Mereology and Fictional Characters in Film

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Do fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes and Hamlet, exist? One may be inclined to deny that they do: they are fictional, after all, entirely made up for the purposes of telling a story. What reasons would there be to believe in their existence? Our practices with fiction may provide some such reasons. It is right to claim that, in the Holmes stories, Holmes is a detective and lives in London; it is incorrect to claim that he lifts buildings with a single hand or that he is able to fly. It is similarly incorrect to claim that he doesn’t exist—at least in the context of the stories. Clearly he wouldn’t be able to solve crimes brilliantly while failing to exist.

But how exactly can a fictional character exist? On Amie Thomasson’s [1999] account, it is, in fact, very easy. All it takes is for someone to tell a story, and describe the traits and deeds of the character, as Conan Doyle and Shakespeare did. And as long as there are copies of the stories or memories of it, the fictional characters will remain in existence. Fictional characters are indeed made up: they are artifacts. But they are also abstract: they are not located in space. No one wandering through the streets of Victorian London would bump into Sherlock Holmes. Fictional characters are, thus, abstract artifacts (Thomasson [1999]).

Can Thomasson’s account of fictional characters be extended to the ontology of film? When we watch a film we see images projected on a screen. These are images of the actors and actresses as they performed in front of the camera. To follow the story displayed on the screen, we need to have access to the characters the film describes. Clearly, if these characters do not exist, we cannot see them. But we can imagine them, being guided by the images we see as we watch the film (Currie [1995]). However, if the characters do exist, in principle, we should be able to see them. How?

Extending Thomasson’s account to film, we can say that all it takes for a fictional character to exist in a film is for the images that compose the film to be projected on the screen. The existence and persistence of film characters depend on such screenings and on the memories of them. In this respect, these characters are artifacts, created by the choices of film directors and editors when the film was composed. However, since these characters are abstract, given that they are not located in space, they cannot be seen. After all, we can only see spatial objects.

But if Thomasson’s account is slightly adapted, so that, in film, artifacts are concrete objects rather than abstract ones, it’s possible to see fictional characters. Suppose that fictional characters in film are located wherever the images that represent them are projected: they are located wherever the mereological sums of every occurrence of the screenings of the images that represent them are located. Since the screening of the images are spatial, observable objects—and so are their mereological sums—and given that the characters are co-located with the screenings
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of the images that represent them, fictional characters in film are then observable. In this way, in George Wilson’s suggestive phrase, we can “see fictions in film” (Wilson [2011]).

Note that the characters are not to be identified with the images—Holmes is not an image, but a man. But Holmes, the character, is located precisely where the screenings of the images that represent his deeds in a film are located. Moreover, images of Holmes represent Holmes without the need for the commitment to the existence of Holmes independently of the pertinent images and films. In this way, the easy ontology of fiction can be straightforwardly extended to film.

References