

**Margrethe Bruun Vaage**

**From *The Corner* to *The Wire*: On Nonfiction, Fiction, and Truth  
(Abstract)**

- Full-length article in: JLT 11/2 (2017), 255–271.

The orthodox view in analytical film theory is that the difference between fiction and nonfiction is anchored in communicative practice. Whereas the creator of nonfiction can be seen as asserting something as true, the creator of fiction merely asks of its spectators that they imagine the work's content. This could be labelled an intention-response theory of the difference between fiction and nonfiction. While watching *Supersize Me* I am as a spectator very much aware of director Morgan Spurlock making an argument about the state of affairs in the real world, and I assess the truth-value of this argument. While watching *Avatar* I imagine that there is a population of humanoids, the Na'vi, on the planet Pandora, fighting for survival: I assess what is fictional (true in the fiction).

However, when it comes to truth claims the difference between the many varieties of fiction and nonfiction is not as straightforward as this. For example, one may argue that the spectator can and commonly does perceive even a prototypical fiction film such as *Avatar* as laying claims to truth in the sense that she may read the film allegorically, and search for the filmmaker's agenda. Is not *Avatar* a critique of Western imperialism, and our non-environmental lifestyle, for example? It is not fully accurate to claim that fiction film does not make truth claims – there are several ways in which fiction films are taken as asserting something that the spectator is asked to believe.

Among the many difficult issues this counterargument raises, I will concentrate on only one here, namely on the case of social realism in fiction. Social realism arguably asserts that something is true in our actual world and asks its spectators to believe this – although works of social realism are also classified as fiction. The solution is not to dismiss the basic theory, but to make finer distinctions. I argue that one difference between prototypical nonfiction and social realist fiction is that nonfiction asserts that its contents (characters and events) are true as tokens, e.g., this person experienced this. As fiction, a work of social realism calls for imagining. However, such a work also asserts that its contents are true as types, e.g., these types of persons experience these types of events.

I argue that this can explain what the difference is between the truth claims made in the nonfictional *The Corner* and *The Wire* as social realist fiction, respectively. Creator David Simon emphasizes that *The Wire*'s portrayal of Baltimore city life is true, and is to be taken as making assertions about American inner city decay. The background for the show is found in Simons and co-author Ed Burns's nonfiction book *The Corner*, written after extensive ethnographic observation of a group of drug dealers in Baltimore. Their intention to assert something as true is reflected in the academic reception of the series, in which it is celebrated for its authenticity and realism. Studying the style, narration and content of *The Wire* carefully further illustrates how these truth-telling intentions are communicated to the spectator. Its documentary-like style mimics observational nonfiction film, and its cyclical narrative structure, focused on an ensemble cast of characters typically marginalized in mainstream popular culture by virtue of status and ethnicity, is typical of works of social realism. The spectator picks up on these clues and expects a certain accuracy and authenticity in the type

representations in *The Wire*, although she is aware that the depictions of these token characters and these token events are not true, but only to be imagined.

In conclusion, the theory presented in this paper may not be able to neatly categorize any given film as either fiction or nonfiction, as some nonfiction films make type claims and some fictions make token claims. I do not claim that the difference between type and token claims is sufficient for categorizing any given work as either fiction or nonfiction. More work is needed in order to categorize and describe the various types of fiction and nonfiction, paying special attention to the particular blend of imagining and belief prescribed by each, as evident in what the creators say about their intentions, textual features of the work itself, and critical reception. However, difficult borderline cases such as social realism in fiction do not collapse the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, as demarcated by the intention-response theory. Rather, such difficult cases should compel us to investigate more closely the communicative intentions and conventions at work. In the case of social realism, it is still correct to say that the spectator merely imagines that these fictional characters experience various events; however, she also perceives a double invitation to believe that these events and experiences are typical, and as such representative, of a larger group about which the work intends to assert something as true.

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2017-09-22

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

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**How to cite this item:**

Abstract of: Margrethe Bruun Vaage, From *The Corner* to *The Wire*: On Nonfiction, Fiction, and Truth.

In: JLTONline (22.09.2017)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-003713

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-003713>