be independently explained. The definition I propose generalizes this: *silly questions target the character of the fictional world conveyed by a fiction F; they are misguided because they wrongly presuppose that F’s metasemantics validates some answers to them.*³⁰ Confusing a-imaginings with c-imaginings is a typical way that silly questions are raised, but what is crucial for a question to be silly is that it incurs the mistaken presupposition, as in previous cases including Inspector Lestrade’s blood type, Tintin’s age, or Wooster’s cirrhosis.

Curran is right that a reason why prescribed imaginings do not specify the fictional world and questions about them are silly is that their being prescribed “is explained by the nature of the genre of the artwork and its associated conventions”. This is an instance of condition (b) in my account. She is also right that answers to silly questions are not to be “found within the terms of the fiction”. But it is wrong that *the topics* of silly questions are to be *found outside the fictional world* (or *meta-fictional*, for that matter). The real issue is whether answers to them add to interpretations relevant for appraising the work vis-à-vis proprietary norms.

Let’s go back to our topic. Fictional narrators in some fictions may just have a “minimal narrating agency” (Wilson 2011, 112): it is indeterminate whether they are people, cameras, or what have you and hence it would be silly to ask for details. In some others however they are “strongly robust” (*ibid.*, 127, 138), and we are entitled to use the Realistic Heuristic to fill in details about them—as suggested about the covert teller in *Pride and Prejudice* and the storytelling narrator in *Persona*. This depends on what a correct metasemantics establishes. The one I assume makes the questions about covert narrators at the start of

Section 5.3 silly, and premise (ii) in Gaut's reconstructed argument at the start of this false.

Let me finally address the important question raised in Section 5.3. Currie brings forth the basic vs. instrumental distinction to support his skepticism about fictional narrators; I have instead advanced my own in Wilson's support, by developing his *fictional in the work* vs. *fictional in the story* distinction and his related distinction between *minimal* and *robust* narrators. Who is right? By relegating many covert narrators to a-imaginings, we give them "little or no significance for criticism or appreciation" (Walton 1990, 84). Is this then a pyrrhic victory? Does this render the debate merely verbal? It may, vis-à-vis some notions thereof. But I would like to make two points. First, cases of garden-path fictions like *Stage Fright*, *Alice*, or *Mulholland Drive* show that, even if they don't constitute the fictional world, a-imaginings *are* imaginings required by fictions, crucial to appreciate them and to obtain the full aesthetic experience that they afford.³¹ Second, my definition of fictional narrators (*fictionalized agents who fictionally produce flat-out assertions*), which suits well the assumptions of contributors to this debate, allows for their being circumscribed to the "periphery" of a-imaginings.

I started this chapter by distinguishing *mere pretense* (MP) from *dedicated representation* (DR) accounts of fictions (Section 5.1). My version of DR accepts effaced narrators that skeptics disallow, as a default; there is good support for them (Section 5.2). Although DR allows for conveying fictional content without narrators, fiction-makers rely on them more than skeptics grant. I have also offered some illustrative examples of fictional contents that are not given through the ploy of fictional narrators (Section 5.1), showing them not to be ubiquitous. I then relied on my DR account of fictionalizing to elaborate in required ways on Wilson's notion of truths merely fictional "in the work" but not "in the story" (Section 5.3), and his "silly question" reply to arguments against covert fictional narrators such as Curran's (2019) elaboration of Gaut's, Section 5.4.³²

Notes

- 1 Macdonald (1954) is an early proponent of the view; cf. García-Carpintero (2022a, 2022b) for a critical appraisal and further references.
- 2 Proponents of DR include Wolterstorff (1980), Lamarque & Olsen (1994), Stock (2017), and Abell (2020).
- 3 Gale (1971, 337), Ohmann (1971, 18), Lewis (1978, 266), and Beardsley (1982, 191–3) advance the same idea.
- 4 These are *storytelling narrators* (Walton 1990, 368), as opposed to the *reporting narrators* that our debate targets; the *Persona* example in Section 5.4 illustrates the notion. Like Wilson (2011, 18, 114), I speak of a *fictionalized avatar* of the author to circumvent controversies about real characters in fictions (García-Carpintero 2019c). Also, I'll put aside

- “implied” authors in favor of actual ones, Wolterstorff (1980, 178), Kindt and Müller (2011), and Predelli (2020, 36, fn. 11) offer good support for this decision.
- 5 We may pretend to ϕ by actually ϕ -ing (Saucelli 2021). Actors pretend that the characters they play drink whisky by drinking tea, but they may really drink it. If third-person narratives have covert narrators (as I’ll argue they do, Section 5.2), their real authors may “portray” the fictive reports of their fictionalized avatars *by truly asserting them*, cf. Friend’s (2012, 184). An entire fiction can consist of such (pretend!) “pretend” assertions, cf. García-Carpintero (2021).
 - 6 Cf. Wilson (1986, 132–4; 2011, 18, 115). Bareis (2020) illustrates how our debate gets trivialized when a wider notion of *narrator* is assumed: if fictionalizing authors count as such, perhaps only supporters of the “death of the author” reject ubiquitous fictional narrators. Like Bareis, Eckardt (2015, 2021) uses a more encompassing notion covering both storytelling and reporting narrators; but that is perfectly fine for her semantic modeling goals, which illustrates the point in the main text that there are different legitimate notions of *narrator*.
 - 7 Curran’s (2016, 101; 2019, 101) characterization of the debate overlooks this point.
 - 8 Wolterstorff (1980, 178) provides an early version of the objection. Köppe and Stühling (2011) offer a helpful presentation of the arguments, and further considerations of their own.
 - 9 The *Persona* example below also makes the point; see García-Carpintero (2022a, 2022b) for more examples.
 - 10 Cf. Wood (1998), 198. I understand “unreliable narrator” in Booth’s classical sense (i.e., Köppe and Kindt’s (2011, 85) UN_{mim-A}), that of a narrator (in a sense I specified) who ascribes to the fictional world a character that the fiction as a whole disclaims; cf. also Koch’s (2011, 63) generalization of Cohn’s (2000) notion of *discordant narration* (cp. Currie 2004, 139). Currie (1995, 22) discusses a “global” type of “unreliability” that allegedly doesn’t require a narrator—fictions allowing for an easy, superficial interpretation, but also a deeper, justifiably correct one—this is Köppe and Kindt’s (2011, 90) UN_{mim-B} .
 - 11 Cf. Koch’s (2011, 59–60) discussion of *Forrest Gump*, Pratt’s (1977, 182–4) of *The Sound and the Fury*, or Heyd’s (2006, 228–31) of *The Remains of the Day*.
 - 12 Wilson (2011, 112) rightly doubts that the point generalizes to all fictions. He mentions works consisting mostly of dialogue like Compton Burnett’s 1953 *The Present and the Past*. But the very first lines of the novel show such dialogues to be explicitly *reported* by an implicit teller, note the past tense in ‘said’: “‘Oh, dear, oh, dear!’ said Henry Clare. His sister glanced in his direction ...”. Epistolary novels are a better case for Wilson’s claim. Of course, the writers of the letters are narrators in my sense, just like any ordinary characters in fictions who fictionally assert; but the fiction as a whole may well lack one.
 - 13 Charlotte Higgins mentions in her *The Guardian long reads* article “‘A peculiarly English epic’. The weird genius of *The Archers*” (15/12/2020) on the 70-years-old BBC radio show that, even if tongue-in-cheek, audiences describe it as “a real-life fly-on-the-wall documentary about one of the strangest villages in England”; she declares that “to many longtime listeners, among whom I include myself, *The Archers* certainly feels real”. I do not need to assume any account of immersion—cf. Chasid (2021) for

- a good discussion. I just presume that imagining receiving reports from reliable narrators enhances the experience of sharing a world featuring the reported events by helping us not to attend to their fictionality.
- 14 Walton (1990, ch. 7) compellingly argues that we ascribe emotional, morally significant content to the fictional world of the work itself on the basis of the emotional experiences we ourselves feel when imagining such private “game worlds”.
 - 15 Eckardt (2015, 2021) mentions “speaker-oriented” epistemic particles like “perhaps” or “certainly”; speech-act modifiers like “frankly” or “sincerely” also support the point. Cf. also Pratt (1977, ch. 2) on correlations between “natural” assertoric narratives (standard narrative reports) and fiction. Currie (2010, 78–9) agrees that “[i]t is nearly universal that spoken or written stories are represented by means of a past tense”, but he explains this away as a “non-representational” feature of fictional works, like Othello’s verse or Julius Caesar’s English. I agree with Zipfel (2015, 68) that this is *ad hoc*. There are independent explanations why those features don’t have representational significance (Section 5.4). But in this case, the explanation is, I submit, that they foster the illusion of a factual telling.
 - 16 Köppe and Stühling (2015) reject this argument because it is “perfectly possible to make-believe that a specific event happened a long time ago” (*ibid.*, 36). This is true, but what the argument highlights is the specific impression of a temporal perspective on the past from which a fictional teller presents herself as reporting.
 - 17 Cf. Pratt (1977, 94–5, 166–71) for an analysis of the case along these lines.
 - 18 This, incidentally, gives support to Wilson’s (2011, 114–5) view that the fictional teller mocking those attitudes that Austen “plays” may well be (a fictionalized avatar of) she herself—which Urmson (1976, 153) just takes for granted.
 - 19 Enrico Terrone suggested that an animated version of *Stage Fright* “lying flashback” would also produce the effect. I doubt that it would spawn the same critical responses or that Hitchcock would have then been led to regret having done it, as he reported to Truffaut (1985, 189).
 - 20 The *Time* critic Richard Corliss says in his review (“Empty Set, Plot to Match”, April 10, 2004) that the distancing works “for about 10 minutes. Then the bare set is elbowed out of a viewer’s mind by the threadbare plot and characterizations”—just my own experience.
 - 21 The manifest irony in the ending of Wilder’s 1960 *The Apartment* (in Miss Kubelik’s attitude when she tells Baxter to “shut up and deal”, showing her skeptical take on the non-romantic nature of the relationship from her perspective), or the spider metaphor/allegory about how the Adam/Anthony character thinks of his wife in Villeneuve’s 2013 *Enemy* are further illustrations. Let me acknowledge that these arguments for fictional narrators from alleged *internal* narrator’s indirection can be resisted by explaining the inferences as *external* indirection from the author’s fictionalizing, as suggested above for cases in fn. 11.
 - 22 Friend’s (2017) *Reality Assumption* that “everything that is (really) true is also fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work” (*ibid.*, 29) is, I take it, a good elaboration of the heuristic. Cf. García-Carpintero (2022b) for discussion and references.
 - 23 Curran (2016, 104) herself makes the point in an earlier paper upholding Wilson’s “silly question” defense of covert narrators (*ibid.*, 112–3); cf. Gaut (2010, 210).
 - 24 Currie’s (1990, 80) account of fictionality posits a fictional narrator for verbal fictions.

- 25 Josep Corbí pointed out this concern. As he put it, relegating covert fictional narrators to an ancillary, merely instrumental status may be a pyrrhic victory.
- 26 Cf. Hayles & Gessler (2004, 491–7). Hudson (2004) says that a “no dream” surrealist interpretation aligns better with “Lynch’s aesthetic interest in the realm of the unexplained”, allowing audiences to “more fully appreciate the surrealistic world of *Mulholland Drive*” (*ibid.*, 18). The point is correct about Kafka’s stories; DR allows us to grant that their contents are not anybody’s dreams. But it is wrong for *Mulholland Drive*, which includes abundant support for the standard interpretation; critics that support the surrealist reading offer instead un compelling arguments. Thus, Klock (2017) argues that, given that Betty—Diane’s avatar in the dream—sees Diane’s body rotting after her suicide, “this ‘dream world’ takes place after her suicide” (*ibid.*, 53). This doesn’t follow; the dream just expresses Diane’s anxieties, including her anticipated suicide. Miller (2013, 106) gives equally weak reasons.
- 27 Thanks to Patrik Engisch for suggesting the reconstruction.
- 28 This develops Gaut’s (2010, 211) own characterization: questions “are silly [...] since there are no answers to them in the fictional world, and we are not supposed to engage in the imaginings that they might prompt; the answers to the question lie, rather, outside the fictional worlds, in the need ... to enhance the work aesthetically”. Like Curran’s, this exhibits the (a)–(b) structure of my account, but I have shown that we may well be “supposed to engage” in (merely ancillary) silly-questions generating imaginings, so it needs elaboration and nuance.
- 29 Woods (2018) rejects this indeterminacy by appealing to a radical form of epistemicism; cf. García-Carpintero (2020b) for critical discussion.
- 30 Currie’s (2010, 59) account is similar: “we ought not to seek an internal explanation when to do so would require us to elaborate improbable scenarios that distract us from the work’s real qualities and purpose, and where there is some evident external explanation”. Like Gaut’s (fn. 28), it exhibits the (a)–(b) structure of mine, sharing its normative overtones.
- 31 Josep Corbí and Neri Marsili emphasized this point. Enrico Terrone raised an interesting worry about works with explicit storytelling narrators that tell their stories within a “frame”, like *The Decameron* or *One Thousand and One Nights*. My account predicts that their c-imaginings are those concerning the frame, whereas the embedded stories prescribe just “ancillary” imaginings. Yet, literary scholars usually treat works like these the other way around: they treat the frame as “ancillary” with respect to the stories that are told within it. But there are two senses of “ancillary” here. In particular, “ancillary” in my sense doesn’t at all mean “unimportant for appreciating the work as a whole”.
- 32 Financial support for my work was provided by the DGI, Spanish Government, research project PID2020-119588GB-I00, and by the award ICREA Academia for excellence in research, 2018, funded by the Generalitat de Catalunya. Versions of the paper were presented at the LOGOS and LANCOG seminars, in Barcelona and Lisbon, respectively. I thank the audience for comments and suggestions. Thanks to Filippo Contesi, Josep Corbí, Esa Díaz-León, Neri Marsili, Sven Rosenkranz, Ricardo Santos, Adam Sennet, and Enrico Terrone for their comments, to Patrik Engisch and Andrew Kania for excellent editorial suggestions, and to Michael Maudsley for his grammatical revision.

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