

## **Fiction as Challenge to Text-Oriented Film Studies**

Fiction film remains the privileged focus of text-oriented film studies despite the growing interest in other film forms. Fiction as a concept also organizes the field's key taxonomy – fiction v. nonfiction – yet little work has been devoted to the notion of fiction itself. The work that does exist is either textualist or spectator centred. The article argues that this leads to significant issues. First, categorization of numerous films diverges significantly from the ordinary understanding of the fiction/nonfiction divide. Second, such categorization may lead to both misunderstanding of audience experience and ethical problems alike. Third, theoretical commitments revolving around indexicality although partially applicable to documentary cannot shed light on fiction contrary to numerous attempts to do so. Fourth, one of discipline's key assumptions – fiction films change real-life beliefs – demands a theory of the relationship between fiction and belief that is currently absent in film studies. Closer scrutiny of the notion of fiction, the article argues, is necessary to dispel these issues. Specifically, the article advocates for 1) non-textualist accounts of fiction and 2) a theory of the relationship of fiction to imagination *and* belief.

**Keywords:** fiction, theory, documentary, belief, imagination

There is undeniably much more to film studies than studying film texts. For some time, film scholars have been interested in other objects of study including film technologies, industries, studios, promotional strategies, distribution networks, exhibition venues, censorship, and audiences among others. But despite these approaches, studies focusing on specific films, film structures, film genres, authorial oeuvres, national or local productions, stylistic epochs, film schools and movements, and the likes remain the bulk of scholarly production. Furthermore, such text-oriented scholarship primarily looks at fiction film. And this is true of all three key branches of film studies – criticism, history, and theory.

Next to privileging fiction film, the concept of fiction also organizes text-focused scholarship. The fiction/nonfiction binary presents a key taxonomical division in the field where it is fiction that is the default term against which the other is defined. For instance, documentary and experimental cinema are, at least in the first instance, regularly articulated in opposition to fiction. In the case of documentary, Bill Nichols writes that “[documentaries] tell stories that, although similar to feature fiction, remain distinct from it” (2017, 4). In calling for the study of experimental cinema, P. Adams Sitney also contrasts it to fiction film, i.e. “[to] this other cinema [heralded by] Griffith, Chaplin, Méliès’, Eisenstein, von Stroheim, Dreyer, Bresson” (1978, 1).

Yet for all the organizing power that the concept of fiction has within the discipline, *fiction* in the notions of “fiction film” and “nonfiction film” rarely receives sustained treatment by film scholars with the discussion most often relegated to relatively brief opening remarks in documentary theories. Works of film theory more broadly, which, interestingly, regularly focus on fiction film, by comparison, may define what film is but are virtually never interested in defining *fiction* film.<sup>1</sup> That an entry for “fiction” cannot be found in any of the widely used conceptual encyclopaedias/dictionaries of film studies – Edward Branigan and Warren Buckland’s 2014 *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Film Theory*, Susan Hayward’s 2017 *Cinema Studies*, and Anette Kuhn and Guy Westwell’s 2020 *A Dictionary of Film Studies* – is also symptomatic.<sup>2</sup> It is as though fiction is a given, hence something film scholars need not worry about.

As a preliminary consideration it is important to say that in exploring the notion of fiction, I do not aim at any form of semantic policing. In ordinary language it is perfectly proper to call lies, fabrications, and made up things, fictions. When Donald Trump insists that his inauguration drew record crowds, we may legitimately refer to this as fiction. But we can easily distinguish this broad sense of fiction from the narrow one in which we say that, for instance, horror films are fictional, whereas TV reportages are not. In this narrow sense, Trump’s claims are lies and not fictions. When I speak of fiction in this essay, crucially, it is in this narrow sense. Moreover, I assume that it is this ordinary narrow meaning of fiction that the definitions proposed in film studies need to explain. Therefore, definitions will be faulty if they stray too much from this meaning without providing good reasons for doing so.

## CURRENT STATE

The result of the relative lack of interest in fiction in film studies is that fiction is most often construed implicitly in terms of textual features. Many understand the fiction/nonfiction distinction in terms of presentational strategies and/or content alone: professional actors vs real-life amateurs, staging vs naturalness, fantastic stories vs everyday events, spectacular sets vs on-location shooting, animation vs live action. Traditionally, this dichotomy was exemplified by George Méliès' trick-films and the Lumière brothers' actualities. Whereas actualities depict everyday events, acrobatic feats, views of various locales, etc., fiction films include trick films, gag comedies, chase films, etc.

Although a useful heuristic, there are numerous counterexamples if the approach is treated as a strict categorization strategy. Despite animation's traditional association with fiction film there are numerous animated documentaries, including the almost completely animated *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) and *Tower* (Keith Maitland, 2016), which are nonfictions as Annabelle Honess Roe (2013) has demonstrated. Conversely, TV shows like *The Office* (BBC 2011-13) and films like *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) make extensive use of documentary aesthetics. Yet they constitute fictions, nonetheless. It is even possible to imagine a fictional film identical to *The Arrival of a Train* (Lumière brothers, 1897) and a nonfictional one indistinguishable from *A Trip to the Moon* (Méliès, 1902). All that is necessary is a change in context. In the first case, a gallery projects the Lumière brothers' film under the title *The Arrival of a Train in Freedonia, c.1900* inviting the visitors to make-believe viewing a black and white recording from the imaginary country from more than a century ago. On another occasion, the same gallery presents *A Recording of a Trip to the Moon* instructing the patrons to treat the film as a single-take documentary recording of one particular screening of Méliès' film.

More explicit treatment of fiction can be found on the opening pages of works of documentary theory. However, documentary theory also remains largely indebted to the textualist approach. In its earlier more radical instances, Michael Renov, for example, argued 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)” (1993, 7). But fictive elements defined in terms of discursive strategies like exaggerated camera angles, editing, or narrative organisation is far from the ordinary understanding of fiction. A World Health Organization video conference on COVID-19 outbreak shot with standard lighting does not become fiction if expressionistic lighting is used instead. It is true that, as Renov himself points out, “documentary has availed itself of nearly every constructive device known to fiction (of course, the reverse is equally true)” (ibid., 7). But, as Noël Carroll has argued (2003), this only points to problems with textualist accounts of the fiction/nonfiction distinction rather than demonstrates that the difference between the two collapses.

In a more moderate version of documentary theory, it is not discursivity in general but specific textual features such as the degree of fabrication that constitute fiction. As Bill Nichols puts it,

“The division of documentary from fiction, like the division of historiography from fiction, rests on the degree to which the story fundamentally corresponds to actual situations, events, and people versus the degree to which it is primarily a product of the filmmaker’s invention” (2017, 8-9). For Nichols, the classification of *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922) as documentary or fiction hinges on whether it is “a plausible representation of Inuit life [or] Flaherty’s distinct vision of it” (ibid., 9). But the fact that Flaherty took liberties with Nanook’s life, does not necessarily entail introduction of fictional elements. Rather, it means that what we are dealing with is a (deliberate) misrepresentation of Inuit life. Compare this to *Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002) where through creative editing Moore misrepresents that buying a gun takes shorter than it does. This does not introduce any fictional elements into the film. Rather, what we have is a documentary which despite presenting itself as a plausible representation fails to be truthful under closer scrutiny. This is no different from how Flaherty has Nanook hunt in traditional Inuit way no longer in use at the time of filming. In other words, Flaherty’s distinct version of Inuit life is not something apart from its plausible representation but is precisely what is presented as the plausible representation (although this plausible representation is in fact a misrepresentation). In another variant of Nichols’ vocabulary, Flaherty is not presenting us with *a* world, but still with *the* world – he is just misrepresenting it. In short, misrepresentation (deliberate or otherwise) does not constitute fiction nor does it introduce fictional elements. The problem with textualist approaches, then, is that textual features alone cannot determine whether something is fiction or not (or in between). To generalize Renov’s claim, nonfiction genres can use representational strategies typical of fiction ones as much as fiction genres can deploy techniques standardly attributed to nonfiction ones. But this means extratextual features must play a key role in determining fictionality.

Despite some interest in the notion of fiction in the studies of documentaries and hybrid forms, only a handful of film scholars writing in English, French and German have produced book-length investigations of the subject in the last twenty years, while in Italian, Spanish, Russian, and Japanese no such work has been written within the discipline in the same period if not longer.<sup>3</sup> The only study in German is an edited collection by Gertrude Koch and Christiane Voss (2009). The volume, however, is disinterested in exploring fictionality’s extratextual markers. Instead, its two best-known contributors – Gertrude Koch and Vinzenz Hediger – propose that films are fictionally indeterminate precisely because their medium properties understood as textual features are fictionally indeterminate.

When speaking of live-action recordings (documentaries and fiction films with live subjects and actors), Koch (2009), for instance, argues that they are both fictions and documentaries at the same time. They are documentaries because they document whatever was in front of the camera. And they are fictions because all such recordings are of people and things passed, i.e. of worlds which are now unalterable. The insistence on fictionality of all such films is misplaced because it conflates the fact that the world of fiction like the one depicted in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) is different from the world of documentary such as the one in *Roger & Me* (Michael Moore,

1989). Whereas it was never possible to speak to Rick from *Casablanca* for there was never such a person as Rick, in the case of Moore's film it was at least in principle possible to interact with the General Motors CEO Roger Smith in the late 1980s. The claim that all live-action films are also documentaries is undermined by Koch's assertion that animations are inherently fictional and that they, unlike live-action recordings, possess no documentary quality. But it is undeniable that if a film is made from hand-drawn pictures, then at the very least it is a documentary recording of those hand-drawn pictures and may even be a documentary of whatever those drawings depict as is the case with *The Sinking of the "Lusitania"* (Winsor McCay, 1918). As we can see, Koch is unable to reconcile the competing demands for determinacy and indeterminacy – both of which stem from the textualist approach to fiction.

Hediger (2009) goes even further in seeking to revive and combine the claims by Christian Metz (1982) and André Bazin (2004) that due to medium-specific properties all films are concurrently both fictions and documentaries. In the first case, he follows Metz's argument that "[e]very film is a fiction film" (1982, 44) because the cinematic signifier is present as an image of the object but absent as the object itself. But according to this logic all representations that single out an object are fictional. Portrait paintings denote a specific absent person with an image that is present. There are even automatic reproductions which do the same. Sound recordings, contrary to Hediger, are only the effects of the air vibrations that constitute the original sound, and not the same ontological object as the sounds that caused them. We do not capture air vibrations themselves but rather their effects which allow us to generate *new* waves (with the same relevant properties as the original ones). Regarding the film's nonfictional status, Hediger claims that all films are documentaries not because they record whatever was in front of the camera, but because as signifiers instantiated in a physical medium, they partake in the being of what they represent. Yet by this logic all representations are also documentaries because all representations instantiate what they represent through signifiers in a physical medium – colour pigments making up graphemes on book pages or forms in paintings, air vibrations constituting phonemes in spoken words, etc. This both undermines any claims to cinema's specificity and falls short of capturing the ordinary understanding of fiction/nonfiction.

Koch's and Hediger's emphasis on indeterminacy in its film-specific version can be understood as a part of a broader philosophical approach which argues that the fiction/nonfiction distinction is moot based on the idea that signification has no access to the real world, merely its representations (Derrida 1976, Žižek 1992, Baudrillard 1994). According to this view, our statements about the world never refer to the world itself but only to other statements. There is nothing but a chain of floating signifiers none of which is grounded in the actual world. And if that is the case, then what we take to be nonfictional statements are no different from fictional ones because the latter do not represent anything in the actual world either. Therefore, the argument goes, the fiction/nonfiction distinction is a mirage.

But even if no statements refer to the real world, we can still distinguish fiction from nonfiction (Konrad 2014). According to the approach dominant in philosophical aesthetics (Stock 2016), we

can do so by following Kendall Walton's (1990) argument developed in *Mimesis as Make-believe* which construes fiction as mandated imagining. The key point to understand is that fiction should not be understood in terms of (linguistic) reference. Rather, it should be modelled on games of make-believe or imagining that children play with different props (toys, everyday objects, people, etc.). A typical game of make-believe, for instance, involves using Barbie and Ken dolls as props for imagining a couple lying on a beach and enjoying the sunset. In another, a child puts a wooden parrot on her shoulder and imagines herself a pirate with a taste for rum and adventure. Much like a child uses her doll as a prop for imagining various objects, people and events, so do viewers use recorded sounds and images of say, Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, as props to imagine Rick and the events of the film. The main difference is that whereas in children's games the mandate is most often explicit, in cinema and the arts in general it is implicit. But to return to the crucial point, the difference between fiction and nonfiction is not whether something refers to the real world or not, or whether something is true or false, but whether we are mandated to imagine it or not. This understanding of fiction also explains why fiction (film) can regularly convey factual truths. Historical dramas often pride themselves on historical accuracy with *Zodiac* (David Fincher, 2007), for instance, conveying numerous facts about the eponymous murders and journalism business in San Francisco of the 1970s among other things. This is not even a matter of degree, because a work could be factually completely true and remain fiction so long as on top of mandating the audiences to believe what is represented, they were also supposed to imagine it. That is why there are texts like Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Sayings* and Javier Marías' *Dark Back of Time* which are treated as fictions despite being factually (almost) completely accurate. And that is why we can also conceive of a completely accurate historical drama, say, a 100% true version of Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) which is still fiction. In film scholarship, it is among those writing in English that Walton's influence can be found. This is because the debates about fiction in film have been relegated to the outskirts of the discipline to be picked up mostly by those interested in applying philosophical aesthetics to film studies. It is no surprise then that in the last twenty-five years it is mostly analytic philosophers who have produced monographs on the subject. Gregory Currie (1995) was the first to develop an extensive theory of film fiction in terms of imagination as a part of a broader theory of pictorial representation in film. Currie's key questions – whether we are supposed to imagine ourselves present at the fictional event represented and whether fiction films have fictional narrators – are also picked up in a book-length contribution by George Wilson (2011). Most importantly for this discussion, in their version of Walton's theory, the key extratextual features for determining fictionality are authorial intentions – audiences are mandated to imagine so and so if and only if the author intends them to do so.

Mario Sluga (2019a), one of the few film scholars to tackle the subject, offers a different version of Walton's theory to argue that a film's fictional status is temporally unstable. According to Sluga, whether something is fiction or not – i.e. whether there is a mandate to imagine so and so – is not defined solely through authorial intention and/or textual features but arises from a negotiation between production, promotion, exhibition, and reception strategies the results of which may change over time. For instance, whereas audiences today treat films like *The Arrival*

of a Train as a nonfictional recording of a train pulling into station, at the end of the nineteenth century such films were both promoted and received as invoking the fiction of imagining a train launching out of the screen and into the auditorium. Conversely, whereas present-day audiences imagine the fiction of an astronomer enduring a string of fantastical misadventures in a film like *The Astronomer's Dream or the Man in the Moon* (Méliès, 1902), its contemporaries billed and understood it as “a life motion picture reproduction of a celebrated French spectacular piece” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 4, 1899, 10), i.e. as a nonfictional reproduction of a magic theatre performance.<sup>4</sup> Such negotiations is also the reason why animated films like the aforementioned *Waltz with Bashir* came to be accepted as documentaries.

A scholar who was initially relatively close to this institutionalist approach but went on to espouse intentionalism on par with Currie and Wilson is Carroll. In his earlier work, Carroll pointed out that audiences generally have information about whether film is fiction or nonfiction beforehand, because films come labelled or indexed as such by “[p]roducers, writers, directors, distributors, and exhibitors” (1983, 237). However, despite maintaining the value of indexing, Carroll’s latest position is that the necessary criterion for fiction is the authorial fictive intention after all: “*x* is a fiction only if the sender intends the audience to imagine the propositional content of *x* for the reason that the audience recognizes that this is what the sender intends” (2003, 204). Where Carroll parts ways with Walton is in arguing that a subclass of nonfiction relevant for film studies – viz. films of presumptive assertion – is defined by the mandate to *believe*: “the maker of a film of presumptive assertion not only intends that the audience adopt the assertoric stance to his film, but he also intends that the audience understand his film” (ibid., 207). But we have already seen that fictions can mandate beliefs at the same time as they mandate imaginings. In other words, *pace* Carroll mandating beliefs is not logically contrary to mandating imaginings. Both can be operational at the same time. It is possible to imagine things that (we believe) are true (UK prime minister Johnson), false (UK prime minister Corbyn), and do not exist (a silver unicorn) alike. The virtually fully factual re-enactment of Queen’s Live Aid performance in *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018), for example, does not render that part of the film nonfiction because there is both a mandate to believe *and* a mandate to imagine the performance. And, to repeat, there is a mandate to imagine not because of some textual feature like the presence of professional actors. Rather, this is because *Bohemian Rhapsody* has been indexed as a fiction film and because audiences – the factor that is missing in Carroll’s list of indexing agencies but plays an important role in Sluga’s institutional negotiations – have accepted this indexing.<sup>5</sup> The decision between the intentionalist and the non-intentionalist approaches hinges on what we take to better describe the ontological status of cultural texts such as religious mythologies. From a non-intentionalist perspective, ancient texts like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Hesiod’s *Theogony* or narrative parts of *Pyramid Texts* invite present-day readers to imagine various deities and as such constitute fictions. But for ancient Mesopotamians, Greeks, and Egyptians it is fair to say that these works articulated sets of real-life beliefs about the actual world. From an intentionalist standpoint, however, the present-day treatment of these mythologies is irrelevant. It only matters how the authors/compiler of these texts intended them to be understood. And given that they were meant to be believed in

they are nonfictions. My own stance is that any definition of fiction needs to start from the ordinary understanding of the term which is closer to the non-intentionalist account. In the case of film, intentionalists will have problems with works like *Tracked by Bloodhounds* (Selig Polyscope Company, 1904) and *The Blair Witch Project* – today firmly indexed and viewed as fictions – because they would need to categorize them as nonfictions given that they were originally intended and advertised as such.<sup>6</sup> But even if the intentionalist approach wins out, it is still the case that numerous early train films we categorize as nonfictions were promoted – a sign of the producers’ intention – as mandating imaginings about their proximity in the following way: “An express train traveling at the rate of a mile a minute is seen approaching [...and...] it does not require a great stretch of imagination to hear the roar and feel the breeze it makes (American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1897: 1). In other words, if Walton’s theory of fiction is correct then films like *The Empire State Express* (American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1896) constituted fictions under both the intentionalist and non-intentionalist account.

The non-intentionalist approach espoused by Slugan is closer to perhaps the most widely read work on fiction by a film scholar in the last twenty years – Roger Odin’s *De la fiction* (2000) whose English translation is yet to appear.<sup>7</sup> In it, Odin continues developing his semio-pragmatic approach from the 1980s and 1990s according to which the status of fiction also does not hinge on textual parameters. Instead, the film’s status depends on whether it is *read* as fiction. More precisely, Odin speaks of modes – categories and classes of films – which include the documentary and the fictional mode among others. Importantly for him, no film is inherently a documentary or a fiction film. Rather, modes are effects of reading strategies – operations in Odin’s terminology. Although Odin has changed the number of operations over the years – in his 2000 monograph there are five broad operations – the key feature of the fictional mode is that it deploys all operations. So, for instance, whereas the documentary mode makes use of the following four operations – diegetization, narration, mise en phase, and the construction of actual enunciator – the fictional mode also deploys the final operation – fictivization. This fictivization, crucially, is the conferring of fictional status onto both the enunciator and the addressee which results in not having to take the film’s content as real. Though in principle spectators can employ any operation to any film they want, in practice their reading strategies are constrained by institutional considerations such as whether the film belongs to commercial cinema, arthouse cinema, non-theatrical cinema, etc.

Although neither define fiction in textual terms, in contrast to Waltonian approaches, imagination for Odin is not at the core of fiction. Instead, it is fictivization. Moreover, in Odin there is no such a thing as a *mandate* to imagine something irrespective of whether the mandate comes from the author (Carroll, Currie, Wilson) or is negotiated (Slugan). Rather, there is primarily the willingness of the spectator to apply the operation of fictivization in line with or against institutional constraints. In other words, Odin’s position could be described as spectator-centric for it is up to the viewer to deploy fictivization or not. However non-intentionalist Slugan’s approach might be, in his account readers alone could not confer fictional status on a film. Under this framework,



when film changes from nonfiction to fiction, the promotional strategies behind it change as well. In Odin it would suffice for spectators to read a film against the institutional grain to transform, say, a documentary into fiction. This could easily lead to the hegemony of the author simply being replaced with the hegemony of the reader.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, Odin is sufficiently aware of the importance of institutions in regulating reading strategies so that in practice there is far less space for negotiating about the film's fictional status than in principle.

The main problems with Odin's account lie elsewhere. The first concerns the relationship between modes and fictivization. Although fictivization distinguishes fictional and documentary mode, fictivization is also part of the instructional mode whose main point is to convey a message. This means that Odin does not have a firm criterion for defining fiction – fictivization is necessary but not sufficient. Moreover, Odin's taxonomy also puts on the same hierarchical level what should be a subcategory. A film like *The Boy with Green Hair* (Joseph Losey, 1948) certainly delivers an anti-war message but it does so through its fictional storyline. In other words, instructional mode should be better understood as a subclass of the fictional mode.

Another issue is the discrepancy between Odin's modes and accepted categorization. Odin insists that musicals do not belong to the fictional mode because they alternate between fictivization of the story and spectacularization of the musical numbers. In the latter, Odin argues, performers are seen as performers and not as characters. But although there are differences between these aspects of the musical, it is regularly the case that numbers still perform a narrative function. *Summer Nights* from the opening of *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) undeniably demonstrates John Travolta's and Olivia Newton-John's skills as performers but it also tells us how Danny and Sandy spent their summer vacation.

The third point concerns Odin's commitment to John Searle's (1975) account of fiction as non-deceptive pretence. According to Odin, in the fictional mode the spectator constructs the actual enunciator as Searle's non-deceptive pretender. But there are deceptive pretences which are fictions. The advertising campaign behind *The Blair Witch Project* demonstrates that the filmmakers intended the spectators to be deceived into thinking the depicted events actually took place, yet the film is fiction, nevertheless. The same holds for Odin's own example *Les documents interdits* (Jean-Teddy Philippe, 1989-2010).

The next issue pertains to the fictional mode's relationship to narration. According to Odin, this mode necessarily entails narration. Insistence on narration is a reading strategy variant of the textual idea that only narratives can be fictions. But there are fictions which are not narrative. Paintings like *Prometheus Bound* or sculptures like *The Rape of Proserpina* depict singular moments in mythical events which are fictional. They do not purport to represent some actual or historical states of affairs like nonfictions do. Similarly, there are non-narrative fiction films which depict singular moments as well. *Carousel* (Adam Berg, 2009) is a short film which represents a moment in a fictional shootout between police and armed robbers by having a camera traverse the urban battlefield while all the characters are frozen.<sup>9</sup> In Odin's vocabulary, these paintings and

films invite diegetization – the construction of an imaginary world – but not narration because such a world can be constructed based on description alone. So, if there are non-narrative fiction(film)s, it is also possible to fictivize without narrating.

Finally, Odin models all modes on linguistic communication between “the actant director and actant reader” (1995, 227) which regularly involve assertions. The fact that the two need not share the codes of communication is precisely what allows the spectator the freedom in applying different reading strategies. But this does not negate that there is still an object of enunciation in Odin – irrespective of whether it is decoded or not. After all, fictivization in Odin is the operation which supplements the actual enunciator (actant director) and the actual spectator (actant reader) with their fictive versions with the consequence that the enounced flowing between the two which would otherwise be true/false is no longer treated as such. When watching *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), for instance, it is irrelevant whether the enounced like Rotwang kidnapped Maria are actually true or not. In Odin’s words, “the spectator no longer feels interpellated as a real person having to take seriously what is narrated to him” (Odin 1988, 128).

The issue here is that fiction films need not involve any such true/false enunciations – assertions – to begin with. Again, non-narrative fiction films illustrate this best. *Carousel*, specifically, invites the spectators to imagine a shootout. But to do so the film does not *assert* something like “(t)here is a shootout” which is then fictivized. Rather, as the camera moves around the combat zone, the film presents images of the gun battle from various vantage points. Asked to describe the film, both the director and the spectators may well use the assertion “(t)here is a shootout” and they would be perfectly correct in doing so (as I have been). But, again, this does not mean that as an audio-visual text this film asserts anything. After all, based on the absence of predicate structures in images and the processing of visual data alike, it has been argued at length that images of x do not simply translate into statements like “(t)here is x” (Bordwell 1985, Carroll 2008). In short, visual depiction is not the same as linguistic assertion. (Not even all utterances amount to assertions – merely vocalizing “shootout” does not assert that there is a shootout).

The main advantage of Walton’s approach over both Odin’s semio-pragmatics and intentionalist accounts, then, is that it does not use linguistic communication as a model for understanding fiction. Instead, it resorts to children’s games of make-believe. This view, unlike Odin’s, allows for fictions which need not be narrative, need not involve any assertions and even need not constitute communication. By simply make-believing a one-eyed parrot on her shoulder, for instance, the child is not only not making any assertions, she is not even communicating anything to anybody. What she is doing is using a plastic parrot as a prop in a game of make-believe. And it is props rather than assertions or objects of enunciation more broadly that are readily applicable to all forms of fiction. Rubens’ painting and Bernini’s sculpture discussed above are props for imagining Prometheus’ and Proserpina’s plight, respectively. The images and sounds in *Carousel* are props for make-believing a shootout as much as the images and sounds of Bogart in *Casablanca* are props for imagining Rick. And in fictions which are replete with assertions such as literary fictions, it is simply that assertions are props for imagining characters and events. Particular

strength of Walton's theory is, therefore, that by replacing assertions and objects of enunciation with props, it privileges no medium of fiction over another.

## CONSEQUENCES

At this point, we need to remind ourselves that the view that extratextual features are crucial for a film's fictional status, irrespective of whether it is Walton's or even Odin's version of it, have had little traction in film studies. The general lack of interest in these debates and the prevalent ideas that textual features alone define the film's fictional status leads at the very least to problems of categorization. Fiction films are identified as nonfictions and vice versa. Numerous nonfiction films are regularly said to be partially fictional because they share textual features with fiction films. And, if Walton's theory is correct, that fictional status may even change over time is left unrecognized.

But miscategorization is not the sole consequence of this disinterest in the notion of fiction. Other outcomes are of greater importance for they relate to theoretical claims, audience responses, and even to a key assumption in film studies. Concerning theory, there is little recognition of how the notion of fiction makes the emphasis on the special relationship between the image and its profilmic object a moot point. When it comes to audience responses, miscategorization leads to faulty affective responses and may even lead to ethical problems. Finally, the assumption, taken for granted in film studies, that fiction films generate real-life beliefs demands both an empirical verification and a theoretical explanation from a position which is invested in articulating the concept of fiction.

The immediate consequences of the disinterest in the notion of fiction relate to logical coherence and scope of some widely influential film theories discussing ontological properties of the medium. Numerous theorists including most notably André Bazin (2004), Siegfried Kracauer (1960), Peter Wollen (1969) and Stanley Cavell (1979) have argued for the existence of a special ontological link between the photograph and its profilmic object. Kracauer, for instance, puts it like this: "film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with that medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality" (1960, ix). But the emphasis on this special ontological relationship, as Noël Carroll puts it, "implies strange results by ontologically misplacing, so to speak, the focus of our attention" (1988b, 148). Given their ontological commitments, the proponents of this theory should be forced to say that in fiction films like *Casablanca* it is the actor Dooley Wilson and not the fictional piano-player Sam that is primarily represented. Yet, this ignores the fact that when watching photographic fiction films, it is usually the fiction that interests us more than the actors or profilmic objects.<sup>10</sup> In other words, there is an incongruence between the focus of theoretical commitment (the profilmic) and the focus of actual viewing (fictional world).

Moreover, the special link between the photograph and its object cannot tell us anything about the ontology of *fiction* film. This is, first, because fictions cannot be recorded directly. Photographic

film can only record the profilmic which can then be used for building fictions. Second, the special ontological link cannot serve as a border between fiction and nonfiction either because there are, as we have seen, animated documentaries.

Concerning audience responses, given that correct categorization is basis for proper responses, miscategorization leads to reactions which may be aesthetically, scholarly, and even ethically dubious. Between the two potential miscategorizations, confusing fiction for nonfiction has less at stake. The most that the spectator is risking is the fate of an anecdotal rube who stops the performance of *Othello* believing that the actress playing Desdemona is really in danger. The comparative danger for film scholars is to misunderstand the institutional experience of films in question. For instance, even if Walton's theory of fiction is incorrect and early train films were always nonfictional, Slugan's analysis demonstrates the importance of imagination for the initial promotion and reception of these films. Take the example of Hale's Tours – simulations of train travel through projection of phantom rides (films taken with a camera placed on the locomotive) in an auditorium made to look like a train car and popular between 1905 and 1910. Exemplifying the standard understanding of Hale's Tours as a hyper-realistic nonfictional phenomenon, prominent film historian Lauren Rabinovitz argues that these rides instilled the false belief of actually taking a ride in contemporary audiences:

Early accounts of these movie rides are reminiscent of the inventive reports regarding the reception of the earliest Lumiere films . . . [The installation manufacturers] organized a theatrical experience for the cognitive convergence of sensory information as the basis of illusion that “you are really there” (Rabinovitz 2012, 84, 86).

But the analysis of contemporary promotion and reception materials demonstrates that it was the imaginative engagement rather than false belief that informed the institutional experience of these films. Here is a typical review following the premiere of American Mutoscope and Biograph Company's *The Haverstraw Tunnel* phantom ride which the company was only too happy to include in its Bulletins and further promote imaginative engagement as a response strategy: “by the exercise of the very slightest imagination, [the spectator] can fancy himself [sic] perched upon the cow-catcher of an American locomotive tearing along at the rate of sixty miles per hour.” (Niver 1971, 36). In other words, much like the earliest audiences were never naïve enough to mistakenly believe that they are in any danger while watching films like *The Arrival of a Train*, so the spectators of Hale's Tours were never gullible enough to be fooled into believing that they are taking a train ride. Instead, they imagined taking one. And this institutional experience risks being lost when nonfictional traits of a phenomenon, i.e. its relationship to beliefs (instead of make-beliefs) are unduly emphasized.

Whereas the miscategorization of fiction films as nonfictions may lead to misplaced affects and behaviours as well as to scholarly misunderstanding of the institutional experience, confusing or even willingly reading nonfiction films as fictions may lead to ethical problems. Let us consider the effects of confusion, on the one hand, and free application of reading strategies, on the other,

starting with the latter. Consider *Fire at Sea* (Gianfranco Rosi, 2016) – Golden Bear winning documentary about the plight of migrants trying to reach European shores. In a strong version of Odin’s framework, the spectator is perfectly free to apply fictivization in her reading of the film. This means that she is completely free not to take the film seriously. From this perspective, what is narrated is no longer a real-life tragedy but something to be easily dismissed. It is not only that this type of wilful reading will not lead to any action relating to the plight, but it is not even that it will generate the bare minimum when it comes to an ethical response to such events – acknowledgement of their truth.

Ethical issues also arise in the other case where fiction and nonfiction are not merely effects of reading strategies and the miscategorization stems from the insistence on textual features as markers of fictional status. *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) – a documentary in which perpetrators of Indonesian Killings of 1955-56 re-enact their crimes – presents an excellent illustration of the problem. Because of the extensive use of re-enactments, the film is regularly seen as a mixture of nonfiction and fiction. As Bill Nichols puts it:

Usually, documentaries embed reenactments as acknowledged reconstructions (fictional representations) of historical but originally unfiled events within a larger context of nonfiction representation. But this need not be the case, as *The Act of Killing* amply demonstrates in a befuddling, disturbing, and illuminating manner. [...] Befuddlement arises when a clear distinction between fictional and documentary representation fails to materialize (Nichols 2013, 25).

According to Nichols, re-enactments are fictional representations. But this cannot be the case for a couple of reasons. The first is that this is a textual feature and as such is neither necessarily fictional nor necessarily nonfictional. Re-enactment is meant as a recorded staged representation of an event that took place. Yet these can easily be nonfictional. Consider a situation in which I wish to convey to my friends how my speech at my relative’s wedding looked like. I stand in front of them, take a glass, and make the speech anew. To the best of my recollection this is a reasonable reconstruction of the event and as such a nonfictional representation of the same. And in the light of the discussion of Koch’s view above, nothing changes if instead of doing this directly in front of my friends, I record the re-enactment and post it on our WhatsApp group. In fact, as the discussion of *Nanook of the North* reveals, I could also be completely misrepresenting how my speech looked like in order to, say, present myself as wittier than I was, but this would not make the re-enactment fictional – it would just make it a deliberate misrepresentation.

Moreover, most of the re-enactments in *The Act of Killing* cannot be fictions precisely because they are presented as veridical accounts of the killings, i.e. plausible representations in Nichols’ vocabulary, without inviting imaginings. For instance, Anwar, one of the main perpetrators, restages in detail how he used metal wire to “optimize” the executions. And this is also what makes re-enactments nonfictions from both Odin’s and Walton’s perspective. From Walton’s position, the re-enactments are not fictions because the audiences are not supposed to make-believe that these killings took place in such a way. Rather, the audiences are supposed to either confirm the

plausibility of these representations by believing in them (as per the official Indonesian history) or deny it (from a critical humanist perspective) and make moral judgements based on that. Certainly, it is true that other re-enactments in the film are often stylized using visual tropes from gangster films, among others. But again, as the discussion of discursivity has demonstrated, these are textual features which cannot determine on their own whether something is fiction or not.<sup>11</sup> For Odin, the point of fictivization is not to take what is represented seriously. Yet the killings the perpetrators are re-enacting surely took place. Undeniably, the re-enactments are regularly misrepresented as heroic deeds and as such certainly involve gross falsehoods, but they nevertheless make a claim to how things happened. Not believing the perpetrators' version is, crucially, distinct from not taking them seriously. The former is necessary for a minimum of an ethical response whereas the latter gives such a response no chance.

Furthermore, to equivocate between fictional and fantasmatic representations and say that these "gangsters live inside fantasmatic representations of their past and present state of mind [...] that seems so far removed from the frame within which most viewers conceive of reality" (Nichols 2013, 25) opens the dangerous door of equating these pathological outlooks with fictions. To repeat, for both Walton and Odin fictions are neither to be believed or disbelieved. Instead, they are to be imagined (Walton) or not to be taken seriously (Odin). But the perpetrators' delusional representations in *The Act of Killing* constitute a country's official line to be believed in. Conflating delusions and fictions risks making the question of belief and therefore potential ethical responses superfluous.

But perhaps the most important reason why the notion of fiction should be given more importance in film studies, is the fact that the concept informs one of the key assumptions behind the discipline. Text-oriented film scholars are regularly interested in questions of representation. There is an abundance of studies focusing on the representation of gender, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, minorities, disability, etc. in fiction film. And the underlying reason for the interest in these matters is the assumption that "how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life" (Richard Dyer 2013, 1), i.e. that "images of people on film actively contribute to the ways in which people are understood and experienced in the 'real world'" (Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin 2011, 3). In other words, one of the core assumptions is that representation (fictional and nonfictional alike) influence audiences' attitudes, intentions, beliefs and even behaviours relating to those representations.

When it comes to fiction, however, these assumptions need to be squared with the ordinary understanding of fiction (also captured in Walton's and Odin's technical accounts) according to which fiction is precisely something that, contrary to nonfiction, in principle does not generate beliefs and does not lead to action. For instance, it is common-sense to say that after watching *Super Size Me* (Morgan Spurlock, 2004) the audiences are supposed to believe the events of the film (that the director went on a 30-day McDonald's diet) and the film's message (that the fast food is unhealthy) and that they should at least consider acting accordingly. At the same time, having seen *Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) it is also commonplace to say that the

audiences are *not* to think that any of the events represented took place *nor* that Italian Americans are mobsters, let alone act on these beliefs and stereotypes.<sup>12</sup>

Yet film scholars have generally been disinterested both in testing these competing assumptions or in the results of these tests. Interestingly, the most recent meta-analysis of persuasive effects of narratives in general demonstrates that although narratives are effective means of changing attitudes, intentions, beliefs and behaviours the results for *fictional* narratives are more ambiguous (Kurt Braddock and James Price Dillard 2016). In other words, the authors conclude that more empirical work is necessary to determine actual effects of fictional narratives, especially when it comes to generating beliefs. Moreover, Braddock and Dillard's meta-analysis of fictional narratives does not distinguish between video, audio, theatre, and verbal text narratives and therefore cannot say what role, if any, the medium plays in potential belief generation. Furthermore, the study also focuses only on the immediate effects but does not consider whether the effects persist over a longer period – another point assumed by film scholars. This is clearly not to say that film scholars should be responsible for undertaking empirical or meta-analytic work of this type, but it is to claim that it should be at least recognized that the disciplinary assumption is precisely that – an assumption in need of empirical demonstration.

A related concern pertains to current disinterest into what, if the assumption of persuasive effects in fiction film is true, the psychological mechanism of this persuasion is. It is clear how, for instance, stereotypical representations of people and groups in nonfiction, given that nonfiction presents itself as plausible representation, may instil beliefs in these stereotypes. It is, however, far from obvious how such representations in fiction could do the same.<sup>13</sup> For this a theory of the relationship of fiction to belief is necessary.

There is undoubtedly more or less explicit understanding among film scholars that “we are all constantly bombarded by images, ideas, and ideologies” and that “these constructs are consciously and unconsciously internalized by everyone” (Benshoff and Griffin 2011, 11). In the tradition drawing on Louis Althusser's (1971) work on ideological state apparatuses and Stuart Hall's (1973) accounts of encoding/decoding, the idea is that the audiences are more prone to accept those representations which reinforce the dominant ideology. Moreover, stereotypical representations accumulate and in the absence of alternative representations the sheer plethora of such representations become treated as the default account of the world. One film with negative stereotypes might not make a difference, but a steady diet of such films will. For instance, given that Italian Americans are often depicted as members of organized crime and that the dominant ideology is replete with such stereotypes, it is no wonder that film viewers will come to see the Italian American community as threatening and violent. But to repeat, although this makes perfect sense for nonfictional representations, the theoretical problem is precisely to explain why we would count *fictional* representations of this type (whether there is one or a plethora of them) toward our default worldview if fictional representations are what we merely entertain or imagine but do not take seriously.

One influential strand of psychoanalytic film theory running from Brecht did speak of cinematic illusion or “impression of reality” where, due to the conflux of the properties of the apparatus, the medium, and the realist narrative form, spectators were at least momentarily said to have been fooled into believing the content of fictional representations. Metz (1982, 69-74, 101-109) offered the theory’s latest notable explicit account of the problem with an appeal to the concept of disavowal which allows spectators to simultaneously believe something and not believe it.<sup>14</sup> Although the spectators know perfectly well that what they are seeing is fiction, on some level they still believe in it. Moreover, there are also moments when the spectator is briefly overwhelmed and enters a dreamlike state in which the credulous spectator takes over from the uncredulous one.

But these ideas have been criticized extensively by cognitivists and psychoanalytic theorists alike and have lost currency. Cognitivists have pointed out that there is no need for recourse to incompatible or wavering beliefs to describe the impression of reality. Other concepts such as the focus on the represented content rather than representational strategies (Carroll 1988a), imagination (Currie 1995), and narrative absorption (Frank Hakemulder et al. 2017) do the job. It should be added that whatever wavering is said to take place during screening dissipates after it, i.e. the impression of reality is not a long-term effect. Moreover, even the later defenders of psychoanalytic theory have argued that we should distinguish pathological disavowal in which the same thing is believed and not believed from normal disavowal in which the same thing is merely entertained while not believed in (Richard Allen 1997, 135-143). Crucially, it is the normal rather than pathological disavowal that is characteristic of fiction film. These critiques clearly call for an alternative explanation as to how fiction film could potentially elicit beliefs, yet since then film scholars have generally not met this demand.

Theoretical models offering answers to this call can be found in other disciplines. Some psychologists have proposed the availability heuristic – a process of generating beliefs based on access to vivid examples (Kahneman and Tversky 1973). Following a fiction film depicting nuclear war people evaluate such an event as likelier.<sup>15</sup> Others have argued that people mentally represent both false and true information as true by default and that additional mental effort is necessary to “unbelieve” it (Gilbert 1991). Building on the idea that understanding entails default acceptance of what is understood and on the experiments with literary fictions, it has been argued that people engage fictions in precisely the opposite way than Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggested. Instead of “willing suspension of disbelief” there is a “willing construction of disbelief” (Gerrig and Rapp 2004).<sup>16</sup>

Philosophers have criticized these accounts and presented their own. Availability heuristic is unlikely to generate long-term beliefs because, by definition, vivid examples fade with the passage of time (Currie 2020). Automatic belief in all information is also doubtful because pragmatic considerations must take place before any such automatic acceptance takes place (Sperber et al. 2010). Understanding hyperbole such as “I died of embarrassment” is precisely to see them as not literally true. Similar pragmatic consideration must therefore precede rather than follow the understanding of fictional representations.



Instead, we may come to believe fictional representations for other reasons (Sullivan-Bissett, Bradley and Noordhof 2017). Currie (2020), for instance, proposes two mechanisms – significant overlap of truths and fictional truths and the confidence in author’s beliefs. In the first case, because even the most fantastical stories abound with real-life truths fictional representations which are not explicitly marked as fantastic are also tacitly assumed to be true. *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), for example, can be easily assumed to provide true information about the visual appearance of numerous US landmarks (before they are spectacularly blown up). In the second, it is assumed that fictional representations diverge from real-life truths only as a part of the author’s narrative design so if they have no obvious story-function they are accepted as true in real-life as well. A background stereotype such as the black maid Lottie in *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945) may be easily accepted because of its lack of effect on the main storyline.

But there are problems with this account as well because it still makes it difficult to explain which fictional representations will be believed and which not. Concerning the truth overlap, the convention that characters speaking English in films about Ancient Rome is not marked as a fantastic element, yet it is hardly claimed that spectators enjoying a steady diet of historical films believe that Ancient Romans spoke English. When it comes to authorial design, that characters are good-looking rarely has a story-function, yet audiences do not come to believe that an average person in real-life is as good-looking as an average casted actor.

The point here is not to decide which of the theories sketched out here is correct. Rather it is to draw attention to their existence and relevance for film studies. More generally then, this article will have hopefully shown the importance of theorizing the notion of fiction not only for the taxonomical organization of the field and the problems stemming from categorization but also for one of the discipline’s key assumption – that fiction film films influence real-life beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is Christian Metz (1982) whose proposal I discuss below.

<sup>2</sup> The entry for "fiction film" in Kuhn and Westwell (2020) only points to related terms: "See diegesis; feature film; narrative/narration; storytelling terminology."

<sup>3</sup> For an account of Italian and Spanish scholarship, I am indebted to Enrico Terrone. Takaheshi Kohei has provided information about scholarship in Japan in his "Seminar of Japanese Literature and Fictionality" presentation at the 2019 International Society for Fiction and Fictionality Studies inaugural conference. For works in Russian and German, see J. Alexander Bareis and Mario Slugan (2019) and Mario Slugan (2019b).

<sup>4</sup> In a further clarification of the definition of documentary Nichols (2017) explains that the understanding of documentary also changes over time through the influence of institutions, filmmakers, films, and audiences. Nichols' approach remains textualist, however, because what matters most is the relationship of these four agents to changing textual conventions. Producers and distributors influence how the film is going to look like usually by exercising pressure to use existing conventions. These may be subverted by filmmakers. Films which are initially outliers may come to popularize new conventions. Audiences, finally, have expectations in line with conventions. In extratextualist approaches, the focus is elsewhere. For Wilson, textual conventions are irrelevant and the only thing that matters for determining fictionality is the author's intention. For Slugan, similarly, it is not the change in textual conventions that is crucial but negotiating whether the film should be engaged primarily as a veridical representation or as a prop in a game of make-believe.

<sup>5</sup> For an example of a feedback loop between audience reception and promotional strategies on the example of phantom rides see Slugan (2019a, 75-76).

<sup>6</sup> "NEGATIVE ACTUALLY MADE [...] OF ACTUAL OCCURRENCE" (Selig Polyscope Company Catalogue, "Tracked by Bloodhounds", Supplement 17, 1905, 1, 3).

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview of Odin's semio-pragmatics in English see Buckland (2000). For another French-language monograph on fiction in film see Siety (2009).

<sup>8</sup> I return to this point in the next section.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5yhqkjiAQ>.

<sup>10</sup> Stars, undeniably, demand special consideration but even when enamoured with Bogart we are also very much interested in Rick.

<sup>11</sup> Angwar's re-enactment could have even been performed by a star actor but this would not necessarily make the re-enactment fictional either (albeit the film would lose much of its power which rests on actual perpetrators performing the re-enactments).

<sup>12</sup> I have already pointed out that fiction films may depict things which are true. There is organized crime in the US and some Italian Americans are a part of it. But, to repeat, although some aspects of the fictional content may be true, the point of fiction is not to assert what is explicitly represented but for what is represented to be entertained. And I have also admitted that some fictions make nonfictional assertions which invite beliefs through their fictional content – historical dramas or the instructional mode in Odin's account to be found in anti-war films. But here we are not concerned with historical facts or how film's message may generate beliefs but how explicit fictional representations – stereotypes – may instil beliefs. Although *The Godfather* stereotypes Italian Americans as criminals, neither its historical truths nor its message is, arguably, that all Italian Americans are criminals.

<sup>13</sup> A related problem known as the paradox of fiction concerns explaining how we engage fictions emotionally if we do not believe that the fictional entities and characters depicted exist. The solutions offered, importantly, circumvent beliefs by emphasising that emotions might stem from imaginings (Carroll 1990b, Smith 1995) or various forms of embodiment understood phenomenologically (Linda Williams 1991, Laura Marks 2000, Vivian Sobchack 2004) or in terms of mirror neurons (Smith 2017). As such they do not provide guidance here.

<sup>14</sup> An earlier famous account hinges on the analogy of the dream-like state and viewing in the cinema (Jean-Louis Baudry's 1986). The problems with the analogy have been discussed at length (Carroll 1988a). Moreover, Baudry's account, Unlike Metz's, is not applicable to conditions of spectatorship outside of cinema.

<sup>15</sup> A version of this view can be found in Carroll (1990a).

<sup>16</sup> One of the few film scholars who has picked up on this argument is Torben Grodal who argues that "even as we watch fictional films it remains true seeing is believing, because to believe incoming information is, as previously mentioned, the default mode and to disbelieve demands a special effort" (2009, 154). But even Grodal adds that whereas cognitive bottom-up processes secure this default belief, top-down processes introduce disbelief, i.e. evaluate the reality status of sensory input.