

## *Fictional Narrative and the Other's Perspective*

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*Anti-cognitivism is best understood as a challenge to explain how works of fictional narrative can add to our worldly knowledge. One way to respond to this challenge is to argue that works of fictional narrative add to our knowledge by inviting us to explore, in the imagination, the perspectives or points of view of others. In the present paper, I distinguish two readings of this thesis that reflect two very different conceptions of "perspective": a first understanding focuses on what the world looks like from a subjective point of view. Within this framework, we can distinguish approaches that focus on the subjective character of experience from others that explore the nature of subjectivity. I will argue that both strands can be successful only if they acknowledge the de se character of imagining. The second conception understands perspective as a method of representing. To illustrate it, I will look back to the invention of linear perspective in Renaissance painting. I will argue that the definition of perspective as a rule-guided method or technique can shed new light on the thesis that works of narrative fiction are particularly suited to display other perspectives.*

**Keywords:** Imagination; perspective; point of view; empathy; subjective experience; cognitive value of literature; social practice.

### *1. The anti-cognitivist challenge*

The attitude prominent philosophers have taken towards works of literary fiction throughout the history is characterized by a curious tension: on the one hand, there is a long tradition of those who appreciate fictional narrative for its potential to add to our knowledge and to widen our cognitive horizons. Works of fiction, they suggest,

contain detailed and colorful representations of particular events and characters that are easily accessible to the reader. These events and characters are creatures of the author's imagination, but the way they are portrayed and interwoven with one another adds up to a narrative plot, which guides the readers' attention and enables them to discern distinct patterns or principles in the story that come to illustrate more general worldly truths. In this way, it is argued, narrative fiction allows the readers to grasp the universal in the particular.<sup>1</sup>

This optimistic outlook is contrasted with the more skeptical stance of anti-cognitivist philosophers, who argue that the primary function of works of literary fiction is an aesthetic one: literary works of art are supposed to arouse aesthetic experiences in the reader; they serve to *entertain*, not to *educate* the audience. Philosophers in this tradition often insist that the descriptions contained in works of fiction are not literally true and that authors of such works do not commit to the truth of the assertions they make, nor do they provide arguments or evidence for them.<sup>2</sup> Radical versions of literary anti-cognitivism, like the one proposed by Jerome Stolnitz (1992), have gone so far to suggest that works of fiction could not possibly impart relevant knowledge to the readers.<sup>3</sup>

Literary anti-cognitivism, at least in its radical version, has not found many advocates among philosophers who contribute to the philosophy of literature. One might suggest, however, that this merely unveils a widespread *bias*: most philosophers who reflect on the nature of literary fiction tend to have a strong, genuine interest for literature in the first place and typically take it for granted that works of literary fiction can and, in fact, often do widen our cognitive horizons. Even if this suspicion is correct, we can note, however, that their bias does not make them blind. They are still philosophers who can appreciate the strength of a simple and convincing argument, even when they do not share the conclusion—and the anti-cognitivist line of reasoning is, at least *prima facie*, quite convincing. It moves from two premises that

<sup>1</sup> A very early, often quoted expression of this view can be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*: The difference between the historian and the poet, according to Aristotle, is that "the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters" (Aristotle 1962: chaps. 9, 1451b).

<sup>2</sup> I am echoing here the characterization of anti-cognitivism that has been provided by Noël Carroll in his (2002).

<sup>3</sup> A radical anti-cognitivist position is expressed—yet often only in side-remarks—by many philosophers in the past, from Plato (*Republic X*, 598 ff.: 607 f) and David Hume (1978: 121) to Bertrand Russell (1940: 294), and argued in more detail by Stolnitz (1992). More moderate forms of anti-cognitivism suggest that the cognitive value does not add to the aesthetic value of a literary work of art and that the former is at best a by-product, a collateral benefit, as it were, but in no way of central importance in literature (cf., for example, Diffey 1995; Lamarque 2006).

seem unproblematic: (i) in a literal sense, there is no truth in fiction; in fact, works of fiction do not contain (nor do they pretend to contain) faithful representations of reality. Moreover, (ii) it is difficult to see how representations that are systematically false could directly add to our knowledge or improve our understanding of reality.

In short, a look at the debate in recent philosophy of literature shows that the anti-cognitivist line of reasoning has impressed many philosophers, but has failed to convince them. If this analysis is correct, the merit of radical literary anti-cognitivism is not that of shedding an interesting light on the nature of literary fiction; but rather in having presented a challenge that has spurred an intensive debate in philosophy of literature in the last three decades.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, the *anti-cognitivist challenge* has stimulated several philosophers to react and formulate a detailed proposal of *how exactly* works of fictional narrative can impart relevant (worldly) knowledge to their readers and add to their understanding of reality.

## 2. *Perspective as subjective experience from a point of view*

Over the years, several different strategies have been proposed.<sup>5</sup> They should not be seen as rivals; after all, literature is a very heterogeneous and multifarious phenomenon, and some accounts might work well with some forms of literature, others with others. One line of reasoning, on which I will focus in the present article, suggests that the cognitive value of fictional narrative lies in its potential to illustrate *what the world looks like* from another person's perspective or from a different point of view. With their detailed descriptions of particular events and characters, it is argued, works of fictional narrative are particularly suited to show *how things are like* for a person in a certain situation or with a distinct cultural, social, historical, biographical, or experiential background etc.—which can be particularly instructive for readers who are not (yet) familiar with the respective situation or background.

Let me note right away that the expression “what the world looks like from a certain point of view” can be read in different ways. It can refer to an aspect that is tied to how one subjectively experiences the world on the one hand or to a method or technique of representing, on the other. I will discuss the first point in this, the second in the subsequent sections. When focusing on the former reading that ties perspective to subjective experience, we can again distinguish two poles: (i) in one understanding, it refers to the fact that one and the same object or scenario might look different from a different point of view or that one

<sup>4</sup> The idea that anti-cognitivism should best be seen as a challenge is suggested also by Phelan (2021: 37f).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the debate, cf. Gibson (2008), Mikkonen (2013) or Harold (2016).

and the same course of events might “feel differently”, that is, cause experiences of different qualitative character, for persons of different backgrounds. The expression “point of view”, in these contexts, is typically not taken literally as denoting the *physical location* of a person or fictional character; it rather stands for the set of beliefs, feelings, judgments, past experiences, the character and the dispositions to act that form the background in front of which the (described) experience is taking place and that determine not only the content of experience, but (at least to some extent) also what it is like having it. Works of fictional narrative can, of course, not add to the readers’ phenomenal knowledge in Frank Jackson’s sense (cf. Jackson 1982; 1986); it cannot transmit the distinctive qualitative character of an experience, which is ineffable, to the audience. A person, who has never eaten a pineapple will not find out what an ananas tastes like by reading a novel or watching a movie. It has been argued, however, that there is a distinctive form of knowledge one can acquire by living through an experience (cf. Walsh 1969; 1970) and that with their detailed descriptions of the relevant experiences—which does not substitute the experience, but can allow the reader to relate to it (Wilson 1983; Schildknecht 2014)—works of fictional narrative can communicate this knowledge to readers who have not (yet) made the relevant experience by themselves.

While this first reading of the expression focuses on the experiential aspect of “subjective experience”, (ii) a second reading underlines the fact that it is always a *subject* who makes the relevant experience. Points of view, it is argued, have an irreducible subjective element. When it comes to propositional knowledge, on the other hand, we typically aim at objectivity. This is most evident in the natural sciences that strive for acquiring ever more objective knowledge. Scientists are not particularly interested in describing what things look or feel like from a certain point of view; they rather aim at unveiling the “true nature” of things; they abstract, as much as possible, from all subjective elements of experience in order to establish truths that are intersubjectively valid. Works of narrative fiction, on the other hand, which give detailed representations of particular events and characters, are particularly apt to perform an “investigation into the subjective nature of experience”, which could, “counterbalance scientific investigation into the objective nature of the real” (Burri 2007: 316). They are, thus, particularly useful when it comes to imaginatively explore the very nature of the subjective point of view, the “view from self” (Burri 2007: 310) or the “subjective perspectives other than our own” (Donnelly 2019: 13).

So far, we have discussed the view that works of literary fiction can make us familiar with the perspective of others by shedding light on the nature of subjective experience of a concrete, yet fictional person in concrete, yet fictional situations or circumstances. We have seen that such investigations can take two forms, depending on whether it focuses on the experiential dimension or on the nature of subjectivity. The

former sensibilizes us to the fact that things can look quite differently when seen from a different point of view. It suggests that the quality of experience is (at least in part) determined the “general outlook” a person has on things, i.e., by her beliefs, desires, emotions, past experiences, and dispositions to act, but also by her character or her cultural, social, historical, or biographical background. The latter helps us to appreciate that these experiences are made by a subject, a single focal point in which a series of experiences converge. Moreover, it draws our attention at how a subject is constituted by these experiences and so teaches us to respect the other’s individual choices and judgments as expressions of their subjective point of view.

Both lines of reasoning suggest that works of narrative fiction are particularly suited to communicate this form of knowledge—not only because they describe particular events and characters, but also because they have an aesthetic quality that attracts the attention of the audience and invites them to engage in imaginative activities and immerse in fictional worlds or, to put it in Walton’s terms, to take part in games of make-believe. In this context, an aspect of imagination that is highlighted by Walton proves important: imagination has always a *de se* component. Participants, who take part in games of make believe, imagine the scenarios prescribed by the work, but they do not imagine them from a “point of nowhere”. They are always somehow present in their fantasies. This can take different forms. At times, one might identify with one of the protagonists and imagine what it is like to live through the experiences described “from the inside”, as it were. In other moments, one might imagine simply observing the events from a bystander’s point of view. Moreover, even a reader who is completely immersed in the events described is still aware that it is her who is imagining the respective scenarios; “the minimal self-imagining that seems to accompany all imagining is that of being aware of whatever else it is that one imagines” (Walton 1990: 29).

The *de se* character of imagination can explain not only how it is possible and why so many readers have the strong inclination to completely immerse in worlds of fiction, but also how fictional narrative can add to our understanding of the perspectives of others. In the game of make-believe, we become (in some way) part of the world of fiction, which allows us to relate to the subjects and events that are represented in the work. It is this form of first-person participation what makes genuine encounters with the fictional character possible—encounters, to be sure, that take place not in reality, but within the world of fiction.<sup>6</sup>

In order to understand how minorities feel about being discriminated against, one should imagine not just instances of discrimination but instances of discrimination against *oneself*; one should imagine *experiencing* discrimination. It is when I imagine *myself* in another’s shoes (whether or

<sup>6</sup> These are not isolated encounters, but ones that are part of a (rule-guided) social practice one shares with others. I discuss this point in Huemer (2021).

not I imagine *being* him) that my imagination helps me to understand *him*.  
 ... And when I imagine this I also learn about myself. (Walton 1990: 34)

This shows that works of fictional narrative can enrich our understanding of another's point of view—both with regards to its experiential quality and its subjective character—only when it succeeds in engaging the audience in participating in a game of make-believe that requires them to have *de se* imaginings of the scenarios described.

The cognitivist line of reasoning that I have sketched so far can suggest that not only imagination, but also empathy plays a central role when we read or watch works of fictional narrative. In fact, several authors have explicitly endorsed that empathy plays a relevant role in our understanding of fictional characters and in our appreciation of works of fictional narrative (cf., for example, Feagin 1996; Donnelly 2019; Gibson 2015; Vendrell Ferran 2018, 2021). This can enrich our cognitive horizons in two ways: on the one hand, we can transform our deepened understanding of the perspective of the (fictional) characters to that of real persons who live in conditions similar to theirs or actually have made experiences that are comparable to the events represented in the work.<sup>7</sup> Apart from that, engaging with works of fiction can also add to our *know-how* by training our empathic capacities which, in turn, allow us to better understand the persons we encounter in real life.<sup>8</sup>

This line of reasoning is one way of spelling out the thesis that works of narrative fiction can add to our knowledge by illustrating the perspectives of others. In the next sections, I want to present a quite different, less “personalized” interpretation of this thesis, according to which one's perspective does not primarily depend on the point of view one adopts when representing a certain scenario, but rather on the techniques one applies when doing the representing. According to this conception, perspective is not a position (spatial or other) one adopts, but rather a method one applies when describing relevant bits of reality.

### 3. *Perspective as a method or technique*

The term “perspective” is an umbrella-concept that spans over a whole range of different uses in very different contexts. There is no clear and univocal definition, nor is there a shared set of characteristics that could serve to pin down the meaning of the term; there is but a vague

<sup>7</sup> This, of course, does not guarantee that the understanding is true or accurate. Talented authors can bring their readers to adopt distorted views or enforce false prejudices towards persons of a certain background. This should not come as a surprise; the manipulative power of fiction was already noted by Plato (*Republic III*: 387<sup>b</sup>). It merely underlines that the cognitive value of works of fiction lies in their potential to add to the beliefs of the audience. Like all human beings, however, authors are fallible and so there is not guarantee that the beliefs that are offered by the work are, in fact, true.

<sup>8</sup> There is empirical evidence that engaging with fiction does, in fact, enhance one's ability to understand others' thoughts and feeling, cf. Kidd and Castano (2013; 2017) discussed in Donnelly (2019).

family resemblance that holds between the various instances of the term (cf. Van Fraassen 2008: 59). In the present section, I will discuss a prominent use of “perspective” that is quite distinct from the one discussed in the previous section.

When one tries to spell out the thesis that (many) works of narrative fiction invite us to imagine the perspectives of others, one can notice that there is a process / product ambiguity: the term “perspective” can refer either to a feature that is manifest in the representation or to a certain technique or a method of representing.

(i) When we use the term in the former sense, we refer to an aspect that is present in the product of our representational activities. This is the meaning we have in mind when we say that in a painting, an object or a scenario is shown *from a certain perspective*—or that the way in which characters or events are described in a novel makes a certain *point of view* manifest. In both cases, we refer to the relative position the author has taken towards the object. Saying of a representation that it is perspectival in this sense means, accordingly, that relevant features of the representation depend on the representer’s “point of view”, i.e., on the relation (spatial or other) she has assumed towards the object. This is the sense of “perspective” as we have discussed it in the preceding section.

We should note that the terms “relative position” or “point of view” can, but do not need to express a *spatial* relation. As I have mentioned in the preceding section, an author’s point of view—the way she sees the world—is determined not only by her location in space, but also by her beliefs and desires, her feelings and emotions, her judgments and past experiences, her character and dispositions to act, etc. All these aspects have an impact on how a given object or scenario is depicted or described in a work of fictional narrative. It is this sense of perspective philosophers have in mind when they suggest that imagining another person’s perspective consists in taking on “the perspective I would have on things if I believed something I actually don’t believe” (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002: 1) or in the attempt to “place ourselves, in imagination, in situations other than our own” (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002: 9). Imagining another’s perspective, according to Currie and Ravenscroft, is a form of *recreative imagination* in which the imaginer simulates the mental states and attitudes another person does or would have, relative to a series of relevant (background-) beliefs that are attributed to her. One could, in consequence, be tempted to suggest that perspectives can be defined by the list of mental states and attitudes a person, who has a certain background of beliefs or finds herself in a given situation, would have.

(ii) In the second sense, the term “perspective” refers not to a point of view, nor to a set of a person’s attitudes, but to a *technique* or a *method of representing*. This is the sense in which we use the term when we say that linear perspective was invented in the Renaissance: in the

early 15<sup>th</sup> century, Brunelleschi introduced a *method* of representing three-dimensional objects in their spatial relations to adjacent objects on a bidimensional plane. I will discuss this historical moment in more detail in the next section, for now it suffices to note that the term “perspective” can stand for a technique or a method that allows a person, who is trained to use it, to represent any kind of object or scenario.

In this sense, “perspective” can no longer be defined as a set of a person’s beliefs or attitudes, but as the mechanism that produces beliefs of a certain kind when a person is confronted with a certain object or finds herself in a certain scenario. This is the meaning of “perspective” that is operative in the very stimulating account that was developed by Elisabeth Camp. In a recent article, she suggests that “having a perspective is a matter of cognitive action rather than cognitive content” (Camp 2017: 79), and proposes the following definition:

a perspective is an open-ended disposition to notice, explain, and respond to situations in the world — an ability to “go on the same way” in assimilating and responding to whatever information and experiences one encounters. (Camp 2017: 78)

Camp calls the disposition “open-ended” because it can be applied—and will produce new results—in ever new circumstances. A person who has acquired the relevant disposition, in other words, is able to represent any object or scenario she wants to.<sup>9</sup> Her suggestion that perspectives are dispositions underlines that for Camp, perspectives are only in part under our voluntary control. This choice is likely motivated by the fact that all persons always already have a perspective; one does not need to choose to have one, nor does one need to acquire one, which suggests that—at least in some basic forms—perspectives are automatic and intuitive ways to notice, to explain and to respond to features of our environment.

It can nonetheless be instructive to confront one’s own perspective with that of others, which happens, according to Camp, when we “try on” a different perspective. In order to do so, one needs to take on, at least temporarily, a different disposition:

Trying on a perspective requires more than just imagining that a set of propositions is true, or even imagining experiencing something. Rather, it involves actually structuring one’s thinking in certain ways, so that certain sorts of properties stick out as especially notable and explanatorily central in one’s intuitive thinking. (Camp 2017: 74)

This passage shows that Camp offers an interesting alternative to the idea we have explored above, according to which imagining another’s perspective consisted in imaginatively adopting a set of beliefs and simulating the mental episodes a person would have before this background.

<sup>9</sup> This, of course, only holds for objects that are suited to trigger the relevant disposition or to be represented by the respective method. The method of linear perspective, for example, allows painters only to depict objects that are spatially extended (be they real or not)—they could not rely on the method to depict abstract objects.

We can note, however, that “trying on” another perspective in Camp’s sense is quite demanding, it takes much more than pretending to adopt a set of beliefs and simulating a series of mental episodes. One cannot strip off a disposition and try on another one as easily as one takes off a pair of shoes in a store to try on a new one. *Trying on* a perspective, according to Camp, requires us to *interiorize* the other’s “disposition to notice, explain, and respond to situations in the world” (Camp 2017: 78), which means to interiorize, at least for some time, also the most basic ways of reacting automatically and intuitively to one’s environment. In a way, we need to become another person for that time; taking on another perspective is “temporarily altering us ‘as we are’” (Camp 2017: 94). Moreover, it is demanding not only to try on another’s perspective, it can also prove difficult to strip it off when one is done; the game of perspectives might have a lasting impact on one’s personality—which can explain the manipulative power of some works of fiction. According to Camp, “adopting a perspective is partly but not entirely under one’s voluntary control. And even when we try on perspectives temporarily, in the context of fiction, doing so may have lingering cognitive effects” (Camp 2017: 74).

With this account, Elisabeth Camp makes a significant contribution to the debate that substantially advances our understanding of perspective. The short sketch that I have given shows that she defines “perspective” as a mechanism to guide attention, to generate beliefs and to trigger responses in all different kinds of circumstances in which we might find ourselves. I do fear, however, that her explanation of how we can try on another’s perspective is not fully convincing; the process described seems too laborious. In most cases, it does not take much effort to imagine another’s perspective—we do so, at different degrees of profoundness, in many exchanges with other persons in everyday life, without having to become another one; we do so in a more playful way when we imagine hypothetical perspectives in games of make-believe that are solicited by works of fictional narrative; and we do so when we “jump” with ease from one perspective to another while pondering over a philosophical or scientific problem.

Moreover, perspectives seem to have a social and normative dimension that dispositions do not have. One can adopt a certain perspective for reasons and can share one’s perspective with others, but it is not clear to me that this also holds for dispositions. Rather than being shared, the latter seem to run parallel. A person masters a technique or applies a method when she is able to conform her own behavior to a set of rules or principles; she has a disposition, on the other hand, if stimuli of a certain form regularly trigger a certain reply. Accordingly, two persons share the same perspective when they share (more or less) the same set of rules or principles to which they conform their behavior; they have the same disposition, on the other hand, when they react to similar stimuli in similar ways that are not shared, but are merely parallel to one another.

It seems to me that Camp's position is at an impasse at this point. In the next section I will suggest that a look back in time can help us to overcome it: there is a lesson to be learned from the dynamics of the events that unfolded when linear perspective was invented in Renaissance painting.

#### 4. *The Invention of Linear Perspective in Renaissance Painting*

The invention of linear perspective in Renaissance painting is generally attributed to Filippo Brunelleschi, who developed a method that allowed artists to faithfully represent space, or rather, three-dimensional objects in their spatial relations to adjacent objects. Applying this method, it was suggested, a painter could depict three-dimensional scenarios "as the eye sees them". Leon Battista Alberti famously compared the plane of a painting with a pane of a window; ideally, a well-drafted painting should be able to trick the observer and make her believe that she is seeing a real scenario through a transparent window.

Brunelleschi liked to demonstrate his mastery with an experiment that involved two of his paintings that faithfully represented two eminent buildings in Florence, the *Baptistry* and the *Palazzo de' Signori*, in their actual contexts. He invited people to assume a clearly defined position in front of one of the two buildings, presumably the position he had occupied when drawing the paintings, and to peek through a small hole in the plane of the painting that was positioned in front of their eyes, with the backside facing them. Moreover, it was possible to place a mirror between the observer and the building at an appropriate distance, in which the painting could be reflected. The test persons peered through the plane towards the building and were asked to decide whether they saw the actual building or the reflection of the painting in the mirror. If we want to believe the account of Brunelleschi's early biographer Antonio Manetti (1970: 52ff), they were not able to tell the difference: Brunelleschi's paintings were indistinguishable from the real scenarios.

In his study on the history of perspective, Martin Kemp points out that it is not by accident that Brunelleschi conducted his experiment with two paintings that showed actual buildings. In fact, when developing his method, he was driven by his interest in architecture. Already during his first trip to Rome he made drawings of buildings using measurements and simple calculations based on triangulation.<sup>10</sup> Brunelleschi's exact method is not recorded, but we know that it relied on real buildings as a starting point for its perspectival projections:

Brunelleschi's method took as its starting point a set of actual buildings, working *from* these towards a perspectival projection. He was not, therefore, creating an independent space on *a priori* principles. He required some

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Manetti (1970: 152f).

method of plotting the salient features of the views on flat surface of the picture plane, which thus came to function as a kind of window. (Kemp 1992: 14)

Brunelleschi, thus, had developed a method to depict three-dimensional scenarios most faithfully, but he could do so only by relying on buildings he could actually see; he could not have applied his method to paint imaginary or fictional ones: “The procedures relied upon existing buildings and, inevitably, resulted in the portrayal of these buildings” (Kemp 1992: 15).<sup>11</sup>

In subsequent decades, Brunelleschi’s method was further developed, both in the workshops, where individual painters adopted it—each of them adjusting it in their own way that met their own practical purposes—and in a more systematic and rigorous way by painters like Leon Battista Alberti, Piero della Francesca or Albrecht Dürer, who gave systematic descriptions of it and so contributed to its codification.<sup>12</sup> In their treatises, they presented linear perspective as a method that was based on principles of mathematics, geometry and optics, “without which no one can become a true artisan” (Dürer 1977: 37). This step in the development was an enormous achievement that fundamentally changed not only the artistic practice, but also the way people looked at paintings. Let me highlight two aspects that are particularly relevant for our debate.

First, the theoretical, systematic, and scientifically informed explanation of the method conferred particular authority on it. It suggested that linear perspective was more than an idiosyncratic style: it was presented as a technique that allowed to avoid embarrassing errors and to depict the world *correctly*; painters who applied the method could come to represent reality “as the eye sees it”. This promise bestowed an assertive force on the painting, which turned it into a claim, as it were.<sup>13</sup> By depicting a scenario, it is as if the painter would affirm that “*this is how things look*” or better: “*this is what a person would have seen if she had been in the relevant position in the right moment in time.*” This entails, however, that there are *criteria of correctness*

<sup>11</sup> This, incidentally, was one of the reasons why Brunelleschi’s method did not catch on right away: it could not be put to use by other painters. “Painters were not employed to paint townscapes as such, except in very unusual circumstances, and a set of existing buildings is unlikely to have provided an appropriate or adaptable setting for the religious subject-matter which predominated” (Kemp 1992: 15).

<sup>12</sup> The parallel development of perspective, on a more practical level in the workshops and on a theoretical level in the treatises, is emphasized by Feyerabend, cf. (1999: 98); cf also (Kemp 1992: 21–44). The process of codification took place in a period of several decades; Kemp suggests that Brunelleschi’s invention of perspective occurred in or before 1413 (cf. Kemp 1992: 9). Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise *De pictura* dates from 1435, Piero della Francesca’s *De prospectiva pingendi* was written in the in the mid-1470s to 1480s, and Dürer’s *Underweysung der messung* was completed in 1525.

<sup>13</sup> For this reason, it has been argued by art historians, the invention of linear perspective has changed the way we look at paintings; cf. Büttner (2005).

for pictorial representation, and invites to hold the painting against reality—as Brunelleschi has done with his experiment, which we have discussed above.

It did not take very long, however, until it was unveiled that linear perspective could not live up to this promise. Leonardo noted already in the last decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century that there was a difference between visual and physical space, which coincide only when the observer looks at things from a fixed position.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Paul Feyerabend's discussion of Brunelleschi's experiment suggests that the criteria for correctness are not absolute or universally valid. It is not possible to determine—in a way that can be extended to all kinds of pictorial representation—how we are supposed to hold a painting against an independent reality. Even Brunelleschi, Feyerabend suggests, when conducting the experiment, examined his painting (of the *Baptistry* or the *Palazzo de' signori*) by checking it against *something else*, but:

This “something else” was not a building; it was a building as seen with a single eye in a precisely defined place or, as I shall say, ... an aspect of a building ... His experiment involved two artifacts, not an artifact (the painting) and an art-independent “reality.” (Feyerabend 1999: 100)

According to Feyerabend, we should understand the painting, the depicted object, and the method of representation as elements of a stage that was built by Brunelleschi—and each comparison between the painting and the object takes place on this stage. We cannot simply treat the painting and the building as two independent objects and compare one with the other. There are too many differences that hold between them and that need to be systematically neglected: “The building was large, heavy, three-dimensional, made of stone; the picture small, light, its surface two-dimensional, and it was made of wood (a panel) covered by layers of pigment” (Feyerabend 1999: 100). A painting is a bi-dimensional projection of a three-dimensional scenario that follows a clearly defined method; it is faithful to some, but systematically distorts or neglects other aspects of reality. Thus, when we hold the painting against reality to judge whether the representation is faithful, we need to focus on the aspects which—relative to the method applied—are considered relevant, and to systematically neglect other ones. The criteria that determine whether the representation is *correct*, in other words, are defined from “within” the method.

This stands in contrast with a basic assumption that was widely shared in the Renaissance and from which the assertive force of the paintings had emerged: the assumption that linear perspective is an objectively valid method to *correctly* depict an independent reality—to represent real scenarios as an “innocent eye” would see them. In short,

<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Leonardo became aware that a strict application of the method would lead to systematic distortions when one tries to apply it to “a series of objects of equal size distributed at equal intervals along a plane perpendicular to our axis of vision” (Kemp 1992: 49).

linear perspective was invented as an “absolute” method to correctly represent reality, but there are good reasons to suggest that the criteria of correctness are not absolute; they do not hold independently of this method, but are defined from within. This was the first point in which I think the invention of linear perspective is relevant for our present purposes.

The second point focuses on the fact that the early treatises on linear perspective present the method by the rules and principles that guide it. The treatises are designed as *manuals* that gave detailed descriptions of the concrete steps one had to perform in order to apply this method of representation. Linear perspective, thus, became a method that was clearly defined by rules and principles and could be passed on to others—to artists and artisans, who could use it for their practical purposes.<sup>15</sup>

By introducing these rules and principles, the method was raised to a level of abstraction that made it superfluous to take actual buildings as starting points for perspectival projections. Painters could now apply the method also to depict imaginary scenarios, which creates an interesting dialectic tension with the fact that linear perspective established an “assertive claim”. Linear perspective is (or better: was conceived as) a method that allows the painter to faithfully represent, down to the last detail, any real scenario. The resulting assertive claim might be bracketed, but remains subliminally present even when the method is applied to a hypothetical or counterfactual scenario, which makes the painter’s invitation to explore it in the imagination even more forceful. It so substantially increases the efficacy of the work.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, once the rules and principles that govern the method are made explicit, they can be reflected, criticized, emended or revised; most importantly, they can be used creatively, bended or even violated. This happened quite early in Renaissance painting and added a new level of quality to it. Some painters quickly realized that by distorting their projections they could achieve particularly powerful effects. The invention of linear perspective, thus, has paved the way for a special technique, *anamorphosis*, that allowed painters like Raphael, Mantegna, Correggio, Parmigianino and many others to achieve illusionistic effects of a highest aesthetic quality. When bending the rules of representations, anamorphisms not only presuppose the very existence of these rules, they also draw the observer’s attention towards them. As

<sup>15</sup> This aspect becomes particularly evident already in the title of Dürer’s treatise, *Underweysung der messung mit dem zirckel und richtscheyt* [*Instruction for measuring with Compass and Ruler*].

<sup>16</sup> David Hume individuated a similar effect in the context of literary fiction, when he states: “Poets themselves, tho’ liars by profession, always endeavour to give an air of truth to their fictions; and where that is totally neglected, their performances, however ingenious, will never be able to afford much pleasure.” (Hume 1978: 121) Thus, the efficacy of literary fiction, according to Hume, depends on the author’s talent to “give an air of truth” to her fictions.

representations of fictional scenarios, they invite the audience to immerse into a world of fiction, but they also draw, at the same time, their attention towards the technique of representation that had been applied to represent these scenarios—and with it the rules and principles that govern our representational activities.

In conclusion, this short excursus on the invention of linear perspective in Renaissance painting has shown that perspective is a technique or method of representation that is guided by rules and principles. In their treatises, Renaissance painters have tried to formulate these rules in a systematic way—very much like grammarians try to make the rules that govern language explicit—with the purpose to pass it on to others, which shows that perspective is a technique that can be taught and acquired; it is a social practice that can be shared with others. Finally, works of art are particularly apt to draw attention to the rules that constitute and guide this practice; and they do so in a particularly forceful way when they bend them.

### 5. *How to imagine other perspectives*

We have seen above (end of Section 3) that according to Camp, trying on another perspective consists in adopting a disposition to notice, to explain, and to respond to situations in the world. I have suggested that this explanation is quite laborious, as it requires us to strip off our own dispositions and to take on other ones; in a way one has to become, if only temporarily, another person. This, I have suggested, does not seem to do justice to the fact that in everyday life we often switch perspective—and in many cases it does not take much effort to do so.

A look back at the invention of perspective in Renaissance painting offers us a slightly different explanation that might be more appropriate in these cases: in light of the discussion presented in Section 4, it seems reasonable to suggest that a perspective is not a disposition, but a *rule-guided method* or *technique* of representing that determines, which aspects of our environment we will likely note by rendering some aspects salient and occluding others; which allows us to explain what's happening around us by suggesting how it fits into a bigger picture; and which enables us to act or to engage in certain forms of behavior in response to it.

This understanding of perspective is more demanding than Camp's; it allows us to attribute perspectives only to creatures who are able to engage in rule-following behavior. Camp is right when she states that “adopting a perspective is partly but not entirely under one's voluntary control” (Camp 2017: 74). After all, some aspects of one's perspective likely result from one's biological constitution and the set-up of one's perceptual apparatus, which allows us to take in some, but makes us blind to other aspects of our environment. It seems important to me, however, to insist that having a perspective is possible only for those who are aware that it is possible to shift perspectives and who have an

understanding that there are other persons who have, in fact, adopted different perspectives on the shared environment.

This underlines the importance of being able to “try on” other perspectives. I suggest that we rely on our capacity of imagination to do so. Imagining another’s perspective consists in reconstructing the rules and principles that govern the respective technique, in figuring out which results they would produce in determinate circumstances, and in grasping the criteria that determine whether a resulting representation is correct. This does not require us to temporarily give up our own perspective, it rather requires us to understand and interiorize rules of representation that are different from our own as well as to apply these rules and to act according to them.

Camp is definitely right when she insists that trying on a perspective has a practical dimension, which, I think, should be understood as *mastering a technique* or *learning to apply rules*. But there are differences in degree, and one can come to understand another perspective also on a more theoretical level. There is an important analogy between imagining a perspective and learning a second language: In a first step, one needs to learn the rules of grammar. The resulting theoretical knowledge can suffice to reconstruct the meaning of an utterance in that language and to determine which forms of linguistic behavior are considered appropriate in it—even though it might take some time and effort to do so. Applying unfamiliar rules and principles can be arduous. When we deal with dead languages like Latin or ancient Greek, we typically content ourselves with this level of proficiency. Similarly, one can come to understand another perspective by gaining theoretical knowledge concerning the rules and principles that govern it—and this knowledge can suffice to reconstruct “what the world looks like” for a person who adopts it.

Becoming fluent in a foreign language, as well as *adopting* another’s perspective, on the other hand, has also a practical dimension, though. If one manages to interiorize the rules of grammar and to acquire the practical skills to behave according to them, one will become fluent in that language—but remains fluent in one’s first language. Similarly, if one learns to apply the rules of representing that govern a perspective, one will learn to see the world in a different way—and, at the same time, remain aware of what it looks like from one’s own perspective.

Imagining other perspectives can, of course, have effects on one’s own. A new technique of representing might be so convincing that one deliberately decides to leave one’s old perspective behind in favor of the new one. In less radical cases, one might try to integrate relevant aspects of the other technique into one’s own (if possible). Sometimes, imagining other perspectives might lead to evolutions that consist in minor adjustments of one’s own perspective that are hardly noticed. These are the cases Camp likely has in mind when she suggests that trying on a perspective can have “lingering cognitive effects” (Camp

2017, 74). Also here we have an interesting analogy with the acquisition of a second language: the more a person immerses into a foreign language, the more she risks that it can have “lingering effects” on her first language—it might make her use unusual idioms or alter her accent or the melody of her speech.

In the present paper I have argued that perspective is best defined not as a “disposition to notice, explain, and respond to situations in the world” (Camp 2017: 78), but as a rule-guided method or technique of noticing and representing, which has an immediate impact on how we come to understand and respond to what is going on around us. When we first develop a perspective—very much like when we acquire a first language—we do not do so by conscious choice. Moreover, we deeply interiorize the rules that guide the practice. This explains how it can seem that adopting a perspective is “partly but not entirely under one’s voluntary control” (Camp 2017: 74). It is important to note, however, that once one has come to have an understanding of these rules, one can revise and alter them—or “try on” another perspective by temporarily adopting a different set of rules.

The rules in question determine how we represent the world around us, which aspects are salient, and how we react to given situations; they guide activities that are relevant for our understanding. Trying on another perspective in this sense is particularly efficient when we are interested in finding out where it would lead us if we would perform these activities (of noticing and representing) in systematically different ways that are guided by different rules and principles. Which aspects of our environment would result salient, which would come to be occluded? How would we understand what is going on around us within this different perspective? Which effect would that have on our ways to respond?

Let me note that there is an interesting contrast between this sense of “trying on another’s perspective” and trying to understand a subjective point of view in the sense I have discussed above (Section 2). When we try to understand what things “feel like” for another subject, we might be driven by trying to get in touch with the other as a person, which explains why our empathetic capacities play a central role in the positions I have discussed. When we try to understand which impact a different method of representing would have on the result, on the other hand, our main focus is on how a person—not a specific individual, but any person who adopts this perspective—would come to notice, explain and respond to situations in the world. We are, in short, not interested in the other as a person, but in the rules she has adopted that guide the way in which she comes to make sense of what is going on around her.

This result can make the present account particularly apt for explaining our interest in works of narrative fiction. We hardly read a novel or watch a movie because we are interested in the characters *as persons*—after all, we know that they are but the products of imagination who have never really existed. In many cases we are rather inter-

ested in their perspectives—in the sense of a rule-guided methods or techniques to notice, explain and respond to given situations. In other words, when engaging with fiction, we are typically not interested in having encounters with *persons*, but with *agents* who have adopted a certain set of rules and principles that guide their behavior. With their detailed descriptions of how characters notice, explain and respond to situations, works of narrative fiction are particularly apt to allow for encounters of this kind. We are, of course, fully aware that these agents are creatures of fiction who have never really existed. This does not undermine our understanding, though. Rather, it helps us to draw our attention not at the characters, but at their perspectives.

## 6. Conclusion

In the present paper, I have focused on one particular response to the anti-cognitivist challenge: the thesis that works of narrative fiction can broaden our understanding of other perspectives or points of view. I have argued that this thesis can be understood in two different ways: in a first reading, it suggests that works of narrative fiction help us to gain an understanding of subjective experiences one might not (yet) have made oneself. I have suggested that the focus of these accounts can be on the qualitative aspects of experience or on the nature of subjectivity. I have argued that works of narrative fiction are successful in communicating this form of knowledge only if they solicit *de se* imaginings in their audience. Moreover, approaches of this kind likely suggest that the audience takes an empathic stance towards the works or the characters described in it.

A second reading of the thesis conceives of perspective as a rule-guided method or technique to note, to explain and to respond to relevant aspects of one's environment. I have discussed Elisabeth Camp's account of perspective, which seemed laborious when it comes to trying on other perspectives. A look back at the invention of linear perspective in Renaissance painting has opened the way to define perspective as a rule-guided method or technique of representing. According to this conception, imagining another person's perspective does not consist in trying on another's dispositions to note, to explain and to respond, but merely requires us to reconstruct—at a merely theoretical or at a practical level—the rules and principles that guide the other's method of representing.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> I have presented earlier drafts of this paper at the "Fact, Fiction and Narration" conference at the University of Rijeka and at the MUMBLE workshop "Imagining, Understanding and Knowing" at the University of Turin. I want to thank the audience at these workshops, as well as two anonymous referees of this journal, for their interesting suggestions and critique. A particular thanks goes to the members of PRISMA (the Parma research group on imagination in the sciences, philosophy of mind and the arts), and in particular to Irene Binini and Daniele Molinari, for our extensive discussions on these topics that have helped me to get a clearer view on the topics presented here.

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