

Aesthetics of illusion: an analysis of *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*

Neha Soi

ABSTRACT

Film, like most other forms of media, works on creating an illusion of reality. The story is depicted in a manner to not only convey the sequence of events, but to offer a perspective to the viewers. The narrative is styled to ensure a privileged viewpoint and it is followed seamlessly to ensure viewer attention. Further, the orchestration of this perspective rests on selective visuality: some details are accentuated and revealed, while others are purportedly hidden to create a semblance of reality and credibility. The technical aspects of the *mise-en-scene*, and the processes that enable the craft are particularly hidden to create a phantasmagoria that can have the desired affect on the viewers. However, in Wes Anderson's 2023 film *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*, these technical processes are not only shown, but also accentuated. Even the narrative is handed over from character to character, ostensibly offering many perspectives to the viewer. This paper is designed to probe the narrative and illusive aesthetics of this film to underscore the alternate illusion of reality that the film offers. The paper also highlights the hypernarrative and the hyperillusive aspects in this cinematic experience.

Keywords: *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*, narrative technique, film form, phantasmagoria, hypernarrative.

Medium is the message...[;] the “content” of any medium is always another medium.

– Marshall McLuhan, 1994: 8

In her 1992 essay on Benjamin's landmark thesis on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Susan Buck-Morss describes the phantasmagoria¹ that conceals reality in its overemphasis and creates an alternate version of it. In talking of art, particularly performing art, Buck-Morss argues that the orchestra in Wagner's opera was hidden from the view of the

audience to enhance an aesthetic affect and cause an alternate reality to take shape. She explains, “[a]t Bayreuth the orchestra – the means of production of the musical effects is hidden from the public by constructing the pit below the audience’s line of vision” (25), to create an illusion of wholeness that can offer a sense of credibility to the performance and make it seem real. This perceptual field of illusion offers a predesigned visual to the audience and mediates the images to produce a desired affect in them. The illusion of reality, in its appeal to the viewers, becomes a simulation of the real and creates a mediated aesthetics. This play of aesthetics between the illusion and the reality becomes a fertile field of analysis in the area of technologically produced works of art,² such as film. Meaning in film is predicated as much on what is revealed as on what is hidden from view. For the phantasmagoria of film to cause affect, the audio-visual is highly mediated to control what is to be made accessible to the viewer. Reality as affect is mediated through an aesthetics of illusion.

While discussing the ‘truth of the image,’ Kolker emphasizes that through Computer-generated images (CGI) or visualizing through the lens, film is artificial. With Bazin and the idea of the *objectif*, the mediation of reality through the lens, even at the level of the camera obscura, becomes an artificial phenomenon: “made by art” (Kolker, 2015: 20). The *media*-tion, that is an essential facet of film, renders it at once susceptible to the perspective that is privileged in the narrative, and herein lies the pleasure of illusion. Inasmuch as film offers a perspective privileged by the media employed in it, it triggers an analysis into these media and a deconstruction of the narrative through its visualization. Narrative in film is not only about the perspective of the auteur but also about the technique of visualization that is multi-mediatic and overlapping. If McLuhan’s idea quoted above it to be taken in this regard, every media carries within it other mediatic forms which inform the content and meaning then comes to be located in the play between these media. The film form, in particular offers an ample scope for phantasmagoria with its multimediality in form, content and technique. This paper is designed to analyze the narrative space of the film *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*

(Anderson, 2023), and unravel the narrative technique employed in the film which engages the viewer in a carnival of visualities. The paper will offer a brief introduction to the film and its narrative technique, while simultaneously underscoring the carnival of illusion, aesthetics and meaning in the text.

An Indian Paintbrush and American Empirical collaborative production, *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* offers a crossover modern parable bringing orientalist morality together with an avarice driven by western mercantilism in an attempt to offer a possible redemption. Based on Roald Dahl's 1977 short story by the same title, the 40-minute film is about the spiritual and moral transformation that comes about in the character of Henry Sugar, a rich and lonely man given to gambling and indifferent to scruples. The name Henry Sugar is disclaimed in the film as a pseudonym taken to protect the identity of this rich man. Sugar (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) reads of how Imdad Khan (Ben Kingsley), a member of a travelling circus in India, acquired the skill to see without his eyes from a Great Yogi (Richard Ayoade), in a book written by an Indian doctor Z Z Chatterjee (Dev Patel), and emulates his meditative practice to perfect the skill with the intention to win at gambling and augment his wealth. However, the experience of Imdad Khan, an essentially oriental character with his vagabond existence, his mysterious skills and his connections with the spiritual, transform the self-centered westerner Sugar and he mysteriously feels the urge to disburse his winnings among people in the street. When his sudden burst of philanthropy causes a chaos in the street, he is advised by a policeman to give the money to a charity. He then asks his accountant John Winston (also played by Dev Patel) to establish places of charity like orphanages, hospitals etc and funnel his winnings to these places. He goes on to take several disguises and travels to various casinos always keeping his winnings limited to an amount that does not invite scrutiny, and thereby funds his philanthropic ventures. Upon his death, his story is conveyed to Dahl (Ralph Fiennes), who is the primary narrator of the film.

The film offers a layered narrative of a story told by Imdad Khan to Dr Z Z Chatterjee, who writes of it in a book that is read by the protagonist Henry Sugar, whose assistant, John Winston, in turn tells the story to Roald Dahl, who narrates the story to the viewer in the film. Interestingly, sitting at the sixth remove from the first narrative, the viewer gets a first-hand view of every level of the narration through first person accounts of each of these layers. There are two prominent stylistic features that are observable about the narrative. First, the film offers direct narrative space in the first person to almost all the characters. Starting from Dahl, the narrative is taken over by Sugar, followed by Dr Chatterjee (and his fellow doctors), Imdad Khan, once again Henry Sugar (and the policeman) and finally Dahl again. Second, the phantasmagoria of the film seems to be created not by veiling but revealing the technique of the visual. Unlike the aesthetics of film which are created by hiding elements of technique like the orchestra in Wagner's opera, the film shows techniques of makeup, costume, lighting and illusion to the viewer thereby undercutting the phantasmagoria. These two aspects of the narrative style create what can be called a hypernarrative in the film, which offers an alternate aesthetics and illusion.

Narratives function as privileged perceptions creating a perspective for the viewer and obliterating all other possible viewpoints. Russian formalists Victor Shklovsky and Vladimir Propp defined the terms *fabula* and *syuzhet* as the raw material of a story and how a story is narrated respectively. In fiction or in film, the narrative is conveyed through the perspective of a privileged eye that offers a perception to the reader/viewer. In the film under study, the narrative is arranged in a manner that the writer Roald Dahl seems to hand over the reins of storytelling to the characters and then retrieves the control of the story eventually. Further at every level of narration, the characters empathically seem to stress that they are conveying the tale honestly and faithfully.

Dahl begins his account with a list of things he needs before he starts writing:

I like to make sure I have everything around me that I'm going to need. Um...cigarettes of course. Some coffee, chocolates. And always make sure I have a sharp pencil before I start. I have six pencils, and then I like to clean my writing board.

This clinical account of detached writing is followed by the story which begins with an introduction to Henry Sugar:

Henry Sugar was 41 years old, unmarried and rich. He was rich because he had a rich father, who was now dead. He was unmarried because *he was too selfish to share any of his money with a wife*. He was 6'2" tall, and *not perhaps as handsome as he thought he was.... Men like Henry Sugar can be found drifting like seaweed all over the world. They are not particularly bad men, but they are not good men either....* Henry Sugar was one of those [who bet on anything], *and not at all above cheating, by the way.* (my emphasis)

The ostensibly objective account of Henry Sugar is tempered with portions of value judgement and interjection on the part of the writer, as emphasised above. The straight-faced narrative with its painted sets and minimal camera movement creates an environment of unbiased reportage but the message is nevertheless opinionated and ideological.

When Dahl's narrative is handed off to Henry Sugar in a change of scene from Dahl's Cispay House to the stately countryside house of Sir William W., he refers to himself in the third person, and continues in the same vein of condescension about himself as Dahl did when he cast him as a spoilt, rich man. Henry says of himself, "He drifted through the house, aimless. Then finally mooched into the library." The tone continues to be that of disdain under the garb of disinterestedness, till Sugar begins to read from Chatterjee's account of "the man who sees without his eyes." The narrative is then passed on to Dr Z Z Chatterjee at the Lords and Ladies Hospital in Calcutta on 2 December 1935, who speaks in the first person, but with the continued air of detachment and stoicism.

Imdad Khan enters the narrative at this point and his words are given to us in the direct form. Imdad Khan announces that he can see without using his eyes and asks the doctors to bandage his eyes thoroughly so that his audience does not suspect him of cheating at his performance in the circus that evening. The narrator, Dr Chatterjee establishes Khan's credibility based on his age, his greying moustache and his confidence and confesses that his curiosity was piqued. It is interesting to note that the doctors not only bandage his eyes, but also put glue and kneaded flour on them to establish that there is no illusion in the performance. Imdad Khan's performance of cycling in the street with his eyes glued shut by the doctors, is seen by the viewers of the film along with the narrator Dr Chatterjee (and Dr Marshall to corroborate his observation). Khan's claim to an honest performance and the doctors' thoroughness in bandaging his eyes go on to stress the objectivity of the narrative and offer a visual assurance to the audience that no illusion, but only reality is being offered to them. Imdad Khan's intriguing story that is clinically vouched for by the doctors, provides as a parallel for the illusion of reality that the film is creating for the viewer through its hypernarrative.

Further the doctor says to Imdad Khan, "I am not a writer by profession. But if you tell me how you developed this power of being able to see without your eyes, I'll take it down as faithfully as I can." He says to the audience then, "I have a shorthand for taking down medical histories. I believe I got everything Imdad said to me, word for word. I give it to you now, exactly as he spoke it." This remark by the doctor once again asserts the objectivity and faithfulness of his account, creating an illusion of credibility and reality.

The narrative is now taken over by Imdad Khan in the first person, who begins his account from his birth in Kashmir in 1873, his attraction to a conjurer and his joining a travelling circus and sojourning all through the country with them. He then tells of a Yogi that he heard of who could levitate in his prayers, and decided to meet him. He tells of his eventful journey to the forest to meet the Yogi and then describes how he saw the Yogi begin his

prayers and levitate for 46 minutes 15 inches above his prayer mat. The details recounted by Imdad Khan in terms of the time the Yogi prayed for, or how long he levitated for, or the visible proof of where he was hit by the Yogi on the shin upon being discovered, are all offered very clearly and emphatically to stress the credibility of the story and create a willing suspension of disbelief.

The stoic and clinical manner of acting with actors facing the camera directly and minimal perspective shots in the film further accentuate the illusion of objectivity in the film. The *syuzhet* then seems to claim a clear congruence with the *fabula* and disclaims any privileging of perspective. Melodrama is minimized in a plot that unfurls rather swiftly leaving no time or space for accentuated performances. A rather poker-faced description seems to disguise what is in fact a dramatized parable.

The essential discourse about oriental mysticism, the exotica of a travelling circus, the fallibility of the human exemplified by the momentary violence on the part of the Yogi and his immediate remorse and penitence all create a backdrop that is at once believable and seemingly realistic. That the action is set around the turn of the twentieth century further accentuates the credibility of the story in its congruence with the existing orientalist ideology of that time. To make it palatable to the twenty-first century viewer, Dahl, and Anderson, introduce a conduit to narrate Imdad Khan's story in the form of two doctors in a colonially funded hospital, one Indian and one British. The story of Imdad Khan is further accessed by the western viewer through the experience of Henry Sugar, who not only reads of it but emulates it, succeeds by it and evolves through it. The corroboration of eastern mysticism by western experience makes the account more believable.

Further, the *mise-en-scene* of the film creates a phantasmagoria that offers an illusion that is unquestionable despite its evident intrigue. Film works on creating an illusion of reality. The frame essentially works to create a space of vision that focuses on the privileged visualisation while actively obscuring the extraneous and the technical to control the perception of the viewer and offer a controlled vision of reality to them. Following Godard's view, it

can be observed that film offers a fantasy even in the context of documentaries or actualities, in that the visualization offered is not real but selective and privileged (*La Chinoise*, 1967).³ Rather than triggering an imagination in entirety, film offers a visualized imagination which evokes a sensibility of reality and truth in its resemblance to the lived reality of human beings in the world. Kolker suggests:

[F]ilms from all over the world are constructed on a principle of radical self-effacement, rendering their form invisible This is made possible through a set of conventions and assumptions by means of which the viewer will accept the illusion of transparency and see the film as an unmediated, ongoing whole, a story played out in front of her eyes. Form and structure, the artifice of the image, and the fragmentary nature of screen acting and editing will all melt away and merge together in apparent wholeness. (47)

This illusion of unmediated presentation is what leads to the affect of cinema. The formal conventions are hidden from view and the screen is presented as a window into reality causing the much significant willing suspension of disbelief.

The phantasmagoria of film usually depends upon obliterating the technical and the mechanical. The dark theatre room (a necessity for Edison's kinetoscope, but a purported blinding in the current times) ensures a limited visual for the viewer. The inclusion of the technical would then predictably obfuscate the perceived reality and challenge the affect. However, in underscoring the technical and mechanical and ensuring its visibility in excess of the *mise-en-scene*, this film creates a hypertextual narrative that ensures the objectivity of the narrator and therefore ironically adds to the affect of illusion of reality.

In *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* the hypertextual elements not only remain visible but also occupy the field of vision to accentuate the story. In fact, very often they also create diversions and interruptions which makes them a part of the

primary action and places them in complete visibility. This lack of the backstage renders the narrative an aura of openness and reality making it seem like anticinema. The *mise-en-scene* which is supposed to augment the illusion of reality now reveals it's working and bares itself to the audience in all its errors and *faux pas* and forms a part of the cinematic narrative. It is in this excess of visibility, that the film creates not an illusion but a hyperillusion that is premised on revealing rather than hiding. The excessive elements of visibility offer an additional scope for the narrative creating what can be called a hypernarrative space, which ostensibly tells beyond the narrative and thereby informs the narrative.

The purported intimacy of Roald Dahl right at the outset in stating his prerequisites for writing is undercut by the background appearance of a hand drawing a curtain away causing more light into the room. The small and simple hut, which seems to have been Dahl's abode for three decades, supposably in isolation, is clearly illuminated by an unseen presence that causes to offer the missing fill light in the opening scene. In a scene where Imdad Khan begins to talk about his youth and his encounter with the Yogi, the makeup is done in front the camera. While the eye brows, wig and accessories are changed immediately with a pit-crew efficiency, the moustache remains unchanged as he narrates his journey to the yurt of the Yogi. He gestures rather agitatedly for the moustache to be changed and then leaves the frame to make the required change, with his voice taking a distant echo. Further on, the scene showing the levitating Yogi, shows him placing a painted stool under himself to give the illusion of a gap between himself and the prayer mat. Even when he descends from the perceived height, he stands up and places the stool away. Further in the film, when Imdad Khan begins his meditative practice to perfect the skill of being able to see without his eyes by focussing on the face of his dead brother, the backdrop is physically altered in front of the camera without any cuts.

It is also interesting to note that this traditional back stage action is performed by the other actors in the film. Not only are the same

actors playing many roles in the narrative, they are also performing tasks such as make up, set arrangement, etc. Benedict Cumberbatch plays the role of Henry Sugar as well as a make-up assist. Ben Kingsley plays Imdad Khan as well as the Dealer in a casino. Ralph Fiennes plays the role of Dahl along with the Policeman. Dr Chatterjee and John Winston are both played by Dev Patel, and Richard Ayoade plays the Great Yogi as well as Dr Marshall. This duplicity of the actors makes their roles seem ephemeral and challenge the technique of craft in offering a lack of stability and affiliation between the characters and the viewers. Interestingly, the lack of stability between actors and characters further universalizes the story and renders it realistic. Insofar as actors play multiple roles, across the scope of time, space and character, the story becomes more relatable and credible.

In its lack of hiding the stagecraft to create an illusion of reality, ironically, a hyperillusive cinematic form is offered which creates an illusion of reality in showing more than what is expected. It is almost as if the backstage elements are made accessible to the viewer creating a hypernarrative that offers an illusion of reality by accentuating the narrative with its ancillary details of craft. The aesthetics of this hyperillusive technique permeate the fourth wall of cinema and invite the viewer on the stage where all stagecraft is visible too. However, the illusion still ensures only partial visibility. The framing of the set is always static and the camera offers only an eye-level shot, with actors moving across the frame rather than the camera following them. Painted two-dimensional sets and backdrops which are sled out to create alternate backdrops (with the sound effect of a sliding frame) add to the theatre-like affect of the film and bring the actors in greater proximity to the viewers. The distance caused by the screen is undercut through these effects which add to the multimediality of the film. Actors face the camera to deliver their dialogue and present their action with a stoicism that borders on the machinic. This makes the film transcend the form of the film to that of theatre and further to the backstage.

In *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* narrative technique, layered narrative, multiple perspectives, theatrical presentation in 2-d sets and backdrop frames, presentation of illusions through painted sets, and actors playing multiple parts diffuse the idea of identity and perspective. While the simple looking frame design and sets offer a semblance of straightforward and unambiguous signification, the multiple voices, perspectives and characters played by actors complicate the narrative and layer it in an unending loop of signification. Not only is Henry Sugar a pseudonym and so simultaneously very near but not accessible, the other characters too, in their constant claims to have reproduced accounts verbatim, raise questions about credibility and perception.

The film offers a technique of narrative that challenges the established form of concealment to create phantasmagoria. In its controlled excess of visibility, the film creates a hypernarrative field of vision which offers an alternate aesthetics and illusion of reality. *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* then becomes a hyperillusive cinematic text that conceals through revelation and creates an aesthetics of multimediality in its form.

Notes

1. Phantasmagoria refers to the use of light and shadows to create visuals which seem dreamlike. While there is a semblance of reality in the produced images, they are illusionary. The term which was earlier used for illusions created for horror theatre in the beginning of the 19th century, has found place in the area of photography and film too.
2. Buck-Morss calls phantasmagoria “technoaesthetics” (22).
3. Godard, in his 1967 film *La Chinoise*, conveys this idea through a character.

References

- Anderson, W. (2023). *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*. Produced by Indian Paintbrush and American Empirical Films Company.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Buck-Morss, S. (1992). Aesthetics and anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's artwork essay reconsidered. *October*, 62, 3–41. The MIT Press.

Kolker, R. P. (2016). *Film, form, and culture* (4th ed.). Routledge.

McLuhan, M., & Lapham, L. H. (1994). *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. MIT Press.

Propp, V. (2010). *Morphology of the folktale* (1929). University of Texas Press.

Shklovsky, V. (2008). *Literature and cinematography* (1923). Dalkey Archive Press.