

Metacinema and Artifice

Fourth-wall Transgression and Narrative Reflexivity in *The Wonder*

BY TRAVIS COOPER
University of Indianapolis

ABSTRACT

This essay examines Sebastián Lelio’s *The Wonder* (2022) through the lens of metacinema, focusing on how the film employs mise-en-scène and fourth-wall transgressions to foreground its own artifice. Beginning with its startling opening on a soundstage, the film repeatedly disrupts narrative immersion, calling attention to the constructed nature of cinematic storytelling. This essay places these scenes in dialogue with Federico Fellini’s *And the Ship Sails On* (1984), a masterclass in reflexive cinema that similarly reveals its backstage machinery. By situating *The Wonder* within broader traditions of cinematic self-consciousness, the essay highlights how metacinema transforms spectatorship from passive consumption into an active, interpretive ritual. By destabilizing realism and exposing the scaffolding of film, *The Wonder* crafts a story while interrogating the very conditions of storytelling itself.

Although cinema is arguably one of the most immersive visual and narrative media, some films are more aware of their artifice than others. Sebastián Lelio’s period piece, *The Wonder* (2022), opens without warning to what appears to be a Hollywood movie set (Fig. 1). A disembodied narrating voice greets us, the confused viewers: “Hello. This is the beginning. The beginning of a film called *The Wonder*.” Cognitive dissonance immediately ensues. The narrator continues: “The people you are about to meet, the characters, believe in their stories with complete devotion.” As viewers, we did not ask for this peek behind the curtain. What’s going on? Anticipating the audience’s bewilderment, the voice proceeds: “We are nothing without stories. And so we invite you to believe in this one” (00:01:07–00:01:31). The



Fig. 1 | Opening on the film set in *The Wonder*, 00:01:00. Element Pictures et al., 2022.



Fig. 2 | Transition from the non-diegetic to the diegetic in *The Wonder*, 00:01:41. Element Pictures et al., 2022.

camera pans steadily through the soundstage, left to right, before zooming into one faux building—the interior of a ship, bearing nineteenth-century passengers, including the protagonist—thus delving into the primary narrative (Fig. 2).

The semiotically confused *mise-en-scène* of the opening frames throws into relief the many carefully constructed elements that go into the effective crafting of a compelling visual narrative. Are we watching a documentary about the making of the film? Have we selected the behind-the-scenes special features, rather than the feature itself? What is going on, exactly? The exposure of the soundstage, dollies, and filmmaking equipment signals to the viewer that the narrative (proper) has not yet begun. The harsh lighting and messy backstage environment are in heightened contrast against viewer expectations regarding what we thought would be a moody period piece set in a remote Irish village in the 1800s. What we are seeing, instead, is a reflexive prelude, an appeal to the audience to reflect on the nature of belief and disbelief, spectatorship, and story.

The opening of *The Wonder* is too much for some viewers. Some find it distracting or pointless. Others—this author included—find it hauntingly effective. But as uncanny as this movie’s introduction may appear, such a cinematic gesture is far from new. Too many similarities exist between Lelio’s *The Wonder* and Federico Fellini’s hyper-reflexive *And the Ship Sails On* (1984) to be mere coincidence. An unforgettable scene in Fellini’s notoriously experimental film challenges what audiences expect of the cinematic experience. First, there is the gradual addition of sound in the opening minutes of *And the Ship Sails On* (00:03:49) followed by the jarring aesthetic switch from black and white to technicolor (00:07:15). But Fellini is in prime trickster form when in a later scene the camera breaks its gaze away from the film’s primary fictional content—the cruise ship and the sea, the wealthy people on the cruise, the ship’s crew, and the various comedic shenanigans that unfold between these different classes—and turns to pan slowly through the backstage operations of directing and recording the film. We see the people on the deck being tossed back and forth with the ship’s pitching (Figs. 3 and 4). But then, ostensibly unrestrained from its traditional narrative, the camera pans

slowly left. In the turn, one glimpses something strange and alien to the narrative. A single microphone boom pole comes into view (Fig. 5). Next, various camera equipment and soundstage scaffolding enter the frame (Fig. 6). Then stagehands, lighting stands, and the massive infrastructure of the hydraulic system powering the rocking of the artificial sea enter the frame (Fig. 7). Lastly, we glimpse the primary camera operators, including the director, Fellini himself, although his face remains obscured behind the camera, which is now square in the centre of our gaze (Fig. 8). At this most solipsistic moment of cinematic exposure and indulgence, the metacinematic aside ends. Seemingly satisfied, the camera completes its sojourn. Then the frame sinks back into the immediate, fictional storyline.

Fellini is a master of reflexive arthouse cinema. The opening fourth-wall transgression of *The Wonder* is a tip of the hat to the playfulness of the Italian auteur. As scholars turn their attention to metacinema, several theories of what exactly constitutes metacinema are emerging. Metacinema indulges in doubleness, layers, and complexity, often involving films about films. Its gaze looks both inward and outward; it is self-referential. Metacinema embeds stories within stories. As with the backstage exposure parallels in *The Wonder* and *The Ship Sails On*, metacinema revels in intertextuality, allusions, and gesture. Metacinema stretches the boundaries of realism and cares not for oversimplistic binary distinctions like *documentary* or *fiction*. And as embodied so well by Lelio’s controversial opening, metacinema encourages a heightened awareness of the socially constructed nature of film artifacts.

Metacinematic expression shatters audience expectations by transgressing the so-called “fourth-wall” of the diegetic narrative. Fourth-wall transgressions occur exactly three times in *The Wonder*: first, in what we might call the prelude (00:01:07); second, around a third of the way through the narrative (00:25:39); and third, during the epilogue (01:42:23). We have discussed the exposed soundstage and the narrator’s entreat-ing of the viewer to suspend disbelief. But later, after we are absorbed in the narrative, a character (Niamh Algar) unexpectedly breaks from her performance as a household servant, peering eerily into the camera and making intense eye contact with



Fig. 3 | The view of the crew and passengers in *The Ship Sails On*, 02:02:55. Criterion Collection, 1999.



Fig. 6 | The soundstage revealed in *The Ship Sails On*, 02:03:04. Criterion Collection, 1999.



Fig. 4 | Seconds before the fictional narrative frame breaks in *The Ship Sails On*, 02:03:00. Criterion Collection, 1999.



Fig. 7 | More backstage operations in *The Ship Sails On*, 02:03:27. Criterion Collection, 1999.



Fig. 5 | The boom appears, signaling the camera's departure from the fictional narrative in *The Ship Sails On*, 02:03:02. Criterion Collection, 1999.



Fig. 8 | The director in the frame, face obscured behind the camera in *The Ship Sails On*, 02:03:38. Criterion Collection, 1999.

viewers (Fig. 9). When she speaks, we recognize her voice as the narrator from the film's unsettling documentary-style opening. This meta-interlude is short lived. As soon as we connect what is happening, in only one or two breaths, the narrator breaks eye contact. Her expression and demeanor shifts. She is a servant again. Back in character, the story moves on. The fourth-wall is again intact and the narrative resumes.

Films working in the meta vein may pay homage to reflexive directors of the past, but they also challenge and reconfigure the role of the audience as consumers of visual narratives. *The Wonder* demands engaged and attentive (rather than passive) viewers and therefore turns moviegoing into an intellectual, even playful sort of popcultural ritual of reception. Viewers must be on the alert for allusions and parallels. Viewers must be vigilant hunters of reflexive winks and other gestures. Metacinema requires viewers to engage in both *eisegesis* and *exegesis*, both reading meaning into and teasing meaning out of a film.

Another way to put this is that metacinema does not lend itself easily to what Kyle Chayka describes as *ambient television*, that is, the viewing of low-stakes entertainment media hosted on mainstream streaming sites like Netflix that play in the background while one works on their laptop, scrolls social media feeds, or does other things as they only half-attentively watch. Metacinema, to the contrary, turns watching into an artistic and intellectual game of reference and connection. It demands audience participation and urges viewers to be present—to pay even *more* attention to the *mise-en-scène*. Staging, props, sounds, colour, composition, costumes: in the metacinematic paradigm, these axiomatic filmic ingredients take on heightened relevance via contrast.

Metacinema, in short, is cinematic “self-consciousness” (Yacavone 86). *The Wonder* is a film that knows its own name, introduces itself to the viewer at the beginning, and bids farewell at the end. The film says, *Look, I am indeed a fictional film.* I

am a Netflix-distributed period piece. But who cares? Want to hear a compelling story? I dare you to resist the narrative's power. In the film's final moments, the camera pans right, exiting the primary narrative and coming full circle to end at the beginning. We are on the modern film set. Again, the harsh overhead lighting, the exposed gear, the technology. At the far right of the frame, we see that the narrator is there, again with her piercing gaze and spine-tingling eye contact. Is she still in character? Is she still the servant? No. Gone is the long period dress and

visual aesthetic. Gone is the rural Irish Midlands setting. She is in modern clothes. But is this a costume? Or is this Niamh Algar herself, the real-world actor who play-acts as the servant, all for the sake of story craft? As Algar unflinchingly stares, the camera zooms in on her face for a final close-up. Algar whispers a soft but chilling refrain, encouraging nothing short of a poetics of audience attentiveness, calmly leading the viewer out of the labyrinthine narrative: "In, out. In, out." Then the screen cuts to black. ■



Fig. 9 | Breaking the fourth-wall with direct audience address and eye contact in *The Wonder*, 00:25:39. Element Pictures et al., 2022.



Fig. 10 | The final seconds of the film. The narrator is back at the soundstage in *The Wonder*, 01:42:28. Element Pictures et al., 2022.

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