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

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jlt-2017-0023>

**Abstract:** 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.

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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.

**Keywords:** Truth in fiction, social realism

An influential theory of the difference between fiction and nonfiction in literature and film draws from an intention-response model of communication and speech act theory (see e. g., Carroll 1997; Currie 1990; Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Plantinga 1987

and 1997; Ponech 1997 and 1999). In broad terms and sticking to the case of film, according to this view nonfiction films do not necessarily differ from fiction films stylistically or by any textual feature. It is rather the filmmaker's intention that makes a difference. Carl Plantinga (1987) was the first in film theory to argue that the maker of a nonfiction film takes an assertive stance towards the world projected by the film, as compared to a fictive stance in fiction films. Similarly, Noël Carroll (1997) argues that the difference between fiction and nonfiction is anchored in communicative practices. While the director's intention with a fiction film is that the spectator should imagine its content (entertain something in thought or *suppose* that so and so is the case without actually believing this to be the case), the intention behind a nonfiction film is that the spectator should believe its content (entertain something in thought as asserted). The maker of a nonfiction film can be seen as asserting something about what is presented as true. The spectator is aware of this intention through contextual indexing (e. g., genre labels), and »regards the propositional content of the film as something that the author believes to be true [...] and as something that is committed to the relevant standards of evidence and reason for the type of subject-matter being communicated« (Carroll 1997, 187). One controversy is whether or not nonfiction films can be reduced to their propositional content. Plantinga (2005, 110), for example, holds in a more recent paper that the communicative richness of the photographic and sonic elements comprising moving images »extends beyond the intentions of the filmmakers«. Showing something on-screen need not commit the filmmaker to any specific propositional content. Plantinga concludes that what the documentary filmmaker asserts is »that the images, sounds, and other materials presented are [...] *veridical representations*« (ibid., 111, emphasis original).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, documentary films »show the spectator how something is, was or might be in the actual world [...] from which the spectator might reasonably be expected to [...] form true beliefs about that subject« (ibid.).

Typical documentaries are first and foremost meant to be taken, in both their particularity and their broad thematic outlines, as reliable accounts of, records of, and/or arguments about the actual world. Fictions may also muse about the actual world, but do so indirectly through fictional characters and events. (ibid., 114)

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<sup>1</sup> The notion ›documentary‹ was first used by filmmaker John Grierson (quoted in Plantinga 2005, 105) who famously defined it as a film in which one finds »a creative treatment of actuality«. Whereas nonfiction film is a wide category potentially including e.g., corporate films, instructional films and news reportages, Plantinga (2005, 105) uses the notion documentary to denote »a subset of nonfiction films, characterized by more aesthetic, social, rhetorical, and/or political ambition than, say, a corporate or instructional film«. For simplicity, and to avoid the confusion with Grierson's original notion, I will use the notion nonfiction film in this paper, but my claims should be seen as restricted to the same subset of films that Plantinga demarcates.

For the present purposes the disagreement between Carroll and Plantinga is not important, as the central point, on which they seem to agree, is that nonfiction films are to be assessed as reliable accounts or records of, or arguments about, the real world. Whether or not this can be reduced to propositional content need not concern us here.<sup>2</sup>

So, it may seem uncontroversial to say that nonfiction filmmakers are committed to the truth of their representations in a different sense from the makers of fiction. Basically this model captures a difference between watching what we may call a prototypical nonfiction film such as *Supersize Me* from a prototypical fiction such as *Avatar*. 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 starters, 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? Dan Flory (2013, 51sqq.) discusses a number of such readings of *Avatar* in a paper about imaginative resistance, arguing that some conservative American viewers sensed »a double invitation« (ibid, 52) not just to imagine the fictional world prescribed in *Avatar*, but also to believe that the film's appraisal holds true about our real world as well. These critics experienced resistance to such an invitation, instead judging *Avatar* as abhorrent on the grounds that it was anti-American.

In fact, there is a wide range of ways fiction film may be seen as laying claims to truth. Do not ordinary spectators expect films such as *Saving Private Ryan* or *Schindler's List* to teach them something about the Second World War? Or do they not use their knowledge about the Second World War to assess whether these films are truthful and accurate? Could not spectators take pleasure in the historical accuracy of films such as *Master and Commander* (see e. g., Gjelsvik 2009), and indeed treat what they learn about the British navy in general as true after seeing the film? At a basic level, most fiction films can be seen as claiming something as true about our real world – watching a fiction film set in a fictional city called London will make the spectator expect some kind of truth in its

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Harold (2016) for a discussion of the idea that we can acquire knowledge from fiction.

depiction of this city, and come to believe that London looks or looked like this (as depicted in the film), all the while merely imagining about the characters and events in the film. So, some elements in most fiction films are perhaps taken as either reliable accounts of, records of and/or arguments about the actual world.

Indeed, the idea that fiction too can lay claim to truth is an old one, as we shall see, and the question has surfaced in various debates in film and literary theory. For example, philosophers have explored how works of literature can be said to make statements about a general theme, meaning or moral of the story that is true not just in the fiction but in our actual world. We may experience works of fiction as having a meaning, moral or thesis that is not explicitly stated anywhere in the work, but is something we as readers/spectators interpret the work as implying or suggesting.<sup>3</sup> Whereas this debate in philosophical aesthetics has typically taken literature as its case study, in film theory related questions have been explored in relation to the filmic technique of montage: one can say that a fiction film can make claims through montage, for example through juxtaposing striking labourers being attacked with cattle butchered in a slaughter-house, as did Sergei Eisenstein in *Strike*, and by this suggesting or implying something about the world – that labourers are being treated like cattle – a claim that the spectator can assess as true or false.<sup>4</sup>

Thus 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. Take a fictional television series such as *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008). In numerous interviews, creator David Simon emphasizes that *The Wire*'s portrayal of Baltimore city life is true. The background for the show is found in Simon's nonfiction writing after spending a year in the Baltimore police homicide department, published as a book entitled *Homicide. A Year on the Killing Streets* in 1991, and another book co-written with Ed Burns after spending a year with African American drug dealers in Baltimore, published as *The Corner. A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighbourhood* in 1997. Another creator also adapted this book into the miniseries *The Corner* (HBO 2000), one of *The Wire*'s closest predecessors, and *Homicide* was also fictionalized by other creators as the television series *Homicide*.

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3 See e.g., Hospers (1960) for a discussion of how literature can be said to imply or suggest a thesis, and also Lamarque and Olsen (1994).

4 For two opposing views of the argumentative potential (often discussed as film as philosophy) of Eisensteinian montage sequences such as this one, see e.g., Livingston (2009, 33) and Smuts (2009). Both discuss not the mentioned sequence from *Strike*, but the much more complex »Of God and Country« sequence from *October*, but arguably the effect is the same.

*Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993–1999). Simon then created the fictional *The Wire*. A writer on *The Wire*'s team, Rafael Alvarez (2009), explains the many steps taken to ensure a realistic portrayal in the series. From background sound to dialect, from props to police work, the emphasis is on realism. *The Wire* intends its contents to be taken as assertions about American inner city decay. As creator David Simon (2009, 3) puts it: »*The Wire* was not merely trying to tell a good story or two. We were very much trying to pick a fight«. The creators' emphasis on realism and truth is echoed in the celebratory academic reception of the series. According to one writer, *The Wire* offers a »troublingly realistic representation« (McMillian 2009, 53). Others write that *The Wire*'s stories »scream of verisimilitude« (Marshall and Potter 2009, 9), and have »an authenticity that bleeds through the screen« (ibid., 10). Jason Mittell (2009, 435) sums this up as *The Wire* having »a commitment to authenticity and realism«.

Indeed, *The Wire* has been used in university classes in sociology and anthropology in order to convey to the students the challenges faced by the urban poor in the US. As professor of sociology William Julius Williams explains: »Although *The Wire* is fiction, not a documentary, its depiction of [the] systemic urban inequality that constrains the lives of the urban poor is more poignant and compelling [than] that of any published study, including my own« (Williams quoted in Bennett 2010; see also Chaddha and Williams 2011). *The Wire* invites a politically reflective attitude, drawing attention to the realities of inner city Baltimore and urban poverty in the United States more widely.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, *The Wire* seems to have some of the implications of the nonfiction mode. But which? The individual characters and events are all made up and arguably only intended to be imagined. The creators do not claim that Avon Barksdale ever competed with Marlo Stanfield over control of West Baltimore's drug trade, or that Detective McNulty was ever sent to the Marine Unit for his breach of the chain of command in the police department. This is only true in the fiction, and the sociology students in Williams's class are hardly asked to accept what is told about these characters and events as true in the same sense as if they were people and events portrayed in a nonfiction film. The basic theory delineated at the beginning of this paper does seem to get the primary spectator activity in relation to this series right – the spectator imagines that such and such is the case. However, there is a double invitation not only to imagine what is true in the story but also to assess these story events as conveying something about the actual world. In what sense does *The Wire* lay claims to truth? A specification of the content of its truth claims is needed.

One place to start to explore these implications would be with the notion of *realism*. In film theory, realism is often used interchangeably with *verisimilitude*

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<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, not everything in *The Wire* is social realism; see Vaage (2013).

and the classical term *mimesis*. I suggest that these notions are typically used to suggest that something is credible. A fiction is credible if it is coherent and resembling our own world in relevant ways (e. g., in superhero films, Superman can fly etc., but besides from this the fictional world is like our own world). In this sense most film and television series are works of realism. Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment (2000, xiisq.) define realism as »a mode of representation that, at the formal level, aims at verisimilitude (or mimesis)« and state that »degrees of mimesis are to be found in most forms of representational art in most periods«. This will not help us capture how *The Wire* can be said to lay claims to truth in a different sense from the majority of works of fiction. The problem is that the spectator does not merely expect some realism in what is fictional (captured by the notion of credibility) when engaging with *The Wire*, but assesses this work as claiming something as true about the real world in a particular sense. Without explicitly differentiating this meaning of the notion of realism from the one described above, Hallam and Marshment do point to a more narrow understanding of the term: »Allied to the more formal concept of realism as verisimilitude is the notion of truth telling. Here realism is seen as being appropriate for, and being obliged to, represent social reality in the interests of knowledge and social justice.« (ibid., xiii) In film theory, the terms realism and verisimilitude are notoriously vague because it is often not clear whether they are intended to be taken in a wide sense (as mimesis, representational, naturalistic, the fictional world being credible), or in a narrow sense (as claiming the truth). It is this latter meaning of realism that will help us make sense of *The Wire*.

We can narrow it down even further. As Carroll (1996, 244) points out, because there are so many types of realism in film (neorealism, poetic realism, social realism, etc.), realism is a term that should not be used unprefixd. And we need a prefix to categorize *The Wire* as realism. Critics and reviewers commonly label fiction with a clear desire to invoke a politically reflective attitude in its spectators, and to reveal the grim realities for our society's poorest, as *social realism*. Hallam and Marshment (2008, 184) define social realism as follows:

Social realism is a discursive term used by film critics and reviewers to describe films that aim to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity. Traditionally associated in Britain with a reformist or occasionally revolutionary politics that deemed adverse social circumstances could be changed by the introduction of more enlightened social policies or structural change in society, social realism tends to be associated with an observational style of camerawork that emphasizes situations and events and an episodic narrative structure, creating ›kitchen sink‹ dramas and ›gritty‹ character studies of the underbelly of urban life. Contemporary forms of social realism are rather more eclectic, drawing on similar subject matter but using a range of stylistic features drawn from a spectrum of formal strategies.



Hallam and Marshment list a number of traits in contemporary works of social realism that fit *The Wire* nicely, such as focus on those marginalized in mainstream popular culture by virtue of their social and economic status or ethnicity, and on how their problems are created by society – »people who are disenfranchised by poverty and lack of opportunity« (ibid., 192). Formally, they list traits such as »ensemble casts and multi-stranded narratives with narrative motivation dispersed across a range of diverse characters, events and situations« (ibid., 190), and a narrative structure that is »episodic and cyclical rather than driven by a logic of cause and effect« (ibid., 192). In this way, works of social realism typically »emphasise the containment of characters within tightly inscribed socio-economic and geographical boundaries« where the characters are »immobilised by their situation and unable to act« (ibid., 194). These criteria are mirrored in the academic reception of *The Wire*. For example, Mittell (2009) points out how this ensemble cast series emphasizes how characters are trapped within their respective institutions. The important point is that the academic scholars' celebration of the realism of *The Wire* introduced above indicates that these scholars take the series to be claiming the truth about urban poverty in the US. The series is not merely perceived as being realistic in the sense that applies to most fiction film and TV series; *The Wire* is perceived as a work of social realism.

The problem is that the communicative definition of fiction and nonfiction seems insufficient when taking social realism into account. What marks a work of fiction as social realism is its intention to assert something about the actual world in some special sense. Social realist fiction seems to be a borderline category. Do not such complicating cases collapse the difference between social realist fiction and nonfiction? Contrary to some philosophers, I think they do not.<sup>6</sup> Rather than being taken as proof that the distinction between nonfiction and fiction cannot be maintained by appealing to a communicated intention to assert or not, the borderline cases should compel us to investigate more closely the communicative intentions and conventions at work. The communicative model of nonfiction and fiction is not wrong, but it is in need of refinement. I propose one such refinement here, among the many nuances needed in order for the model to fully capture the complexities of this field: there is a difference between the truth claims found in social realist fiction and nonfiction, respectively.

I suggest that prototypical nonfiction asks the spectator to assess what is shown as true as tokens: typically, nonfiction asks the spectator to believe that this very person experienced this in this actual location, or that these particular

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Friend (2011 and 2012) and Matravers (2010 and 2014) who argue against the idea that fiction is sufficiently characterized by evoking imagination whereas nonfiction deals in beliefs.

events took place.<sup>7</sup> Nonfiction typically makes claims about particular or token people, locations and events, and we will assess these claims as more or less truthful depending on whether they are, in fact, true about these tokens.

By contrast, social realist fiction asks the spectator to assess what is shown as true as type: this type of person has experienced this type of event in this type of location. When watching a fictional work of social realism the spectator understands that both the characters and events in the story are made up, and thus merely call for imagining. Nevertheless, she expects them to be true in the sense of being representational or typical of the (real) group that she perceives the work to make claims about. The spectator expects a certain accuracy and authenticity in the type representations in *The Wire*, although she is aware that the depictions of this token character and these token events are not true. In other words, the content of the truth claims in social realist fiction is different from that in prototypical nonfiction: one is a claim about a type, the other about a token.

Furthermore, the type representations in social realist fiction are typically historically specific – social realist fiction does not merely claim something about universal human types or experiences (e. g., this kind of person would experience this kind of challenge in life). Rather, its claims are specific to cultural and/or historical contexts. Thus, for example, when *The Wire* makes claims about types of people, events and locations, it is not merely making universal claims about what a drug addict might experience, or a poor person might do, but rather how specific constraints given by the political context shape and restrict the characters' lives (e. g., how the ›War on Drugs‹ is in effect a war on the American underclass, or how the ›Leave No Child Behind‹ policy undermines learning in American schools by focusing on test preparation skills). There is thus a historical specificity in the type claims in social realism.

My suggestion might sound close to Aristotle's (1997, 7) famous dictum that poetry »is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular«. Aristotle's formulation is, in John Hospers's (1980, 7) words, a »maddeningly brief formula«. What does it mean that fiction is about universals? One interpretation that Hospers discusses is that Aristotle can be taken to mean that fiction makes implied statements about types in the real world. However, Hospers quickly rejects this interpretation, as he points out that authors of fiction do not typically say explicitly that the characters are to be taken as representative of a group or class. Furthermore, he points out

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<sup>7</sup> Note that this suggestion should be acceptable to both Carroll and Plantinga, as Plantinga's point about the richness of moving images going beyond mere propositional content is accommodated.

that what he labels the representative view »simply does not do justice to the uniqueness and individuality of the characters in fiction« – we value them because they appear as individuals, not as mere types (ibid., 6). Speaking about fiction in general, I fully agree with Hospers. Nonetheless, for the subcategory of fiction labelled social realism, I contend that the creator does intend the characters to be taken as representative of a group or class: Hospers's representative view is a correct description of social realism. This does not mean that the spectator does not value the characters as individuals as well – but in line with the double invitation in social realism, additionally the spectator values the characters as representative of a marginalized group or class. Hospers's line of reasoning is symptomatic of a persistent problem in the literature about truth in fiction: one treats fiction as one singular category, whereas arguably there are several kinds of fiction, and the role played by truth in one kind of fiction may not be the same as that played in another. Settling the question of what role truth plays in fiction cannot be done without taking this complexity into account.

In order to flesh out my suggestion I will illustrate it with a closer analysis of the difference between *The Corner* and *The Wire*. From the nonfiction book to the dramatized (yet, I will argue, nonfictional) miniseries and on to the fictionalized *The Wire*, it is an archaeological project, so to say, to excavate the different layers of realism in this family of works. In the book, *The Corner*, its authors state that »[t]his is a work of journalism. The names that appear in these pages are, in fact, the real names of people who have lived and struggled along West Baltimore's Fayette Street« (Simon and Burns 2010, 610). This makes it clear that the authors intend the book to be taken as nonfiction, as making claims about some token, real human beings – as nonfiction literature and films typically do. The book is indeed classified as a work of nonfiction. Nevertheless, it is predominantly written in the tradition of new journalism, with an omnipotent narrator moving with ease in and out of the different characters' inner mental life, not revealing that there are two writers present, observing and interviewing. Stylistically, the book resembles fiction – an uninformed reader might naturally read it as such. However, at regular intervals there are chapters (or subchapters) where the authors turn to argumentative, polemical analysis of their subject – still without identifying themselves or discussing their role as writers, but making the (uninitiated) reader suspect that this is a piece of nonfiction. Linda Williams, whom I will turn to shortly, labels this an *editorial rant*. And then, at the end of the book its claim to truth is clarified, and its method of inquiry discussed critically.

The miniseries *The Corner* similarly plays around with the stylistic difference between nonfiction and fiction. It was marketed as a crime drama, but is a difficult borderline case. Each episode opens with the words ›True Stories‹, followed by an interview with one of the main characters. For the uninitiated spectator, these

interviews might be perceived as actual, nonfiction interviews – but some spectators may recognize some of the characters as actors, or other cues in these scenes may reveal that these are only mock or pretend interviews: the interviewees are indeed actors, being interviewed in-character about their lives on the corner in West Baltimore. Each episode also ends with such (mock or pretend) interviews. In between this prologue and epilogue, however, the events from the book are dramatized using the conventions of fiction film. For example, we sometimes see a main character's memories in the form of flashbacks (in brighter colours to emphasize the nostalgia for a time when this area in Baltimore was no drug wasteland, but a functional working class, African American neighbourhood). Furthermore, the camera seamlessly follows the characters, who never acknowledge its presence. In the last episode's opening mock interview, the use of this dramatized mode becomes comical when the interviewer (off-screen) complains to the teenage mother Tyreeka about not being told of her giving birth, as she had promised that the camera team (>we<) would be allowed to be present. But we were in fact present, as we saw the birth in the previous episode! There seems to be an intentional tension between the dramatized main parts in *The Corner*, and its mockumentary wrapping. Nevertheless, most important for my concerns here is that this miniseries makes it clear, in the end, that it does in fact make claims about particular, real life people. At the end of the credits in each episode, we are informed that the miniseries is »[b]ased on a true story. Certain details involving some characters, scenes and events have been altered for dramatic purposes«. Being based on a true story is a relatively weak truth claim, and would be in line with conventions of fiction films, many of which are based on true stories to a greater or lesser extent. However, at the very end of the entire miniseries, the (real) director steps forward, and calls on some of the main characters' real life alter egos – the real Fran, Blue, Tyreeka and DeAndre – and interviews them about their lives, and about being the subject of study first for the book, and then for the miniseries. With this ending, the miniseries clarifies its nonfiction intention: despite using dramatization and altering some minor details for dramatic purposes, it makes claims about these (token) real life people and events.

*The Wire* takes the full step from nonfiction to fiction. Despite aiming at truth and realism, *The Wire* does not claim that these token characters exist, and that these particular events happened like this, but that these types or kinds of people typically face these kinds of challenges and live these kinds of lives in inner cities in the United States due to specific historical/political conditions. The fictional characters in *The Wire* borrow some traits from their real life predecessors in *The Corner* – such as the goodhearted fictional Bubbles making his living through collecting or stealing scrap metal and selling it to the scrap metal plant, just as the real Gary MacCullough did. However, Bubbles experiences many things that Gary

never did (most notably, he survives his drug addiction). *The Wire* does not claim that Bubbles ever existed. It is clear that he is fictional, but also that he is in some sense representative of drug addicts in this environment.

Investigating the ethnographic background for *The Wire* and what is gained by telling a fictional story, Linda Williams (2011) argues that a work of fiction gives the creator the freedom to show how systems are interconnected by having some characters – such as Bubbles – move between systems, thus being a connector in a way that Gary MacCullough was not in real life. She quotes (ibid., 209) sociologists J. W. Williams and Amol Chaddha, who argue that whereas scholarly works »tend to focus on many of these issues in relative isolation«, the fiction of *The Wire* is able to »defly weave together the range of forces that shape the circumstances of the urban poor while exposing deep inequality as a fundamental feature of broader social and economic arrangements«. Linda Williams also adds that fiction allows for character dialogues to function as comments on the events in the fictional world, thereby relieving us of the editorial rant where the creator sums up and draws conclusions for us. These scholars suggest that this fiction is able to convey the truth about this type of environment more effectively than scholarly works that focus on similar issues in relative isolation, presumably because the scholars are bound by standards of evidence. The artistic freedom offered by fiction is seen as offering a more universal truth. This could potentially be one step towards explaining the advantages of telling a fictional, socially realistic story as compared to a nonfictional story. However, this is not my aim in the present paper. The important point here is the series's truth claims.

*The Wire* makes use of a number of stylistic devices that are arguably intended to inform and remind the spectator of the creators's intention not just to tell a good story but to say something true about life in inner-city America. Mittell (2009, 435) writes that *The Wire*'s »commitment to authenticity and realism [is] typified by a minimized documentary-style aesthetics«. Central to this realist aesthetics is little or no use of non-diegetic music, an immobile camera, little or no ›flashy‹ editing and little or no use of flashbacks. Similarly, Erlend Lavik (2012) argues that although its plain style is not the most preeminent quality of *The Wire*, it is not to be dismissed as uninteresting, but should be acknowledged as a »realist, often documentary-like aesthetics«. For example, he argues that the series mimics the style of observational nonfiction film. In addition to these stylistic devices, the series's content (focus on the marginalized and poor who are presented as contained by socio-economic structures) and narrative structure (ensemble cast, multi-stranded narrative and a cyclical narrative structure) are typical of social realism in fiction, as the category is defined by Hallam and Marshment. Through indexing, spectators will be aware that *The Wire* is fiction, and by making use of intertextual knowledge they may come to realize that fiction with this kind of style, content and

narrative structure is a specific subtype, namely social realism. Analysis of the series's style, content and narrative structure reveals the rhetorical devices that are used in this series to communicate the creators's intentions to make type truth claims, as is typical of social realist fiction.

I have suggested that distinguishing between token and type claims captures the difference between prototypical nonfiction film and social realism in fiction. Admittedly, there are a number of problematic cases that can be seen as counterexamples to the theory offered here. For example, fiction films with a particular historical setting also typically make some type claims to truth: as is the case with many historical period films, one can argue that the novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, as well as its film adaptation, make type claims. In this work we do learn something about what it might have been like to be a woman in Henry James's time. However, when these works are not categorized as social realist fiction, I suspect it has to do with what is perceived as the main intention behind the work; to claim something about this historical epoch, or merely to imagine about a fictional world. As pointed out by Hospers, authors of fiction do not typically state that the characters are to be taken as representative of a group, and readers/spectators value the characters for their individuality, and not as mere types. Indeed, while not denying that fictions can be true in many ways, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (1994) deny that assessing the truth-value of individual works is central to the institution of fiction. Truth claims do not typically play a central role when we appreciate and evaluate fiction. This arguably holds for historical dramas as well. When reading or watching *The Portrait of a Lady*, assessing whether or not the portrayal of its main female character amounts to claims to truth about women in this era is not what takes centre stage. When appreciating and evaluating the work, assessing the story as making claims to truth is not primary.

Peter Kivy (1997, 120sq.) argues against Lamarque and Olsen that a literary work's perennial themes may give the work an *afterlife*, in which the reader will continue to ponder the questions and topics raised by the work. Such reflection, he argues, can be said to be literary appreciation. After reading or watching *The Portrait of a Lady*, one can indeed be left ruminating on the position of women in society, and appreciate the work even more for giving rise to such a reflective afterlife. I do not want to deny that works of fiction can make us reflect on real life issues in this manner. However, notably, such reflection over perennial themes is still different from assessing the truth value of the historically specific claims in social realist fiction. The afterlife of fictional works is arguably of a more universal kind than the deliberation over politically specific type claims triggered by a work of social realism.

So, when watching a work of social realism, one will perceive a strong, intended desire to raise awareness, to argue about a historically specific state of

affairs, and to teach its audience something about this. As evident in the quotes from the academic reception of *The Wire*, spectators did perceive such an intention while engaging with this fiction, and praised the series for being authentic and realistic (i. e., true). The creators also clearly communicated such an intention in interviews. In line with the communicative definition of fiction and nonfiction, one can thus argue that one method that may be used in order to establish the content of the truth claims in a fiction is to investigate what the creator has explicitly stated, combined with close analysis of rhetorical devices used in the fiction that might communicate this intention to the spectator, and finally the degree to which truth claims are given a central role when the work is evaluated in critical reception. Although we might learn something about bygone eras in our real world by watching historical dramas, fiction is first and foremost intended for imaginative engagement, and not didactical learning experiences or political arguments about the state of affairs in our real world. Yet we need more research on the truth claims of period films specifically, as their categorization does suggest that their specific blend of imagining and belief sets them apart from prototypical fiction.

Another counterexample could be an experimental film like Dziga Vertov's *The Man With A Movie Camera*. This experimental film is not social realist fiction, yet one can argue that it does seem to make type claims in some sense (this is a typical day in a typical Soviet city). When it comes to aesthetic experimentations in nonfiction, Bill Nichols's work on various types of what he (2010) labels the documentary mode is informative. He identifies six such types; poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. *The Man With A Movie Camera* can be seen as a hybrid form, being a documentary in both the poetic mode as well as reflexive mode. Across the various modes of documentary, the extent to which the film has rhetorical content varies – documentary films in the poetic mode are often less rhetorical; or, to rephrase, they do not first and foremost assert or claim that something is true. *The Man With a Movie Camera* is first and foremost a lyrical play with the film medium. Although it can also be seen as making claims, these tend to be fairly abstract, such as Nichols's interpretation »the transformative power of the masses as they, like the machinery of cinema, go about the business of producing a new, postrevolutionary Soviet society« (ibid., 131). Documentaries in the poetic mode are surely an important addition to our understanding of nonfiction film, yet poetic documentaries are not prototypical nonfiction.<sup>8</sup> The poetic documentary's primary purpose is arguably not its assertive force. Again, what is needed

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<sup>8</sup> See Plantinga (2005) who carefully defines the documentary in a way that allows for sufficient flexibility to include documentaries in Nichols's poetic mode. Plantinga labels this the asserted veridical representation.

is to break down the monolithic categories of fiction and nonfiction into subgroups and investigate the truth claims in each of them.

There are other problematic cases. One of them is the biopic, such as the recent films about Alfred Hitchcock, Princess Diana or Hannah Arendt. These films make claims about tokens, or about these real, particular people who actually existed, and as such they can be seen as nonfiction. However, they often also take liberties that an authorized biography would not, supplying details about events that are unknown to the public, or making interpretations about their subject that would be controversial, and as such perhaps invite the spectator to imagine about the character and event just as much as actually believing everything that is portrayed. To rehearse my argument again, more attention is required to analyse in detail the truth claims in these films, and how they are perceived in critical reception.

To sum up, the theory presented here 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 believing prescribed by each, as evident from what the creators say about their intentions, textual features of the work, and critical reception. As my suggestions stand in this paper, at the very least I propose that the token-type distinction makes sense of the difference between the nonfiction book *The Corner* and the TV series *The Wire* as a work of fiction and, more specifically, belonging to the subgroup social realism.<sup>9</sup>

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