Reading Notes “Fictdion, Non-Fiction, and the Film of Presumptive Assertion: A conceptual Analysis” by Noël Carroll

**I Introduction**

NC offers a new name and associated concept-definition for a class of films that others call ‘documentaries’ or ‘non-fiction films’. His approach is inductive (in Danto’s sense): that is, he implicitly derived his definition from considering what were the distinctive properties of this class of films, properties revealed by observing many films regarded as belonging to this class. The resulting definition captures these distinctive properties and “they track the extension of films that film scholars want to talk about and refer to better than the alternative candidates do.”

JP: This is ‘inductive’ because of NC’s appeal to the ‘extension’ of his new term/definition. For my students: an ‘extension’ is just a fancy way of referring to the ***things in the world*** that form the class that the term refers to. And NC’s approach is by way of *inductive generalization* (when I notice that all frogs I have encountered can both live on land and in the water, I can generalize from this fact I have discovered about frogs and say that “all frogs are amphibious”).

‘Documentary’ was the term John Grierson used in referring to filmmaker Robert Flaherty’s film *Moana*. That film was very like the early *actualités* that the Lumière brothers were famous for creating back in the late 19th century, but differed in that it was more than a film recording of actual events and people/things. The intention of filmmakers like Flaherty was to create a piece of film *art* while doing so using the same material the *actualités* used, i.e., *actual events and people/things*. Grierson defined a documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” (which plainly makes direct reference to the *actualités* silent films of the brothers, but *modifies* that since *actualités* were **not creative** any more than newsreel films were **creative**).

NC: Grierson’s concept “is too narrow” [154] since it excludes both the *actualités* and videotapes of the Rodney King beating.

JP: Students should note that here Carroll is making a decision about what should be included in any term/concept that can be used to cover all documentary films. They might ask: “How does Carroll justify his choice as to which films *should be included in the extension of what others have called ‘documentary/non-fiction films’?*”

JP: NC offers a justification for introducing his own, new term/definition for the class of films he wishes to capture with that term/definition: “Grierson meant one thing by ‘documentary’, and now we mean something else by it. But there is at least this problem. Whatever *we* might mean by it is obscure and perhaps equivocal. Thus, we have on the one hand, the relatively precise notjion of the documentary that Grierson has bequesthed us, and, on the other hand, another more ambiguous idea. This at the very least courts confusion. I propose to relieve that confusion by granting Grrierson his definition for what he was talking about and by introducing a new concept **for what we wish to speak about**.”

JP: But what establishes **what we wish to speak about**? Reasonable answer: what contemporary film viewers and students of film find themselves connecting together under the loose and imprecise term ‘documentary’.

**Upshot:** as more documentary-style films have been made, new terms/definitions were needed to capture what ***they all most seem to have in common.*** This is what a botanist does when they are trying to isolate a class of organisms so as to distinguish it from all other classes (for example, all plants that count as ***orchids***.)

NC then tackles the problem with the *other* term used to capture this class of films: **non-fiction**.

Non-fiction is **too broad** as it includes any film that is not **stories that are ‘made-up’**.

E.g.: Ernie Gehr’s *Serene Velocity* is not a fiction since they tell no imagined story, but it doesn’t seem to be the sort of thing that we naturally regard as ‘documentary-style’ films (any more than Stan Brakhage’s experimental art films would be).

JP: NC’s best justification for pursuing a new term/definition to capture what is distinctive about documentary-style films is to make it more successful in capturing a) all the films that fall under that definition, and b) exclude any that do not (at least, more successfully than alternatives).

JP: Another justification: his new term/definition ”…makes more sense out of the debates that people have in this area of enquiry.”

NC’s ultimate goal is to carve out a subset of non-fiction films that more adequately covers how those differ from some **other** non-fiction films (the ones that ***do not involve playing the assertion game***.

**2 Fiction and Non-Fiction**

NC’s first opponent: deconstructionist rejection of the whole ‘fiction/non-fiction’ couplet. They claim all films are *fictional* (because, for example, all films are created by filmmakers who point the camera where they choose, edit the resulting raw footage as they choose, and hence the product is **made-up** by the filmmaker and their collaborators). [155]

NC counter to the Metz-style reason for claiming all films are fictional: if the fact that Sarah Bernhardt is not *in the screening room* when we watch her talking about being Sarah Bernhardt is sufficient to show that the film is **fictional**, then when generals look over photographs of battlefields in preparing for the next move in a land war, the photographs are **also fictional** (because the battlefield is not in the generals’ headquarters where they are considering their next moves in the war in the theater of conflict partly captured by the photographs)! [156]

NC considers a reply from Metz that leans on a new distinction: *fictional* fictions and *nonfictional* non-fictions. NC thinks this just reintroduces the distinction between fiction and non-fiction that the original claim “all films are fictions” was meant to get rid of, while confusing matters along the way! [156Lb/Rt]

NC’s best argument against Metz: “it contradicts the logic of representation. Representations are not equivalent to whatever they represent. This is why we have representations.” [156Rm]

NC’s best argument: to treat all representations as fictions is to collapse distinctions that we find useful, and to confuse those matters that these distinctions very usefully *clarify*. One very good piece of evidence for that is the fact that all film is a ‘representational vehicle’ but whereas a film *about Sarah Bernhardt* is *not fictional*, a film in which Sarah Bernhardt plays *Ophelia* **is fictional**. Metz’s deconstruction of the fiction/non-fiction couplet just collapses and thereby *flattens* a useful distinction in two **kinds of representational vehicles**. [157Ltm]

NC addresses the non-Metzian deconstructionist approach to rejecting the fiction/non-fiction distinction: the two **share many structural features in common**. The structural devices used in fiction films (narrative, for example) are often used by non-fiction films. NC notes that the very same observation supports a different conclusion: that **these shared structural features are NOT WHAT DISTINGUISH THE TWO KINDS OF FILMS!**

NC: and while non-fiction can borrow devices like narrative from fiction, fiction can borrow the same devices for non-fiction purposes (give a scene in the fictional story the appearance of *verisimilitude*, for example by shooting in a location many people have visited, like the Trevi Fountain in Rome).

JP: There is a lot in NC’s points against the deconstructionist gambit that ultimately turns on what Danto so clearly identifies as a problem for determining what is distinctive about *film in general* (as opposed to stage dramas, photography, etc.): nothing available in the *perceived features of the various things we are trying to distinguish* can **do the job of distinguishing them that is needed!** Cf. NC on 157Rb where he says “…a text is not constituted or determined by its *manifest* textual properties….inspected in isolation.” [the last bit is from 158Lt]

Key final point in NC’s dispute with the deconstructionist move: Since showing that the move depends on a logical mistake does not persuade those who *went there* with the deconstructionists because they didn’t see **how to make a plausible distinction between fiction and non-fiction**. NC does that next.

NC offers a way out by a) acknowledging that the deconstructionist is right in denying “that one can determine whether a candidate film is a fiction …. On the basis of the intrinsic, manifest properties of the work”, and then b) showing that ‘non-manifest, relational properties of the work in question … [and by those means] …[successfully] draw a distinction between fiction and non-fiction…”. This distinction turns on “**certain authorial intentions**.”

As with Paul Grice’s analysis of conversational implicature and associated phenomena arising in communication through language between speakers, the *meaning* of any speech act lies in conventions concerning *speaker intention* that signal to a listener *what the listener response* should be. Example: “Good morning” elicits “Good morning”. “Pass me the ketchup” elicits the listener’s appropriate action in handing the speaker the ketchup. This kind of **handshaking** is fundamental in communication, and NC is using that as a way of framing how *filmmaker intention* generates a similar corresponding *viewer expectation/attitude* toward the film that the filmmaker has presented to them. [159Lt-m]

NC: fictive/non-fictive intentions are *normative* not *predictive*. The point is that the work’s maker (novelist, nonfiction writer) is deploying *norms* through certain conventional signals that are part of that kind of communication and are understood by writer *and* reader **both**.

NC First-Pass account of what makes work X a piece of fiction: “…applying the intention-response model to the case of fiction, we may begin by hypothesizing that a structured set of sense-bearing signs, such as a novel or a film, is fictional only if presented by an author, film-maker, or sender who intends the audience to respond to it with what we might call the fictive stance on the basis of recognizing the author’s, film-maker’s, or sender’s intention that the audience do this on the basis of recognizing what we might call the sender’s fictive intention.” WOW [159Lm-b]

NC now explains why a certain kind of *imagination* is necessary to make sense of his account of how ‘fictive intentions’ are to be useful in distinguishing fiction from non-fiction by way of the speaker intention/listener response Gricean model of communication. This kind he calls “*suppositional imagination”.* [161Lt]

NC’s account of what makes a work *fiction*: “in making fictions, authors are intentionally presenting audiences with situations (or situation-types) that we are meant to entertain in thought.” [161Lm]

KEY: the successful author manages to convey ***what you are to imagine***so that the suppositional imagination of the audience is **not allowed to imagine whatever they like!**

NC now gives us his account of what makes a work *non-fiction*. It starts simply by being the *negation* of the account of fiction works: the viewer is *not* to take the author’s intention to be that they, the audience, should regard what the author intends them to understand is *unasserted but merely to be imagined/supposed*. This most-broad version of a non-fiction work covers proper non-fictions (*Moana*) and improper non-fictions (*Serene Velocity*). The reason is that it covers both films where the author’s intention/viewer response is that the latter is to take what is communicated as *asserted* but **also** those films in which author intention/viewer response is that the latter is to take what is being communicated as *lying outside the assertion game altogether*. Thus this account can cover both *Moana* and *Serene Velocity*.