

PAY NO ATTENTION TO THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN: FILM, COGNITION, AND EXPERIENCE

ERIN KRAUSE

Arizona State University

“The fact is I am quite happy in a movie even a bad movie.”

Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*

“Should we be mindful of dreams? Can we interpret them?
The master looked into his eyes and said tersely: We should
be mindful of everything for we can interpret everything.”

Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*

WHEN PHILOSOPHERS THINK about film, the questions we ask are slightly different than those asked by scholars from other disciplines. Philosophers have recently become more interested in the study of film because of the influence it has on contemporary thought and life. In this paper, I will discuss philosophical hypotheses about the medium, in particular, how people are moved and informed by film, and what it is about film that makes it at once so popularly appealing and at the same time so personally relevant.

Most people have seen the classic 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* at least once. There is an important scene near the end in which Toto, Dorothy’s scrappy little dog, pulls back a curtain to reveal that the great and powerful Wizard of Oz is really just an image projected on a screen by a bumbling side-show magician. After reading Gregory Currie’s 1995 book *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science*, I am of the opinion that Currie and Toto are quite similar. This is a purely superficial analogy of function, in that both Toto and Currie show the ordinary workings behind the image on the screen. By simplifying and reducing the explanation of human interaction with film, Currie attempts to explain how films can have meaning for the many people who see them. As Toto unmasked a would-be wizard, Currie writes to unmask the movies. Currie advances what he calls the Simulation Hypothesis, which identifies the cognitive mechanism of imagination as the human means of processing fictional film narrative. On this view, the processing of film images is a simulation of belief formation akin to an attempt to understand the mental states of others.

Currie’s presentation is well-reasoned and cogently argued, yet there is a general sense in which I disagree with his account, so I must first

express my overarching concern that his theory reduces the experience of film to simply a cognitive process and therefore fails to account for the full experience of film. In pursuing a cognitive science perspective, Currie argues against the prevailing application of linguistic theory to the study of film. Specifically, he challenges what he identifies as the structuralist strategy, which seeks to “explain our competence in nonlinguistic—or at least not obviously linguistic—domains by appeal to those mental structures that underlie our linguistic competence...” (Currie 115). Instead, Currie advocates an understanding of film as an essentially visual medium. In the process he cannot deny that film is representational but specifies a pictorial, rather than a signifying, sort of representation. Along this line, Currie rejects the notion of conventions of film representation which would function as conventions of language are understood to function. Currie’s insistence that images flickering across the wide screen refer to nothing beyond the objects they depict is one source of my disagreement with him. I believe that the images film viewers see not only depict objects, but can signify ideas, emotions and qualities which viewers understand based on the existence of conventions of film representation, when relativized to the framework of a particular film.

Currie extends his strict idea of depiction to the understanding of images, which he defines as the ability to recognize objects depicted. This theory of pictorial understanding is the basis for his theory of film interpretation later in the text. Currie’s options for interpretation are limited because he has given up signification. So he has to appeal to something like a causal interpretation, rather than a discussion of the symbolic meaning of film images. It is here that I believe Currie’s ideas are the weakest, because his behaviorally-based hypothesis about how people evaluate film fails to account for the human capacity to be involved thoroughly in the action of a film. A primary weakness in Currie’s theory of interpretation lies in his insistence on an analogy between the interpretation of film and the interpretation of behavior. It is his contention that people evaluate literature and film in much the same way they evaluate the behavior of others, seeking to understand others’ intentions (and therefore the causes of others’ behavior) by hypothesizing mental states which might plausibly lead to the behavior being evaluated.

While this follows logically from Currie’s assertion that people use imagination to process fictional film images in a way that simulates the formation of beliefs about the mental states of others, I maintain that this is an inadequate explanation of the effect that film has on viewers because I believe that people evaluate the behavior they see in a film relative to the framework of the film, and not to the possible intentions of the filmmaker. Even if people understand film in the way Currie sug-

gests—using their imaginations to process fictional images—this indicates a complete engagement with the film that would preclude the consideration of something outside the film, such as filmmakers' intentions. If we accept Currie's pictorial stance and his appeal to intention as indicated, I believe Currie's hypothesis is still weak because, in citing reasons why a filmmaker juxtaposed certain images, or why the emotional states of fictional characters are depicted in a particular way, we must fall back on the deeply ingrained symbolism of cultural conventions. If Currie is forced to interpret films on the basis of why filmmakers chose certain images and arrange them in a certain order, he cannot go too far without bumping into the symbolic significance of images. This would contradict his early rejection of conventions and symbolic meaning.

In the following pages, I will outline Currie's argument as it is presented in *Image and Mind*. Then I will raise my concerns about representation and interpretation and my over-arching concern about the reductive tone of Currie's approach. In response, I will outline my own approach which includes the discussion of how film engages our emotions as well as our imagination.

Toward Philosophy of Film

Because Currie sets himself so specifically in opposition to current film theory, I will take a moment to outline the prevailing ideas of film discourse, and show how philosophy has made its mark on film scholarship to this point. Literary and aesthetic studies are at the root of much of what constitutes scholarly film criticism today, so it is not surprising that much of the methodology of current studies echoes these disciplines. The rise of post-modern thought and its emphases on signs and symbols and the possible disparity between signs and the objects they represent have also made for lively criticism among scholars, because they have brought out many opposing lines of thought. Dudley Andrew, a leading film scholar, summarizes the state of theory: it is "an accumulation of concepts, or rather, of ideas and attitudes clustered around the concepts" (Andrew 3). In his book, *Concepts in Film Theory*, Andrew traces the development of film studies as a scholarly construction and reasons that the ubiquitous nature of film in Western culture has made film fair game for study in many disciplines.

Philosophy may seem an unlikely pairing with film, even given the pervasiveness of film, but it has been pointed out that philosophy and film are quite a good match because some of the central concerns of film scholars are essentially philosophical questions and "issues relevant to film yet unapproached by film studies have been addressed from Plato onwards. Similarly, there is a lengthy philosophical tradition discussing some of the central concepts employed in film studies about

knowledge, evidence, point of view, perspectivism and objectivity” (Freeland & Wartenberg 2). In a 1996 anthology, *Philosophy and Film*, edited and introduced by Cynthia Freeland and Thomas Wartenberg, the usefulness of philosophical thinking as an approach to film is considered. From classic aesthetics to Marxist feminism, all branches of philosophy have something to contribute to the study of film just as all disciplines can make a contribution. But philosophy itself, with its emphasis on rigorous thought and cogent argumentation, may produce the soundest theories when all is said and done. Stanley Cavell, one of the first and still one of the most respected philosophers to write about film, considers film studies in light of what he understands philosophy to be:

I understand it as a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about.... (Freeland & Wartenberg 12)

If this is the case, then philosophers who apply their thought to film will be able to shed some light on how the rest of us think about film. It seems to me that this would be film philosophy’s most valuable enterprise, because it is the sort of epistemological question left unanswered by other disciplines. Along that line, the rise of linguistic film theory is not surprising because it is not only an outgrowth of the literary roots of film scholarship but an example of the rigorous analytic thought that philosophy brings to film studies. Linguistic theory looks at film and attempts to identify possible analogs between film and language. The most likely comparisons come under the linguistic studies of semiotics—of signs and signifiers—because it is not too difficult to draw a clean parallel between words used as symbols or signifiers and images used the same way. This discourse is usually opened up by a discussion of the language of film, in which technical devices such as cuts and fades are seen to be significant not only as transitions between images but as directional signs for the film viewer. The metaphoric nature of film is also in play here, as scholars discuss the meaning of a particular image or sequence of images as they might discuss an utterance or sentence.

In his exploration of the work of Christian Metz, a French film philosopher who was among the first to identify and discuss semiotic analogs and their significance in film, Warren Buckland has defended such linguistically-based ideas about film:

The appeal to language ... was prompted by a number of broadly theoretical and even philosophical issues around the questions of signification. How can a photographic reproduction and representation of reality be a meaningful statement about this reality? ... We need to understand how films are understood’ (or in other words) we need to

‘understand images of the world as *speech* about the world.
(Buckland 9)

This couches the questions philosophers ask about how we can understand film in distinctly linguistic terms, identifying images directly with speech. While this analog seems most reasonable to many philosophers, it is just the point at which Gregory Currie enters the story, decrying the analog that Buckland and those who follow his philosophy accept uncontroversially.

Currie Considered

Currie intends his book *Image and Mind* to be a serious departure from prevailing film philosophy. He alludes to the Copernican turn after the rejection of Ptolemy in an attempt to indicate just how radical a stance he is prepared to take (Currie 6). Along that line, Currie makes it clear that he has no patience for the application of semantics or semiotics to the study of film. He boldly rejects the entire notion of the linguistic analog with film. He instead proposes a model of meaning based on concepts from the philosophy of mind, a relatively new line in film philosophy. This approach is also espoused by Michael Colin, among others, who reasons that cognitive approaches to problem solving are employed by the human mind to disseminate the knowledge a film imparts. “At the starting point of a cognitive pragmatics of the narrative film ... lies an account of the spectators’ processing of cues which is related to *cognitive* activities of the perceiver” (Muller 7). The understanding of a film has remained the central concern for Currie and other cognitive philosophers, but the manner in which it will be investigated and reported has shifted significantly. It is a “shift from ‘sign to mind’—that is a transformation of the research object from formal structures in texts towards cognitive structures in film spectators’ minds” (Buckland 32).

In getting his argument under way, Currie specifically rejects the idea that film images are symbolically representational. He admits only that they are pictorial, and in this sense are seen as icons of the objects they depict. He also rejects Illusionism, the notion that the images in films are illusions. Currie identifies illusions in film as ideas created in the viewer that what they are watching when they watch a film is somehow real. In arguing against Illusionism, he cites behavioral evidence—to wit, people watching a film do not act as if the events on screen are real. This would entail a physical response in keeping with event transpiring on screen such as running from a fire or grieving significantly when a screen character dies. Since this does not occur, He asserts that no one watching a film is so captivated by the experience that he or she believes that screened events are real events. He also

argues against an analog between films and dreams, noting that “there does not seem to be any substantial, systematic likeness between film experience and dreaming that holds out promise of serious explanatory gains” (Currie 28).

After discounting the idea that film is illusion or that it resembles a dream, Currie re-iterates the pictorial nature of film, and insists that it is photographic—not representational, which would, in Currie’s words, “extend our epistemic access to things in the world; if they are reliable representations give us information about things when those things are not directly accessible to us” (Currie 49). This is a rejection of signification even at the most basic level, which I do not think stands up in light of the way people perceive films. I will elaborate on this in my response to Currie later in this paper.

Of course, Currie disagrees strenuously with the opening assumption of a linguistic analog, even though “. . .the ubiquity of language is so entrenched that expressions like ...‘the language of film’ do not strike us as peculiar or in need of justification” (Currie 113). He bases his argument on a vehement rejection of structuralist notions of the universal application of theoretical linguistics to a wide range of disciplines in an effort to detect unifying structure by which all products of culture could be analyzed and evaluated.

Currie states that a linguistic understanding of film would be predicated on an analogous relation between film and natural language. Predictably, he objects to this analog advancing specific reasons why film is unlike natural languages such as English citing features of natural language that do not have cinematic analogs. Productivity, acontextuality, and conventionality are three he mentions specifically and argues against. A natural language such as English has the virtues of recursive meanings, molecular flexibility in recombination of atomic meaning units (words) and acontextuality. Because of these qualities, words are not dependent on the other words around them for meaning though they contribute to the meaning of larger units (sentences) Sentences never uttered before—new combinations of words—have understandable meaning because of these attributes of natural language. He rejects the first two features for film on the basis that any language comprised of the images of film is not infinitely recursive and recombinable to produce meaning. In natural languages, words are atomic parts of sentences which can be broken down and recombined in new ways; the only necessary skill is an acquired fluency. In film, Currie argues, no such fluency is attainable, and there is no way to systematically recombine filmed images because they are not meaningful apart from the context of a particular film. As a result, Currie sees no way in which conventions of a film language could be developed. “To be con-

ventional in the way language is there would have to be a set of conventions governing the meanings of all the image atoms, and since there are no image atoms, there are no such conventions” (Currie 131).

Currie also rejects an attempt, which he deems weak and vague, to liken the study of film to semiotics. In derailing this hypothesis, he again resists the discussion of filmic conventions. Allowing that images in films are signs in that they are pictures of objects, he maintains that these images do not *signify* or mean anything beyond what they refer to visually. Apparently it follows that without the construct of signification, we cannot deign to discover or codify any set of filmic conventions that could be read systematically as a sort of shorthand communication between filmmakers and film viewers. Currie argues stridently against the possibility of a set of conventions for the interpretation of film: “It is not possible to identify any sort of conventions that function to confer meaning on cinematic images in anything like the way in which conventions confer (literal) meaning on language” (Currie 130). To assert that this is not the case is to confuse the metaphors which might be depicted in film images with some systematic interpretive scheme that can reliably supply meaning for a particular image in a particular film. Currie’s rejection of convention in film is based on the rejection of the linguistic analog. He admits that there might be cultural influences on the use of particular images, but will not accept that this is conventional in the same way language is. This distinction seems rather fragile, however, when we remember that the use of conventions in language stems from the repetition of cultural influence over linguistic practice.

Only in the technical realm is Currie willing to admit a vocabulary understood by both filmmakers and film viewers. He cites transitional devices such as fades in and out between images as something conventionally understood and therefore useful in communicating meaning. The technical devices Currie mentions are atomic (as he defines atomic) in that they recur from one film to the next and have the same meaning each time they occur. Currie is willing to admit that these technical components of film fiction are conventional because they are peculiar to film as a medium and are therefore understood within what might be considered the parlance of film. However, on Currie’s view, this is a fairly narrow wedge as far as the admission of a ‘conventional’ image is concerned because these transitions hardly qualify as images—rather it is the lack of an image, or the space between images that is considered conventional. Since images are what Currie considers the basic unit of film, the use of transitions between them is not much for him to give up in the consideration of the analogy between language and film. For the linguist, it would be similar to the consideration of the breath taken when someone pauses between words for emphasis—it would be

a physical factor of speaking, not an actual component of language. Currie sees transitions the same way, though I think that there might be more to say about some types of transitions and their significance in films. I will expand my treatment of conventions in the latter section of the paper.

In the end, Currie reiterates his rejection of a linguistic analysis of film, clearing the way for a positive statement of his own theory of how films mean. In structuring his argument, he draws a parallel between the understanding of a film and the understanding of the mental states of others. This analog moves him firmly into the realm of cognitive science where the discussion of ‘other minds’ has long been relevant to the concerns of philosophers. He answers the question of how we can know what someone else might think or feel by postulating a theory of simulation and imagination. Currie believes that in the process of attempting to know what others think or feel, we simulate their experience by making reference to our own experiences. This is an everyday notion of how people are able to empathize with others and project the actions others will take in relation to a given circumstance.

For his next trick, Currie reaches into the realm of the cognitive sciences to analyze the role of the imagination in our apprehension of meaningful content in film fiction. This is Currie’s connection between the natural inclination to evaluate the behavior of others on the basis of what we think has led another to action. This causal speculation in everyday life is based on a hypothesis we form about another’s intention. The role of the imagination is the key to how we meaningfully process something we know is fiction. Currie likens the process of imagining to belief formation. When we watch a documentary film or a news broadcast, we are involved in the process of belief formation as we assimilate the information into our consciousness. If we feel the source of the viewed information is reliable, we add it to our system of beliefs. When we view fictional material, we undergo a process by which we acquire imaginings which simulate beliefs.

Currie links the process to our attempts to comprehend the mental states of others by simulating their thoughts so that we can understand what they are thinking. This “simulation hypothesis” is “very important for our understanding, not just how we comprehend other minds, but of how we engage with fictions, including cinematic fictions” (Currie 147). According to Currie, as we deal with film fiction, we have no goal beyond our engagement with it, so we project a mental state guided by a film for the purpose of processing and understanding the film. The simulation hypothesis allows Currie to argue that we apprehend meaning in film as we do in everyday life, but without feeling the same effect we would if the events in the film were actually happening to us. He

takes the application of the imagination to fiction this one step further by saying that we process fiction 'off-line,' without creating the actual reactions we would have if we were somehow within the film. Thus, he establishes the idea that our imaginings in response to fiction are not merely representations of the events to ourselves. Although these imaginings produced by simulation as we watch fiction

lack connections of belief to the external world via perception and behavior, they retain some internal connections. With off-line simulation, states of imagining function as internal surrogates of beliefs because they retain belief-like connections to other mental states and to the body. (Currie 149-150)

A theory which is slightly different yet complementary to Currie's is advanced by Michael Colin, who also takes a cognitive science approach to the way films are understood. In *From Sign To Mind*, the volume of philosophical essays on film edited by Warren Buckland, Colin explicates his view that the cognitive sciences offer a good theoretical framework and could eventually complement a semiological approach to film in a paper entitled "Film Semiology as a Cognitive Science." Colin notes the problem-solving aspect of film viewing and couches the understanding of a film, and the apprehension of a film's message in terms of a mental task. This task is the acquisition of knowledge as one watches a film based on processes which include reasoning by analogy and consultation of stored knowledge. By comparing a film image that the spectator has never seen before with a stored image that is similar, the spectator can understand the new image. Problem solving enters the process when images that are not easily analogized appear.

Colin insists that the functional processing of information is the main task of the film spectator. This reiterates Currie's concern, though Colin does not disallow the idea of signification, but believes that it may be one of the problems to be solved as the viewer watches a film. Colin believes that schemata of film understanding could be developed to clearly comprehend how films are dealt with by the brain. This strengthens Currie's case, yet the semiologic aspect of Colin's theory broadens the spectrum of thought by making it clear that a cognitive theory for the apprehension of semiotics in film could be a possibility. At any rate, Colin's theory is not as harsh a departure from current film philosophy as Currie's is, and still showcases the cognitive function in film viewing. Neither cognitive theory, however, seems to fully account for the human engagement with film as a result of the way it is processed by the mind.

In the last segment of *Image and Mind*, Currie discusses his theory of film interpretation. Moving from his theory about simulation and the cognitive structure of imagination as the means of processing a simula-

tion of fictional images in a film, Currie builds a case for interpretation in general and then for film interpretation specifically. Since Currie has jettisoned the idea of anything but pictorial representation, he must look elsewhere for interpretive tools. In likening the cognitive processing of film images to the formation of beliefs about the mental attitudes of others to explain others' actions, Currie lays the groundwork for his interpretation hypothesis.

He begins with the notion that "interpreting literature is a species of the interpretation of behavior" (Currie 239). The interpretation of behavior on Currie's account is an observer's hypothesis about an agent's intention for his behavior. Proceeding from this point, Currie discusses the idea of real author intention (RAI). He dismisses this notion, however, because it is clear to him that it would be impossible for a reader to know the actual intentions of an author in creating a work of literature. He does not believe, however, that a reader could hypothesize a plausible set of intentions leading to the production of a literary work, and that the carefully considered hypothesis that would result from this sort of speculation would adequately explain the content of a written work. Currie's intentional hypothesizing takes the evidence of a finished work, and reasons backward to plausible intention. The reasoning is governed by over-arching considerations of simplicity and plausibility in light of the evidence presented in the work under consideration. Questions of possible indeterminacy of intention are resolved by looking for the interpretation that is "simpler, more plausible, better supported by the evidence and in general more explanatory" than other possible interpretations (Currie 226).

Cinematic interpretation proceeds along the same line on Currie's view, noting, of course, the difference in the data inputs—appearance meaning of images instead of literal meaning of words. He accepts appearance meaning as something loosely analogous to the literal meaning of words. Since he has already rejected all analogies between film and language, Currie is quick to point out that appearance meaning of images is not like literal meaning of words, but rather function analogously as components that can be evaluated for interpretive purposes. For this purpose, Currie distinguishes appearance meaning from photographic meaning. Photographic meaning is sometimes hard to ascertain, because photographs can involve optical tricks which are elements of telling the fictional story of a film. While viewers may know the photograph itself is a trick, they are also cognizant of the appearance of the photograph and what it is supposed to mean within the context of the film. Appearance meaning is substantiated by the evidence of the image's context and is taken as what a given image is 'supposed to mean' in the film. For Currie, the apprehension of appearance meaning

doesn't depend on anything beyond the apprehension of what a particular image depicts. Since depiction is all the representation Currie expects from images, this is the most he could expect find, and this result is consistent with the rest of his claims about film images.

A Film Intermission

Currie cleverly illustrates his ideas of cognitive processing and interpretation of films by discussing several films, including *The Remains of the Day*, which offer unreliable narrators yet somehow manage reliable narration. Currie views the unreliable narrator as a paradigmatic test case for his ideas about film interpretation because it is a case that makes it clear that the viewer is not merely reiterating the narrating main character's point of view, but rather developing a point of view from which the entire film can be seen. For Currie, this clearly shows the 'off-line' quality of observation he wants to claim for fiction viewing and highlights the function of the imagination in processing film images. The unreliable narrator scenario shows how separate the viewer is from the events of the film and how this distance allows the viewer to fully apprehend and imagine the situations of the film. The interpretation of the film based on appearance meaning is testable through this scenario as well, because the viewer, according to Currie, must examine filmmaker intention rather than relying on hypothesizing a plausible explanation for the actions of the main character.

Taking up the challenge of the unreliable narrator, and the tension that exists when the events of a film mean one thing to the viewer and something else to characters within the film, I present two brief synopses that can be used to illustrate the points discussed in this paper.

In *Remains of the Day*, Stevens, a classically loyal and reticent English butler, is shown to make grave misjudgments about his master's moral worth. He is willfully and woefully blind to the indications that the gentleman he works for is consorting with the Nazis in the years immediately preceding England's entry into World War II. We are shown that the master of the house is as misled by his situation as Stevens is. The repressed butler continues to dedicate his life to the service of a morally incompetent man, at the same time as he eschews a romantic involvement with the great manse's housekeeper. He is in love with the housekeeper, but unable to express himself because of his propensity for calm reserve. He is unwilling to accept her overtures of friendship and romance, and thus not only loses out in his personal life but also faces the disgrace of working for his unfortunate master.

Again, in a case such as this, the 'simulation' of Currie's thesis is the imagined projection of the spectator's point of view to the camera's point of view. Instead of simulating the position of a single character or

characters, the viewer imagines himself as the fictional viewer of a fictional scene. In *The Remains of the Day*, there is a particularly striking contrast between the point of view of the main character and the point of view of the film viewer. This is purposely done, as it is in Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* (1941), to indicate that there is a misleading aspect of the film's situation for the characters, but not for the viewer. In fact, the viewer sees the errors in judgment made by the narrator long before, and much more clearly, than the narrator does.

The Lady Eve is considered a classic film, not only because of Sturges' quirky genius which is reflected in everything from the tweaking of high society to the snappy repartee to the lush visual style, but also because it tells us something specific about life and the value of love. Briefly, the movie relates the tale of a wealthy American heir to a family fortune (Henry Fonda) and the slightly crooked woman he falls in love with (Barbara Stanwyck). Fonda, an intellectually bright yet socially dopey American millionaire, meets Stanwyck on an ocean liner where she is helping her father set up marks for a con game. Initially Stanwyck sees Fonda as just another dupe, but then she falls for him as well and vows, to her father, to go straight. Fonda's butler, a worldly-wise gentleman, protective of his employer, finds out about Stanwyck's line of work and makes sure Fonda finds out as well. Fonda, a high-minded fellow, is shattered by the news and breaks off his relationship without giving Stanwyck a chance to let him know that she wants to change now that she loves him. Scorned, Stanwyck vows revenge.

When we next see Stanwyck, she is arranging to visit a colleague of her father's who is running a scam in Fonda's tiny neighborhood, pretending to be a minor English royal. Enter Stanwyck as the Lady Eve, dressed to the nines, her hair done regally, speaking in a delicately affected English accent. She descends upon a party at Fonda's home and completely deceives him into believing that she is an entirely different person from the woman he met on the ship. The change in her appearance has been minimal, and he marvels at the uncanny resemblance as he falls in love with "Eve." Their whirlwind courtship leads to marriage, as Stanwyck planned, and once she knows she has got him in the palm of her hand, she takes pleasure in upsetting him to the point that he leaves her.

Following their divorce, they meet again (by chance?) on a cruise ship. Fonda thinks he has left "Eve" and is seeing Stanwyck again for the first time. He realizes how much he loves her—still unaware that they have been together all along. The scene fades as she begins to set him straight.

This is certainly a case that could be used to illustrate Currie's point if one insists that films are only presentational and not representational.

One can still gather the major plot points, and understand the humor of the situation in which Fonda's poor sap finds himself, but it would be a disservice to Sturges' film to persist in the notion that all of the messages of this film are overt. In responding to Currie's argument, I will make reference to both *The Remains of the Day* and *The Lady Eve*, as well as other films. The themes of awareness and oblivion illustrated in these films heighten the tension between what is presented and what the viewer must understand to fully appreciate the film. Since I am arguing primarily that Currie's theory does not allow for a full appreciation of film, this tension will be illustrative for my points as well.

Currie Reconsidered

A remark in an essay by Susan Sontag prompted me to reconsider Currie's theory. In "The Decay of Cinema," Sontag, who has long written about photography and other art and media, indicates an aspect of film that is completely left out of Currie's cool, calm, cognitive science approach. Sontag writes:

People took the movies into themselves.... But whatever you took home was only a part of the larger experience of submerging yourself in lives that were not yours. The desire to lose yourself in other people's lives...faces. This is a larger, more inclusive form of desire embodied in the movie experience. Even more than what you appropriated for yourself was the experience of surrender to, of being transported by, what was on the screen. You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie....
(Sontag 60-61)

The essay itself is a paean to the days when movies were only at movie theatres and the experience of seeing a movie was something special. Now that movies are everywhere, Sontag contends that they have test their ability to captivate us as they once did.

I disagree with Sontag on this last point. I still find myself totally engaged by films I see on television; even in the middle of the night; even films I have seen many times. My main argument with Currie is grounded in this experience. I believe that films function on more than a simply cognitive level at which data, already tagged as fictional; is processed and stored. And while I do not insist that the 'more' of which I speak is specific to a linguistic analysis of films, I do have trouble, as I indicated earlier, with Currie's complete rejection of a representational aspect of film and with his rejection of film conventions as a way of interpreting what a film means. I believe that the loss of these connections to the representational significance of images takes away too much from the impact of film on viewers. First, I will make my case for conventions, noting conventions that are specifically relevant to film. I will also refer to the movies explicated earlier to show that there are

instances of signification as well as depiction in those films, and that those films would be poorly understood, if not entirely misconstrued if we do not admit the existence of representation and conventional signs.

Semiotics, the study of signs and signification, focuses on information-carrying entities (symbols) and how these symbols are used and understood by people, animals and machines. Certain branches of linguistic philosophy, specifically semantics and syntax, explore signs and their meaning. The study of semantics and syntax has produced the idea of the conventional sign, or convention, which is identified as a sign for which a meaning is commonly understood in abstraction, apart from its physical form. Examples of conventional signs are a crown indicating royalty or a skull and cross-bones indicating danger. A convention can be either simple or more complicated, such as the common use of a shift in focus to indicate a shift in temporal orientation like a flashback, a common narrative device in movies. *The Wizard of Oz* is an excellent example of this specifically cinematic sort of convention in its use of sepia-toned scenes denoting reality and full Technicolor denoting the beautiful fantasy of Dorothy's dream life over the rainbow. *The Wizard of Oz* is in fact a movie full of conventional signs and representational devices. As a fantasy, and a musical fantasy at that, it cannot be thought of as simply pictorial.

While Currie might insist that shifts in focus and the use of color or sepia tones are technical devices rather than specifically cinematic conventions, I would like to suggest that the conventional nature of film technique is well-established. Rather than thinking of conventions as specific rules for the use of language, as Currie does, I think the discussion can be expanded to viewers' expectation of meaning for particular types of images. In developing plausible explanations for the interpretation of film after film, viewers are bound to note instances of images that appear to have the same meaning over and over again. In this way, film as a medium has built its own framework of reference within which viewers have expectations about what certain images and transitions are taken to mean.

A good example of a dream sequence, especially salient in *The Wizard of Oz*, is commonly signified by a 'watery' dissolve which is recognizable as the framing shot at the opening and closing of such a sequence. The unsteadiness of the image suggests, and I assert, signifies, the feeling of slipping into a dream, and of 'coming to' after waking from a dream. In Currie's terms, I venture to say the transition has the 'appearance meaning' of the transition into or out of a dream. As for the difference between color and black-and-white or sepia tones, I suggest that the repeated usage of such a distinction between present and past or reality and dream in film after film has made such a distinction conventional.

The key to conventional signification is in the reliability of the recognition of signs by spectators. The metaphoric language of literature is based on conventions, evidenced by phrases such as “my love is a red, red rose” used to indicate the rare beauty of love and other figurative uses of language. Though the word convention itself seems to indicate that some convocation of meaning-makers met at some time in history and decided upon what signs would be meaningful, this is most certainly not the case. Conventions evolve implicitly over time among members of cultural communities. The discussion of conventional communication dates back to the beginning of philosophy. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle examined dramatic conventions, such as scenes of recognition and reversal in tragedy. Conventions, then, can be said to comprise a system of tacitly agreed upon communication. Praxis, or use, is the basis for the formation of conventions, as well as the basis for their effectiveness in communication.

The communication of quotidian life is based largely on the observance and understanding of conventional symbols—green means go, a skull and cross-bones mean danger, etc. It is not unreasonable to expect that human understanding of something like film would also be primarily based on conventional communication. Understanding of conventions of filmic expression is especially important when the representational nature of film is considered. According to Currie himself, film is always understood relative to its relation to reality, or to what it depicts or fails to depict. Within the framework of a specific film, there is no reason why an evaluation of a conventional image cannot be understood within the film’s context. In film, as in literature, conventions have developed over time—some universally, some specific to particular cultures.

There are different levels on which conventional communication operates in film. The conventions of everyday communication certainly hold when they are depicted in films—a viewer still understands the green means go of a traffic signal when it is seen in a film. The nature of film also allows for additional significance of the green light which may be non-conventional, yet symbolic to viewers in the sense that it symbolizes something like a move forward in a film’s narrative. This sort of signification extrapolates the everyday, conventional meaning of green as a signal of forward motion. This is the type of signification based on convention that is common in literature. There are also conventions specifically associated with film, such as fades in or out, or use of focus to direct the attention of the spectators. In any case, there are aspects of film conventions that are peculiar to the medium, which is both visual and linguistic. Conventions are a shorthand that allows effective communication in film—just as they allow communication in other fields—by relativizing utterances and images to a specific set of ideas and pre-understood contextual cues.

Look again at *The Wizard of Oz* and consider the symbolism of the Lion, the Tin-man and the Scarecrow. The Lion, which would normally signify courage, is cowardly. The Tin-man, the most tender-hearted and caring of the group, is upset because he has no heart. And the Scarecrow, whose head is full of straw, is the one who usually figures the way out of trouble. In each case, the characteristic the symbolic figure *presents is* at odds with what viewers would expect. This dichotomy is the representational aspect of the film—we have to look beyond the surface of the characters, and understand the contextual clues to make use of conventional signs. The conventions we are expected to understand are backward because the message of the story is that we may think we’re missing something you already have. This is also signified in Dorothy’s predicament of being lost among people who are the same as those she left at home. Her traveling companions on the yellow-brick road are the same as those with whom she walked on the dirt roads of Kansas. It is the audience recognition of this and the plot convention of the journey, relevant to both film and literature, that viewers understand when they fully comprehend the film. I see no way that Currie’s off-line imagining would allow viewers to fully experience the movie without the contextual assistance of representation and convention. The thoughts required to ‘lose oneself’ and fully experience the film as Sontag indicates are granted by the resort to the representational.

Clearly, there are some film images which inhabit the common understanding. the sight of Emerald City just beyond the next poppy-strewn field, the shower curtain ripping away from hook after hook in Janet Leigh’s bathroom at the Bates Motel, John Wayne galloping toward the camera at full speed and then artfully reining his horse in for a profile shot, and Gene Kelly singing in the rain. They are auditory as well, ranging from the husky, enigmatic whisper of “Rosebud” to the surprised recognition, “Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas any more.” Every time these images appear, they are understood by those familiar with them, not only as visual or auditory fragments of a larger film, but as signs of their contextual content—hope, helplessness, heroism, happiness—as well. Further, as elements of the conventional canon, these and other similar fragments are signs of their meaning abstracted from their film. The images mentioned here have all been used to signify their abstract meaning in films besides the ones they were taken from.

Though I do not think it is necessary to insist that these conventions form a language of film, I think the existence of conventions that are familiar to most people in a culture is evidence that our experience of film goes beyond what Currie would have us believe. It also seems that to deny a language of film, we must admit of at least some way in which

each film is understood to be representational in some way. I believe that there is a tacit understanding on the part of the viewer that he or she is watching a fictional film. This is the framework to which reactions to the film are relativized. It is this relativization that allows us to be engaged completely by the film for as long as we are watching it.

That brings up another point of Currie's which seems to be at odds with Sontag's description of the film experience. Currie asserts that film viewers do not experience the emotions and behaviors they would if they were actually projecting themselves into a film and experiencing the dangers, sorrows or romance that occur in a film. He uses this as evidence that film is not an illusion. I would agree that a film is not an illusion but a real item—a work of fiction that engages our attention and interest. I submit that the experience of a film is more thoroughly engaging than a novel, because it presents specific images in a sequenced series meant to hold the attention and interest of the viewer in ways that a novel—words printed on a page—cannot.

Sontag speaks of losing oneself to a film and becoming 'submerged in it.' I believe that Sontag's description more fully captures a full film experience, and gives a clearer understanding of what can occur as a viewer watches a film. Currie's ideas about simulations which people run while engaged with fiction could include crying, laughing and screaming, emotional sensations that films produce in viewers as they watch. It is to the detriment of his explanation that Currie does not take the visceral reaction of film viewers into account as part of his explanation of simulation. Perhaps he means to include this sort of reaction, but his insistence on cognitive processing 'off-line' allows for less engagement with a film than most people experience. Certainly not every film affects every viewer this way, but I believe this is more a question of the effectiveness of individual films than a question about how people respond to films as a medium.

It is the understanding of what we are doing when we watch a movie that Currie hints at but does not fully explicate. When a person sees a film, he or she is aware of experience on two levels. One is the awareness of watching a movie, and the other is the awareness of the movie. I believe the framework of reference to the fact that we are watching fiction is what allows us to safely become completely absorbed in it as we watch so that we can fully experience it. We can comfortably lose ourselves as Sontag indicates because we know we are not *really* being attacked by a serial killer or *really* getting married or *really* going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. On Currie's view, it is precisely this same understanding that keeps us from fully experiencing the movie.

I suggest, however, that viewers use reality and their real experiences to gauge the plausibility of a fictional narrative film. While evaluations of

the meaning of events within a film are relativized to the framework of a specific film, there is always the initial relativization of the world of the film we watch to the world of our reality. The conscious decision to engage ourselves in a film and its narrative sequence of events opens us up to the full experience of the fiction given the fact that we knowledgeably bring our experience to bear as we evaluate a film, and submit our interest and attention to the film fully. The idea that we relativize films to real life supports the idea that our awareness that our awareness of watching a film makes the process more engaging. This duality may seem paradoxical, but it clearly explains the strong effect movies can have on viewers and allows for the personal relevance of film to vary from one person to the next. I do not think Currie's off-line simulation adequately accounts for the personal understanding of a movie, because he does not clearly indicate the place of personal experience in our apprehension of movie messages. His rejection of signification not only discards the idea that images may be conventional signs, signifying something to most people, but disallows the personal relevance of film images as well. If film images only depict, they cannot be said to remind us of anything beyond the experience of the film in which they appear. I maintain that we have a reference to our personal experience that cannot be disregarded as we watch a film. The resonance of some images will be different for each person watching a film, but that is a key to why films generally have the power to affect us so significantly.

This sort of representational paradox is dramatized by movies like *Remains of the Day* and *The Lady Eve*. While I believe that the tension that these films produce between the narrator's understanding and the viewers' understanding enhances the experience of the film, Currie would want to say that this is what reminds us that we are only simulating an experience. In the case of each film, the fact that we are aware that we are watching a film is what allows us to see both points of view in each of the films. Merely running simulations of the action of the films might not allow us to fully apprehend this point.

The tragedy of the butler in *Remains of the Day* is not fully realized unless one is aware of the contextual clues that show he is at odds with his world. Turns of bad weather and problems with his car are more than just bits of action in the film. The butler begins to see that his life is not secure in service as he experiences these physical travails. In that sense they signify trouble in a general way to both the film character and to the audience. The fact that the audience notices the significance of these problems before the butler does is significant as well, because his apparent opacity to clues transparent in meaning to the viewer serve to *depict* an inner quality of his personality. This feature of the butler's character, his apparent inability and unwillingness to recognize the problems of

his own situation could not be depicted except through the significance of clues to the viewer. While Currie may persist in indicating that this is available through simulation, I protest that this cannot be so. The recognition of a difference in point of view is not the poignant story of a man who has wasted his life. Without the emotional element of understanding incorporated in viewing a film, we could easily say that the butler is just somewhat oblivious to his surroundings. If we are only imagining ourselves watching a fictional story, the impact of a wasted life is lost.

Similarly, in *The Lady Eve*, it would be possible to understand the plot of the story—the intentional misdirection of Henry Fonda's character and the eventual reconciliation of the couple. Without a representational interpretation, however, one misses Sturges' messages about the way women and men deal with each other—and how easily women can win the battle of the sexes. Sturges also comments on the ultimate victory of true love by bringing the lovers together in the end. Viewers would also miss the subtextual elbow in the ribs about class distinctions that Sturges has incorporated into the movie. The main character—a member of the upper class—is constantly bumbling and bamboozled while his servant is clearly on top of things. His love is also of the lower economic echelon, and *she* outwits him—twice! The importance of this message is underscored once again by the fact that the last line of the film, after the resolution of the lovers' conflict, is spoken by the servant: "Positively the same dame!" The servant has known all along and boasts his knowledge with this final line. The importance of the message would be certainly be diminished, if not entirely test if the rest of the film was viewed on Currie's theory. The understanding of the film's events would remain in tact if run as an 'off-line simulation,' but the multiple significances of the narrative would be lost.

Both the films speak clearly to the issue of interpretation as well as understanding. As we have seen, Currie's interpretation depends on causal explanations based on the hypothetical intentions of a hypothetical author. I can see no reason to allow more credibility to this imagined causal hypothesis than to signification, especially since the interpretation based on signification can be made relying entirely on the film and since Currie's interpretive method requires broad speculation. While I have stated that evaluations of film experience are relativized to the knowledge we are watching a film, I have not specifically stated that I see this as a key factor in interpretation. The understanding of a film as a story we are watching is keyed to clues within the story. If we are not fully experiencing the story, we may miss some of the clues and therefore some of the meaning of the story. This holds for interpretation of the story as well. Relying on the notion of pictorial representation alone will not allow for full apprehension of interpretation of a film's

meaning. Currie's intentional analysis seems too far removed from a film itself to legitimately provide an understanding of a film. The fact that the case for significance beyond depiction can be made for both comedy and drama, in films made fifty years apart, argues for representation beyond the pictorial. The credibility of signification as a tool of interpretation seems to offer a 'better' interpretation on Currie's own grounds, quoted above—simpler, more plausible, better supported by the evidence and in general, more explanatory.

I would like to note as well that Currie strongly argues against the association of film and language early in his argument, but then bases his schema of film interpretation on the interpretation of literature, attempting to substitute images and their appearance in films for words and their literal meanings. Currie attempts to diffuse the tension between his denial and defense of literary analogs, but I find his structure/function distinction weak in this respect. If his rejection of linguistic analogs in film is to hold, he cannot plausibly argue that we interpret film in much the same way we interpret literature, with images having the same function as words. Either words and pictures are analogous or they are not. Currie cannot have it both ways.

Currie argues that literature and film are interpreted much the same way behavior is interpreted. The observer of behavior hypothesizes about the mental states that lead to action. I disagree that this is the case with film, even if we see the finished film as the product of intentions on the part of the group of agents (wringers, actors, director, etc.) involved in making the film. There is no reason to believe that each person who sees a movie thinks about the intentions of the people who created it. The power of movies lies in the fact that viewers are separated from the creators of a film and wrapped up completely in their experience of the work. If film is to be distinguished from linguistic (literary) medium, it must also be distinguished in its ability to completely engage the viewer in this way. This engagement precludes the behavior-oriented explanation Currie suggests. If behavior is being dissected, I submit that it is the behavior of the characters on the screen that get the mental attention Currie speaks of. As I have indicated above, films are complete within themselves for the most part, and film viewers relativize their evaluations of filmed behavior to the framework of the film they are viewing, not to the intentions of the makers of the film. I grant that film scholars may indeed wish to speculate about the intentions of filmmakers to discover the reasoning behind choices made by filmmakers as artists, but Currie's is analogous to literary critics speculating about a particular novel, not to the actions of the average reader, who relativizes evaluations of behavior within a novel the same way a film viewer relativizes to the framework of a film.

Conclusions

In the final analysis, Currie's bid to set film theory on its head does not succeed as completely as he might have liked. He does make interesting points about how we might process information as we watch films. The notion of off-line simulation may be valid for the rudimentary understanding of the actions that occur contributing to the narrative structure of a film fiction, but unless Currie's ideas are expanded somewhat, I do not believe he accounts fully for the power of film experience.

I cannot, therefore, agree to his insistence that this cognitive processing encompasses the total experience of film viewing. None of the films discussed in this paper could be as richly understood and interpreted if viewers did not look beyond what is presented and attempted to understand contextual references and instances of signifying representation. I submit that there are some films that would not even be intelligible based solely on the bare understanding of what they depict, although I see no need to fully examine such a film to prove my point.

Perhaps no theory based on cognitive science could ever account for the rapture Sontag speaks of, or explain the transcendence of being 'lost' in a film. This phenomenon—common, many would agree, to all art forms—is certainly not a feature of all films. But to say that it is a feature of none of them—a statement which follows from Currie's narrow theories of pictorial representation and intentional interpretation—is to miss out on the possibility of being swept away by the full experience of a movie. The personal relevance of films is based on our ability to understand them in terms of our own experience, which cannot be brought to bear unless we endow the images of the films we see with significance beyond the representation of objects they depict. I also believe that our ability to be swept away by the story of a film is enhanced by the knowledge that we are giving our attention and interest to a fictional narrative. I cannot give up the richness of that experience. I would rather see the image of the great and powerful wizard, even though I know that there is a side-show trickster projecting the image from behind a curtain.

Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona

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