

Double Trouble

On Film, Fiction, and Narrative

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“When I was small,” said Frog, “my mother and father and I went out for a picnic. On the way home we lost our way. My mother was worried. “We must get home,” she said. “We do not want to meet the Old Dark Frog.” “Who is that?” I asked. “A terrible ghost,” said my father. “He comes out at night and eats little frog children for supper.”

Toad sipped his tea.

“Frog,” he asked, “are you making this up?”

“Maybe yes and maybe no,” said Frog.

— “Shivers,” in Arnold Lobel, *Days with Frog and Toad*

Edward Branigan once noted that, while fiction and narrative are distinctive phenomena, they do—rather like Frog and Toad—frequently consort with one another: “Narrative and fiction are quite different things even if they often appear together in public” (Branigan 1992: 192). Indeed, like Frog and Toad, they are often

mistaken for one another; the confusion is widespread in ordinary usage, and in recent times it has been compounded and reinforced within theoretical discourse. Notwithstanding the weight of such authority, I argue that this is a mistake. The distinction between fiction and narrative is a real and important one, and as David Gorman suggests, “the synonymous usage of the terms is loose at best and confused at worst” (2005: 163). Moreover, as we will see, by conflating fiction and narrative we obscure the boundaries of each of these phenomena taken individually. We also compound the problem of the historical emphasis within narratology on fictional narrative. If we want to shed light on the relatively “poorly understood nature of factual discourse” in narrative form (Gorman 2005: 167)—without presuming that nonfictional narrative can be treated as a form of disingenuous fictional narrative—we must first disentangle fictional from nonfictional narrative.

My focus throughout this discussion is on narrative as it is manifest in motion picture media—in the cinema, but also on television, on the Internet, and in the museum gallery, in the form of installations and video art. Motion pictures in general have certain special attributes, and each of the more particular motion picture media has certain defining features; I take note of some of these “medium-specific” matters along the way. But my overarching assumption—as signaled by the starring roles accorded to Frog and Toad—is that the fundamental processes and phenomena connected with narrative operate identically or similarly across literary, depictive, and performative media. Before it is anything else, narrative is a form of cognition arising from our evolved need to track agents through time and space. The characteristics of narrative cognition determine the fundamental shape of narrative, conceived as a form of external or public representation, across the various media.

Fiction and narrative can each be defined by reference to their respective contrast classes: fictions and nonfictions, narratives and non-narratives. We can begin with some concise but widely accepted definitions. A narrative is constituted by a set of agents and events linked in a cause-effect fashion. Every one of the terms in this apparently innocuous characterization, however, can be subjected to critical scrutiny, and less demanding definitions of narrative have been advanced. Do the agents need to be human, or human-like? Do these agents merely need

to be present, or do they have to act? Is “pure causality”—causality without intentional action—sufficient for narrative? Perhaps the most minimal definition would stipulate only that, in a narrative, events must be represented in time. Sam Taylor-Wood’s *Still Life* (2001), a film in which we see a bowl of fruit rot in accelerated, time-lapse fashion over a duration of roughly four minutes, would then be a work of narrative. Here we see the first of our two related problems coming into view: is a definition of narrative with such broad extension plausible? Does it leave us with a hopelessly vague and slack concept of narrative? Or does it accurately represent the near ubiquity of narrative, or least of the human propensity to search for narrative (Aumont et al. 1992: 71)? Call this the “pan-narrativity” problem.

Fictions, meanwhile, are part of a larger class of counterfactual representations, including lies (purported representations of facts), counterfactual conditionals (“if . . . then” statements), and fictions in the familiar sense. A fiction in this latter sense is a representation of agents and events that is framed, and thus understood, as imaginary. Fictions, then, contrast both with other types of counterfactual representation, as well as with the various kinds of factual representation, that is, representations that aim to inform us of actual states of affairs: historical texts, census data, security camera footage. Fiction and narrative are thus both forms of representation, and the point of overlap between the two categories is home to a very common form of representation, namely, the fictional narrative.

But wait. “It is no news that distinctions between fact and fiction are disappearing a little bit every day, and before the century is out, they may be gone for good” (329), wrote Donald Spence in 1990. Many contemporary theorists would share Spence’s suspicion of the distinction between fiction and fact, holding that narrative form, or the act of representation itself, has the effect of “fictionalizing” all subject matter regardless of its origin. Jacques Aumont and his colleagues, for example, hold that “every film is a fiction film” by virtue of the fact that all films shape their subject matter through form and technique (Aumont et al. 1992: 71). In its most radical form, this skeptical perspective extends well beyond narrative and even representation, conventionally understood; Hans Vaihinger regarded everything beyond sensation as a mat-

ter of “fictional” or “as if” representation (Vaihinger 1911/1924; Blackburn 2005: 16). Contemporary writers such as Hayden White, Spence, Aumont, and others in the field of film theory, like Slavoj Žižek, are all swimming in the wake of philosophers like Vaihinger (and his rather better-known hero, one Friedrich Nietzsche). Here, then, is the other head of our monster: are all narratives—even all representations—really fictions? This is the problem of “pan-fictionality” (Ryan 1997), parallel to (if more widely recognized than) the problem of pan-narrativity.

Fiction and Narrative: Some Basic Permutations

One way of grasping and underlining the distinction between fiction and narrative is to consider the four permutations generated by the intersection of fiction, narrative, and their respective contrast categories:

- Fictional narratives
- Nonfictional narratives
- Nonfictional non-narratives
- Fictional non-narratives

If all nonfictions are really fictions, as some theorists would have us believe, and if nothing escapes the ambit of narrative cognition, as another set might aver, these four categories would simply collapse into one undifferentiated grouping. “If culture were made by its theorists, it would be headed toward a single huge category that subsumes every utterance: a category variously called ‘texts,’ ‘discourse,’ or ‘representations,’” Marie-Laure Ryan tartly remarks (1997: 165). But, as we shall see, the four permutations do pick out distinctive types of filmic representation that we ought to recognize as such.

The class of fictional narratives is the most straightforward, in part because films of this kind form the largest and most salient type of filmmaking across the history of film: most feature-length films are narrative fiction films. The second category, nonfiction narrative, is also a common form. The vast majority of documentary films fit readily into this category: films that narrate stories about actual places, people, and events, including feature films like *Grey Gardens* (dir. Albert and David Maysles, Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyer, and Susan Froemke, 1975) and



Fig. 1. Reconstructions and interpolated movie footage in *The Thin Blue Line* (1988, dir. Errol Morris).

Let's Get Lost (dir. Bruce Weber, 1988) as well as innumerable broadcast documentaries (one prominent BBC documentary series is entitled *Storyville*). Many of these films also make implicit or explicit arguments; in these cases narrative and argumentative form is interwoven (on narrative and argument as distinct “text-types,” see Chatman 1990: 6–21, 56–73). For example, the recent BBC nonfiction series *Earth: The Climate Wars* (dir. Gaby Hornsby, 2008) not only tells the story of debate around and research on climate change; it also advances an argument about the most plausible conclusions to draw from the evidence accumulated over the last thirty years. Moreover, many nonfiction films depend extensively on footage of actual events and individuals, footage bearing the “trace” of these real entities. But such footage is not essential to the nonfiction narrative; many films will depend on more indirect representations of what they represent, such as reconstructions, or stock footage of the relevant type of event (but not the particular event being referred to). *The Thin Blue Line* (dir. Errol Morris, 1988) foregrounds such a practice, with its highly stylized reconstructions dramatizing conflicting accounts of the events it investigates (figure 1); but the practice has a long history within the tradition of nonfiction filmmaking. What is essential to the nonfiction narrative film is that it adopts an “assertive stance” toward the world, making the truth claim that a particular sequence of events took place, in the temporal and causal manner specified (Plantinga 1997: 15–25).

The terrain becomes more sparsely populated when we turn to the next category, the nonfiction non-narrative. One sort of case that comes to mind is exemplified by Tim Macmillan’s *Dead Horse* installation (1998), consisting of two “timeslice” films of two horses, each captured at the moment of slaughter in an abattoir. The timeslice technique freezes time at a particular moment, like a conventional still photograph, but depicts movement through that space, in the manner of a motion picture. (Macmillan has explored this technique in other films such as *Ferment*—see figure 2).

The nonfictionality of the subject in *Dead Horse* is not disputed, but the extent to which the installation escapes narrative might well be, for two reasons. First, the films contextualize the frozen, visual depiction of the slaughters by a soundtrack in which we hear horse’s hooves and



Fig. 2. Timeslice imagery in *Ferment* (1999, dir. Tim Macmillan).

a tinny radio playing pop music—the ambient sounds of the abattoir prior to the moment of shooting. The gunshot is never heard, but it is implied by the gap between the sonic and visual representations of the abattoir; and to that extent the installation does represent an intentional event (the shooting of the horses). But imagine that there is no soundtrack. Even in such a case, one might argue that the timeslice imagery invites us to hypothesize about the nature of the event captured at this “decisive moment”—to attempt to situate it, in other words, within a causal sequence of events. So the second reason we might have for resisting the idea that *Dead Horse* evades narrative—a reason that generalizes to a great many still depictions, photographic and otherwise—is that we instinctively seek to situate an isolated event or frozen moment within its temporal and causal context. (And I do mean *instinctively*.)

Another candidate, or set of candidates, for the nonfiction non-narrative permutation are some of the early silent films of Andy Warhol, including *Sleep* (1963), *Empire* (1964), and the *Screen Tests* (1964–66). Warhol and his collaborators made around five hundred of the *Screen Tests*, and in them we see members of Warhol’s entourage, and visitors to his studio, framed roughly in the manner of a still photographic portrait for about four minutes (the duration of a 100-foot roll of 16mm film shot at 24 frames per second but projected at 16 frames per second).¹ Although the films register movement, as the depicted figures shift position or change the direction of their gaze, there is very little in the way of action, as it is normally understood: no goals are formed or sought, no interactions with other agents take place (figure 3).

Of course, we can lower the threshold for what we count as an action or a causal sequence, treating a shift of posture as a goal-directed, deliberate action, or noting that subtle changes in lighting over the duration of the film are themselves causal events. (Think of the gradual but very significant lighting changes that take place over the eight-hour duration of *Empire*.) And there may be some truth to the idea that such films make us attentive to “microcausality,” to causal and intentional events at a minute level. But these films are notoriously difficult to watch if we watch them solely or mainly on these narrative terms. Rather, such films invite us to watch their subjects in terms of composition and character: the lighting and positioning of the figures within the frame, the way



Fig. 3. *Screen Test 136: Helmut* (1964, dir. Andy Warhol).

that they hold and “manage” themselves before a camera for a sustained period of (again, by conventional norms) inaction. There is a kind of “drama” here, arising from the standoff between the subject and an un-moving, unyielding camera; but again this is distinct from the kind of interest that true narrative form generates.

The population diminishes even further for the fourth category, fictional non-narrative films; indeed, it is hard to come up with completely convincing examples at all. Relatedly, most theorists of fiction either treat fiction exclusively as a property of certain kinds of narrative or as a mode of representation that typically takes narrative form (e.g., Gorman 2005: 164); Kendall Walton (1990) is among the few to provide an account of fiction beyond the bounds of narrative. It is not hard to imagine non-narrative fictional films, however: just think of a fictional equivalent to the Warhol *Screen Tests*, with performers portraying fictional characters in place of the actual countercultural figures. This would amount to a genre of “fictional moving picture portraiture.” But why is it that fictional non-narrative films are so rare when compared with nonfictional

non-narratives? The action of a film necessarily unfolds in time; could it be that, as a consequence, all films bring with them hints of or the potential for narrative—even in cases, like *Dead Horse*, where time is suspended? This cannot be the whole story, for this would apply equally to the case of the nonfiction non-narrative, and we have seen that there is a ready supply of potential cases in that domain. Perhaps, then, the answer lies in the special charge carried by the (moving) photographic representation of an *actual* figure: simply seeing an actual figure in a photographic shot carries an interest that merely witnessing a fictional character does not. The nonfiction non-narrative film may draw on this additional source of interest in a way that is largely unavailable to the fictional non-narrative film.² Nonetheless, there would seem to be no reason in principle why intriguing fictional, non-narrative depictions—equivalent to painterly and photographic portraits, still lifes and landscapes—should not be made in the medium of film.

Blends and Borderlines

It is apparent in these brief accounts of films in each of the four categories that the *blending* of representational modes is a typical, rather than an exceptional, feature of representations. That is, we should not take the analytic taxonomy of basic permutations set out above as either a measure of the relative frequency of the different modes, or as a set of prescriptions about what filmmakers ought to be doing. The first very common blend that we might note is the historical drama, that is, the fictional narrative set against the backdrop of actual, historical events. The epic film series *Heimat* (dir. Edgar Reitz, 1984, 1992, 2004) provides an excellent example. While the characters in the film, and many of the places, like the main village of Schabbach, are fictional inventions, these are set against a backdrop of real historical events and persons, from World War I through to the reunification of Germany and the turning of the millennium. Indeed, a vast number of fictions blend fictional invention with historical narration in small ways, in the form of allusions to historical events that may be peripheral or irrelevant to the main action in causal terms (in strong contrast to the causal significance of these historical events to the fictional storylines in *Heimat*).³

A close relative to this form of historical drama is the narrative film “based on” historical events and figures, but in which the fictionalizing impulse is explicitly allowed to overrule strict historical narration. The recent “biopics” of Truman Capote, *Capote* (dir. Bennett Miller, 2005) and *Infamous* (dir. Douglas McGrath, 2006), both operate in this way, by weaving fictional speculations about Capote and the writing of *In Cold Blood* (1966) around a thin spine of accepted historical fact. Note, though, that the “assertive stance” continues to play a significant role in relation to such “factions,” in spite of the “overriding” of strict historical narration. Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me* (1989) was famously criticized for playing fast and loose with the exact order of the real events it implicitly claims to depict accurately. *Tsunami: The Aftermath* (dir. Bharat Nalluri, 2006), a fiction based on the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, faced exactly the same type of criticism for its temporal compression of certain events following the tsunami. In the eyes of many critics and audiences, if not always in the eyes of fiction makers, the “based on” disclaimer does not license any and all departures from the actual situation inspiring the fiction.

I noted earlier that certain nonfiction non-narrative films, like Warhol’s *Screen Tests*, trade on the special “charge” that derives from photographic imagery—a quality extensively explored by theorists such as André Bazin (1967) and Walton (1984). That special quality is also exploited by some *narrative fiction* filmmakers, who have created another kind of blend between fictional and historical representation by shooting fictional incidents against the backdrop of historical events. Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* (1969) is the most celebrated example, in which some of the action takes place at the fractious 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Wexler shot certain scenes in the vicinity of the convention as it happened: in these shots, we see performers embodying fictional characters against the backdrop of actual events as they unfold. Wexler creates an unusual ontological blend of staged action and real events, fiction and historical, documentary representation, within individual shots. As with some of our earlier cases, however, this dramatic instance reminds us that, in a less marked way, the same blend has been ubiquitous in fiction filmmaking at least since the rise of location shooting, in the aftermath of World War II. That is, many fiction

films are shot, wholly or partly, in actual locations rather than studio sets, allowing filmmakers to embed their fictional representations within nonfictional, photographic representations of actual locations. The degree to which filmmakers seek to control what happens in these spaces beyond the staged, fictional action varies greatly; some actively embrace the unpredictable nature of location shooting. But, by and large, what sets *Medium Cool* apart from more familiar filmmaking practice is the salience and significance of the real events caught photographically along with the fictional action: riot police pursuing protesters, rather than the usual background murmur of passers-by and wind in the trees. The rise of CGI (computer-generated imagery) may make this kind of blend between fictional and nonfictional imagery rather less pervasive than it has been for the last fifty years.

So far most of the blends I've considered all come, as it were, from the "side" of fiction—*Heimat* and *Medium Cool* are each, in their own ways, realist fictions, representations first and foremost presenting us with fictional stories, but binding their fictions with various kinds of historical representation in order to secure a kind of realism. A closer look at nonfiction films reveals another kind of blend. Take the BBC show *Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999). The show is modeled on conventional nature documentaries, which typically follow the lives of particular groups of, and sometimes individual, animals. The bread and butter of such shows is live-action documentary footage, capturing the behavior of the animals in medias res. *Walking with Dinosaurs* shares the same basic ambition as these shows and is characterized by the same nonfictional, assertive stance: the show makes truth claims about the prehistoric world inhabited by dinosaurs. But of course, live-action footage is not an option; so the show uses CGI in its place. But the effect of this decision is to import into the show not merely a vein, but a major artery, of fictional representation. The animals populating ordinary nature documentaries actually exist, or did at the time of shooting; Big Al the allosaurus, however, is a fictional creation, albeit one intended to typify what contemporary paleontology tells us about that species. So here we have a case of *functional nesting*: a fictional narrative used in the service of the assertive stance. A fictional narrative in the service of a general truth or a set of such truths: how is this different from fiction



Fig. 4. *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976, dir. John Smith).

in general? In the case of *Walking with Dinosaurs*, the fictive element is subordinate to the assertive stance, whereas in prototypical fictions (fables, novels, short stories, fiction films) the fictive stance dominates; if it is present at all, the assertive element will be either secondary or merely implied.

Yet another kind of blending between the fictional and the nonfictional is evident in the work of British avant-garde filmmakers John Smith and Patrick Keiller. In Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) and *The Black Tower* (1985–87) and Keiller's *The Clouds* (1989), *London* (1994), and *Robinson in Space* (1997), documentary shots of real spaces (in London and elsewhere in Britain) are combined with voice-overs spinning overtly fictional tales. *The Girl Chewing Gum* remains the most concise and witty example of the form. Most of this film is composed of a continuous long take of a street corner in Dalston (part of the East End of London), shot in the mid-1970s (figure 4).

Vehicles and pedestrians pass by in front of the camera, which initially frames the space in a slightly jittery long shot. An air of inept and comic amateurism is crystallized by the voice-over, in which a man calls out instructions in a voice that apparently strains against background street noise and primitive recording technology. The instructions, though, have an absurd character, directed as they are to the vehicles and the passers-by, which we intuitively recognize as the *undirected*, chance occurrences that happen to have taken place on this street corner at the time of shooting: "Now a man comes by and bites his nails, two pigeons fly past from right to left, two boys run past from left to right." If we are tempted to wonder whether what we are seeing really is an elaborately staged fiction—rather than a documentary slice of street life—our judgment that we are watching a record of real, unstaged action is clinched when the off-screen director issues directions to a clock situated at the top of one of the buildings: "Now, I want the long hand to move at the rate of one revolution every hour, and the short hand to move at the rate of one revolution every twelve hours." The film thus mocks the all-seeing, all-knowing pretensions of the traditional "voice of God" nonfiction narrator.

But the film is interested in more than comic parody of the form, and claims to authority, of conventional documentary filmmaking. Even as

the voice-over utters the extravagant and obviously implausible claim about the clock hands, the camera executes a hesitant tilt upward and zoom inward toward the clock—a gesture that fits with the conception of the narrator, as a technically incompetent and probably delusional amateur, that we have formed.⁴ As the film proceeds, the voice-over makes ever more ambitious (and unlikely) assertions concerning the behavior of individuals visible on the screen: “This young man has just robbed the local post office and is trying to appear inconspicuous. He is trying to remain calm, but his hand is sweating as he grips the butt of the revolver in his raincoat pocket even harder.” The narrator also starts to make assertions about imagery that has passed, rather than imagery visible at the moment of utterance. At his apparent behest, the soundtrack drops out altogether for a moment. And in a magnificent climactic twist, the narrator declares that his narration emanates from “the edge of a field near Letchmore Heath, about fifteen miles from the building you’re looking at”; a few seconds later, the ambient sounds of the street fade away. Thus the speaker emerges as an unreliable narrator, and from this moment onward the film pushes on from absurdity to outright surrealism, reaching its apogee when the narrator states that he can see a blackbird—with a nine-foot wingspan—and a man with a helicopter in his pocket. And just as startlingly, the film ends with a coda, in the form of a single shot of an entirely different location. A long take pans through 360 degrees across an empty, mist-shrouded field, at dawn or dusk, a tree visible in the middle ground: a location resembling the field in Letchmore Heath described a few seconds earlier, without the surreal elements, without the voice-over—but, paradoxically, with the ambient sounds of the street restored.

Through these mind-bending, audio-visual conundrums that conclude the film, Smith pulls us in two directions at once, *at two levels*. We cannot take seriously the preposterous claims made by the narrator concerning his power over diegetic elements—indeed this is why the claims are funny; and yet the narrator does silence the soundtrack, transport us from one location to an entirely different one, and confound our expectations of audio-visual and narrative coherence. On the back of this tension Smith creates a push-pull between the multilayered contrivance of the film and the stubborn substrate of documentary representation

on which it is based, which refuses to yield even in the face of the intricate and playful reflexivity of the film. For all its formal jiggery-pokery and the obvious fictionality of many of its elements, we are left with an indelible impression of the distinctive, actual sights and sounds of a moment in the history of a particular street corner in East London. And a field in Letchmore Heath.

The title of this section promises discussion not only of “blends” but of “borderlines.” How do these differ? In most of the cases of blending discussed so far, we can pretty clearly distinguish fictional and non-fictional elements, even as we experience them bound up with one another in the works. Similarly, though I do not have the space here to discuss them in detail, there are works blending unambiguously narrative elements with clearly defined non-narrative elements. Perhaps the most notorious example of such a mix is Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967), a stridently non-narrative film structured around the stuttering progression of a zoom shot across a New York loft space. Over the forty-five-minute duration of the film, two brief fragments of narrative are introduced, but these make no impression on the progression of the zoom. It is in this sense that the narrative and non-narrative elements coexist in the film, like oil and water, rather than merging or binding together. David Bordwell has argued that a similar kind of formal structure is evident in what he terms “parametric” or “style-centred” films, in which elaborate patterns of style are evident that are not reducible to their narrative significance, and in this way retain a kind of independent salience alongside the narrative structures found in such films. Directors who have worked in this mode, according to Bordwell, include Robert Bresson, Jacques Tati, and, above all, Ozu Yasujiro.⁵

Borderline cases present us with a different kind of object and a different kind of phenomenology; in these cases we are made to wonder whether we should be inferring narrative connections among the elements presented, or whether we should regard the represented events and agents as fictional or actual. Like Frog, storytellers sometimes like to tease us about the exact status of their representations. But before we consider cases that seem to hover over the borderline between fiction and history, let us consider the boundary between narrative and non-narrative. We have already encountered one potential case—*Dead*

Horse—and another film by John Smith, in which he revisits the street-corner scenario using a combination of still photographic and digital video technology, presents a second case. Mark Webber’s commentary on *Worst Case Scenario* (2001–3) for the London Film Festival catalog is instructive, pointing as it does to the relevance of the film for the problem of pan-narrativity:

This new work by John Smith looks down onto a busy Viennese intersection and a corner bakery. Constructed from hundreds of still images, it presents situations in a stilted motion, often with sinister undertones. Through this technique we’re made aware of our intrinsic capacity for creating continuity, and fragments of narrative, from potentially (no doubt actually) unconnected events.⁶

As with certain moments in *The Girl Chewing Gum*, we wonder whether certain apparent narrative connections are really discoveries, or projections.

We have already noted the relevance of Andy Warhol’s early films to these questions. Another major figure from the world of 1960s avant-garde filmmaking, Bruce Conner, offers a further variation on the boundaries of narrative form. Conner was an exponent of the compilation film—a form based on the re-editing of “found footage” derived from pre-existing films, usually a mix of B-movies along with low-budget industrial, educational, and advertising material. Conner’s earliest film, *A Movie* (1958), was part of a sculptural installation, and to that extent any narrative dimension of the work was subordinated to the spatial imperatives of work in that medium. The film, however, went on to live a second life as a stand-alone cinematic work. And seen in this way, the play with narrative in *A Movie* and later films by Conner becomes apparent.

Conner’s principal editing strategy is to juxtapose events of a similar nature that are not causally, temporally, or spatially linked in a literal sense. At the beginning of *A Movie*, for example, a series of shots depicts fast-moving objects—cavalry riders and Indians, sports cars racing, tanks and other military vehicles on the move, water skiers. The deliberately “degraded” quality of the shots makes it very apparent that this is a collage of disparate elements, scavenged from a variety of original



Fig. 5 (contd. on opposite). Metaphorical narrative in *A Movie* (1958, dir. Bruce Conner).



sources. In this sense Conner's films lack even textural and graphic unity, that is, the unity derived from a more or less consistent use of film stock and other equipment and materials. Against the background of this "absurd mosaic" (Peterson 1994: 141–44), however, Conner conjures up surprising and witty connections. Many of these connections are associative (objects and events related by some quality, like speed, height, or delicacy) or graphic (objects and events similar in their compositional form or direction of movement on the screen). Nestling in among these we find a steady yet unpredictable stream of "metaphorical" *narrative* connections. That is, because we recognize that the shots comprising a sequence not only represent different spaces and times but have been taken from diverse original sources, we realize that there are no literal narrative connections between shots. But we cotton on to Conner's outrageous narrative conjectures. Cavalry (from a Western) are being pursued by a tank (from a war documentary); in a later sequence, footage of a submarine commander peering through a periscope is followed by stag movie footage of a semi-clad woman posing seductively; cut back to the commander ordering the firing of a torpedo; cut to a shot of an atomic explosion; and finally a shot of a surfer riding the giant wave "caused" by the explosion. Piling metaphor on metaphor, Conner implies a causal sequence of sighting, arousal, and consummation via the collage of Cold War imagery (figure 5).

So much for the boundary between narrative and non-narrative; what of the border zone between fiction and nonfiction? One important manifestation of ambiguity concerning the fictional or nonfictional status of a filmic representation arises from the "performativity" of real agents. Take, for example, reality TV shows. The participants locked up in the *Big Brother* (2000–) house are real enough, in the sense that they are not actors performing scripted (or, for that matter, improvised) dramatic roles. And yet there is clearly a sense in which these people are engaged in "self-dramatization," "playing up" aspects of personality for the sake of the show—aspects that probably got them onto the show in the first place. They may even be inventing aspects of personality just for the show. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the garish world of reality TV; to a greater or lesser extent, and with more or less saliency, it is a feature of most nonfiction filmmaking—at root because it is a feature

of life itself. We do not have to be in front of a camera to recognize that there are occasions when, consciously or not, we may dramatize (act out, exaggerate, heighten) our personalities or present ourselves in very different ways depending on context. Erving Goffman focused on just this dimension of human identity in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Sometimes it is difficult to discern the line between “performative self-constitution” (I am this way because I act this way) and outright fictional performance. “Performativity” in this sense has also been mined extensively in performance art, avant-garde film and video, and postmodern photography: some of Joel-Peter Witkin’s photographic portraits, for example, depict real “freaks,” but overtly dramatize their appearance and set them against contrived, fictional backdrops.

Neither the phenomenon of “self-dramatization” in real life nor its development and exploitation in motion pictures and other media, however, provide support for the idea that all narrative representation is fictional, and that we should simply discard the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Recognizing self-dramatization is important as a brake on taking the behavior, utterances, and claims of nonfiction subjects at face value; dissembling and self-deception are pervasive features of human life, and it would be naive to imagine that such tendencies would not impact on our representational practices in general, nonfiction practices included. But we still need to recognize the difference between *The Truman Show* (dir. Peter Weir, 1998) and *Big Brother*, and the contrast between fiction and nonfiction enables that recognition. Even postmodern pan-fictionalists need the distinction, for another reason: without it, they would be deprived of one of their favorite party tricks—the game of assume-and-deny.

Notes

1. Note that these films should not be confused with the two feature-length, sound, scripted films from the same period, *Screen Test #1* and *Screen Test #2* (both 1965).
2. I say “largely unavailable” because a distinctive feature of live-action fiction films, whether narrative or non-narrative, is that we can look upon them as documentary records of the performers and spaces used to represent fictional characters and locations. We can regard the shots of the Ringo Kid in John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939) as a record of John Wayne’s appearance in 1938 (when

- the film was shot). Indeed, many film theorists hold that this kind of dual attention to both fictional character and (star) performer is an integral feature of our experience of mainstream fiction films.
3. Moreover, all fictions rely extensively on reference to the actual world in another sense. Our very notion of a character, for example, is dependent on a mimetic hypothesis. But this general or generic form of reference is distinct from the kind of reference to historical particulars—actual events and agents—at stake in the analysis here.
 4. In the eyes of many film theorists, not all narrative films have narrators, even if all verbally articulated narratives do possess narrators (a proposition that itself has been challenged). For debate, see Chatman (1990: 124–38), Bordwell (1985: 61–62; 2008: 121–33), and Livingston (2005: 363–66). Of course, many films do possess overt narrators, as *The Girl Chewing Gum* clearly does.
 5. See Bordwell (1985: 274–310; 1988). I revisit the notion of parametric form in relation to *The Five Obstructions* (Jørgen Leth and Lars Von Trier, 2003) in Smith (2008).
 6. Mark Webber, review of *Worst Case Scenario*, in London Film Festival catalog, quoted on Lux Online, http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/john_smith/worst_case_scenario.html.

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