



Internal Focalization and Seeing through a Character's Eyes

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ABSTRACT

In fictional narratives, what is said can be presented from the perspective of a character. Thus, in passages of 'internal focalization', the narrative 'mimics' the character's perspective and tells only what is accessible to the character. This narrative technique is pervasive in fictional narratives but it is notoriously hard to define. In this article, we argue that 'internal focalization' can be defined as the mandate to imagine perceiving from a character's point of view. In investigating how internal focalization lets us see through a character's eyes, we develop an account of internal focalization that relies on a particular type of imagination as its defining feature.

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In this article, we want to advance a definition of internal focalization in fictional narrative texts that takes as its basic element a certain type of readers' imagining. In cases of internally focalized narration, readers are invited to imagine something from the point of view of some character, or so we shall argue. The approach to be developed here applies to internal focalization as a literary device that is to be found in texts. But it is inspired by a certain framing device in film – namely, point of view (POV) shots. POV shots involve positioning the focus of the camera on the same level and in the same direction as a certain character sets her gaze, thus mimicking her point of view. Such shots are widely believed to invite viewers not only to imagine seeing the content shown on screen but also to imagine seeing it through a character's eyes. Murray Smith, for example, claims that such a setup brings the viewer 'to imagine "from the inside" the character's experience'.¹

A similar case has been made for a comparable dramatic setup in theatre. Vitor Moura hypothesizes that 'theatrical hidden characters constitute a device akin to cinematic subjective shots'.² Hidden characters spy on the events unfolding on stage. They can be seen by the audience but not by the other characters they are spying on. Moura claims this setup results in 'a particular vantage point within the fictional world [being] shared by spectator and character. In a way, the seeing element becomes the very centre of our imaginative project'.³ Both hidden characters in theatre and POV shots in cinema, so goes the claim, let audiences see through a character's eyes.

The connection between narrative technique in film and theatre and a specific type of imagination (that is, 'from inside a character') suggests that something similar holds true for texts as well. Thus, texts may not only guide us in *what* we imagine but also *how* we imagine: they let us imagine not only seeing something but also seeing it in a certain way – namely, through someone else's eyes.

We want to argue here that a connection can be drawn between imagining the content of fictional textual narrative through the eyes of a character and the narrative technique of internal focalization. Internal focalization is often spelled out in terms of an alignment of narrative information to the perceptual state of a character. It is thus analogous to POV shots in that it can mimic, in a way, the perception of that character. In investigating how internal focalization lets us see through a character's eyes, we shall develop an account of internal focalization that relies on the type of imagination as its defining feature.

1 Murray Smith, 'Imagining from the Inside', in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 412. For discussion, see Jinhee Choi, 'Leaving It Up to the Imagination: POV Shots and Imagining from the Inside', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 17–25; for a detailing of the many filmic techniques involved, see, for example, Markus Kuhn, *Filmnarratologie: Ein erzähltheoretisches Analysemodell* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), chap. 4 (especially pp. 140–45). We shall not go into detail here, as our focus lies on internal focalization in narrative texts.

2 Vitor Moura, 'Seeing-From: Imagined Viewing and the Role of Hideouts in Theatre', *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 6 (2014): 259.

3 Ibid., 273.

The term ‘focalization’ was introduced by Gérard Genette,⁴ and later developed further to better distinguish between the question ‘*who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?*’ and the very different question *who is the narrator?* – or, more simply, the question *who sees?* and the question *who speaks?*⁵ Focalization is concerned with the first question. Regardless of who the narrator is, the narration can be ‘filtered’ through the point of view of a character such that the narrator is reporting not their own perceptions but those of another person. Genette’s question ‘Who sees?’ thus stands *pars pro toto* for ‘who perceives?’ as he puts it in his later writing.⁶ Taken literally, however, his extension may not go far enough. The possible range of experiential phenomena goes beyond just perception, encompassing emotional states, judgements, and so on.⁷ In what follows, we shall use ‘perception’ (and ‘perceptual’ and so on) as umbrella terms for all experiential phenomena in question.

The phenomenon of a divergence between speaker and the ‘point of perceptual origin’⁸ had been described before Genette introduced his nomenclature, both by writers and narratologists. Thus, for instance, Wayne Booth, in reference to Henry James, describes so called *reflectors*, that is, ‘third-person “centres of consciousness” through whom authors filter their narrative’.⁹ James also gives notable examples of the technique, amongst them the opening passage of *The Ambassadors*:

Strether’s first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive until evening he was not wholly disconcerted. A telegram from him bespeaking a room ‘only if not noisy’, reply paid, was produced for the enquirer at the office, so that the understanding they should meet at Chester rather than at Liverpool remained to that extent sound.¹⁰

Genette introduces two commonly distinguished subtypes of focalization – namely, internal and external focalization – and he explains these subtypes in terms of restrictions on information given by the narrator: if the information given by the narrator is restricted by what a certain character knows and perceives, then the narration is focalized internally ‘through’ that character. Thus, in our example from *The Ambassadors*, we get no information as to who hands the telegram to Strether, because, being newly arrived, Strether does not know the person in question. Alternatively, if the narrator only

4 Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

5 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 186.

6 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 64.

7 See, for example, Manfred Jahn: ‘For this reason, the term *apperception* is often used to designate both the interpretive nature of perception and one’s understanding something in “frames” of previous experience.’ Manfred Jahn, ‘Focalization’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 101. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan distinguishes ‘various facets of the phenomenon’ of focalization: perceptual, psychological, emotive, and ideological; see her *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), 77–82.

8 Jahn, ‘Focalization’, 100.

9 Wayne C. Booth, ‘Distance and Point-of-View: An Essay in Classification’, *Essays in Criticism* 11 (1961): 66.

10 Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 1.

supplies information that can be gathered by an observer of the character – camera-like – then the narration is focalized externally. If there are no constraints on information given by the narrator, then there is no focalization or ‘zero-focalization’, as Genette puts it. The case of a third-person narration filtered through the perceptual vantage point of a character, then, would be internal focalization, which will be our focus in this paper. Following Patrick O’Neill, we may call the character whose vantage point orients the narrative perspective the ‘focalizer’, while the object of focalization, that is, what is perceived or on her mind (broadly speaking), is the ‘focalized’.¹¹

The term ‘focalization’ and some terminological variants are well established in the narratological description of fictional texts. Yet, as a narrative technique focalization is notoriously hard to pin down, Genette points out that ‘points of view’ may shift within a narrative:

Any single formula of focalization does not, therefore, always bear on an entire work, but rather on a definite narrative section, which can be very short. Furthermore, the distinction between different points of view is not always as clear as the consideration of pure types alone could lead one to believe.¹²

Accordingly, while both the concept and phenomenon itself are generally accepted, there can be significant disagreement about its application to specific narrative sections. Whether any text or even sentence is focalized one way or the other is often far from obvious. This difficulty translates into the difficulty of defining types of focalization. Definitions based on necessary and sufficient conditions usually aim at clear cut classifications. And, while there may be ‘pure types’ of both external and internal focalization, a definition needs to be able to handle less pure cases as well.

There is a frequently used metaphor in discussions of focalization that we believe points to a helpful approach to clarifying the concept: internal focalization, it is often claimed, puts us in the shoes of the focalizer, gives us access to their consciousness, or lets us see through their eyes. Thus Kendall Walton makes the rather cautious claim that the limitation of narrative information to what a character knows ‘gives the reader a sense of what a certain perspective is like, a feeling for how things seem from a certain standpoint, and encourages empathy with the character whose perspective it is’.¹³ Manfred Jahn, using Henry James’s terminology, goes further than Walton, claiming that by way of internal focalization readers’ imagination is akin to first-hand impressions: ‘the reader, seeing the storyworld through the reflector’s eyes, becomes a witness rather than the narrator’s communicative addressee’, thus suggesting that readers share the perception of the focalizer.¹⁴ O’Neill goes as far as describing the focalizer as ‘the perceived centre of consciousness’, letting readers share not only the focalizer’s perception but essentially their mind.¹⁵

11 Patrick O’Neill, ‘Points of Origin: On Focalization in Narrative’, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 19 (1992): 334, his emphasis.

12 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 191.

13 Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 378.

14 Jahn, ‘Focalization’, 96.

15 O’Neill, ‘Points of Origin’, 333.

These descriptions of internal focalization aim not so much at identifying textual features of internal focalization as at identifying the effects certain texts are supposed to have on their readers: they make them imagine the content narrated in a certain way – namely, through someone else’s eyes. We believe that this metaphor of ‘seeing through a character’s eyes’ can be understood as a specific way of imagination, which in turn can be helpful in a definition of internal focalization. If narrative information is restricted by the perception of one character, then it seems plausible to assume that the relevant content is supposed to be imagined by readers from that character’s point of perception. At the same time, wherever we are invited to imagine fictional content through a certain character’s perspective, it seems plausible to claim that the passage in question is focalized internally. We thus want to suggest that internal focalization be defined by the invitation to imagine from a character’s perspective.

To move from metaphor to a more substantial claim we need to further clarify what is meant by seeing through a character’s eyes as a specific type of imagination and how and when such imagination is warranted. This is what we will be concerned with in Sections III and IV, respectively.

III. SEEING THROUGH A CHARACTER’S EYES

To see something through someone else’s eyes obviously is not literally possible. It is a metaphor that demands clarification, and even more so in case of fictional characters. A straightforward way of spelling out this metaphor amounts to claiming that what is at issue is *imagining* seeing something through someone else’s eyes. So, what does it mean to imagine seeing something through a fictional character’s eyes? We can begin to understand this based on a distinction between propositional and non-propositional accounts of imagining from a character’s perspective.

Propositional account. Imagining from a character’s perspective can be spelled out in terms of what Fabian Dorsch calls ‘intellectual imagining’, that is, ‘hypothetical thoughts about the possible consequences’ of something, ‘[s]upposing, imagining-that and making-believe with a propositional content’.¹⁶ Consider imagining that the sky is blue. In intellectual imagining, imagining that the sky is blue means pondering a proposition of that content or imaginatively judging it to be true. Now, what could it mean to intellectually imagine this but from a fictional character’s perspective? One way to do so would be to add further imaginative propositional content, for example by additionally imagining that a certain character believes the sky to be blue, considering what consequences that belief would have on their thought and action. Now you have two pieces of content: (1) the proposition, that the sky is blue (call this the *base content*), and (2) the meta-proposition – namely, that (1) is believed by a certain character, plus the additional propositions that follow (call this the *perspective content*). Let’s consider another example. Suppose a fictional text starts with the revelation that a detective on a murder case has herself witnessed the crime, hence knowing who the perpetrator is: the gardener. She just has to find additional evidence that will hold up in court. Based on that information, you may imagine (1) the murderer to be the gardener. Later in the story, when the detective is confronted with someone who claims to be the murderer – say, the butler – you are able to draw the conclusion that (2) the detective knows whether this would-be murderer is lying or not. By drawing that conclusion, you put yourself into the detective’s shoes in an

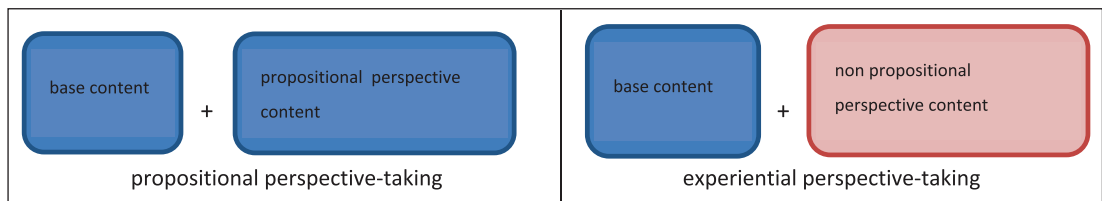
16 Fabian Dorsch, *The Unity of Imagining* (Frankfurt: Ontos, 2012), 42.

instance of intellectual imagining – for now, you not only imagine the gardener to be the murderer but you also imagine that knowledge through the detective’s eyes as well. Call this form of perspective-taking *propositional* perspective-taking.

Non-propositional account. But there are other types of imagining as well. Acts of imagination can not only differ in *content* – that is, what is imagined – but also in what Dorsch calls the *type* of imagining.¹⁷ Imagine walking through a field. Doing so as an instance of intellectual imagining you would ponder a proposition. But imagining walking through a field can also mean conjuring a mental image that is akin to seeing something while walking there (sensory imagining), as well as imaginatively enacting the walking (experiential imagining) or conjuring up the feeling you would have doing so (affective imagining). All of these imaginings are of a more experiential kind than the intellectual pondering of a proposition. Call them *experiential* imagining.

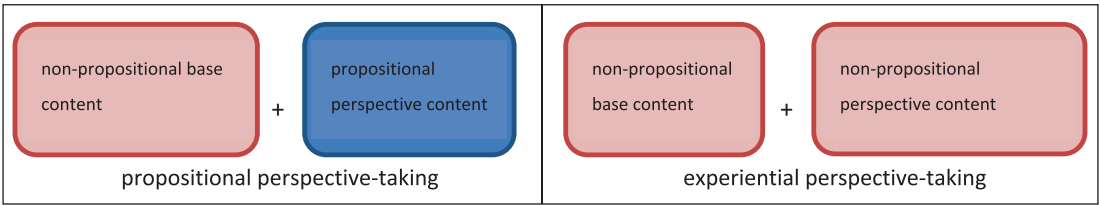
Now, imagining from a character’s perspective can take experiential imaginative forms as well. Where in propositional imagining taking the perspective of a character amounts to merely adding further propositional content, in experiential imagining taking the perspective of a character amounts to adding further non-propositional content to the base content. Consider again the base content, that the gardener is the murderer. Imagining the gardener to be the murderer from the detective’s perspective can also come to conjuring the excitement or nervousness of knowing, mimicking the affective and experiential state of the protagonist, thus adding non-propositional content. Call this form of perspective-taking *experiential* perspective-taking. Again, the type of imagination involved in this differs in its non-propositional features from intellectual imagining, that is, in a subjective phenomenological sense. It cannot fully be grasped by pointing to mere propositional content.

So far, then, we have distinguished two forms of imagining and of imaginative perspective-taking, respectively. In both our examples for imaginative perspective-taking, we combined some (propositional) base content (namely, imagining that the gardener is the murderer) with some additional content in either of the two different imaginative types. Thus, in propositional perspective-taking the resulting (composite) perspective content consists in base content plus other propositions, while in cases of experiential perspective-taking the (composite) perspective content consists of base content plus some non-propositional (experiential) content. Schematically:



Imagining the base content, however, can also differ in type. Vividly imagine seeing a blue sky. In doing so, you may conjure a mental image akin to a sensory experience as the base content. Adding the layer of perspective-taking, again, could come in the

17 Ibid., 32–47.



The quasi-visual experience of the ‘thing’ imagined (the base content) is the same in both cases. Adding propositional perspective content would amount to intellectually pondering that a certain character has the base-content experience. Adding non-propositional perspective content, on the other hand, means colouring the base content in the hue of someone else’s consciousness. And this means that base content and perspective content merge: when we aim at taking someone else’s perspective, what we do is *try to have* the experience they have.

While somewhat hard to put in words, the phenomenon of non-propositional ‘perspectivized’ base content is easily recognizable in examples. Imagine a good friend or spouse crying. You know that they are devastated. Putting yourself in their shoes is easy and it certainly does not stop at intellectually imagining that one feels sad while also pondering the meta-representation of that proposition as being on the mind of your friend or spouse. Putting yourself in their shoes, you can feel what they do, embody their consciousness to a degree. With fictional characters, there is obviously an added layer of complication: there is no actual person whose perspective could be taken. While probing difficult questions for both logic and ontology, this problem is, however, of no relevance for the description of subjective phenomenal states: subjectively, we do feel for fictional characters, and we thus do put ourselves in their shoes.¹⁸ Also, we should note that putting oneself in a character’s shoes is no more delusional than putting oneself in one’s friend’s shoes. Imaginatively adopting another (fictional or real) person’s consciousness should normally involve some degree of self-awareness, that is, knowledge that one is (merely) imagining, and it will be possible to stop your imaginative endeavour at will. Finally, (imaginatively) putting oneself in some character’s shoes may go hand in hand with awareness of the literary work as an artefact that can be appreciated for its linguistic structure, composition, narrative techniques, and so on.¹⁹

18 The problem of empathy with non-existents has been debated extensively; see, for instance, Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, chap. 7, for an accordant discussion.

19 There is an extensive discussion pertaining to both the philosophy of mind and aesthetics on whether, or to what extent, viewers (spectators, readers) are simultaneously aware of both an artwork’s structural elements, such as a painted surface, and its representational content. Drawing on Richard Wollheim, Murray Smith calls this ‘twofoldness’ of experience and argues that it is part and parcel of much artwork reception; see his ‘On the Twofoldness of Character’, *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 277–94. For a careful discussion, including some disentangling of accordant claims, see Bence Nanay, ‘Is Twofoldness Necessary for Representational Seeing?’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005): 248–57. The debate over the ‘twofoldness’ of experience shows that there is much more to developing a comprehensive picture of the mental structure of artwork reception than our account of internal focalization in terms of seeing through a character’s eyes may provide. Our aim here is to take some steps towards explaining internal focalization, thereby contributing to the bigger picture. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for alerting us to the discussion on ‘twofoldness’ and also to the distinction between imagination and delusion mentioned above.

In sum, then, seeing through a character's eyes can mean two things. (1) One can intellectually ascribe certain content to the perceptual state of a character in the form of minimal perspective-taking; or (2) one can conjure the entirety of a character's perceptual state by means of employing experiential types of imagining, in a way imaginatively switching one's perceived centre of consciousness – as O'Neill puts it – to that of a character.

IV. CONNECTION TO FOCALIZATION

We believe that the faculty of non-propositional perspective-taking identified above is useful as the basis for a definition of internal focalization in fictional textual narrative. Fiction invites us to imagine things. According to some theorists, the very nature of works of fiction lies in their invitation to imagine. But, even when imagination's role as a necessary condition for fiction is denied, it is undoubtedly intimately related to fiction in that imagination is both a regular as well as an adequate reaction to fictional narratives. Reading, watching, or hearing fiction goes hand in hand with imagining. When Arthur Conan Doyle tells us of Sherlock Holmes, we are imagining what we are told to be true, thus at least employing intellectual imagining. No competent reader's reaction to the story would ever be outraged disbelief at Doyle's egregious lies. Moreover, it seems plausible to assume that certain narrative features of fictional texts guide our imagination not only regarding fictional content but also regarding the type of imagination.²⁰ Detailed descriptions of the protagonist whistling a tune, for example, may warrant not only the imagination of the mere propositional content that the protagonist is whistling but also a quasi-sensory imagining of hearing.

When we say 'warrant', we have a Waltonean picture in mind. In *Mimesis and Make-Believe*, Walton lays out a normative account of fictional content:

[A] fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something. Fictional propositions are propositions that are *to be imagined* [...] Anyone who refuses to imagine what was agreed on refuses to 'play the game' or plays it improperly. He breaks a rule.²¹

In case of fictional texts, what is agreed on to be imagined is the fictional content of the work. The text itself is, in Walton's usage, a *prop* in a *game of make-believe*. The prop mandates certain imaginings: most fictional texts mandate readers to imagine that there is such and such a character, doing certain things, and so on. Refusing to engage amounts to breaking a rule. That is why competent readers do not lament a story's untruthfulness. One simple case that makes the normative force of these mandates obvious is the usage of deictic terms. Where it says 'here' or 'now' in a fictional text, we are to imagine the appropriate time and place 'in the story' and not the author's. In this, fictional 'narrative allows, invites, and possibly even requires "deictic shifts" to imaginary co-ordinates and spaces'.²²

While some imaginings are mandated, others are prohibited, that is, mandated *not* to be imagined. When the detective is described as slowly approaching her suspect from

20 For empirical research on this, see (summarizing) Renate Brosch, 'What We "See" When We Read: Visualization and Vividness in Reading Fictional Narratives', *Cortex* 105 (2018): 135–43.

21 Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 39, his emphasis.

22 Jahn, 'Focalization', 102.

behind, hoping to catch him by surprise, imagining her to be whistling a tune would be in violation of the textual mandate. Of course, I am in a sense free to do imagine whatever I want; I could imagine Sherlock Holmes being the secret perpetrator of all the crimes he claims to have solved. But that is certainly not what the fictional texts *mandate* me to imagine. There is, however, much left to the imagination that is neither mandated nor prohibited but rather allowed for. If not stated otherwise, I am free to imaginatively colour the character's clothes every which way I like.

Walton spells out these rules to imagine mostly in regard to propositional content, but he notes that props 'prescribe nonpropositional imaginings as well as propositional ones'.²³ If so, it is not only imaginative content that is mandated; the type of our imaginative engagement may be, too. Think, for example, of the romantic poets' depictions of awe-inspiring nature such as the following:

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
 Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields,
 Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air
 Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven,
 And veils the farm-house at the garden's end.
 The sled and traveller stopped, the courier's feet
 Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit
 Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed
 In a tumultuous privacy of storm.
 Come see the north-wind's masonry.
 Out of an unseen quarry evermore
 Furnished with tile, the fierce artificer
 Curves his white bastions with projected roof
 Round every windward stake, or tree, or door.²⁴

Plausibly, descriptions such as this one do not aim at a mere intellectual pondering of propositions but at an aesthetic experience that is grasped more fully by experiential imagining. A reader that does not engage in the appropriate way is just not using the text as a prop in the right way.

The same is true for the imagination of perspective content. The mere statement that a certain character knows something lets us take that character's perspective in the form of propositional perspective content by mandating us to intellectually imagine a meta-representation of the relevant base content as being part of the beliefs of the character. The perspective content, however, can also be mandated to be imagined in the non-propositional type of imagining. The narrative mimicry of the character's perception by means of internal focalization warrants experiential imagination that goes beyond the mere intellectual imagining (namely that the character experiences something).

We want to suggest that, where fictional content is to be imagined through the eyes of a certain character in the experiential way, the narrative is focalized internally. Let us emphasize at the outset that ours is not an empirical claim about readers' cognitive

23 Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 43.

24 Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Snow-Storm', in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym, Robert S. Levine, and Arnold Krupat (New York: Norton, 2007), 1245–46.

or mental states in causal relation to certain features of a text. Rather, the claimed connection is a normative one in the Waltonean sense laid out above: wherever we are *supposed* to imagine from inside a character's perspective, the text is focalized internally.

To make our idea clearer, let us look at an example for *external* focalization first. Here is the opening paragraph of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*:

Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller, v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v *motif* was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down – from high flat temples – in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan.²⁵

Hammett's protagonist, the private detective Samuel Spade, is described from what we may call an observer's perspective. The description evokes a mental image of Spade's likeness, conjuring up a picture of his face. The passage certainly mandates imagining of a certain content, that is, that Spade's face looks such and such. However, it also allows for – if not mandates – a sensory imagining of Spade's face, a quasi-visual impression.

There is, however, nothing anchoring readers' imagination within the consciousness of some specific observer in the world of the fiction. Nothing would demand or justify here that we imagine taking the position of *a character* in the story in a way that it would be a fictional truth that *that character* is seeing Spade's face. The base content, that is, the image of Spade's face, is not coupled with any perspective content in the afore-mentioned sense. Certainly, we are supposed to imagine Spade's face, but nothing indicates that we are to imagine seeing it through some character's eyes. Our imagining, in Richard Wollheim's words, is 'acentral', from no-one's standpoint:

In visualising the Sultan's entry into Constantinople, I could visualise it from no point of view – from no point of view, that is, within the historical scene. In that case I would visualise the Sultan and his train of viziers and bashans and guards as they passed through the gates of St. Romanus, paused at the hippodrome, and then rode on to Santa Sofia – and this pageant would be presented to me, or I would represent it to myself, as stretched out, frieze-like, the far side of the invisible chasm of history.²⁶

Now, one may argue that seeing something, whether imaginatively or actually, necessarily involves seeing from a certain perspective. That certainly holds true for actual sensory inputs, but it is heavily contested with regard to imaginings:

When someone is actually watching a scene from a certain visual perspective she is located in a position which offers that perspective. But it doesn't follow from that that when someone *imagines* seeing a scene from a given perspective she also *imagines* being at a place that offers that perspective.²⁷

25 Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (New York: Knopf, 1930), 3.

26 Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 73.

27 Moura, 'Seeing-From', 268.

Imagine the surface of Mars. Maybe the image you conjured is from an angle low to the surface, like the ones we are used to seeing from photos made by the robot population of Mars. Certainly, that is a perspective in a technical sense; the picture you see before your mental eye is from some standpoint. But is it also from *someone's* standpoint? Imagining such an embodied perspective is certainly possible. We can imagine being one of the robots on Mars, or even being there ourselves, and the mere prompt to imagine Mars's surface in no way prohibits us from doing so.

But such an embodied perspective is not allowed for every prompt to imagine. For example, the camera's perspective in film, even though technically situated at a specific location in relation to the image shown on screen, does not usually represent a person watching, *mandating* viewers to imagine a person being there. Not every shot is a POV shot.²⁸ Equally, external focalization does not usually mean that we are to imagine some entity being there, watching the things narrated. The difference between the focalizer and the focalized comes into play here: the focalized object is presented in a certain way, but there is no focalizer in external focalization. Only internal focalization – that is, mediation through a certain character's perspective – lets us identify a focalizer.

Now, one may argue that nothing prohibits us from imagining the content narrated in external focalization through someone else's eyes, that is, a focalizer, if only through those of the narrator. Just as imagining the surface of Mars need not (though may) involve imagining being there, external focalization need not necessarily involve an imagined focalizer even if it allows for one.

That, however, is not true. If fictional facts are facts *to be* imagined, as Walton suggests, then it would be a fictional fact of the storyworld that some character/ the narrator is watching Spade, if such an imagining would be acceptable. That is obviously not so. Not every passage narrated in external focalization allows for the interpretation of the story as being about some unknown stalker, watching someone from afar. When the detective comes home at night, brooding alone in her living room over the ever-nearing death of everyone, we are not to imagine us or anyone being there with her. To do so would break the rules mandated by the textual prop to imagine having an experience of seeing that is akin to that of a person observing someone. Moura calls this a 'shift from *imagine seeing* to *imagine being*'.²⁹ Such a fully fledged experience of imagined being would, for example, also allow for a kind of proprioceptive imagining, that is, the imagination of being embodied physically in the scene. Not only is such an imagining not mandated in this context; it is prohibited by the rules that come with the prop.

Contrast the above with an example for internal focalization. Franz Bieberkopf, the protagonist of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, has just been released from prison, standing outside the gates:

He shook himself, gulped. He stood with one foot on the other. Suddenly he took a run up and he was sitting in the tram, with passengers all around him. At first it felt like being at the dentist's, when the dentist has the offending tooth gripped in his pliers and is pulling, and it feels like your

28 For discussion, see also Jerrold Levinson, 'Seeing, Imaginarily, at the Movies', *Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (1993): 70–78.

29 Moura, 'Seeing-From', 268.

head will explode with the pain. He craned his neck to look back at the red wall, but the tram rushed him away down the tracks, and he was left merely facing the general direction. The tram turned a corner, trees and buildings interposed themselves. The streets were full of bustle, Seestrasse, people got on and off. Something in him screamed: Watch out, watch out. The tip of his nose felt cold, something brushed his cheek. *Zwölf Uhr Mittagszeitung, B.Z., Die neuste Illustrierte, Die Funkstunde neu.* ‘Any more fares?’ The police have blue uniforms now. He made his way off the tram unnoticed, mingled with the crowd. What was wrong? Nothing. Hey, watch where you’re going or I’ll whop you.³⁰

As in our example from *The Maltese Falcon*, this passage is not narrated by the protagonist but focalized internally such that Franz Bieberkopf is the focalizer. Consider what kind of imagining is mandated by both the style and the content of the narration.³¹ Information about Bieberkopf’s bodily sensations (nose feels cold) and thoughts (something in him screams) gives readers access to his consciousness. At the same time, the rapidness of information, the interposition of advertisements, and the speech of other passengers mimic Bieberkopf’s experiences. In reading this passage, readers are invited to put themselves in his shoes, see through his eyes, and they may do so in an experiential sense, by sharing his perspective. Imagining Bieberkopf’s experience in this way breaks down the metarepresentational distance between base content and perspective content, merging the two in just the way the metaphorical parlance of ‘seeing through someone’s eyes’ is getting at. While the description of Spade’s face quoted above neither mandates nor allows for any perspective content from someone’s standpoint within the scene, here base content and perspective content are so aligned that there is no escaping imagining the scene from Bieberkopf’s perspective.

Now, there is a pressing objection to our notion of experiential perspective-taking rooted in cognitive science. The objection has it that, in watching someone, a system of mirror neurons makes us experience a mimicry of the mental state of the person watched.³² If so, then every instance of watching someone would also let us perceive that person’s actions through their eyes, simply because that is how our minds work, or so the objection goes. In fact, the accordant assumption lets us put our entire idea on the head. Jinhee Choi points out that ‘what facilitates the viewer’s central imagination is primarily the viewer’s *limited* access to character psychology’.³³ Her reasoning for this claim is that mind-reading is an epistemic tool employed to derive information about someone. Mind-reading is thus not needed, Choi argues, where that information is readily available. Consequently, where internal focalization gives readers access to a character’s mental state anyway, there is no need to imagine

30 Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: NYRB, 2018), 5–6.

31 It is noteworthy that citations embedded in a non-fictional text (such as our essay) can only approximate the experiences readers of fiction usually have, so such considerations are skewed by the artificial context of reception.

32 See, for instance, Alvin I. Goldman, *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 132–36.

33 Choi, ‘Leaving It Up to the Imagination’, 23 (her emphasis). The term ‘central’ imagination is used by Wollheim in contrast to ‘acentral’: ‘Centrally imagining contrasts itself with acentrally imagining, and, when I centrally imagine an event, there is someone whom I imagine from the inside.’ Wollheim, *Thread of Life*, 74.

perceiving from that character's perspective, since no informational gap needs filling.³⁴ Being supposed to imagine seeing through a character's eyes, then, would be the imaginative modus of *external*, not *internal* focalization.

We want to dispute this assumption on three grounds.

First, the perspective-taking in central imagining and in mind-reading is hardly comparable. The first is a conscious, often even active process, while mind-reading largely happens without any purposeful involvement; as such, it is a subpersonal level process.³⁵

Second, not *needing* a piece of information certainly does nothing to *stop* us from putting ourselves in someone else's shoes. Seeing someone crying lets us infer their sadness (or happiness, based on additional clues) from their facial expression, but this kind of empathetic inference is certainly not cognitively blocked somehow when that person already told us that they are sad, and we thus do not have an informational gap about their mental state to fill in. The conclusion that internal focalization or POV shots cancel our *need* to put us in a character's shoes, then, even if granted, would have no bearing on the question whether we do so anyway.

Third, and most importantly, the perceptual mimicry of mind-reading and imagining perceiving-as-someone-else is not the same. Mind-reading aims at information-gathering. This faculty is indeed employed primarily as an epistemic tool to derive information about other individuals. That, however, is exactly why mind-reading has nothing to do with the mandated imagining of internally focalized narratives. This type of central imagining emphatically does *not* aim at connecting two people but at making them one: we are to imaginatively embody Bieberkopf's apperceptive state. In reading the opening paragraph of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, we are supposed to imaginatively 'be' Franz Bieberkopf,³⁶ not just to gather information about him. That is why the type of imagined perspective content is important. Only perspective-taking in the non-propositional sense lets us share in a character's experience instead of just enabling us to understand it.

Let's assume internal focalization really can be defined as the mandate to imagine perceiving through the eyes of a character. How is that helpful for the application of the concept to narrative text? In the examples above, both content and narrative style are used to argue for the kind of imagining mandated. As long as such mandates are underpinned by certain (textual) narrative features, focalization itself, it seems, can be spelled out by pointing to those features – as we did above – making the type of imagination irrelevant. However, there is no definite list of narrative features that guide our imagination in a certain way. Indeed, there cannot be: any sentence can be internally focalized, and that suffices to show that focalization must be something over and above a (finite) list of textual features.

34 Note that Choi herself aims that argument at POV shots in film and not at focalization in textual narratives.

35 For details on the distinction between personal level and subpersonal level processes, see Zoe Drayson, 'Psychology, Personal and Subpersonal', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/psychology-personal-and-subpersonal/v-1>.

36 As noted above, this will involve knowing that one is imagining, or some other form of metarepresentational awareness.

Moreover, a purely ‘textual’ account of internal focalization does not do justice to what may be called the *aesthetic significance* of the technique. In order to see this, let’s go back to the question of whether the observer’s position in external focalization mandates us to imagine a stalker-character. We argued that it does not. But what about a story that really is told from a stalker’s perspective, narrating in the third person what his victim is doing, such that the fact that the perspective belonged to the stalker is only revealed to the reader in the very last sentence. This story would indeed be focalized internally, the stalker being the focalizer, and readers would be mandated in the end to imagine having had his perspective all along, thus revealing the psychopathic coldness of seeing through his eyes with such lack of emotion that it was not previously recognizable to be a person’s perspective. What a very different text that would be from the one just one sentence shorter! Pointing to the mandated type of imagined perspective content thus reveals the gist of internal focalization in a way that pointing to mere textual features does not. There certainly are textual narrative features in many texts that are indicative of focalization. They can be pointed to in *justification* of the claim that some content and type of imagination is mandated, thus grounding our judgement. But they do not *define* the phenomenon itself. The mandate of every narrative passage is to be judged individually, based on complex interpretative considerations.

Does this mean that focalization is just a way of reading a text and thus ultimately subjective? No. Try reading the opening of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in a way that does not put you in Bieberkopf’s perceptual place. It is hard to do. But even if you were able to do it, it is obviously contrary to the intended reading. In the same vein, there is just no textual hook for you to read the opening of *The Maltese Falcon* in a way that would justify the claim that it is focalized internally.³⁷ Both cases are pretty clear cut.

And yet there are other cases, too. Remember Genette’s warning that ‘the distinction between different points of view is not always as clear as the consideration of pure types alone could lead one to believe’.³⁸ What imaginings are mandated by a text often are open to interpretation. Consequently, the question whether any given passage is focalized internally or not can be open to interpretation as well. That, however, does not mean that readers can choose whatever reading they prefer. A successful interpretation must be grounded in textual evidence. Pointing to certain narrative features when arguing that some passage is focalized in a certain way is part of that interpretational grounding. The focus on mandated imagining lays bare the interpretational nature of any analysis of focalization in a certain piece of text. Pointing to a catalogue of narrative features like ‘internal monologues’ or ‘report of thoughts’ implies certainty where there is none, while pointing to mandated imaginings preserves Genette’s contention that focalization is not always clear cut.

By way of an outlook, we may conceive that it is not the case that internal focalization either is in the text or is not but rather that it occurs to a lesser or greater degree. For example, some textual props may ask readers to imagine hearing through some character’s ears without demanding (or prohibiting) that they also experientially imagine perceiving from that character’s standpoint on other dimensions of perception. Other texts may ask of their readers to imagine the fully fledged perceptual state of being a certain character. In this, the level of perceptual information given and the

37 For an open list of such textual means, see, for example, Tilmann Köppe and Tom Kindt, *Erzähltheorie: Eine Einführung* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2022), 138–41.

38 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 191.

resulting differences in mandates to imagine point to the possibility of degrees of focalization. At the same time, some passages may not demand a certain type of imagination at all, or may not prohibit one, leaving space for ambiguous cases. Both interpretational possibilities of ambiguous focalization and degrees of focalization are interesting topics of further investigation when internal focalization is defined as the textual mandate to imagine the narrated content in a non-propositional, experiential manner through the eyes of a certain character.

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