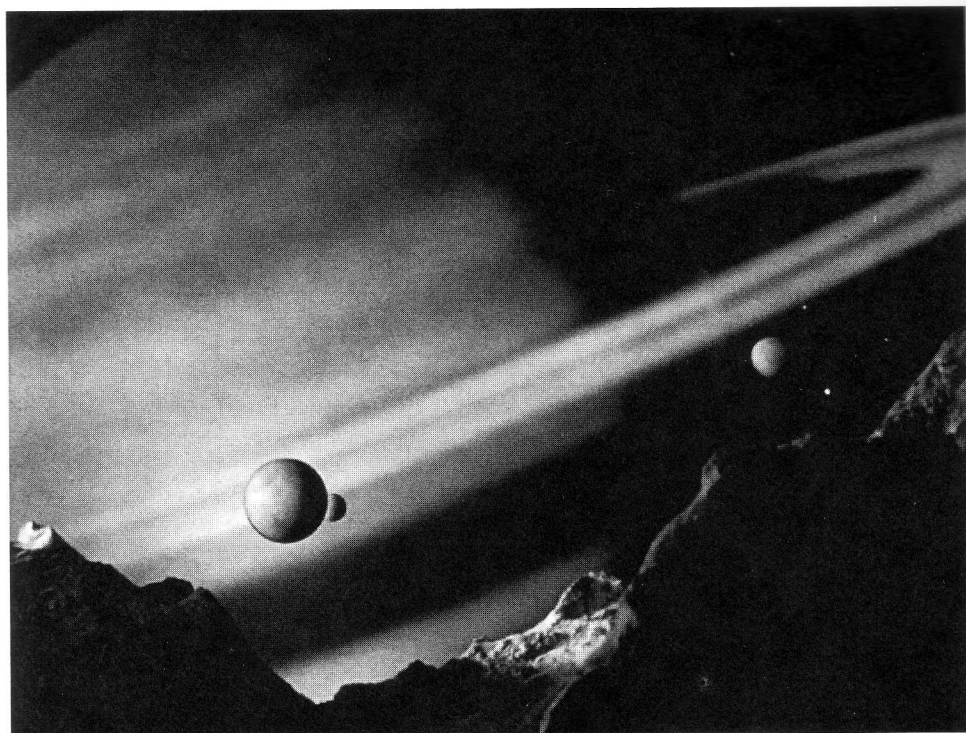


What in the World Distinguishes Fiction from Nonfiction Film?



Rigid categories in aesthetics are difficult to defend. How can we distinguish between blues and rock music, or melodramas and westerns? Paintings can have sculptural qualities and poems can be musical. To speak of blurred boundaries between such categories seems perfectly sensible because of the range of compatible qualitative properties shared in each pairing. Bill Nichols, relying on the logic of such arguments, contends that the evidential, indexical qualities of cinematic cameras, when combined with the rhetoric, stylistics, artifice, and ideologies of narration and film construction, blurs the boundary between fiction and nonfiction in film:

One of the most blurred of recent boundaries lies precisely between fiction and nonfiction. When a single idea about the nature of reality, a common set of shared values and collective purpose, does not prevail, a considerable blurring of previously more sharply maintained boundaries is in the offing.¹

Although the theorist probably most associated with this application of “blurred boundaries,” Nichols is not alone in holding this view. Michael Renov

states “that all discursive forms – documentary included – are, if not fictional, at least *fictive*, this by virtue of their tropic character (their recourse to tropes or rhetorical figures).”² Approximately twenty years earlier Christian Metz offered the more extreme assertion that “Every film is a fiction film” because every film is only a photographic representation, and therefore an illusion, or fiction, of presence.³ Noël Carroll points out that Metz conflates representation and fiction and reduces all representation to fiction, thereby rendering the term “fiction” useless.⁴ Even Carl Plantinga, who has done so much to clarify the term “nonfiction,” accepts that “in specific films the distinction between fiction and nonfiction will sometimes be fuzzy at best,” contending that factual indeterminacies and unclear indexing of a film as fiction or nonfiction can make a film impossible to classify. Nevertheless, he concludes, “a distinction with fuzzy boundaries is no less a distinction.”⁵ If qualities such as style, rhetoric, ideologies, narrative forms, tropes, or indeterminate classifications were capable of making nonfiction somewhat fictional, then both the concepts of fiction and nonfiction would make little sense, and so would attempts to make sense of the world through nonfiction films.⁶

Understanding the diverse aesthetic and representational practices utilised in nonfiction film production (including those shared with fiction film) aids evaluation of both the production and reception of nonfiction film, as well as the historical, social, cultural, political, philosophical, and aesthetic significance of the form. These shared practices do not blur the boundary between fiction and nonfiction any more than the similarities between the *News on the March* sequence in *Citizen Kane* (1941) and newsreels like *The March of Time* (1935-1951) risk making the former nonfiction or the latter fiction. Films, whether fiction or nonfiction, are attempts at human communication. Carroll, challenging the view that representation necessarily implies subjectivity and fictionalisation, points out that representations cannot come from nowhere. A film will have camera, narrative, and authorial points of view, but none of these fictionalise a nonfiction film.⁷ Narrative also does not privilege fiction. Peter Lamarque notes that “The mistake is to treat some particular modes of narrative, notably fictional narrative, as archetypal. Narrative is not identical with fiction and to classify a discourse as narrative has no implications for reference, truth-valuation, or any other kinds of value.”⁸ Lamarque’s focus on reference and truth-value identifies key concerns that can help to resolve the problem of blurred boundaries. Uncertainty about the nature of reality does not justify blurred boundaries, but suggests the need to understand

better to *what* nonfiction films refer, *how* they do so, and *the significance* of this distinction between fiction and nonfiction.

My central thesis is that fiction and nonfiction films differ in *where* objects, individuals, actions, and events referred to in a film have truth-value.⁹ My approach is, in principle, simple; I take the negation in “nonfiction” seriously. To do so, an analysis of fiction must first be offered. Previously I proposed an account of fiction based on actualist theories of possibility in the metaphysics of modality.¹⁰ I contend that fictions are representations of stories in fictional worlds. Fictional worlds are *like* the possible worlds described in actualist theories of modality, but with the intentional creation and addition of alien properties, such as characters, events, or states of affairs.¹¹ Actualism restricts the discussion of possible worlds to the set of all things that exist.¹² Fictional characters and other fictional inventions exist in our world as cultural artefacts, or as Peter van Inwagen calls them “theoretical entities of literary criticism,” not as the things they are in the stories.¹³ A fictional character is not a possible person. The addition of these alien properties, the result of a fiction-maker’s fictive intent, makes the worlds of fiction impossible worlds because no world can be possible if it contains constituents that are impossible. For instance, Sherlock Holmes, in the actual world, was born from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s imagination, not biology. Only in fiction does he have biological origins. His existence as anything other than a character in fictions is therefore necessarily false, even if an actual person in the real world resembles Holmes. The character and any such person are numerically and existentially distinct entities.

Fiction films refer directly to the furniture of fictional worlds, and only allegorically to the real world. By contrast, nonfiction films refer directly to the furniture of the actual world. Since the actual world, possible worlds, and what I will call “naturally occurring impossible worlds” are also composed of the furniture of the actual world, nonfiction films can refer more broadly to any of these worlds.¹⁴ Nonfictional worlds are not produced intentionally, unlike fictional worlds, but from “maximal consistent set[s] of propositions” about the furniture of the actual world. Adams calls each set “a world-story.”¹⁵ The actual world contains only true propositions, whether they be necessarily or contingently true. Possible worlds are like the actual world, but contain contingently false propositions. Impossible worlds are also like the actual world and possible worlds, but contain at least one necessarily false proposition. Worlds made impossible strictly through necessarily false or contradictory propositions about the actual world are naturally

occurring impossible worlds. Only worlds made impossible by the intentional act of fiction-making are fictional worlds. All nonfiction worlds relate directly to the actual world. Fictional worlds, containing alien furniture, cannot refer directly to the actual world or possible worlds because they could never be those worlds, even if many propositions in any fictional world are true in the actual world also. The distinction between the worlds of fiction and nonfiction is a distinction in the actual world. Since nothing in the actual world can be both what it is and its negation, the boundary between the worlds of fiction and nonfiction cannot be blurred.

Films are not worlds, but representations of stories within worlds. Being representations, they need not be accurate, but operate within a framework of truth-value. We need to consider not only the metaphysics of fiction and nonfiction, but also the nature of assertions about them. For instance, consider the statement

(1) The Allies won WWII.

Is this statement true contingently or necessarily? To answer this question, at least at the level of philosophy, we can analyse it within a possible worlds model. The statement is true in the actual world. If it is false in at least one possible world, then the Allies victory was contingent. WWII also features in fictions.

(2) In the fictional world f , the Allies won the war.

(3) In the fictional world f' , the Allies did not win the war.

These statements may help us to think about the outcome of WWII, but they are not about WWII in the same way as sentence (1). Because these fictional worlds possess alien properties they are not possible. We lack an existential connection with them. The Allies losing the war in a fiction has a different meaning than the possibility that the Allies may have actually lost the war. The latter, but not the former, would change our lives substantially. We can also use this model to look at other concerns. I presume time travel is impossible. Consequently,

(4) Time travel is possible

is false in all possible worlds. However, time travel exists within fictional worlds like those of *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*. Thus,

(5) in the fictional world f^* , time travel is possible

is true of some fictional worlds. Yet, a filmmaker could defend her or his *belief* in the current, actual possibility of time travel. Such a film would be nonfiction, since it lacks fictive intent, but is equally not factual.

Representations are authorial acts through which a sender of a message intends a receiver of that message to recognise the sender's intent to convey the

meaning of the communication.¹⁶ Noël Carroll, Carl Plantinga, and Trevor Ponech have all offered theories of nonfiction based on speech act theory. Speech act theory, while often discussed within linguistics, need not be limited to linguistics or language.¹⁷ Ponech states that “in producing non-fiction, a communicator uses some unit of motion picture footage in an effort to assert that something is (or was, or will be, or could be) the case.”¹⁸ He accounts for nonfiction as “cinematic constatives,” a term he borrows from Kent Bach and Robert Harnish’s speech act theory.¹⁹ He characterises their understanding of a constative as follows: “my utterance is an assertion provided that I make it in such a way that I try to signal to the receiver that I wish to elicit his or her credence in what I have said.”²⁰ Carroll, Ponech, and Plantinga all rely on an understanding of “nonfiction” as a negation of fiction, but contend that, while accurate, it produces a result which is too broad. Ponech explains that “not fiction” will be greater than the set of cinematic constatives. “So my own model of motion picture non-fictions has its limitations,” he explains, “since it is only meant to describe, as broadly as possibly, the essential pattern – the expression of assertive illocutionary forces – embodied by a single, albeit major group of nonfictions.”²¹ Ponech notes that his model does not account for speech acts such as “prohibitives” – such as those short clips frequently seen just prior to the screening of a feature film prohibiting acts like the use of mobile phones and recording equipment during the screening. He offers a reasonably broad understanding of what constitutes nonfiction film, but maintains that photographic and cinematographic recordings which merely have a counterfactual relationship with the objects recorded do not, by themselves, constitute nonfiction films because they lack a speech act. “[D]efining cinematic non-fiction or stipulating its prototype on the basis of a-rational, mind-independent indicator relations does not really capture the actual conditions under which even surveillance camera footage becomes a work of non-fiction, versus a natural sign the function of which is more like a thermometer than *Drifters*.”²²

While mind-independence is neither a necessary nor sufficient criterion for nonfiction, Ponech recognises, but glosses over the significance of, such films being nonfiction. Surveillance footage and actualities say something like “here it is.” Whether, and if so how, such films are cinematic constatives in Ponech’s model is unclear. Such films seem to sit at the periphery of the definition, just as they have throughout the history of debates about nonfiction in film studies. Carroll goes further. He defines nonfiction to correspond with films that “belong legitimately

in the curriculum of courses with titles such as *Introduction to the Documentary Film*". In doing so he eliminates such things as "interactive lessons about the way to draw a flower" and avant-garde films, like *Serene Velocity*, because they lack an assertive stance.²³ This, though, is a conservative, institutional limitation on the discussion. It would be reasonable instead to question why the discipline restricts such works from such courses, especially given the historical constitution of the discipline through such filters as politics, semiotics, and romantic conceptions of art and artists.²⁴ Both of Carroll's examples relate directly to real-world concerns like aesthetics and film itself, in ways that fiction films do not.²⁵

Rather than limit our understanding of nonfiction to conventional boundaries such as documentary film, evaluating "to what" speech acts in nonfiction films apply offers an alternative approach to evaluate the scope of nonfiction representation in film. To some degree this approach already exists. Both Plantinga and Ponech build into their arguments a broader ontology. Plantinga states:

nonfictions assert a belief that given objects, entities, states of affairs, events, or situations actually occur(red) or exist(ed) in the actual world as portrayed. This distinction between nonfiction and fiction stems from two forms of discourse found in most societies, corresponding to two fundamental purposes. On the one hand, we use discourse to make explicit claims about reality – to inform each other about occurrent states of affairs. On the other, we use discourse to present fictional stories (consisting of states of affairs that do not actually occur).²⁶

Ponech argues for a wider scope by allowing for the representation of possibilities. Neither theory explains why assertions about the actual or the possible constitute the limits of nonfiction speech acts. The scope of Ponech's model comes closest to the scope of nonfiction I defend here. However, if we wish to understand the important distinction between the "two forms of discourse" Plantinga raises, we need a clearer boundary between fiction and nonfiction and a stronger justification for what separates them. Such a categorisation will encompass a wider range of films than Carroll, Plantinga or Ponech suggest.

In my view, nonfiction filmmakers refer *denotatively* and *intentionally* to nonfictional worlds.²⁷ Nonfiction representations need not have any further illocutionary intent beyond asserting correspondence to a nonfiction world. A film like *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare* (1895) asserts the existence of a train, a place, and some people, but says nothing more about them, even if we can interpret all sorts of significance from the moving image. It is, of course, possible that

fictional characters or events in a fiction film could be indiscernible from actual characters and events, but such coincidences do not make the fiction nonfiction, because the filmmakers did not assert the characters and events were, could be, could have been, or could not have been so, only that they could be *like* this.²⁸ *Like* is the realm of allegory. For a film to be nonfiction, the filmmakers must assert that the constituent characters, events, and states of affairs of the film are numerically identical with the furniture of the actual world. A qualitative identity locates only similar properties. Charles Foster Kane, for instance, has sufficient qualitative correspondence with William Randolph Hearst for Hearst to attempt to have *Citizen Kane* shelved. Kane, though, is not Hearst.²⁹ There is no doubt *Citizen Kane* is an allegory about Hearst, but it is not a story about him. *Citizen Kane*'s denotative reference is the events, characters, conversations, etc., of the fiction. The film's meaning, about the influence of such people as Hearst, is a connotation of the work. Nonfiction filmmakers need only *intend* that their films refer to a nonfiction world and assert something about it. Doing so will assert a view about the actual world by expressing views about the way it is, could be, could have been, or could not be. Errors in a nonfiction film will not alter its status as nonfiction, provided the errors do not result from a filmmaker's fictive intent. Works that lack fictive intent are nonfictional.

Boundaries

I here use the term "nonfiction" to establish the broader category of works distinguished from fiction. Carroll also identifies this important boundary, but rather than evaluating its significance, he restricts his analysis to characterising a more canonical classification. The term "nonfiction", understood as the negation of fiction, has both descriptive and logical value. It locates the important distinction of evaluating the world and its modal states directly, rather than allegorically. In contrast, the term "documentary" has a strong historical connection to films with social, political, and ideological concerns, particularly films of the British Documentary Film Movement, and therefore risks excluding films without an obvious social purpose. Advocates of direct cinema herald the medium's ability to document the world indexically via the photographic process. Yet many nonfiction films include re-enactments, graphic illustrations, models, and animations, which do not provide indexical evidence.

Gregory Currie argues that documentaries comprise indices of objects and events composed into intentional communications; hence, a "documentary"

is only one kind of nonfiction film.³⁰ Currie calls these indexical sound and image recordings “traces” because they have a counterfactual relationship with the recorded object and are mind-independent. He explains: “When I say that photography is intention-independent, I mean that in this precise and restricted sense: the photographer or cinematographer who sets out to record the scene in front of him will record what is there; the painter with the same intent will paint what he thinks is there.”³¹ Currie’s tight focus on traces brings precision to our understanding of the production and reception of films that rely on the medium’s evidential capacity. His argument explains, for instance, why “deception,” or “documentary malpractice” in the 1999 Carlton Television programme *The Connection* created such controversy.³² Images allegedly showing male prostitution and drug trafficking were manufactured. These were not reconstructions, but, as Brian Winston states, “a public lie.”³³ Images purported to be evidence were not. The problem was not that the images were manufactured, but that this genre of nonfiction establishes audience expectations about evidence which this film did not meet. Currie does not explain, nor does he intend to, the boundary that separates nonfiction film from fiction film. Both nonfiction and fiction films have their genres. Not all films that are nonfiction will be documentaries.

The term “factual” also has undesired meaning. The manufactured sequences in *The Connection* do not make the film fictional because the filmmakers aimed to lie about states of affairs in the real world, not undertake fiction-making. A lie, as Harry G. Frankfurt reminds us, refers to the real world: “It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth.”³⁴ A liar “promulgates a falsehood.”³⁵ Being real-world directed, even as a deception about the real world, a lie is not fiction. Thus, a term like “factual”, which implies accuracy, cannot serve as a descriptive synonym for nonfiction. Illocutions, in any medium, can be incorrect whether the utterer intends to deceive or simply makes errors. A film can therefore be both nonfactual and nonfiction. The status of a representation can also change. Theories in physics and historical accounts do not become fictional when disproven; they are just wrong. Films are no different.

Although terms like “documentary” and “factual” leave out certain types of film which are not fiction, and are therefore too restrictive, theorists have argued that “nonfiction” is too broad. Ponech sections off nonfiction films which are not cinematic constatives. Carroll excludes avant-garde films, amongst others. However, a film such as *Mothlight* (1963), composed of biological matter

attached to clear leader, printed, and run through a projector, denotatively refers to objects of the world, and is therefore a document of sorts, but is not what we would expect in an *Introduction to Documentary Film* class, even if the terms “factual” and “documentary” descriptively apply to the film. Yet, Brakhage’s films tend to contemplate things like vision, epistemology, classification, sex, death, the universe, etc. As Patricia Aufderheide notes, Brakhage himself considered his films to be documentaries: “I really think my films are documentaries. [...] They are my attempts to get as accurate a representation of seeing as I possibly can.”³⁶ *Mothlight* clearly is *not fiction*. Its interests are real-world directed.

The term “nonfiction,” when understood as “not fiction,” includes a wider group of films than those typically associated with the term. Such breadth need not pose a problem. Gregory Currie justifies analysing documentary rather than the broader categorisation of nonfiction because there is something particular to and interesting in the practice of assertion through the physical traces photographic images provide. But we also need to understand how reconstructions, actualities, surveillance footage, video diaries, cookery programmes and any other direct assertions about objects, events, and states of affairs represented in moving images differ from fictional representations in film. The term “nonfiction” describes the rigid division I wish to illuminate because it points to representations that in some way express something about the world and its modal states.³⁷

Illustrations

Classifying films as either fiction or nonfiction is by no means a straightforward endeavour. The examples below illustrate both my argument and the challenges one faces when attempting such a classification. I have chosen these examples because they are the types of films that could be argued to justify a fuzzy boundary between fiction and nonfiction. Through these examples I aim to show that any fuzziness rests in aesthetics and verisimilitude, but that these are not the relevant criteria that distinguish fiction from nonfiction. Of course, any film could be misclassified by its viewers, and my analyses are as fallible as any others. I do not intend my argument to provide a schema for classifying films through interpretation. A film, I contend, is fiction or nonfiction only in virtue of its makers’ intentions.

A film such as *All the President’s Men* (1976) has a very close connection to reality and, while a fiction, is in many ways factual. *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987), in contrast, relies extensively on theatrical sets and invented scenes and

may appear to be fictional. Yet, the fictional scenes in *Nice Coloured Girls* do not evoke the same type of ethical concerns prompted by *The Connection*, nor do they make the film itself fictional. Resolutions to these apparent contradictions do not require the notion of blurred boundaries, but clarity about world references and the nature of the assertions. Fictional worlds are ontologically complete within an actualist theory because they begin from the actual world. Fiction-making involves imagined additions or alterations to the actual world. *All the President's Men*, while based closely on Bob Woodward's and Carl Bernstein's factual account, nevertheless involves fictionalisation in William Goldman's adaptation, creating specific situations and dialogue and asserting them as true in the story. *Nice Coloured Girls*, by contrast, asserts an account of historical and contemporary relations between Aboriginal women in Australia and white men. Its direct reference is the actual world. The fictional narrative intercut throughout the film does not assert the existence of these characters or that they said or did certain things. Rather, it illustrates the film's real-world assertions. Its function could be compared with something like a medical diagram of, for instance, a human lung. While not a drawing of any specific, individual lung, the illustration exemplifies key properties of lungs. Similarly, through the internal narrative in the film, and the film as a whole, Tracey Moffatt asserts her views about the common properties of such encounters between Aboriginal women and white men.

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) and the National Film Board of Canada film *Universe* (1960) have a close relationship that prompts comparisons which can further help us distinguish between fiction and nonfiction. *2001* does not depict a fictional space journey for its own sake. It presents an allegory that prompts consideration of humanity as a biological, intelligent, social, and technological species in the universe. *Universe* refers to and presents knowledge about our solar system and universe, as known at the time of production, to prompt some of the same questions.³⁸ *2001* represents space and space travel with a high degree of accuracy, and generally coheres with knowledge about our universe at the end of the 1960s. D. B. Jones notes that

NASA ordered at least 300 prints of the film, which they used for training and for public information. [...] Stanley Kubrick, when he started work on his *2001: A Space Odyssey*, discussed the project with Colin Low [*Universe's* producer] and hired Wally Gentleman, the wizard who had achieved the optical effects for *Universe*, to do the same for Kubrick's

film. And Kubrick used the voice of Douglas Rain, who spoke the commentary [...] for *Universe*, as the voice of Hal, the computer.³⁹

Yet the accuracy *Universe* portrays, and which inspired Kubrick and his team, does not rely on photographic evidence. The film makes numerous claims about the solar system, the universe, and astronomy, but represents this knowledge through models, animations, and voiceover (see accompanying still). It offers very limited photographic evidence that the universe is as presented. The use of models and animations in *Universe* serves two purposes. First, they show approximations of locations that were impossible to photograph prior to 1960 and developments in NASA's space programme. Second, and more significantly, they point to the core reference of the film. The film does not simply show the universe; it represents scientific, philosophical, and historical *ideas* about the universe and our place within it. It represents our species as capable of asking, and answering, complex questions about its existence.

Although constructed for a realist aesthetic, the animations and models in *Universe* are generally recognisable for what they are. Aesthetic realism here does not imply that the filmmakers construct models and animations to emulate photographic recordings of what the universe looks like. Many of the images and animated sequences look much like what the film's contemporary audience would *expect* the moons, asteroids, and planets in the solar system to look like if they could have been photographed in 1960. However, the filmmakers take licence with other sequences, such as the journey beyond our solar system. While such sequences do not depict what space travel would actually look like, they convey relevant information without drawing significant attention to the film's formal construction. In such instances the film narrates, rather than shows. Even Bazin, who argued so forcefully about film's capacity to record reality, recognised that realism in film is not the attempt to produce an illusion or copy of reality, but the establishment of a self-effacing style suited to dramatic and *interpretative* possibilities which were previously the domain of the writer.⁴⁰

The filmmakers make clear from the beginning of *Universe* that the images of space in the film represent their contemporary knowledge *about* space, and are not to be mistaken for indexical images *of* space, despite any representational verisimilitude. Only four minutes into the film the voiceover states: "What will the first men to leave the earth find? Enough is now known that we can, in imagination, journey into these spaces" [*Universe*, 3:55 – 4:12]. Many camera

placements and movements in the film would be impossible if its representations were restricted to photographic images of real stars, planets, and asteroids. It does not take sophisticated film literacy to recognise that an image of Jupiter's surface could not be of the real planet's surface when the voiceover states: "Here, under the enormous pressure of the atmosphere, a human being would be crushed beyond recognition" [10:00 – 10:10]. A camera on Jupiter's surface, if the planet has a surface, would meet the same fate.⁴¹ In 1960, such a shot was impossible, and likely still is. Sequences depicting the surfaces of other celestial bodies, such as the Moon, Mercury, Mars, a moon of Jupiter, and Pluto, show not *evidence* of these objects, but *illustrations* of contemporary astronomical knowledge about them.

The film takes licence with images of space travel, which today may not stand out as inaccurate representations. The filmmakers provide two animated sequences that anticipate scientifically erroneous images of space travel common in fiction film and television: the stargate sequence from *2001* [18:20 – 18:52] and stars flashing past starships travelling at warp speed in the *Star Trek* series [22:20 – 23:05]. Yet even here *Universe* does not slip into anything resembling fiction. The stargate-like sequence in *Universe* presents an imaginary journey through a corridor of clouds to the edge of the solar system. Neither the animations nor the voiceovers introduce anything fictional into the film because they provide no fictional invention or assertion. The film makes no claims about the travel or how it could be achieved. The phrase "if we could" makes no claim about anything actual, possible, impossible, or fictional [22:27 – 22:51]. The voiceover and animation function jointly as a rhetorical device employed to shift the discussion from the solar system to interstellar space. In contrast, *2001* builds *Universe's* corridor of clouds into the fictional invention of the stargate, while *Star Trek* makes it true in the *Star Trek* fictions that when a ship goes to warp, stars pass like streetlights on a motorway. The fictions assert these phenomena as true in their fictional worlds. *Universe* makes no such assertions.

The problem, though, is how to distinguish between these techniques in fiction and nonfiction films. The answer rests in the way filmmakers use film to communicate with an audience.⁴² By using sounds and images (including the written and spoken word), filmmakers express beliefs, thoughts, doubts, and hypotheses about the world and its modal states. *Universe* expresses the filmmakers' beliefs about the nature of our universe, even if the film shows very little photographic evidence of it. The film's contemporary audiences, during the earliest days of the

space race, would be well aware that photographers and cameras were not being dispatched to the planets or to other suns, and would clearly understand that the images in the film were approximations that describe and illustrate beliefs about the universe.

The initial sequence of the David Dunlap Observatory shows the observatory itself. It also shows Dr. Donald MacRae setting up the observatory for an evening's work [01:24 – 03:49]. There is no way to tell merely by watching the film if Dr. MacRae is routinely setting up the observatory for the evening, or is dramatically performing this setup for the film. But it does not matter which is correct, since the filmmakers make no assertion that any *particular* act of setting up the telescope has any significance. Rather, whether a genuine setup or a performance, the sequence depicts some of the tasks that must be performed, while indexically showing the observatory itself. Similarly, the sequence about Mars [07:48 – 08:36] shows an image of the planet's landscape. This image, a shot of a model, provides iconic imagery of what scientists, and the filmmakers, believed the surface to be like.

Not all sounds and images in the film express beliefs. The “warp” sequence in *Universe*, of the journey from the solar system out into interstellar space [22:19 – 23:05], conveys no beliefs or hypotheses about how such a journey could be undertaken. It shows no ships, only a disembodied view of a journey. The voiceover asserts that this journey beyond the solar system takes place only in the imagination: “If we could move with the freedom of a god....” The images in the sequence provide only a rhetorical device to aid the transition from the solar system to interstellar space. The sequence that follows asserts beliefs about the nature of the universe beyond the solar system. In doing so the film also conveys faith in scientific method – a faith further demonstrated in the observatory sequences throughout the film. The bracketing of the film with shots of Toronto and the observatory, and the inclusion of sequences depicting a night's observation at the observatory, establishes an overarching question about our place in the universe as a species capable of contemplating its existence. The variety of illocutionary acts in *Universe* expresses knowledge about the universe and exemplifies the complex means of expression possible in nonfiction film.

To understand a film, its audience must be able to distinguish which aspects of the representation are *relevant* to its illocution. Although photographic representations are indices and can sometimes be used as evidence, they frequently function most significantly as iconic representations. Flint Schier notes that “iconic

representations are necessarily selective about what they commit themselves to depicting.”⁴³ Viewers of a film must be able to identify which elements of an iconic representation have illocutionary force. Incidental inclusions, such as vapour trails evident in the skies of a western, imply nothing relevant for the interpretation of the film. Background scenery in an interview may or may not be relevant for understanding the content of the interview or the expertise of the interviewee. Shier raises a further, and more obvious example for film. “A black-and-white photograph is by the nature of its medium simply non-committal about the colour of the depicted object.”⁴⁴ The absence of colour in *Universe* asserts nothing about space itself, although it may be relevant in other ways to the interpretation of the work. This ability to ignore irrelevant properties of an image and recognise the relevant properties is simply part of what it is to be a competent reader of images.

There is one way in which a film like *Universe* is significantly indexical. The models and animations in the film are intended to convey knowledge about the universe. Although the images are not indices of the objects they depict, they maintain an existential bond with the *ideas* that motivate the construction of the animation and model sequences in the film. Had the filmmakers’ understanding of the solar system and the wider universe been different, the images would have been correspondingly different. The film’s depictions of various types of star systems beyond our solar system express beliefs about the existence of these star systems and the validity of the scientific methods that enabled astronomers to detect the existence and nature of these star systems [15:29 – 22:22].

If reference, rather than any prescribed form of representation, is essential to nonfiction film, then indexical sounds and images are contingent, and not essential to the form. Reenactments, models, illustrations, animations, and other forms of representation, may seem to sit uncomfortably with nonfiction films for two reasons. First, they have a long and prolific association with fiction, and may, by convention, seem to be fictional forms. Second, realist theorists of nonfiction film have privileged the evidential capacity of the photographic image. Bazin characterises this concern when he contends that the value of a film like *Nanook of the North* (1922) rests in the image’s ability *to show*, rather than editing’s capacity *to suggest*. “What matters to Flaherty, confronted with Nanook hunting the seal, is the relation between Nanook and the animal; the actual length of the waiting period. ... [T]he length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true object.”⁴⁵ This distinction outlines aesthetic possibilities, but does not suggest a

definition of nonfiction. Such evidential and existential purity is rarely achieved in nonfiction film. Even in *Nanook* the seal hunting sequence was allegedly faked. Moreover, the sequence has elliptical editing which follows the dramatic principles of a rescue. We do not see “the actual length of the waiting period,” but instead comprehend the waiting by the drama of the family racing to Nanook’s aid. The value of the sequence is principally iconic. It refers to the *type* of hardships that nineteenth century Inuit endured.⁴⁶

Similarly, *Shipyard* (1935), a film from the British Documentary Movement, narrates the story of the construction of a ship. The film does not intend, however, to provide a record of the construction of a specific vessel. Paul Rotha aimed to convey the skill, labour, pride, and hardships of shipbuilding. To achieve this objective he filmed shipbuilders building two ships to get the desired shots. The film shows, e.g., what it is like to rivet together the steel plates of a ship, through the images of people doing so. The film would be significantly diminished, though, if it were read only as a record of building and launching a ship or two. *Shipyard* depicts certain ships and shipbuilders, but does so to represent the dignity of shipbuilding, the problematic economic dependence such communities have on shipbuilding, and aspects of the social and cultural existence of mid-1930s British shipbuilders. We are meant to read the images for their representative likeness, their iconicity. To read the images otherwise is to miss the social commentary of the film.

Recognising that nonfiction films rely on iconic resemblance does not imply that the photographic image’s evidential qualities have no role to play. Many nonfiction films contain images intended to be read as indices because they provide the evidence through which the film’s makers can assert beliefs. Such images, though, are first and foremost iconic. An image functioning as evidence serves little purpose if it does not hold some visual resemblance to the profilmic objects and events that enable recognition. But once this recognition is achieved, the indexical quality of the image can prove remarkably effective. *Night and Fog* (1955) shows ovens, piles of hair, personal effects, and corpses to make evidently clear that the Nazis carried out their extermination policy. For this film visual, indexical evidence proves both persuasive and affective. But the film does more than provide evidence of the Holocaust. These images express attitudes about the Holocaust which the filmmakers’ use to build an argument about complicity.

Beliefs and knowledge are, of course, fallible. Inaccuracies, premised on

filmmakers' sincere attitudes toward propositional content in their films, do not render works fictional, nor do they in any way challenge their status as nonfiction, since these filmmakers were not engaged in fiction making. *Universe* provides a clear example of this. The film contains errors. Notably, in the Mars sequence, the voiceover states "It is reasonably certain that the markings on its surface, bluish-green in the Martian summer, turning rusty brown in the autumn, indicate vegetation" [08:03 – 08:16]. Scientist James Lovelock demonstrated only a few years later that this belief was false. The Viking missions to Mars in the mid 1970s confirmed Lovelock's conclusion.⁴⁷ Yet, the film includes an animated illustration and a voiceover conveying the then current understanding of observational data about the red planet. It would be wrong to describe the voiceover, the animation, or their combination as fictional. Facts are simply the way the universe is. Statements and representations are truthful when they correspond with facts, false when they do not. Whether true or false, the film's representation of Mars respects the authority of the factual universe and the prevailing scientific knowledge about Mars in 1960. This section of the film is inaccurate only because the science on which it is based was inaccurate.

Film is merely one means among many for human communication. Yet when it comes to nonfictional representation, film is often presumed to have an obligation to provide direct evidence of the world's material surface. But the world is also full of ideas, ambitions, aspirations, and imaginations, all beyond the material veneer of reality and the reach of the camera. Animations, models, and re-enactments enable filmmakers to refer directly to such aspects of the world, bringing a depth to nonfiction films difficult to achieve otherwise. By characterising nonfiction as the logical negation of fiction I aim not just to resolve the paradox of blurred boundaries that too often haunts discussion of nonfiction film, but also to indicate what makes nonfiction, and its distinction with fiction, so significant. Nonfiction, I argue, involves illocutions which have truth-value in the world and its modal states. Within modal actualism, all possible and impossible worlds are built from the furniture of the actual world. Fictional worlds, through the inclusion of alien properties, can never obtain, and are therefore never about the world in the way nonfictions are. Regardless how accurate or inaccurate a nonfiction film may be, it is about us and the rich diversity of existence.⁴⁸

C. Paul Sellors

Notes

- 1 Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), x.
- 2 Michael Renov, "Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (London: Routledge, 1993), 7.
- 3 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 43-4. This book anthologises essays Metz wrote in the mid 1970s.
- 4 Noël Carroll, "Fiction, Non-Fiction, and the Film of Presumptive Assertion: A Conceptual Analysis," in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 176-7.
- 5 Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chapbook Press, 2010), 24, originally published by Cambridge University Press (1997).
- 6 Noël Carroll has argued extensively against "postmodernist" views, including those I mention here, that collapse fiction and nonfiction, on the one hand, and objectivity and subjectivity on the other. See his essays "From Real to Reel: Entangled in Nonfiction Film," in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 224-52; "Nonfiction Film and Postmodernist Scepticism," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 283-306; and "Fiction, Non-Fiction, and the Film of Presumptive Assertion: A Conceptual Analysis," in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, eds. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 173-202.
- 7 Carroll, "From Real to Reel," 227.
- 8 Peter Lamarque, "On Not Expecting Too Much from Narrative," *Mind & Language* 19, no. 4 (Aug. 2004): 406.
- 9 Rather than repeat awkward phrases like "objects, individuals, actions, and events" I will use the term "furniture" instead. I borrow this term from Robert M. Adams and his theory of actualism, a theory on which I rely to define both the worlds of fiction and nonfiction. See Robert M. Adams, "Theories of Actuality," *Noûs* 8 (1974): 211-31.
- 10 See my essays "A Realist Account of Fiction," *Film and Philosophy* 10 (2006): 51-66; and "The Impossibility of Science Fiction: Against Buckland's Possible Worlds," *Screen* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 203-16.
- 11 'Alien' is David Lewis' term. See his *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 1-2.
- 12 See Alvin Plantinga, "Two Concepts of Modality: Modal Realism and Modal Reductionism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 1 (1987): 189-231; and Adams "Theories of Actuality."
- 13 Peter van Inwagen, *Ontology, Identity and Modality: Essays in Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 44. See also Amie L. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). I discuss these views in my essay "A Realist Account of Fiction."
- 14 Actualists tend not to discuss impossibility, presumably because any world-story that has necessarily false propositions will not be obtainable, and is therefore irrelevant for understanding possibility and necessity, which the theory aims to illuminate. Nevertheless, impossible worlds, while perhaps irrelevant for the metaphysics of modality, are relevant for discussions about fiction and nonfiction film, as I aim to demonstrate.
- 15 Adams, "Theories of Actuality," 225.
- 16 I discuss intention and authorship in detail in *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths* (London: Wallflower Press, 2010) and "Collective Authorship in Film," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no.3 (Summer 2007): 263-71.
- 17 See Carroll, "Fiction, Non-Fiction, and the Film of Presumptive Assertion"; Carl Plantinga "What a Documentary is After All," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 105-17; Carl Plantinga, "Moving Pictures and the Rhetoric of Nonfiction: Two Approaches," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 307-24; Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chapbook Press, 2010); and Trevor Ponech "What is Non-Fiction Cinema," in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, eds. Richard Allen and Murray Smith

- (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 203-20.
- 18 Ponech, "What is Non-Fiction Cinema," 204.
 - 19 Ponech, "What is Non-Fiction Cinema," 207-9.
 - 20 Ponech, "What is Non-Fiction Cinema," 207.
 - 21 Ponech, "What is Non-Fiction Cinema," 209.
 - 22 Ponech, "What is Non-Fiction Cinema," 205.
 - 23 Carroll, "Fiction, Non-Fiction, and the Film of Presumptive Assertion," 174-5.
 - 24 Seminal histories of nonfiction frequently distinguish recordings, such as actualities, from a more canonical understanding of the term. Richard Meran Barsam, for instance, locates the beginning of nonfiction with *Nanook of the North* (1922), while Erik Barnouw sees actualities as a preliminary step towards documentary: "The aura of prophecy surrounds much of the work of this first documentary period. It foreshadows the many potential roles of a documentary film maker" (29). See Richard Meran Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1974), and Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
 - 25 I do not intend this comment to be taken too critically, but as somewhat symptomatic of the otherwise very important studies I discuss here. Shifting debates about nonfiction from vague notions of art and indexicality to speech acts already produces a valuable reconceptualisation of nonfiction film. Carroll, Plantinga, and Ponech re-evaluate and challenge historical understandings in film studies. Subsequently, I am surprised that this valuable reconceptualisation of theory is not accompanied by a robust reconsideration of the historical categorisation of nonfiction films.
 - 26 Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, 18.
 - 27 An anonymous reviewer of this paper rightly points out that filmmaking involves more than one intention: "to teach, to persuade the audience of a certain point of view, to give aesthetic pleasure, etc." Such plurality of intention will, as the reviewer notes, make some films difficult to classify, and certainly some filmmakers will intend to make their films difficult to classify for aesthetic and/or semantic purposes. However, in making a film a filmmaker will have a view if he or she has a fictive intent. Viewers' difficulties classifying a film does not make the film other than it is. While I am interested in elaborating here the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, the reviewer is right to assert that, *as experienced*, film cannot be reduced to a single distinction. I am grateful to the reviewer for this comment.
 - 28 The impossibility of a fictional character differs from something not being possible of a person.
 - 29 This distinction between numerical and qualitative identity is certainly not unproblematic within the philosophies of modality and identity. See Harold Noonan, "Identity," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified November 7, 2009, accessed June 29 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity/>. However, in the current discussion I avoid these problems because my argument relies only on the filmmakers' assertions. For example, Drew and his colleagues assert numerical identity between the John F. Kennedy in *Primary* (1960) and the John F. Kennedy who sought the US Democratic Party presidential nomination at that time. Arguments about numerical identity in philosophies of modality and identity consider all properties. Assertions about fictional and nonfictional representations can concern only relevant properties. A re-enactment, for instance, will not reproduce identical physical properties. However, filmmakers constructing and including re-enactments in films do not assert anything more than iconic resemblance to the characters, events, and states of affairs.
 - 30 See Gregory Currie, "Visible Traces: Documentary and the Content of Photographs," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 285-97. Currie revised and republished this work as "Documentary," in *Arts and Minds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 63-83.
 - 31 Currie, "Documentary," 66.
 - 32 Currie, "Documentary," 69.
 - 33 Brian Winston, "Making Connections: The European Convention on Human Rights, The Independent Television Commission and the Documentary," in *From Grierson to the Docu-Soap: Breaking the Boundaries*, eds. John Izod, Richard Kilborn, and Matthew Hibberd (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2000), 209.

- 34 Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 55.
- 35 Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 46.
- 36 Stan Brakhage quoted in Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 63.
- 37 I do not suggest that the terms “documentary” and “factual” should be abandoned, or only applied restrictively when they descriptively identify specific films. Nor do I suggest that “nonfiction” is a preferable term in general discussion. We use all of these terms unproblematically as something like proper names, rather than descriptions. Analytical debates treating these terms as descriptions clarify concepts, but need not determine colloquial usage. Equally, colloquial usage and conceptual imprecision should not be held as equivalent to analytical clarity.
- 38 *Universe* is available on the NFB website (<http://www.nfb.ca/film/universe/>). In this essay I provide timings for relevant clips rather than stills from the film.
- 39 D. B. Jones, “The Canadian Film Board Unit B,” in *New Challenges for Documentary*, edited by Alan Rosenthal (London: University of California Press, 1988), 136.
- 40 André Bazin, “The Evolution of Film Language,” in *What is Cinema*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (London: University of California Press, 1967), 23-40.
- 41 At present we do not know if Jupiter has a solid core. Also, this sequence [09:13 – 10:10] notes 12 moons of Jupiter. At present we are aware of 50 moons and 14 provisional moons orbiting Jupiter. See NASA’s website “Solar System Exploration: Jupiter,” last modified April 26, 2013, accessed June 29, 2013, <http://solarsystem.nasa.gov/planets/profile.cfm?Object=Jupiter>.
- 42 I argue extensively for an intentionalist account of film authorship in “Collective Authorship in Film,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 263-71 and *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths* (London: Wallflower Press, 2010).
- 43 Flint Schier, *Deeper into Pictures: An Essay on Pictorial Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 164.
- 44 Schier, *Deeper into Pictures: An Essay on Pictorial Representation*, 164.
- 45 Bazin, “The Evolution of Film Language,” 27.
- 46 Bazin may have had the walrus hunt in mind instead. It includes long takes of waiting and of landing the catch (provided the jump cuts in the Criterion Collection edition indicate lost footage, rather than elliptical editing). Nevertheless, the sequence retains a dramatic shape through editing and framing, including the struggle to land the walrus and the walrus’ “mate” attempting to rescue its stricken partner.
- 47 *Nova*, “Goddess of the Earth,” aired January 28, 1986, PBS, WGBH Boston.
- 48 I would like to thank Giorgio Bertellini and Fergus Robb for their discussions on the topic of this paper and the journal’s anonymous reviewers for their astute comments.