

## **Neither here or there, but now.**

### **Film Experience and the Aesthetic Illusion**

#### **Introduction: the Zhivago case**

In a sequence of Nanni Moretti's *Palombella rossa*, the protagonist Michele Apicella and the other characters watch the movie *Doctor Zhivago* on television. They react as if the vicissitudes of Zhivago were happening now, in their own present (cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzvWp74TD8U>). When Zhivago tries to get off the tram and reach Lara in the street, they cheer him by shouting, "Turn around!" "Knock!" "Run!" They behave like supporters who are watching a live broadcast of a sport event. Interestingly, they do not try to move in order to help Zhivago. They do not think of themselves as inhabitants of the fictional space. They know that Zhivago's space is not their space, although they experience Zhivago's time as if it was their present. They perceptually experience Zhivago's pursuit of Lara as happening now although they know and feel that this event does not take place in their own space. In this paper, I will argue that Michele Apicella and the other characters of *Palombella rossa* undergo an aesthetic illusion whose nature is distinctively cinematic.

#### **Aesthetic illusion in pictures**

Following Jonathan Lowe (1996), I conceive of *standard perception* as a sensory experience whose intentional object matches the real object causing the experience. From this perspective, a *perceptual illusion* is a sensory experience whose Intentional Object does not match the Real Object causing the experience; our perceptual system deceptively signals us that either there is something which actually is not there or something has a feature which it actually lacks. On the other hand, following Werner Wolf (2004), I conceive of an *aesthetic illusion* as the spectator's

sense of having entered the represented world while at the same time keeping it at a distance. Still, the notions of “having entered the represented world” and “keeping it at a distance” are to be unpacked. I will try to do so firstly in the general case of the pictorial experience and secondly in the specific case of the experience of moving pictures.

In the pictorial experience, we normally experience the picture’s surface, not the depicted scene, as the Real Object in our environment. In this sense, the pictorial experience remains a case of standard perception rather than a perceptual illusion (except for the limit case of *trompe l’oeil*). The peculiarity of the pictorial experience is that the primary Intentional Object, which matches the Real Object (the surface), is supplemented by a secondary Intentional Object (the depicted scene), which does not match anything real but does not seem to be here (in front of us, in our environment). Thus, in the pictorial experience there is no deceptive signal, no inclination to believe something wrong. The perception of the picture’s surface as being there neutralizes the possible illusion of the scene as being there. The illusion boils down to an unactualized possibility, an innocuous illusion, which at most could be actualized thorough monocular vision (for example by looking to the picture with just one eye through a pipe). In fact in the ordinary pictorial experience, our perceptual system does not signal us either that there is something which actually is not there or that something has a feature which it actually lacks.

Nevertheless, the depicted scene is not a mere figment of the imagination. It is not only sensory in format, but also publicly experienceable and will-independent just as the real objects of perception. It is the object of a distinctive perceptual experience (which one might call *seeming-to-see* or *innocuous illusion* or *parasitic perception*), which supplements the perception of the picture’s surface. That it is to say, the perceptual experience of the depicted scene

interferes with the perception of the surface. Our perceptual system signals us that there is a surface but finds it hard to show us the flatness of this surface (its being a flat patchwork of colors) since the depicted scene interposes between the surface and us. Richard Wollheim (1980) call this experience “seeing-in” and describes it in terms of “twofoldness”, that is, the experience is constituted by both a “configurational fold” representing the picture’s surface and a “recognitional fold” representing the depicted scene.

In sum, the viewer of a picture has a perceptual experience (whose distinctive features are sensory format, will-independence, public accessibility) of the depicted scene, and yet she does not perceive that scene as something real taking place in front of her, in her environment. In this sense we can characterize the experience of a picture as a sort of aesthetic illusion. The perceptual experience of the depicted scene that can provide the viewer with the impression of having entered that scene, and yet the perception of the picture's surface prevents a genuine perceptual illusion by allowing the viewer to keep the depicted scene at a certain distance.

### **Aesthetic illusion in films**

Films are moving pictures, pictures provided with a temporal dimension. They can make us perceptually experience not only a scene but also its movements and changes (and possibly its sounds): not only a scene but also an event. Thus, a film allows us to answer two different questions. First, what is there? Second, what is going on? With respect to the first question, the answer of our perceptual system is the same as in the case of static pictures: in front of us, there is a surface, not a scene. Yet, with respect to the second question, our perceptual system is more sensible to the movements of the depicted things than to the changes of the picture’s surface. As Roman Ingarden puts it, “The spectator ceases to see the screen, and in its place sees in an

*almost perceptual manner* things and people”. (1989, my emphasis). On the one hand, the spectator keep on seeing the screen as the main *object* being here, in her egocentric space. On the other hand, the spectator ceases to see the screen and starts seeing scenes involving depicted things and people as the main *event* going on now, in her tensed time.

Thus, the experience of a film scene involves a sense of (temporal) *presentness* without a corresponding sense of (spatial) *presence* (cf. Dokic 2012). In this sense, the pictorial experience of films, unlike that of static pictures, involves a sort of perceptual illusion, which supplements the aesthetic illusion with a temporal component. That is because the perceptual illusion of presentness, unlike that of presence, is not perceptually neutralized by the perception of the picture’s surface, namely the screen. The perceptual illusion of presentness can be only cognitively neutralized. Indeed, if the moving image is a live broadcast of a real event, the sense of presentness does not lead us to a perceptual illusion but rather to a veridical experience. In watching moving pictures we undergo a sense of presentness which is ontologically neutral. The depicted events that we see in the screen can either actually happen now, as in the case of live broadcasts, or do not happen now, as in the cases of documentaries and fiction movies. In the latter case the perceptual effect of events happening now contributes to the whole aesthetic illusion provided by fiction films. Remember the two components of the aesthetic illusion: “having entered the represented world” and “keeping it at a distance”. The sense of presentness that gives us the impression of events happening now enhances our sense of “having entered the represented world”, while the lack of a sense of presence, due to the perception of the screen as the Real Object in our environment, gives us a way of “keeping the represented world at a distance”. As Bernard Williams puts it, “While watching a film, “we – in a sense – *see* what is happening in that world, but not in the same sense as that in which we *see* [real people], nor as

that in which the characters *see* one another” (1973). The first use of “see”, unlike the second and the third, does not involve a sense of spatial presence, but it still involves a sense of temporal presentness.

The comparison between movies and live television is the key point in order to understand the aesthetic experience in film. The spectator of live television experiences events as happening now in an environment that is not hers. She feels a sense of presentness (events happening now) without a sense of presence (events happening here). The sense of presence concerns egocentric space while the sense of presentness concerns tensed time. On the one hand, the spectator does not experience the depicted scene as being located in her egocentric space, that is, within a system of axes converging at her body. She just experiences that scene as being located within a system of axes converging at a certain perspective. She can only estimate relative directions of things and distances between those things, not absolute directions and distances of things with respect to her position in space. On the other hand, the spectator experiences the depicted scene in a tensed way, that is, as belonging to a series centered in a now. In fact, a *perceptual* experience of events should exhibit the main temporal feature of perception: representing the perceived events as presently unfolding, as happening now. As Le Poidevin puts it, “what we perceive, we perceive as present – as going on right now. [...] To perceive something as present is simply to perceive it” (2015; see also Poidevin 2007 and Kriegel 2015). Perception lacks a temporal distinction corresponding to the spatial distinction between the here and the there. We cannot *perceive* events situated in different temporal location of the series centered in the now. We cannot perceptually experience them as past or as future. We can only perceptually experience them in the now.

## The claim of presentness

Gregory Currie (1995, 200) calls “Claim of Presentness” the claim according to which the cinematic experience is tensed in such a way that the spectator experiences fictional events as happening now. Currie argues that the Claim of Presentness is wrong since it cannot take “anachronies” such as flashbacks into account. A film exhibits an anachrony when the temporal order of the narration does not comply with the temporal order of the story told. In the case of flashback, for example, a film depicts an event X *after* another event Y but in the objective order of the story X takes place *before* Y. Currie argues that if the spectator normally experienced fictional events as happening now, then, when faced with a flashback, she would experience herself shifted in the past, as if she was a time traveler.<sup>1</sup> Yet this kind experience does not show up while watching a film, hence Currie rejects the Claim of Presentness, thereby stating that “cinema represents events [...] as standing in tenseless relations of priority and occurrence” (1995, 19).

Currie’s argument basically is a *reductio*, which can be outlined in the following way.

- (1) While watching a film F, the spectator S experiences the depicted events as happening now (i.e., the Claim of Presentness);
- (2) S experiences a certain event X after having experienced another event Y;
- (3) S acknowledges that X precedes Y in the objective order of the story, namely, X is a flashback;

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<sup>1</sup> Currie considers another possible line of defense of the Claim of Presentness, that is, the hypothesis according to which flashbacks, unlike normal scenes, exhibit a distinctive phenomenology that does not involve a sense of presentness. Yet he discards this hypothesis since no relevant phenomenological change shows up in the experience of flashbacks. That is why, in his view, the defender of the Claim of Presentness if forced to ascribe the experience of being shifted in the past to the spectator of a flashback.

(4) In the shift (because of (2)) from the experience of Y as happening now (because of (1)) to that of X as happening now (because of (1)) but preceding Y (because of (3)), S must experience herself as a time traveler who has been shifted in the past;

(5) Spectators do not normally experience themselves as time travelers shifted in the past when they watch flashbacks;

(6) the Claim of Presentness has to be rejected (because it leads to the contradiction between (4) and (5)).

Premise (1) is nothing but the claim being investigated, namely the Claim of Presentness. Premises (2) and (3) are unquestionable inasmuch as they simply reflect the standard definition of a flashback. Still, it is debatable whether thesis (4) really follows from (1), (2) and (3); and it is debatable as well whether the further premise (5) really holds, and whether we should accept the conclusion (6). All of that depends on how we interpret the description “being shifted in the past” in (4) and (5). I will argue that the proper way of interpreting “being shifted in the past” makes thesis (4) compatible with premise (5), thereby explaining the experience of flashbacks without raising the contradiction that leads to the rejection of the Claim of Presentness.

In Currie’s interpretation, “being shifted in the past” means “being shifted in a spatiotemporal location situated in the past”. This interpretation makes the Claim of Presentness incompatible with the normal functioning of the cinematic experience, since spectators who watch a flashback do not have the impression of leaving their seats in the movie theater.

Still, as argued above, a spectator can experience events as happening now without being forced to experience them as happening here. The case of live television suggests that the sense of presence and the sense of presentness are two distinct feelings, which are to be carefully kept distinct. The spectator of live television may undergo a sense of presentness without the need of

a concomitant sense of presence involving a spatial relation between her body and what is perceived. She perceives the depicted events as situated in a temporal series (namely, tensed time) centered in her own now, and as taking place in this very now, but she does not perceive those events as situated in a spatial system (namely, egocentric space) centered in her own here.<sup>2</sup> Since fiction films are moving pictures just as those constituting live television, filmmakers can exploit the same perceptual effect in order to provide film spectators with the experience of fictional events as happening now.

That being the case, we can address the case of flashbacks that Currie uses in his argument against the Claim of Presentness. Let us consider a flashback that provides a spectator with an experience of an event Y as happening now followed by the experience of another event X as happening now yet preceding Y in the objective order of the story. The spectator switches from the experience of Y as happening now to that of X as happening now as if she switched from a live broadcast of an event to another one (for example by means of her remote control). She is not forced to experience herself as shifted in another spatiotemporal location. Indeed, she is “shifted in the past” only in the sense that she acknowledges that X precedes Y in the objective temporal order of the story although she perceptually experiences X in the same way as she experienced Y just before, that is, as happening now. The shift is cognitive, not perceptual. This seems to be precisely the kind of experience that a flashback is aimed at producing, namely, a slight contrast between *perceiving* an event as if it was happening now and *knowing* that it has already happened. The untenable *contradiction* between (5) and (6) boils down to an admissible *contrast* between the spectator’s perceptual experience of the depicted

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<sup>2</sup> This difference between the pictorial experience of space and that of time seems to depend on the fact that we experience the here as the point in space occupied by our body, whereas the now is simply experienced as the point in time where our experience occurs. That is to say that the experience of the now does not seem to require an awareness of our own body in the way in which the experience of the here does. Since the depicted events are perceived as detached from our body, those events cannot be experienced as related to our here but they can nevertheless be experienced as related to our now.



events and her knowledge about them. The spectator keeps *perceiving* the events in the flashback in a tensed way, as happening now, even if she *knows* that these events stand in a tenseless relation of priority to those events that she perceived before.

To sum up, the cinematic experience does not substantially change during flashbacks, it remains a perceptual experience of events as happening now. What changes is only the fictional world's temporal location in which the spectator cognitively situates an event that she experiences as happening now.

Let us call  $P(K)$  the experience of a certain event  $K$  as happening now. If  $P(A)$  follows  $P(B)$  in the subjective order of experience, the subject is inclined to infer that  $A$  follows  $B$  in the objective temporal order of the world represented by that experience. This inference is usually correct, but there can be cases in which it is not. In these cases the perceptual experience reveals to be a deceptive representation of the objective temporal order. This kind of deception can take place also in ordinary perception, for example when we have an auditory experience  $P(V)$  of a sneeze of a person in front of us followed by an auditory experience  $P(T)$  of a thunder in the sky and we infer that the sneeze takes place before the thunder, but in fact it is the contrary, the thunder precedes the sneeze in the objective temporal order, and  $P(T)$  follows  $P(V)$  only because the thunder needs more time than the sneeze to travel from its origin to us. Even if we *know* that the thunder happened before the sneeze, we however *perceive* it as happening now, and therefore we undergo an inclination to wrongly locate it after the sneeze – an inclination that we can neutralize only at a higher cognitive level.

The case of the flashback functions in a similar way. We know that the event  $X$  precedes the event  $Y$  but our experience  $P(Y)$  precedes our experience  $P(X)$ ; therefore we may undergo an inclination to wrongly locate  $Y$  after  $X$  in the objective temporal order, – an inclination that we can neutralize only at a higher cognitive level. From this perspective, the experience of a

flashback can be treated as a sort of perceptual illusion, since the spectator's experience of Y as happening now followed by her experience of X as happening now, if not neutralized at a higher cognitive level, leads her to the wrong belief that Y precedes X in the objective temporal order of the story.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we can compare the case of the flashback to a paradigmatic case of perceptual illusion, namely, the Müller-Lyer illusion. As in experiencing the latter we *see* two lines as different in length while we *know* that they are identical, so in experiencing a flashback we *see* an event happening now while we *know* that this event cannot happen now since it happened before another event that we already saw. Currie himself, in a subsequent paper about time and narration, seems to suggest that the sense of presentness can function as a sort of perceptual illusion:

The Muller-Lyer does not go away when careful measurement shows us that the lines are the same length. Perception represents their lengths as unequal despite our knowing that they are not. Similarly, when I come to realize that a distant star as seen by me now is displaying long past states, my experience of the star does not go from being *an experience that represents the star as present* to being one that represents it as past, and I do not know of any evidence that the experience can be changed in this respect even by long training. I suggest that we are stuck with the experience of time that we have (2004, 92, my emphasis).

We are so “stuck with the experience of time that we have” that, although we *know* that a distant star existed in the past but does no longer exist in the present, we keep *seeing* it as

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<sup>3</sup> For example, when we see Vincent and Jules talking about hamburgers in the second scene of *Pulp Fiction*, after having seen the robbery at the restaurant, we have the impression that the discussion about hamburgers takes place after the robbery, an impression that we will correct only later when we will discover that, in the objective order of the story, the robbery takes places after that discussion.

present. The Claim of Presentness goes one step further claiming that we are “stuck with the experience of time that we have” even when we watch a fiction film. We *see* fictional events as happening now, although we *know* that they are not taking place in our world. We do so because that is that way in which our perceptual system functions. And we *see* a fictional event as happening now even when we are faced with a flashback, although we *know* that, in the objective temporal order of the fictional world, the event that we are seeing cannot happen now since it precedes other events that we have already seen.

### **The Imagined Observer Hypothesis**

In his criticism of the Claim of Presentness, Currie also states that “The Claim of Presentness is a consequence of the Imagined Observer Hypothesis” (1995, 201). According to this hypothesis, a spectator *imagines perceiving* fictional events thereby being forced to imagine either

(IOH.i) that she has been moved into the fictional world

or

(IOH.ii) that the events occurring in the fictional world are such that they can be seen from her actual world.

According to Currie the the Claim of Presentness is essentially linked to the Imagined Observer Hypothesis. Conversely, I contend that the Claim of Presentness is independent from the Imagined Observer Hypothesis and from its consequences. More specifically, the commitment of the Claim of Presentness to (IOH.i) can be avoided since we have shown that the Claim of Presentness involves only a sense of presentness, not a sense of presence, and the impression of being moved in the fictional world comes from the latter. Still, it remains to show that the Claim of Presentness has no commitment to (IOH.ii). Indeed, I agree with Currie that

“In most films, the possibility that the events of the story could be literally *seen* from another world is ruled out. Imagining that we see in an extramundane fashion would be more, not less, in conflict with the fiction” (2004, 98). However, as argued above, a perceptual experience of depicted events as happening now does not involve the attribution of the property of causing this experience to those very events. Thus, a cinematic experience P of an event X is just an experience of X as happening now, not also an experience of X as causing P itself (cf. Rossholm 2004). Causation from events to the cinematic experience only concerns the genesis of that experience, not its phenomenology.

The only plausible sense in which a spectator can conceive of herself as experiencing fictional events “in an extramundane fashion” comes from the combination of her perceptual experience of those events as happening now and her knowledge that there is no causal chain that connects her to the perceived events. Instead of foregrounding her further knowledge that the perceived events are nothing but representations (e.g. actors playing characters, or CGI stuff), the spectator can indulge in the imagination that she is undergoing an “extramundane” perceptual experience that does not require a causal transaction between the perceiver and the perceived events. I am not arguing that this is the kind of imagination that spectators normally deploy or that films normally require. I am just claiming that this is a kind of imaginative project that is compatible with the perceptual experience of films (for similar views, see Hopkins 2008 and Wilson 2011). And this is the only acceptable sense in which the Claim of Presentness may – though is not forced to – lead us to endorse the Imagined Observer Hypothesis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A more technical way of making this point is the following. When the spectator ascribes the vision of fictional events in an extramundane fashion to herself, she does so in a *de dicto* modality, which concerns the mode in which those events are presented. She does *not* ascribe this experience to herself in a *de re* (or, if you prefer, *de facto*) modality, that is, she does not think that fictional events are such as that they cause her extramundane experience of them. Fictional events do not have the property of causing perceptions of them in an extramundane fashion. Indeed, ‘causing’ and ‘extramundane’ are incompatible terms. The extramundane fashion just concerns the way in which the spectator relates to fictional events, not

## Conclusion: back to Zhivago

Let us go back to the characters of *Palombella rossa* who react to the movie *Doctor Zhivago* as if it was a live broadcast of a sport event. On the one hand, there is something exaggerated in their behavior. We do not normally behave like them while watching a fiction movie. On the other hand, this exaggeration, as a successful parody, highlights a relevant component of our behavior of film spectators. We do not outwardly behave like *Palombella rossa*'s characters, but we somehow feel sympathetic with them since our emotional engagement with fictional events is similar to theirs, though we do not externalize it in the way they do. *Palombella rossa*'s characters are much closer to us than the legendary spectators that ran away while watching Lumière Brothers' *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*. That is because films obey to the general rule that governs what Francesco Buonamici calls works of verisimilitude: "The work of verisimilitude in the spectator can never cause him – unless he be an imbecile – to mistake the thing representing for the thing represented" (*Discorsi poetici nella Accademia fiorentina in difesa d'Aristotile*, In Firenze: Giorgio Marescotti, 1597; cit in Faas, 1986, 62).

In fact, *Palombella rossa*'s characters do not seem to be "imbecile" in the sense in which the putative fugitive spectators of *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* would seem to be. The behavioral responses of *Palombella rossa*'s characters are excessive in degree, but not substantially wrong. Unlike the putative spectators of *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, *Palombella rossa*'s characters are not mistaking the thing representing for the thing represented.

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the way in which she conceives of those events *causing* her experience. It is worth noting that naïve realist accounts of perception make room for a conception of the perceptual experience that is not essentially linked to the notion of causation, and which can also take the pictorial experience into account (cf. Martin 2012). The same point can be rephrased by exploiting the content/attitude distinction (cf. Kriegel 2015) and saying that the extramundane fashion does not concern the content of the spectator's experience but only her attitude.

They are just treating one sort of moving image, namely fiction cinema, as if it was another one, namely live television. In this paper, I have argued that this attitude elicits a peculiar aesthetic illusion, which significantly enriches our experience of film spectators.

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