

Film historians nowadays regularly acknowledge the lecturer was not an uncommon part of screenings during the early cinema period. This performer afforded not only narrative clarity but also amplified the viewer's experience through emphasis on sensational story elements. Yet, the lecturer is still for the most part treated as *external* to the film text. In this paper, I first, want to argue that there is good reason to think that early cinema audiences treated film lectures, when delivered, to be a part of the film text. To do so, I argue against classical accounts of film lecturing as extratextual, draw on the institutional context and precedent, and provide positive evidence from historical accounts. Second, with recourse to Walton's (1990) theory of fiction, I argue that the lecturers had the power to transform travelogues into games of make-believe with a simple turn of the phrase. By using narrative present tense, Holmes invited audience to make-believe they are taking the trip as the lecture unfold. In other words, what we think of as documentary accounts of travels to foreign lands were often presented as fictions to contemporary audiences. Building on Altman's (2004) analysis of Holmes' (1901) written lectures, finally, I argue that Holmes' performances constitute some of the earliest instances of fictional narration in cinema. He secures this through a combination of narrative present tense, the use of "we", and the use of images and films. In the intermedial fictional text that is Holmes' lecture, Holmes is the fictional narrator who is responsible for all of the images we see and sounds we hear.

Let me start off with a classic account of film lecturers, introduced by revisionist film historians who rediscovered the figure in the first place. Tom Gunning, for instance, argues:

As Noel Burch indicates, the film lecturer endowed the film image with narrative order and legibility, a reading at the service of linear storytelling.

But, as Burch also points out, providing added realism and narrative clarity through an *exterior* supplement contradicted the traditional diegetic realism to which film aspired. The lecturer could supply such values only as a supplement, an additional aid, rather than as an inherent organic unity. A lecturer's commentary undermined an experience of the screen as the site of a coherent imaginary world in which narrative took place [...]

Within the narrator system, narrative clarity and spectator empathy could not be achieved at the expense of diegetic illusionism (Gunning 1991, 92, *my italics*).

What Gunning and Burch highlight as explicit contrast to the lecturer's "exteriority" are in fact general textual features rather than properties of a recording – viz. "an inherent organic unity" and "a coherent imaginary world". The problem is that "an inherent organic unity" and "a coherent imaginary world" are very unlikely candidates for defining whether an element is intratextual or not. Numerous films represent incoherent imaginary worlds but that is not used as a reason for claiming that an element contributing to this incoherence is extratextual. Similarly, if the point is that the narrative spoken by the lecturer and the one unfolding on screen do not coincide, then, were the same divergences to occur in sound film, we would also be forced to say that one of the tracks is extratextual. At most, the failure to represent a coherent imaginary world may amount in an evaluative dismissal of the film. In the same vein, inherent organic unity is a criterion of evaluation and not of intra- or extratextuality. That rather than representing a unified

story from the novel of the same name, Edwin Porter's 1903 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* only picks out the most dramatic scenes without much concern for following the lines of cause and effect fully, does not make any part of the film extratextual.

If their arguments are to be taken at face value then, at best, Gunning and Burch appear to be claiming that *at the time* the criteria of evaluation functioned as criteria of textual demarcation. At worst, they are confusing the former with the latter. The problem with the first scenario is that no contemporary sources are given in favor of the claim that audiences in the transitional era used evaluative criteria to demarcate among exhibition elements. Moreover, the very reason behind the surge in the film lecturer's popularity at the time was precisely the perceived disunity, incomprehensibility, and incoherence of the films shown. Yet, for all the complaints about such films in the trade press at the time nobody expresses the view that some parts of these films are extratextual. In the second scenario, to assume that an exhibition element could undermine inherent organic unity and coherent imaginary world that element would in fact need to be understood as internal rather than as external to the text. The occasional broken filmstrip, the time it takes to change the reels, the loud projection noise, the potentially distracting chatter, all these factors would have influenced the viewing experience, but they could not make a dent in the organic unity and diegetic coherence of the film screened. The reason is that all these projection circumstances are properly external to the text. They could not change what was to be imagined, the level of its coherence, or whether it was inherently unified or not.

The likelier reason for why Burch, Gunning, and others see the lecturer as extratextual appears to be implicit rather than explicit. It seems that in the end they all fall back onto the recording medium as the key criterion for textual demarcation. And I suspect this is also the guiding premise of present-day filmgoers – only the recorded content can be a part of the text. But there is no logical a priori reason why this would be the essential criterion.

Historically speaking, there are precedents in which the agents responsible for narrative comprehension of early cinema were construed as a part of the text. As Jeffrey Dym and Andrew Gerow have argued, a case in point are benshi – Japanese orators who for more than four decades introduced and explained films, translated intertitles, spoke dialogue lines, provided poetic commentary, and on occasions even transformed the meaning of the screened images. Moreover, film lecturing in general develops from the tradition of illustrated lecturing in which, as the historian of magic lanterns Richard Crangle points out, “[T]he verbal element could not logically function without the visual element, and the visual element was perceived to be not fully delivered without some form of additional explication” (2001, 45).

But we need to go beyond precedent and simply arguing against the opposing stance, we need to provide positive evidence for the view that lecturers' speech was treated a part of the film text. Consider, for instance, a contemporary reviewer's report on Horitz *Passion Play* from 1897 produced by Marc Klaw and Abraham L. Erlanger – the first passion play to be recorded on film for American audiences:

One of the most attractive of Mr. John L. Stoddard's lectures was that on the 'Passion Play' at Ober-Ammergau. It was illustrated by magnificent photographs, and yet, [...] [a] painting or a photograph can only partly convey the thought of movement and action, while, by the other means, the spectator is able to judge of the dramatic character of the works of these mountain peasants, and the imagination is only slightly called upon to picture the scenes in their complete reality.ⁱ

Notice the relative importance of the speech in relation to the image – it is the film that illustrates the lecture and not the other way around. A reviewer of another Passion Play – *Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898) produced by Eden Musée makes the same point:

'[the full evening's entertainment] began by showing a map of the Holy Land and then takes the listener on an imaginary journey detailing the many events in the life of Christ and the most important of which were illustrated by the cinematograph'.ⁱⁱ

Coming to the second point, these types of lectures are generally seen as nonfictional accounts of (travels to) foreign lands. Perhaps the most famous of these lecturers is E. Burton Holmes, who entered the business in the early 1890s and became famous after John L. Stoddard's retirement in 1897. Most notably, he was among the first extensively use films.

Starting with an analysis of the printed version of Holmes's first lecture – 'Through Europe with a Camera' from volume seven of his *Lectures* published in 1901 – Altman identifies the key traits that would prove to be the mainstay of Holmes's style. These include the persistent use of narrative present and first-person plural. A typical section from the lecture (and his overall oeuvre) reads as follows:

The first event of interest after passing Sandy Hook is the departure of the pilot. We all rush to the rail to see him clamber down the ship's side and tumble himself into a little row-boat, which immediately puts off.

The combination of 'we' and narrative present conspires to evoke a sense of comradeship between Holmes and the audience. Holmes appears to invite the audience to embark on the journey with him. The first-person plural can be read as addressing the actual passengers on the ship or as simply referring to oneself, but it can also be understood as mandating the audience to imagine themselves accompanying Holmes on the voyage. The use of the present tense makes for the coincidence of: (1) the imagined time of the story, (2) the time of narration of the story, (3) the time of hearing the story and (4) the time of perceiving the images. All of this coaxes the audience to identify a mandate to join Holmes. As Altman observes, moreover, the features of the image track work in tandem with the verbal track to secure this mandate. Holmes's lectures regularly position the images with reference to the observers and their movements. For instance, the above cited departure of the pilot is accompanied by a high-angle photograph positioned above the hand rail. In another example, the sequence of a closer shot of the Tower of Pisa which is followed by a wider shot of it is motivated by a verbal account of departing Pisa and looking back at the tower:

[As we stand] it is difficult to realize that the tower is really thirteen feet out of the perpendicular. But if we glance toward the base, one hundred and seventy- nine feet below, the fact is at once startlingly apparent. Descending, then, before the tower shall decide to topple over, let us leave the city by the Porta Nova, glancing back . . . for another look at our old friend.⁸⁸

In other words, verbal track secures the continuity and spatial overlapping of the elements in the image track making the latter appear as the visual representation of the observers' point of view.

Though Altman's astute narratological analysis illuminates a number of key features of Holmes's lecturing style, there is one crucial problem with Altman's account – his understanding of fiction. Near the end of his chapter on lecture logic, Altman considers what the unacknowledged use of other people's photographs means for Holmes's work. In other words, Altman is concerned with the fact that Holmes incorporates photographs he did not take himself into his lecture. He believes that this practice brings two meaning systems operating in Holmes's lectures into sharp relief: 'While the first system is purely documentary or *mimetic* in nature, the second establishes a fiction and its supporting *diegetic* world.'⁸⁹ He claims, moreover, that 'one becom[es] visible only because of the temporary failure of the other'⁹⁰ and that 'we learn that diegetic coherence has actually taken precedence over mimetic accuracy'.⁹¹

The crux of the problem is an untenable binary opposition that Altman appears to construct – factual validity, documentary practice and mimesis, on the one hand, are contrasted to narrative coherence, fiction and diegesis, on the other. A representation of a story, however, is not necessarily fiction for documentary practice regularly includes story-telling. Similarly, that a story is coherent does not mean it is fictional or vice versa. It is true that borrowing another photographer's image of the Museum of Olympia makes for a smoother transition from the exterior to the interior of the museum in Holmes's story. It is also true that blowing up and cropping one and the same photograph instead of producing another one taken closer chimes well with the narrative of moving away from the Leaning Tower depicted in that image. And, to address Altman's final example, it is no less true that Holmes suggests in both word and image sequence that the Roman Forum is far closer to St. Peter's Cathedral than the actual 4 km of walking that separates them: 'Leaving these ruins, once the very center of the ancient world, we turn to a temple grander than any ever built in the ancient days – St. Peter's.'⁹² But none of these deceptions makes the story which refers to these images fictional.

What does make things fictional is the invitation to *imagine* certain things. Under the most widely cited theory of fiction in philosophical aesthetics – Kendall Walton's – fiction is a subset of imaginings, i.e. what one is *supposed* to imagine. We are free to imagine all sorts of things, but only those we are *mandated* to imagine is what constitutes fiction.

In this particular case, what is crucial is that the propositional content of Holmes's claims on its own does *not* mandate us to imagine anything. This propositional content does not mandate us to imagine that Holmes stood where the borrowed shot of the Museum of Olympia was made, that he moved away from the Leaning Tower of Pisa or that Roman Forum and St. Peter's Cathedral are right next to each other. Or, to put it more precisely, the propositional content mandates us to

do so only because there is another marker in Holmes's lecture style that necessarily makes us construe the intermedial text as authorizing a game of make-believe to begin with. The *precondition* for such a mandate is Holmes's use of narrative present (rather than the use of 'we'). Given that the voyage (the story) is clearly not taking place at the time of Holmes's lecture, the narrative present forces the audience to *imagine* it is taking place now. In other words, Holmes's game of make-believe is visible from the get-go. Not because Holmes tampered with the photographs making up the image track but because he uses present tense. If Holmes were lecturing in the past tense, then the audience would be perfectly legitimate to dismiss the call to imagine themselves as participating in the voyage. They could take 'we' to refer to Holmes's actual entourage, and construe all of his statements as claims to factuality. Some of them, that is, the claims that Altman focuses on, would then under closer scrutiny be revealed as instances of pretence or lie.

Furthermore, imagining ourselves as sharing in Holmes's visual perspective hinges exclusively on his use of first-person plural. Only Holmes's 'we', when understood as a prop in a game of make-believe and not (only) as a reference to his entourage or as a reference to oneself, allows this. Not even the use of present tense, moreover, is crucial here for the story could be told in the past tense and still allow for audience to imagine themselves as participants in the journey. The only difference would be that they would have to imagine themselves *having seen* the sights in question rather than *seeing* them at this very moment.

All of this leads us to the conclusion that in the intermedial text that is Holmes's lecture, Holmes is the fictional narrator who is responsible for all the images we see and sounds we hear. Moreover, it is important to note that whether the audience imagined themselves as accompanying Holmes or not does not make a difference regarding his status as a fictional narrator. Even if they did not, they were still mandated to imagine that the story is taking place in the present – this fact already suffices for us to call Holmes's verbal performance a game of make-believe. He is not *claiming* that he is travelling at this very moment; rather he is *mandating* us to imagine that (at least) he is travelling at this very moment. This, it is worth emphasizing again, is not to say that the audiences were mandated to imagine only the story as coming from Holmes. They were also mandated to imagine him as responsible for the image track. One of the key findings of Altman's analysis strongly speaks in favour of this conclusion. As he notes, relating images to observers and their movements regularly sets up images as point-of-view shots: 'Holmes' photographs are described not as "location y" but as "location y seen from location x".⁹⁴ These, in turn, mandate us to imagine that what is shown on screen is what (at least) Holmes is showing/seeing as he explores the sight in question.

As we have seen, a turn of phrase can easily transform non-staged recordings into props for imaginings. Here, it falls to some of the subtlest means – deictics, that is, the markers of enunciation present in pronouns and verb tenses – to do so. The fact that the audience is mandated to play a game of make-believe does not mean that the factuality (and occasional pretence) of the verbal propositional content and pictorial referential content is eliminated no more than it means that the profilmic referential content is lost in photographic fiction films. Contrary to what Altman claims, imagination *supervenes* on the documentary system and no

failure of one is necessary to spot the other. What is important, as Altman rightly points out, is that already practices older than fiction film managed to transform photographic representations into props. Crucially, this was accomplished using the verbal rather than the visual track. Moreover, the lecturer was not only the key figure for this feat but also the first agent to inhabit the role of the *controlling* film narrator. Such narrators are entities mandated to be *imagined* as responsible for *all* the mandates and props that make up the text. In other words, these narrators mandate imaginings about themselves as agents to whom all the information that makes up the intermedial text can be attributed and/or who dispense that information. In Holmes's case, to repeat (on top of believing), we are mandated to imagine Holmes as telling the tale and showing/seeing all the images

ⁱ 'The Passion Play', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 November 1897, p. 5.

ⁱⁱ *New Haven Journal-Courier*, 15 March 1898, p. 5.