



*Jack C. Wolf*  
*SUNY College at Brockport*

## Carroll's "From Real to Reel"

Jack C. Wolf

It is apparent at the outset that the basic considerations of Professor Carroll's discussion lie not in logic or in criticism per se but in the imprecisions of language and the failure of language as a representation or "map" of "reality," a matter which I do not propose to re-examine as part of this discussion. However, these basic problems lead in many cases to the splitting of non-existent hairs, and I suspect that the continuing controversy between "fiction" and "non-fiction," "subjective" and "objective," may be a case in point.

In principle I agree with Professor Carroll's position that in so far as one can distinguish between "fictional" and "non-fictional" anything, it is just as valid to consider "fictional" and "non-fictional" film as it is to speak of "fiction" and "non-fiction" in literature. That does not mean that either classification is necessarily a valid or legitimate one in any absolute or ultimate sense any more than it is valid to think of perception of the world as an "either-or" condition. It does mean, however, that if one wishes to generate or continue a discussion, it is essential to reject both the extreme subjective viewpoint of solipsism as well as the extreme objective viewpoint of formal objectivism. It is a Procrustean process, admittedly, and one with which many may not agree, but it is essential if there is to be any discussion of the possibility of objectivity in non-fiction film.

A good place to begin an examination of Carroll's presentation is with the two criteria he proposes for considering the relationship of "objectivity" to "non-fiction" film. The first criterion, he suggests, is the producer's label or "index," and it must be accepted without question. Whatever the producer calls "non-fiction" film is non-fiction film. This is not unlike recent claims in literature with regard to poetry or the earlier situation of Mambrino's helmet in Don Quixote, that is, anything is what I choose to call it.

The second criterion, after acceptance of the producer's classification, is that the material in the film be measured against an empirical reality to judge the non-fiction film's degree of "objectivity." But, Carroll cautions, we must be prepared to discover that the film has little or no correspondence to reality. It may, indeed, be completely untrue as far as verifiable fact is concerned. However, that the film be partially or completely untrue to fact does not affect its being "non-fiction" because "non-fiction" refers not to the film or its content but to the intention of the producer, that is, to a subjective judgment.

This is something of a departure from customary assumptions which insist on a more interdependent relationship between "non-fiction" and "objectivity," and indeed many dictionaries and handbooks define the terms as synonymous, sharing a relationship to external criteria. Carroll makes an exclusive distinction, however, because he is arguing that non-fiction film can exist without being verifiably true to any degree as well as being verifiably true to some degree, a condition which would not be legitimate or possible if fidelity to some external reality were admitted as part of the criteria basic to the initial labeling or "indexing."

But this raises further problems. If, as Carroll states at one point "nonfiction refers to the actual world" and "fiction... refers to segments of possible worlds," how can one distinguish between the imagined or falsified reality in a "nonfiction" film and the imagined reality in some "fiction" film? After all, fiction films such as the currently popular Gandhi or the recent television blockbuster Winds of War recreate scenes which actually happened during past eras and use dialogue which, as a matter of historical record, was actually spoken. Yet the films are historical fiction even though, accepting Carroll's criteria, they might just as easily be labeled non-fiction.

Further, once the label of "non-fiction" has been accepted, as Carroll insists it must be, further verification with regard to any external or "real" existence is redundant. As with Mambrino's helmet, the product may in no way accord with "reality," but that cannot change its index. So we have the paradox that, according to Carroll, although the label "non-fiction" refers to the "actual world," it does not in any way have to be verifiable as referring to the actual world. In fact, as closer examination reveals, the term "non-fiction" in Carroll's view indicates nothing but the fiat of the producer that we must accept the product as being true to external reality, or the "actual world," without being allowed to check its truthfulness of representation or even to question it.

It is therefore impossible, in Carroll's scheme, to distinguish between references to some "actual world" and references to some "possible world" because both are the same world, filmic realities which must be accepted as "real" because they have been so labeled by the producer and to which we cannot apply external criteria of objective truth.

One might ask why not just let the producer declare his film "objective" at the same time as he labels it "non-fiction" and thus avoid the difficulty entirely. The answer is that this would make the whole resolution of the question one of complete subjectivity and would, therefore, as in a solipsistic system, allow no further discussion. But one must wonder at the value of any discussion based as it is in Carroll's presentation on such an arbitrary point as the producer's subjective decision in labeling.

The principal value in Carroll's presentation, it would seem, is in its largely implicit insistence that any discussion of "fiction" versus "non-fiction," "reality" versus "illusion," or "objective" versus "subjective" can be possible and productive only if the extreme positions of solipsism and objectivism and the more generalized statements of the problem are avoided.

Thus, I would agree that it is possible to consider such films as historical recordings of events, training films, and newsreels as "non-fiction" because, even though they are not complete, they do present information verifiable against other records and other external criteria. And in so far as they are intended to instruct or inform and are faithful to their intent, they are non-fiction. I do not agree with Carroll's position that the label of the producer is the one and only criterion acceptable for determining the category of film. If the producer says the product is true to "actual reality" and it is demonstrably false to that "actual reality," then it is fiction, an untruth, and the label should be rejected.

With "fiction" films, of course, there is no problem. These are intended to entertain, make no claims to portray or truthfully represent any actual, existing world — even though per accidens they must to some extent do so — and the question of objectivity does not apply to them.

But the value of "non-fiction" as a label, a verbal map of reality, is to tell the audience how to consider and judge the film, and no amount of calling it truth when it is fiction will substitute for verifiability of the final product.