



*Carol Brounson
SUNY College at Fredonia*

Objectivity and Nonfiction

Carol Brownson

I. Objectivity

A major goal of Noel Carroll's paper is to show that documentary film can be objective, that it is not specially tainted by subjectivity as compared to any other medium of thought. If we allow that written works can be objective, then film can be just as objective. I would like to agree with this without also holding that subjective/objective is a particularly useful distinction to make in trying to understand film. Carroll in fact offers good reasons for discarding this terminology. He gives three popular meanings of 'objective' in relation to documentary film and shows how none is viable in itself and that they also conflict with each other. But we cannot simply redefine the term to mean what Carroll then argues constitutes a reasonable standard of objectivity, i.e., "we call [or should call] a piece of work objective in light of its adherence to the practices of reasoning and evidence gathering in a given field. It is objective because it can be intersubjectively evaluated against standards of arguments and evidence shared by practitioners of a specific area of discourse." In order to uphold this view of the standards of evaluation that we should apply to nonfiction films, it seems obvious that we would do better to discard the objective/subjective terminology in our researches in film theory, and also do everything we can to carry on popular discussions of documentary films in more illuminating terms (Carroll himself uses 'intersubjective'), so as to bring the very standards of evaluation that Carroll describes to bear on documentaries, without losing them in the confusion of the other too well established uses of the term 'objective.'

The central argument in part I of the paper is that the standard arguments against the possibility of objectivity in documentary also demolish its possibility in other areas where we hold that objectivity (in the sense put forth above) is possible, and therefore these arguments cannot be correct. The success of this argument depends partly on our firmly holding that objectivity is possible in other areas, and partly on the critics of the objectivity of documentary holding this also. Otherwise, if their arguments against film's objectivity are part of a wider argument for the impossibility of objectivity, we would be forced to evaluate wider skeptical arguments to evaluate their criticism of film. Carroll writes, "I do not think that commentators who conclude that the nonfiction film is subjective intend their remarks as a mere gloss on the notion that everything is subjective." (p. 7) I think more

evidence might be produced that they do not, since it is conceivable that a more wide-ranging skeptical view is exactly what inspires at least some forms of this criticism. (We might like to think that film theories are developed entirely as a thoughtful response to the experience of film and not simply as a footnote to other theories, but I doubt that this could be the case.) Some of these film theorists may not be inclined to hold that "everything is subjective," but it is not unthinkable that they might be willing to hold (1) that all knowledge claims are subjective, or (2) that language is not objective. These positions have been held, and they do force the abandonment of some concepts for evaluating knowledge claims, such as truth and objectivity, but they substitute others such as happiness, effectiveness, predictive value, elegance, coherence, noncontradiction, simplicity, sophistication, pleasure, etc. If any of the main attacks on the possibility of objectivity in film are grounded in either of these sorts of argument, then Carroll's argument will have no force against them.

There may be something special about the medium of film that requires that we not associate it with other media, so that arguments about other media should not automatically apply to film, and vice versa. That special feature might be the role of the camera in relating the world to us. Pictures made by cameras seem to be not easily equated with linguistic assertions in their means of establishing reference to the world. The camera seems both especially able to capture the world objectively, because mechanically, and inevitably bound to a narrow, even personal, point of view, giving a glimpse of the object in time which may fail to catch its essence. (Thus a certain tradition of art criticism attacks the Renaissance for its introduction of linear perspective into painting in the belief that this elevates the individual point of view to an equal level of significance with what is pictured.)

Critics of objectivity of film have tried to show that the camera doesn't capture the world mechanically. Carroll's criticism of arguments against a special role of the camera in capturing reality is that "in attempting to show that cinema does not automatically reproduce reality... they insinuate that cinema can never faithfully record, document, or bear evidence about the world." His argument is that "not automatically" should not be equated with "never." But the real concern of the argument against automatism of the camera is "if not automatically, then how?" A metaphor shared by automatic reproduction theorists and their critics is that of "the mirror of reality." If the camera can achieve this mirroring automatically, then it is genuinely different from language. If it cannot, and if its mirroring is not mechanical but intensional, then its manner of making reference to the world could be essentially like language. This line of argument would only show that film cannot be objective if it is already held that language cannot be objective (on some other grounds). Thus a view that film cannot be objective grows out of the view that

language cannot be objective; it does not accidentally extend this far.

A second criticism that Carroll offers of arguments against a special role of the camera in capturing reality is that these arguments apply only to the shot and are extended unjustifiably to the film as a whole by trading on the ambiguity of 'point of view.' Carroll contends that anti-objectivist critics have directed their arguments against the composition of the shot, which depends on camera placement, and have unjustifiably applied their results to the film as a whole. The trouble with this criticism is that it ascribes a simplistic mistake to his opponents. Consider the quality of the ambiguity of 'point of view.' 'Point of view' does have different meanings, but they are not unrelated. They are derived from each other by metaphoric extension. The extension occurs because the metaphor is apt. 'Point of view,' as simple camera placement, partially determines composition of the picture (along with arrangement of elements in the scene photographed). The art of the camera is in getting it into a point of view such that the resulting composition will express the viewpoint of the intellect. Such shots can then be used by the filmmaker to build up and contribute to the viewpoint (in its widest sense) of the film as a whole. Art and film critics often point out such relationships and no fallacy is involved. The fallacies occur, according to Carroll, when a pure theorist argues that the shot which necessarily has a point of view (as camera placement) necessarily conveys an attitude (first fallacy), and that the whole film made up of shots necessarily conveys a subjective attitude (second fallacy). In short, the theorist's fallacious argument is:

Every shot in a given nonfiction film has a p.o.v.
Therefore, every nonfiction film is a personal vision.

This argument confounds at least three, and possibly five, senses of 'point of view.' But this might not be the argument of at least some anti-objectivists. If a theorist attacks documentary's possibility of objectivity out of a conviction of language's subjectivity, then the notion of the whole film being subjective need not depend on showing that the shot is subjective. Rather, their argument could be that the whole film is obviously subjective insofar as it has characteristics clearly like those of linguistic objects (narration, editing, etc.) and need not be proved to be so. It is only the shot which appears to make special claims to nonlinguistic objectivity, and so it is only the objectivity of the shot that needs to be argued against. Thus their arguments are only directed against the shot on the grounds that the shot is the only element of the film that might mirror the world non-linguistically. The effort therefore is only to show that the way the shot refers to the world is intensional, not mechanical, and is therefore language-like. This will remove the last

obstacle for such theorists to go ahead and talk unrestrainedly of "reading" a film rather than having to "see" any part of it -- even the shot. Such a pattern of argument, which claims film is subjective as an extension of the claim that language is subjective, would remain untouched by Carroll's arguments.

II. Fiction/Nonfiction

'Documentary film' is a term which was attached to a group of films almost inadvertently by John Grierson, and which somehow stuck. It has not seemed particularly satisfying even to the father of documentary himself. Attempts have been made to get us to stop using the term on the grounds that it fails to adequately characterize the group of films it refers to, and creates misleading expectations of evidence to be supplied by the films and prevents us from seeing wider possibilities of objectivity. The term many have been falling back on lately is 'nonfiction film.'

Unlike 'documentary,' 'nonfiction film' does not appear to characterize the films it refers to. It projects a schema for the larger classification of all film. This schema is significant because the umbrella term it projects is 'film' rather than 'art object,' and therefore it leaves open the question of whether a given kind of film is art or not. The category 'film' is then subdivided immediately into fiction and nonfiction. Thus the problem with 'nonfiction film' is not whether the term adequately characterizes a group of films, but whether the schema it projects cuts up the territory appropriately. There are reasons to think it might not. For instance, it may force on us the conclusion that fiction films are fiction, and nonfiction films are nonfiction, and that therefore only the latter should be judged by standards of truth. This is not what we now tend to do. To take two of Carroll's own examples: (1) propaganda films seem purposely to fail to uphold standards of truth and yet are considered nonfiction; (2) docu-dramas invite judgment in terms of standards of objectivity and truth, though they are obviously fiction. (3) In addition, a significant percentage of fiction films make a point of realistically portraying some niche of life, e.g., what life is like in a WWII U-boat (Das Boot) or the texture of life and the moral dilemmas of a student in California in the late 60's (The Graduate). Does the fact that these are fiction films mean we are wrong for gently criticizing them for making mistakes in their portrayals of the signs of stress in a submarine, or by showing the main character driving away from Berkeley toward San Francisco on the Golden Gate bridge, when he is supposed to be hurrying toward Berkeley from Los Angeles? More significantly, are we making a similar category mistake when we criticize a film for being untrue to the nature of the basic human dilemmas it presents? Do we not think of fiction films

as being even more capable than nonfiction films of conveying deeper truths of human nature and the nature of the world, though they may not be defined by their capability of doing so?

I take it that if Carroll is offering elements of a definition of nonfiction film, it is one which will show it to be a characterizable and genuine category, and not simply one that is left over after fiction film is picked out. One argument for there being a category of nonfiction film is implied by Carroll's description of objectivity. That is that the category is suggested by the comparison with written works. Fiction/nonfiction is a categorization familiar to readers of the New York Times Book Review. Two classes of best sellers are divided this way. What characteristics of these written works does the categorization depend on? "Nonfiction" includes at least two diet books, and does look like the left-over category after "fiction" is collected in the first. But the New York Times Book Review also divides paperback best sellers into two categories. These are mass market and trade. 'Mass Market' is defined as "soft cover books usually sold at newsstands, variety stores and supermarkets, as well as in bookstores," and 'trade paperbacks' are "soft-cover books usually sold in bookstores and at an average price higher than mass market paperbacks." The basis of this categorization is merely commercial, and not any intrinsic characteristics of the contents of the books. Grierson established the tradition that the films made by his groups would be distributed non-commercially. Perhaps such a commercial distinction is just what lies behind our categorization of "documentary films."

Though popular bookstores may divide their books according to a fiction/nonfiction categorization, libraries do not. The Library of Congress classification does include a section PZ which is fiction. But there is no category "nonfiction" which includes the rest of the books in the library. Goodman's works are to be found in the philosophy section, and not in "nonfiction". This also indicates that fiction/nonfiction is merely a division of commercial convenience. Why then, is it commercially convenient to make this distinction? The 'nonfiction' list of best sellers includes a diet book or two, some exercise books, various "how-to's," a collection of light parables, and biography. The distinction seems to be made, both here and in trade bookstores, so that people can sort out entertainment from books which make some contribution (however feeble) to our knowledge and abilities. One is for fun, the other work and improvement.

There is a long standing assumption in Western thought that knowledge and pleasure are incompatible goals in human endeavors. This assumption of a dichotomy between knowledge and pleasure may also contribute to the distinction between fiction and non-fiction film. Fiction film is thus the category of works designed to entertain and give pleasure, and thus we are not required to apply standards of truth and knowledge to it; non-fiction is the category whose goal is knowledge, and the

discovery and dissemination of truth, and it thus requires us to apply standards of criticism appropriate to the pursuits of knowledge. This distinction also seems to prevent us from using truth as a standard of evaluation applicable to fictions, because their goal is not truth but pleasure.

But here it becomes significant that this categorization appears to take no position on whether film is art or not. It is a categorization which locates film as a tool, which may be applied to the ends of art, or those of other fields (science, politics, history, anthropology, etc.). Thus it may be possible to use this categorization to cut across the old dichotomy between pleasure and knowledge by breaking down the assumption that if art is in any way concerned with truth, then it has to be in competition with the sciences to discover and record truths. This will only happen if all categories of film can be art, and if truth in some form can be relevant to all categories. It is all too possible however that this categorization will be used to confine art to the fictions, with all the nonfictions being seen as species of the search for knowledge and the only categories in which truth is relevant. In that case the new terminology will have gained us nothing.

At places in his paper Carroll refers to his proposed description of objectivity as it should apply to film as if he were asking a contribution to the definition of the category "nonfiction film." (For example: "some may feel that this is not a very helpful definition..." and "in defense of my partial definition..." (p. 16)) I think this is a misleading description of what he accomplishes in this paper. Rather than giving a partial definition of nonfiction he has described a reasonable and respectably rigorous standard of evaluation applicable to films which lay claim to objectivity or truth (or whatever term we choose as modern replacements for these terms). Such a standard is welcome both in film theory and in the practice of filmmaking. It is welcome in film theory because it clears away a lot of nonsense about the possibility of films being objective and underwrites and encourages reasonable and detailed criticism of particular films by the application of standards appropriate to the field which the film invokes, rather than inhibiting such detailed criticism by supplying overly general standards that are supposed to apply to film as a whole. It is welcome in film practice because it encourages the rigor of thought and construction that film is capable of but sometimes neglects on the purely sophistic grounds that such rigor of thought is not possible in film. As a standard of evaluation, Carroll's description of 'objectivity' can apply to both fiction and nonfiction films. But it is primarily appropriate to those films which do not proclaim themselves as fictions and therefore exempt from judgments in terms of certain issues of existence of objects and events pictured.