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Falsehoods in film: documentary vs fiction

Stacie Friend

Department of Philosophy, Birkbeck, University of London, UK

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Falsehoods in film: documentary vs fiction

Stacie Friend

I claim that we should reject a sharp distinction between fiction and non-fiction according to which documentary is a faithful representation of the facts, whilst fiction films merely invite us to imagine what is made up. Instead, we should think of fiction and non-fiction as *genres*: categories whose membership is determined by a combination of non-essential features and which influence appreciation in a variety of ways. An objection to this approach is that it renders the distinction too conventional and fragile, undermining our justification for criticising documentaries like *Bowling for Columbine* or *The Hunting Ground* for playing fast and loose with the facts. I argue that this objection is misguided, misidentifying the justification for criticising non-fiction films that mislead or deceive. I develop an alternative account that explains why we also criticise many fictions for inaccuracy.

Keywords: documentary; fiction and non-fiction; genre; assertion; belief; imagination

1. Introduction

It is well-known that Robert Flaherty staged various sequences when filming *Nanook of the North* (1922), the first documentary feature. Condemning Flaherty might seem anachronistic, but documentary filmmakers today who stage events, manipulate footage or otherwise deceive audiences are bound to face a barrage of criticism. Prominent examples include Michael Moore, criticised for staged scenes and selective editing in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), or Kirby Dick, condemned for offering misleading evidence in *The Hunting Ground* (2015).

It matters to these criticisms that the documentaries are non-fiction rather than fiction. Many would say that the notion of deception cannot straightforwardly be applied to fiction. According to the most popular philosophical approach, non-fictions are characterised by assertions we are invited to believe, whereas fictions present content we are merely supposed to imagine. This seems to explain why we criticise documentarists rather than fiction filmmakers for misrepresentation: It is only non-fiction we hold to standards of accuracy or sincerity.

Unfortunately, though, the explanation is wrong. In my view, there are no essential features that distinguish between fiction and non-fiction. According to the Genre Theory I have developed elsewhere (Friend 2011; 2012; n.d.), categorisation is determined by a combination of non-essential features and influences appreciation in a variety of ways. This does not mean that the distinction is non-existent or unimportant; but it does mean that there is no necessary connection between non-fiction and purported accuracy.

A common objection to my approach is that it renders the distinction between fiction and non-fiction too conventional and fragile. Margrethe Bruun Vaage claims that it cannot account for differences in truth claims between the genres and thereby ‘collapse[s] the distinction between nonfiction and fiction’ (2017, 262). Kathleen Stock (2016) suggests that by relying on changing conventions and practices, the Genre Theory sacrifices explanatory power. If non-fiction need not be accurate, why are we more likely to condemn untruths in non-fictions than in fictions? The Genre Theory seems to undermine our justification for criticising documentarists like Moore and Dick who play fast and loose with the facts.

In what follows I will argue that this objection is misguided, because it misidentifies the justification for criticising deceptive documentaries. I begin by critiquing the standard philosophical approach to distinguishing documentary from fiction film. I then turn to the

Genre Theory and describe the challenge it faces in more detail. Finally, I develop an account of the basis of criticism that applies to both fiction and non-fiction.

2. The standard distinction

Within analytic philosophy, the standard way to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction is via the different attitudes they invite. Whereas works of non-fiction invite us to *believe* what they portray, works of fiction invite us to *make believe* or *imagine* it. In the discussion of texts, the idea is typically framed as a contrast between distinctive speech acts, understood in terms of Gricean reflexive intentions. Specifically, producers of non-fiction put forward content as asserted, intending audiences to recognise this and therefore to believe that content; whereas producers of fiction do not make assertions, but instead invite audiences to imagine the content of the work (see, e.g., Currie 1990; 2014; Davies 2015; Stock 2017).

The same contrast has been deployed to define documentaries, understood here as non-fiction films.¹ For example, Noël Carroll (1997) proposes that documentaries are ‘films of presumptive assertion’. On his view, documentary makers use the filmic medium to put forward propositional content as asserted; audiences are meant to recognise the filmmaker’s assertoric intention and believe the content in virtue of that recognition. Similarly, Trevor Ponech (1997) maintains that non-fiction films are constituted primarily by ‘cinematic assertions’. The filmmaker uses ‘motion picture technologies and representational strategies in order to indicate to viewers that they are supposed to take the attitude of belief toward what is represented’ (Ponech 1997, 212).

Carl Plantinga (2005) objects that whilst these accounts nicely describe expository documentaries—typified by voice-over narration, as in David Attenborough’s *Blue Planet* (2001)—they fail to capture observational documentaries such as Frederick Wiseman’s *Hospital* (1980), or *Startup.com* (2001), which do not clearly articulate any assertions about their content. Plantinga maintains that documentaries are characterised by *Asserted Veridical Representation*. A veridical representation is one ‘that is, in the case of implicitly or directly asserted propositions, truthful; and in the case of images, sounds, or combinations thereof, a reliable guide to relevant elements of the pro-filmic scene or scenes’ (Plantinga 2005, 111).

Recently Enrico Terrone (2020) has argued that the above accounts should be rejected because they fail to distinguish between documentaries and docudramas. Docudramas—such as *All the President’s Men* (1976), *Apollo 13* (1995), and the Netflix series *The Crown* (2016–)—are fictions, but plausibly ‘invite the audience to take propositions about their subjects as asserted’ (Terrone 2020, 45). Such films purport to tell a (largely) true story, even if they use actors and dramatic techniques to do so.

Manuel García-Carpintero (this volume) argues that his account avoids Terrone’s objection. Like the other theorists Terrone criticises, García-Carpintero defines non-fiction as assertoric; however, he rejects a Gricean interpretation of assertion. Instead, he holds that speech acts are defined by the norms that constitute them, thereby determining their correctness conditions. For example, assertion can be defined as the speech act that is correct if and only if one knows that *p*, or *p* is true, or it is reasonable to believe *p* (García-Carpintero 2013, 344–345). García-Carpintero (this volume) suggests that the constitutive norm for assertion, and therefore non-fiction, is to provide ‘epistemically good enough information’ relative to the context; by contrast, fictions are subject to the norm of providing ‘good enough imaginative projects’. Though docudramas aim to improve their audience’s epistemic

¹ Gregory Currie’s (1999) claim that documentaries are predominantly constituted by ‘visible traces’ of the pro-filmic objects is usually taken to contrast with assertion-based definitions. However, by ‘documentary’ Currie means a specific sub-genre of non-fiction film (see Currie 2000). He agrees that non-fiction is defined by assertion; but assertion is insufficient for the more specific classification. I follow most philosophers in focusing on the broader category.

position, this goal is subordinate to the imaginative project. The opposite holds for documentaries.

Terrone's own account also appeals to norms, though without reference to assertion. For him, documentaries are films whose 'use plans'—culturally determined norms for appreciation—are primarily to enable audiences to form a particular kind of perceptual belief, namely a *pictorial belief*. This means 'endorsing what one perceives in a picture' (Terrone 2020, 46). When a documentary includes visible traces (original footage) of the objects it is about, the pictorial beliefs will concern those objects. But a documentary need not elicit pictorial beliefs about its subject matter. In watching a re-enactment, audiences form pictorial beliefs concerning the re-enactment itself; it is in virtue of these that they form non-perceptual beliefs about the real events being re-enacted.

Docudramas also prompt non-perceptual beliefs about real events, but Terrone claims they do this by eliciting primarily pictorial *imaginings*—which locate the depicted events within the spatiotemporal framework of a fictional world—rather than pictorial beliefs, which portray the re-enactment as an event in the spatiotemporal framework of the actual world. Terrone acknowledges that re-enactments can prompt pictorial imaginings, but these are not treated as constituting a fictional world; 'their main focus of attention is the actual world' (2020, 49). So although Terrone does not adopt an assertion-based account of documentary, he retains the assumption that fiction and non-fiction are distinguished by a contrast between (pictorial) belief and imagining.

These accounts appear to explain why we are more apt to condemn documentaries than fiction films for inaccuracy. False assertion, and the invitation to form false beliefs, warrant criticism; we have an interest in acquiring true beliefs and avoiding erroneous ones. Where non-fiction filmmakers intentionally portray events contrary to fact, they can be accused of misleading audiences, or—even worse—outright lying. The same (it seems) cannot be said of fictions which invite us to imagine what is false or inaccurate; imagining of this sort is why we engage with fictions in the first place. If fiction filmmakers intentionally portray characters who do not exist or events that never happened, this is not blameworthy. Moreover, even if fictions can mislead in one way or another, on the common assumption that lying requires assertion, fictions defined as non-assertive cannot lie (see Mahon 2019). They are therefore not subject to the most serious degrees of censure.

3. Against the standard distinction

If all and only documentaries made assertions or invited belief, whereas all and only fiction films merely invited imagining, it would make sense that we condemn the former and not the latter. However, this account of the distinction is mistaken. Works of non-fiction frequently invite imagining—including imagining what is non-veridical, such as counterfactual situations—whilst works of fiction make assertions and invite beliefs (Friend 2011; 2012; n.d.). This is just as true of films as it is of representations in other media.

Illustrating this point, Terrone argues that docudramas constitute a counterexample to the claim that fictions do not make assertions. For example, consider *JFK* (1991), Oliver Stone's docudrama about the assassination of John F. Kennedy.² Stone's declared purpose was to persuade audiences that Lee Harvey Oswald (Gary Oldman) was a patsy in a military-industrial-governmental conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy. Although Stone fictionalised elements of the film, the plot closely follows the account offered by the central figure, Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner), in his 1988 memoir, *On the Trail of the Assassins*. Stone defended his cinematic account of the assassination, including in testimony before the US Congress. Congress subsequently passed the Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992,

² I discuss *JFK* in some detail in Friend (2003; 2010).

which required the National Archives to collect and release all documents related to the assassination; the final report of the Assassination Records Review Board gives credit to Stone's film.

In short, although *JFK* is fiction, it is also a (successful) work of propaganda, designed primarily to instil beliefs about real-world events. The film is constituted largely of representations that are asserted to be veridical (in at least some respects), including visual and verbal representations of how the assassination occurred and the unfolding of Garrison's investigation.

JFK also looks like a counterexample to Terrone's claim that fiction films invite pictorial imaginings rather than pictorial beliefs. The events portrayed are located in our own world, in the relatively recent past; these real events are the main focus of attention. That they are recreated by actors does not distinguish them from skilful re-enactments in documentaries. Even a paradigmatically fictional film like James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) is clearly set within the spatiotemporal framework of the actual world. Further, both *JFK* and *Titanic* include many scenes that incorporate actual footage or which are exact reconstructions of real events. It would beg the question to reply that because *JFK* and *Titanic* are fiction, their uses determine that we should treat the events as occurring in a fictional world. It is at least as plausible that the imaginings invited by works of fiction are directed toward the real world; on this construal, to imagine a 'fictional world' is just imagining our own world to be different from how it actually is (Friend 2017).

Terrone clarifies that pictorial imaginings involve what Robert Hopkins (2008) calls 'collapsed seeing-in'. The idea is that in watching a fiction film, we 'experience a pictorial representation of fictional events' rather than a 'pictorial representation of a theatrical representation of fictional events' (Terrone 2020, 50). So when we watch *Titanic*, what we experience seeing in the film is *the ship sinking*; awareness of the theatrical collapses. When we watch a documentary about the Titanic, what we experience seeing in the film is instead *a reconstruction of the ship sinking*. But this seems a contingent fact about unconvincing documentary reconstructions. The re-enactments in films like Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) and Johanna Hamilton's *1971* (2014) are notably cinematic, seeming to plunge us into the action; we may forget the theatrical. We do remain aware that we are watching a re-enactment.³ However, the same applies to fictions like *Titanic*; audiences do not forget that they are watching a reconstruction.

Terrone's contrast comes under further pressure from documentaries relying heavily on CGI, like the BBC's *Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999), or animation, like Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). Terrone claims that animated documentaries do not ask us to form pictorial imaginings about a fictional world, but rather 'perceptual beliefs concerning an animated reconstruction in the actual world' and therefore do not 'enable immersion' (2020, 51). *Waltz with Bashir* is, however, highly immersive—at least as immersive, I would say, as many fiction films. It is not just an animated reconstruction of events, but instead weaves a story of Folman's attempt to recover his memories of being an Israeli soldier in the 1982 Lebanon war; as such it combines representations of real people and events with fictional characters and dream and fantasy sequences.

Folman's film is concerned with genuine experience. *Walking with Dinosaurs*, on the other hand, is designed to give viewers an experience that no one has had: seeing dinosaurs in their natural habitats. It is evident from the start of the series that the invited response is imaginative. The first thing the narrator (Kenneth Branagh) says is: 'Imagine you could travel back in time, to a time long before man. Back across 65 million years.' The episodes are shot in the style of a standard wildlife documentary, with Branagh's voiceover reporting on the

³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this worry.

doings of the dinosaurs as if they were taking place before the camera. For example, later in Episode 1 we see computer-generated dinosaurs onscreen whilst he intones, ‘A growing chorus of calls signals the arrival of a huge herd of Placerias’.⁴ Though the series is based on scientific discoveries about dinosaurs, we are meant to imagine that we are, *per impossibile*, seeing dinosaurs through film, as opposed to watching a re-enactment of (what scientists think) dinosaurs looked like.

These examples also pose a problem for the other theories I have described. Whatever is asserted by *Walking with Dinosaurs*, whatever we are invited to believe, it is not the content of the narration; no one is asserting that Placerias have arrived. If there is an assertion, it is rather that a herd of Placerias might have looked and sounded like *this*. But this is not the sort of ‘flat-out assertion’ typically associated with non-fiction (García-Carpintero, this volume). We are arguably intended to believe more of what is represented in *JFK* than in *Walking with Dinosaurs*.

4. Effects of classification

In reply to such criticisms, one might insist that most works are a mix of fiction and non-fiction (e.g., Currie 1990; Davies 2015; Stock 2016). That is, they are a mix of elements we are meant to believe, and invitations to imagine what is made-up. With texts, the distinction is applied to sentences or longer stretches of discourse. With film, it might apply to individual scenes or to different dimensions of the representation. For instance, Ponech’s notion of *cinematic assertion* characterises a ‘unit of motion picture footage’ (1997, 204). The aim is to identify the essential element that defines fiction or non-fiction.

The theorists I have discussed usually assume that a film counts as documentary if it is constituted *primarily* or *predominantly* by these essential elements. For example, Terrone says that in the use plan for documentaries ‘the formation of pictorial beliefs has priority over that of pictorial imaginings, whereas in fiction films it is the other way around’ (2020, 47). Terrone goes on to say that some films can be appreciated as either a docudrama or a documentary, insofar as they invite a balance of pictorial beliefs and pictorial imaginings. The implication is that (non-)fictionality is a matter of degree, determined by the relative proportion or importance of certain defining features.

I do not deny that we sometimes describe works as containing ‘fictional’ and ‘non-fictional’ elements. However, this approach fails to capture the role played by overall work classifications in appreciation (Friend 2012, n.d.). Morris’s use of re-enactments in *The Thin Blue Line* was controversial when the film was released, though it was also defended as ground-breaking. Critics on both sides of this debate were perfectly aware which parts of the film were which; their responses make sense only because the work as a whole was categorised as documentary. Reflecting back, Charles Musser (2015) writes, ‘For those viewing this canonical film today, the challenge is to recognize the many levels on which it was a radically disruptive force that defied numerous assumptions about documentary as a mode of expression and ultimately reconfigured our understanding of what constitutes nonfiction audiovisual practices.’ What was ‘radically disruptive’ about *The Thin Blue Line*, such as the cinematic dramatisations or film noir conventions, would not have been radical in a fiction film.

Furthermore, there is empirical evidence that work-level classifications affect our experience. Studies suggest that we process texts differently when we think they are fiction or non-fiction, resulting in distinctive memory representations: better memory for details for fiction, and more elaborated ‘mental models’ of the situation for non-fiction (see Friend 2012; n.d.). In a rare examination of film, Louise Pouliot and Paul Cowen (2007) had

⁴ Clip at <https://www.bbcearth.com/video/?v=417176>.

participants watch one of six film clips, taken from either documentary or fiction films. They examined the correlation between *interest* (involvement) and *perceived realism*, a construct combining a *semantic* component (belief that the content is accurate) and a *syntactic* component (belief that the footage is undistorted). They found a positive correlation for documentary, but the opposite for fiction film.

By contrast, the idea that only non-fiction invites belief receives little empirical backing. Studies of persuasion by narrative texts indicate that for many kinds of beliefs and attitudes, fictions are at least as likely to persuade as non-fictions (see Friend 2014). Again, there are fewer studies of film. Xoxia Cao (2015), investigating the effects of classification on political attitudes, had participants watch a short film clip labelled either ‘fiction’ or ‘documentary.’ The label made no significant difference to participants who were high in ‘need for cognition’ (roughly, the degree to which a person likes to think); but participants low in need for cognition were *more* persuaded by the ‘fiction’.

The point is that work-level classification matters to appreciation, but not because we respond with entirely different attitudes toward works in each category. Instead, there are a variety of effects, some of them surprising, which can only be investigated empirically. The standard approach to distinguishing fiction and non-fiction by appeal to invited responses of belief or imagining just cannot account for this complexity.

García-Carpintero (this volume) agrees that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction applies to works, not their parts. What matters is not the relative weight of specific elements within a film, but rather the intention of filmmakers that certain norms apply to the whole. For example, even if *JFK* invites more beliefs than *Walking with Dinosaurs* or *Waltz with Bashir*, we still judge the fiction by the quality of the imaginings invited. With the documentaries, we take the imaginings to be subordinated to an epistemic project, such as Folman’s project of conveying what it was like to be a soldier in the Lebanon war.

However, this kind of epistemic project cannot sustain a distinction with fiction. Fiction-makers often aim to communicate ‘what it was like’ to have certain experiences, to live in a certain time and place, and so on. Stone’s goal in *JFK* was to persuade audiences of the truth of a conspiracy theory. Even Cameron’s purpose in making *Titanic* appears epistemic: to accurately portray the sinking whilst bringing home its human significance. This epistemic project is not necessarily subordinated to the fictional romance. In an interview Cameron suggested that the fictional story is instead designed to enhance the experience of the real event: ‘I hope [protagonists] Rose and Jack’s relationship will be a kind of emotional lightning rod, if you will, allowing viewers to invest their minds and hearts to make history come alive again’ (Moseley 2012, 77).

García-Carpintero might reply that by presenting *Titanic* as fiction Cameron *ipso facto* subjects it to the imagination norm rather than the epistemic. However, this reply begs the question against the claim that fiction and non-fictions may be subject to a variety of norms. In my view, there is nothing preventing fiction filmmakers from prioritising epistemic aims and therefore epistemic norms. The practice of creating fiction with a didactic purpose is probably as old as the practice of creating fiction itself.

I conclude that accounts of documentary that draw a distinction with fiction in terms of belief or assertion are unsuccessful. I now turn to my own account.

5. The Genre Theory

I develop and defend the Genre Theory elsewhere (Friend 2012, n.d.), so here I will be brief. To say that fiction and non-fiction are *genres* is to say that they are ways of classifying representations that guide appreciation, so that knowledge of the classification plays a role in a work’s correct interpretation and evaluation. Genres in this sense are what Kendall Walton (1970) calls ‘categories of art’. Walton argues that the ways in which we classify artworks

has an impact on our perception of their aesthetic properties, and he identified a variety of factors that contribute to classification. Among these are *standard features*—manifest features that are typical for the category, such as flatness for painting or contrasting shadows for film noir—and (what I term) *categorial features*, such as the artist's classificatory intentions and contemporary classification practices. I say the same about classification as fiction or non-fiction. What other theorists propose as defining features of non-fiction—such as making assertions and inviting beliefs—I see as standard features of the genre.

Standard features are those we expect works in a genre to have, possession of which tends to place the work in the category. Such features are contrasted with *contra-standard features* (properties atypical for the category) and *variable features* (properties which can happily vary within the category). I take the necessary and sufficient conditions offered by other theories to be standard features rather than essential properties. Some of these features, such as inviting belief, apply across media; though Teroni's appeal to specifically *pictorial* beliefs excludes texts. Many, perhaps most, standard features are medium-specific. For instance, footage of real events is a standard feature of documentary and a contra-standard feature of fiction film; but it has no relevance to classifying texts. With that in mind, we might say that a film which consists primarily of interviews and footage of historical events is likely to be a documentary, whereas one which consists primarily of actors performing is likely to be a fiction film.

However, such features are insufficient for classification by themselves. One reason is that works may have contra-standard features and still belong to a category; a fiction film could consist primarily of interviews and footage. Moreover, what counts as standard for a genre can change over time. The use of novelistic techniques by certain journalists starting in the early 1960s deployed contra-standard features for news reporting. Their efforts resulted in the advent of New Journalism, soon popularised by Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966); these techniques are now standard for the sub-genre of creative non-fiction. The sort of animation used in *Waltz with Bashir* is no longer contra-standard for documentary feature films. In these cases, categorial features play a key role. It matters to the classification of *In Cold Blood* and *Waltz with Bashir* that their creators intended to make non-fiction; one could not tell just by reading or watching how to categorise these works. It also matters that the intended classification was accepted within the relevant practices. Had the *New Yorker* refused to publish Capote's story as non-fiction, it would never have been so influential.

Insofar as classification as fiction or non-fiction turns on a variety of manifest and contextual features, the (non-)fictionality of works cannot be a matter of degree along any single dimension. A documentary that has contra-standard features is not thereby more fictional. Instead, the features are notable because they are striking within the category. This is why *The Thin Blue Line* was 'radically disruptive' of the documentary genre, but no less of a documentary. The Genre Theory captures the multi-dimensionality of classification.

With the basics of the Genre Theory before us, we can now return to the challenge described above. If there is no essential connection between non-fiction on the one hand, and assertion, belief or accuracy on the other, what justifies us in criticising documentaries that promote falsehoods? The Genre Theory seems to render the relationship between non-fiction and purported accuracy too contingent, undermining the sense in which we criticise films like *Bowling for Columbine* and *The Hunting Ground* precisely because they are documentaries.

My reply is that the justification for criticising works of non-fiction which misrepresent cannot be *only* that they are categorised as non-fiction.

6. The basis of criticism

To understand why categorisation cannot be the whole story, it is helpful to observe that we do not criticise every departure from veridical representation in non-fiction, whilst we do criticise many fictions for inaccuracies.

In addition to using animation, Ari Folman includes fictional characters and imaginary elements in *Waltz with Bashir*. These features are typically praised for contributing to the dreamlike quality of a film whose themes include the malleability of memory and the legacy of trauma. In both Carl Sagan's original *Cosmos* documentary series (1980) and the recent reboot with astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson (2014), we see the presenter travelling in the 'Spaceship of the Imagination', allowing him (for instance) to hover above the horizon of a black hole. This is not just unrealistic but impossible; yet rather than being criticised, such techniques are treated as innovative ways to make the science vivid.

At the same time, misrepresentations in fiction may elicit condemnation. Fiction films are often criticised for anachronisms, such as the appearance in *Troy* (2004) of a parasol which would not be invented for another 800 years. Other inaccuracies warrant more serious critique. Ben Affleck's *Argo* (2012), about the real rescue of US diplomats from Iran during the hostage crisis, falsely portrays the British and New Zealand embassies turning away the Americans and significantly diminishes the role of the Canadian ambassador who was largely responsible for the plan. Diplomats from all three countries protested the distortions.

More recently, Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) was criticised for portraying torture as key to the CIA's discovering the hiding place of Osama bin Laden. Because the film's portrayal contradicted the US Senate Intelligence Committee's own information, Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal were investigated to discover if they had access to classified material withheld from legislators. Senators, concerned that the film would persuade audiences that torture was an effective tool in the fight against terrorism, condemned the film as 'grossly inaccurate and misleading'.⁵

If we are justified in criticising these fictions—and we are—it is not because we treat them as partly non-fictional. Rather, it is because we expect certain kinds of accuracy from certain genres, authors, filmmakers, and so on. Whether these expectations are justified turns on a variety of factors. Consider a criticism levelled by deGrasse Tyson against *Titanic*. Near the end of the film, Rose (Kate Winslet) lies floating in the ocean, looking up at the night sky; but the image of the sky we see in the film does not accurately represent the star pattern that would have been visible at that time and location. For many fiction films, the misrepresentation would be irrelevant. However, given Cameron's meticulous attention to visual detail, it is reasonable to expect an equal level of accuracy in this respect. Importantly, Cameron did not reply by pointing out that he was making fiction and was therefore exempt from any commitment to accuracy. To the contrary, Cameron replaced the footage with an accurate representation of the night sky. Whilst not definitive, such responses suggest that the expectations are justified.

In my view, our default assumption is that works of fiction, like works of non-fiction, are about the real world (Friend 2017). Thus we automatically assume that the 'world of the story' is the same as the world we live in, except insofar as the fiction prompts us to depart from that assumption—for instance, by indicating that certain individuals exist (as when there are fictional characters) or that the ordinary laws of physics are suspended (as in some science fictions). If this is right, default expectation of accuracy is justified unless we have reason to think that a work differs from reality in a certain respect. We have no reason to think that Cameron is any less perfectionist about the sky than about every other visual aspect

⁵ The statement is at <https://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2012/12/feinstein-releases-statement-on-zero-dark-thirty>.

of *Titanic*. Beyond the default, filmmakers can increase or decrease expectations of accuracy in various ways. In addition to other contextual indications of historical accuracy, *JFK* includes original footage, such as repeated presentations of the Zapruder film of the assassination; whilst *Zero Dark Thirty* opens with audio recordings of the actual 911 calls made by people in the World Trade Center on the day of the attack. By manipulating the syntactic component of perceived realism, the filmmakers increase expectations of accuracy. Denying that such expectations are justified because the films are fiction is simply disingenuous.

Regardless of one's position on how expectations of accuracy are generated, assertion is not required. For example, in Moore's *Roger & Me* (1989), the editing suggests a distorted timeline of what happened before, during and after the closure of the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan. Moore can be criticised for the misrepresentation of chronology even if (as he claims) he never asserted that the events occurred in the order presented. The same sort of criticism can be appropriate for fiction films. Although I have argued that films like *JFK* make assertions, fiction films can also generate expectations of accuracy which do not rely on assertion. For instance, we may interpret Cameron as asserting the veridicality of his reconstruction of the Titanic's sinking—given that this was an explicit purpose the film—but probably not the pattern of the stars in the sky that evening. Even so, the way the film is made generates expectations of accuracy concerning the constellations, which Cameron himself treats as justified.

One might object to the foregoing that even if we criticise fiction films for inaccuracy, there must still be differences between fiction and non-fiction that explain why we are more often justified in criticising documentaries. I agree. But I do not trace this fact to an essential, defining feature of documentary; rather it is due to the standard features of non-fiction, which are associated with higher expectations of accuracy than those of fiction. When these expectations are unmet—for example, when a news channel claims to be 'fair and balanced' but fails to exemplify those qualities—we are right to criticise. But we would be equally right to criticise fictions which fail to meet justified expectations of accuracy.

To conclude, the observation that we are more likely to criticise documentaries than fiction films for misrepresenting the facts does not show that the Genre Theory is mistaken or that non-fiction should be defined by reference to assertion, belief or accuracy. Although it matters that *Bowling for Columbine* and *The Hunting Ground* are documentaries, this is not by itself why they merit condemnation; fiction films that generate and violate justified expectations of accuracy also deserve criticism. The classification of films as fiction or non-fiction, like our evaluation of films in each category, is multi-faceted.⁶

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