

Theorizing Fiction in Film Non/Fiction

Some Thoughts on Recent German Film Theory

Mario Sluigan

Abstract
Despite fiction film arguably being the privileged object of film theory the notion of "fiction" has been undertheorized by film scholars in general and those working in German in particular. Perhaps the most important exception to this trend has been Gertrud Koch and Christiane Voss' 2009 edited volume on fiction on the intersection of philosophy, film, and media studies. This essay discusses the place of this volume in the history of the genre volume – Koch's and Vinzenz Hediger's – and their attempts to define fiction in terms of medium properties as well as their efforts to articulate all photographic films as simultaneously fictional and nonfictional. In the first case, I demonstrate that medium understanding is a terminally unstable category, it is possible to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction at a given moment in time. I conclude with a call to applying Kendall L. Walton's (1990) transhistorical theory of fiction, which allows a number of its advantages over the more recent proposals and by emphasizing its suitability for investigating the change in film's fictional status over time.

Keywords
Kendall L. Walton; Gertrud Koch; Vinzenz Hediger; Christian Metz; André Bazin; theory of fiction; fiction as make-believe; film theory; documentary

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Introduction

There is undoubtedly a rich tradition of theorising fiction in German-language scholarship. From a philosophical perspective, Hans Vaihinger (1911) has proposed that theoretical models used to describe the world are non-fictional. Frank Kessler (1998), for instance, because we have no direct access to reality. Focusing on literary texts, Kate Hamburger (1957) has argued that there are textual markers which define whether something is fiction or not. Wolfgang Iser (1991) has put forward a triad of the fictive, the imaginary, and the real in playing the game of reading. A latter devoted to fiction is missing from the history of the dynamism in the field is the recent 540-page handbook covering theory, psychology, history, and interdisciplinary aspects of fiction (Tobias Klauk and Tillmann Köppe 2014).

When it comes to aesthetic fictions, most of the work, however, has focused on literary fiction. Even Koch and Köppe's reference book – subtitled *Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch (An Interdisciplinary Handbook)* – takes the bulk of its examples from literature with film and other arts receiving only scant attention. There is, undeniably, a growing interest in aesthetic fictions beyond literature as evinced by Anne Enderwitz and Irina O. Rajewsky's 2016 *Fiktion im Vergleich der Künste und Medien*. But if one is to look for the clearest sign of aesthetic fiction in film, even here we find research that is interested more in interpretation rather than theory proper.

This is not specific to German-language scholarship but to film studies in general and film theory in particular. The dearth of monograph-length studies theorizing fiction is even more striking if one considers the fact that fiction film has been discussed and researched in the history of film theory. For instance, already in 1916 one of the earliest theorists – Hugo Münsterberg – chose to focus on the film's dramatic fiction form in his aptly titled study, *Photoplay*. Although devoting a few pages to experimental film, the focus of both of Bela Balázs (1982, 1984) monographs originally published during the Weimar era, similar to film theory in general. The same can be said of Rudolf Arnheim's work (1933). Victor Perils (1974) is explicit that his *Film as Fiction* is interested in "photographic fiction film". David Bordwell (1985) also writes about *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Stanley Cavell, although defining his theory of film as "world projections" (1979: 72) which clearly allows for non-fiction, has virtually nothing to say about it. Over the years there have undoubtedly been other voices like Bill Nichols (1991) and Annette Michelson (2017) who focus on documentary and experimental film, respectively. Second, while theory of fiction is missing from film theory, it is missing from film studies. The fact that no writings on non-fiction film are included in Leo Baez and Marshall Cohen's widely used *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (2016) is perhaps the best sign of the relative dearth of nonfictional status of research.

Fiction as a concept even shapes the recent surge of interest in the theory of documentary film. For the latter is primarily understood as non-fictional. Frank Kessler (1998), for instance, sites his piece as an opposition between two concepts – "Fakt oder Fiktion?" ("Fact or Fiction?"). Nichols, a pioneer of documentary studies, frames his definition of the genre along these lines: "[documentaries] tell stories that, although similar to feature film, are in fact distinct from film" (2017: 4). Another notable scholar writes: "Although the distinction between nonfiction film and documentary cannot bear much theoretical weight, it might be useful to think of the documentary as a subset of nonfiction films, characterised by more aesthetic, social, rhetorical, and/or political ambition than, say, a corporate or instructional film" (Carl Plantinga 2005: 105). However, for all the organising power that the concept of fiction has within the discipline "fiction" in the notions of "fiction film" and "nonfiction film" rarely deserves a sustained treatment whether fictional or not. In the second, I argue that although the term for "fiction" cannot be found in either of the two widely read conceptual encyclopaedias of film studies – Susan Hayward's 2006 *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* and Edward Branigan and Warren Buckland's 2014 *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory* – in the German-language context, similarly, a chapter devoted to fiction is missing from the history of film and Thomas Morsch's 2011 *Handbuch Filmtheorie (The Handbook of Film Theory)* as well. It is as though fiction is a given, something film scholars need not worry about. Undeniably, some concepts stand as preconditions of the discipline but even the concept of "fiction" – admittedly absent in the cited volumes as well – has deserved more thorough engagement than fiction over the years (cf. André Bazin 2005; Noël Carroll 2008).

The most notable exception to this trend, at least in German-language scholarship, is Gertrud Koch and Christiane Voss' 2009 edited volume – *Es ist, als ob: Fiktionalität in Philosophie, Film- und Medienwissenschaft (It is as if: Fiction in Philosophy, Film and Media Studies)*. This work, although a decade old now, still presents the most relevant book-length discussion of fiction in film theory in recent years. In it a number of proposals are floated on how to grasp film in fiction, but two of the recurring themes are that the film's medium properties are critical for constraining film's nonfictional status and that a given film is fictional and nonfictional at the same time. In what follows I wish to address the contributions by the volume's most notable film scholars – Gertrud Koch and Vinzenz Hediger – who espouse these themes. In both cases I will argue that the medium underpins the distinction of such status but that this does not mean that it is impossible to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction films. Building on Hediger's perceptive analysis of the history of the fiction/nonfiction distinction in film history, I will conclude that film theory, in fact, constitutes a fiction which can accommodate the temporal instability of fiction. Crucially, I will argue that although acquainted with Kendall L. Walton's work on fiction, contributors to Koch and Voss' volume miss the opportunity to apply his transmedial theory of fiction to film.¹

Aesthetic Fiction as the Virtual

Koch usefully sets the stage for us by positing the key question:

„Müssen Objekte als ganze Fiktionen sein oder können sie dies nur in bestimmten Hinsichten sein, und wenn Letzteres zutrifft, betrifft es dann nur die Hinsichten oder sind am Objekt ausweisbare Eigenschaften Träger der Unterscheidung von fiktiv/nichtfiktiv? (2009: 140)²

She starts off by distinguishing aesthetic from non-aesthetic forms of fiction. The latter include phenomena such as scientific or legal fictions whereas the former pertain to aesthetic objects such as film and literary works. According to Koch, non-aesthetic fictions subsume any literary or works constitute hypothetical statements about what is possible. One can possess something without actually having it on one's person or even being in its vicinity, while holding the object remains a distinct possibility. Aesthetic fictions, by contrast, do not afford the possibility of found or engaged interaction. Although they really are a copy of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963, USA), it is impossible for the viewer to possess one of the nonfictional world represented therein. Even if we were to have visited Bodega Bay in 1963 when and where the events of the film take place, we would never have been able to meet *the film's* characters and they would not be a part of their world.

Koch's next step is to propose an account of aesthetic fiction as that which prepares for the *virtual*. In C.S. Peirce's sense of the word. According to Peirce's definition, there is a clear distinction between the virtual and the potential:

(1) A virtual X (where X is a common noun) is something, not an X, which has the efficiency (virtue) of an X.
(2) It is the proper meaning of the word, but (2) is has been seriously confounded with the potentiality of an X (which is almost always the case). The latter is the case of the word without actual efficiency [...] the sun was said to be *virtual* in order, that is, in its efficiency. (C.S. Peirce 1902: 763-764, italics mine original).

This allows Koch to erase the border between fiction film and documentary and to treat not only fiction as documentary but documentary as fiction as well. In the former case, Koch finds that because there is always something in front of the camera – actors, costumes, locations, etc. In the latter case, because documentaries screen images of what has already passed it means that really always appears as fiction. Let us consider the (elements of her argument.

Writing in the tradition of documentary theory which has in the wake of Hayden White's (1973/1987) work on historical discourse blurred the distinction between fiction film and nonfiction, Koch points out that documentaries use the same range of film techniques as fiction films do – camera movement, editing, lighting, use of off-screen space, close-ups, etc. She goes further, however, and proposes two additional reasons why documentaries constitute fictions. The first reason why "das Wirkliche im Film immer als Fiktion auftaucht" ("the real in film always emerges as fiction") (Koch 2009: 145) is because all the people and objects caught on camera that are screened are no longer where they are when they are recorded. Such objects can only be captured under the Peircean notion of the virtual. Second, fiction also derives from the fact that such words are now temporally enclosed and unalterable, much like the aforementioned world of *The Birds*.

When it comes to White's ideas, it has been fashionable to claim that because nonfiction uses the same techniques as fiction – e.g. plotting and closure – from literary fiction in the case of history and montage, staging, and other devices from film fiction in the case of documentary – then nonfiction must not be different than fiction. But it is well known that stylistic techniques, i.e. textual features cannot determine whether something is fiction or not, precisely because nonfiction can use techniques usually associated with fiction. As such as fiction can deploy devices standardly connected to nonfiction. The *Blow Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) famously emulates documentary aesthetic but neither it nor any of the members from found footage nor the members of the documentary crew. Similarly, if I express how I got lost yesterday in (poor) verse – "I walked about yesterday, I didn't expect to lose my way" – this does not make my current location.

To continue with Koch's own argument, documentaries undoubtedly present us with images of temporally removed objects. And given Peirce's example of the sun being virtually on earth in its efficiency, we can easily think about photographed objects as being virtually present in images. Although strictly speaking not present in the film, the objects are there. They are there for all able-bodied to see. But this is not the same as being able to film. Contrary to Koch's ideas on the subject that "Musik nicht in seibem Sinne Wiederholung von Vergangenen in der Gegenwart der Aufnahme ist wie der Film" ("music is not the repetition of the past in the present of performance in the same sense than film"), recorded music is not different in this regard (ibid.). Like the recorded image, the recorded sound is not the same as the original object being recorded." The sound wave that is the original object is only the automatic film image and Verdict, this relationship of recorded medium. It is not the actual vibration of the air that are stored but only their effects. In other words, if documentaries are fictional due to the virtual character of the images that make them up so is recorded music.

Regarding the inaccessibility of the represented world it is true that we cannot access and/or change the events depicted. But this is not the same as being unable to access the world of *The Birds*. Undeniably, I cannot talk to the characters of Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005, USA) who has since died but this is not the same as not being able to converse with Melanie Daniels from *The Birds*. If I visited the Katmai National Park and Preserve in Alaska twenty years ago, I would not have been able to engage the bear enthusiast who was in the car conversation. By contrast, even if we spoke to Tippi Hedren on the set of *The Birds* in Bodega Bay I would not have been able to speak to her fictional character. The reason is that fictions, unlike past events, have no spatiotemporal relations to us.

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The main problem with Koch's understanding of recorded images as fictional is that it arbitrarily expands the notion of fiction without giving any reason why we should accept fiction to the notion in the first place. Theoretical reasons why documentaries are fiction should either provide a definition which is (approximately) coextensive with the ordinary meaning of the word or should, in the case they offer a technical definition, explain why this status. To discussing of fiction is preflight on its ordinary meaning. By defining of fiction in terms of the virtual, Koch does the latter but without providing any good reason to do so. It is true that Koch sees Peirce's distinction between the potential and the virtual as fitting nicely with her differentiation between non-aesthetic and aesthetic fictions but that alone is not a good enough reason for such a radical overhaul of the notion of fiction.

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