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## Reply to Carol Brownson and Jack C. Wolf

Noel Carroll

Let me begin by commenting on some points Carol Brownson makes that I think are correct and which have helped me to clarify for myself the nature of my own project. She says, "Rather than giving a partial definition of nonfiction, he has described a reasonable and respectable standard of evaluation applicable to films that lay claim to objectivity...." I think Brownson is right that I should steer clear of attempting to define nonfiction for the very reason that it is not a homogeneous class of things but a bunch of things lumped together only because they are not fictions.

In my paper, I really had in mind using nonfiction as a label for all sorts of films of purported fact -- historical films, anthropological films, films of current events, etc. I wanted to say, contrary to many contemporary theorists, that such films of purported fact can be objective as well as having certain other features in common -- e.g., reference to the actual world. But I made these points by speaking as though nonfiction film was an essentially unified class, when it is not. I should have made my points by saying "historical films can be objective," "anthropological films can be objective," "sociological films can be objective," etc. rather than by speaking of nonfiction films tout court. My argument is really that films of putative fact can be objective and not that everything that is not fiction has some epistemic standard of evaluation -- Ernie Gehr's Serene Velocity is not fiction but it does not have an accompanying set of standards for epistemic evaluation. Throughout the essay, I generally use "nonfiction" to refer to various genres of films of putative fact (journalistic reports, historical films etc.). But at times I slip into talk of a homogeneous genre of nonfiction films which I suggest that I can partially define, when, indeed, all I actually should be claiming is that films of putative fact can be adjudged objective in terms of the prevailing standards of epistemic evaluation of the types of knowledge claims that the films that make said knowledge claims present. Also I am making the related generalization that this "genre" of nonfiction films makes reference to the world. Brownson's remarks on my confusions here are very useful.

On the other hand, I have great difficulty understanding Brownson's points about objectivity. She urges us to drop the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy in discussing documentary film but never really explains why we should do this. She suggests that I have redefined the concept of objectivity in terms of adherence to intersubjectively assessable practices of reasoning and evidence gathering. But I am not sure that I

have introduced a new meaning of "objectivity." Admittedly I do not mean by "objectivity" "self-evident certainty." But nor do many contemporary theorists. The contemporary concept of objectivity, dating back to Peirce and Husserl, it seems to me, centers on the notion of intersubjective validation. I haven't redefined "objectivity" but have employed one major prevailing conception of it.

Brownson also thinks that I am wrong in thinking that most commentators who conclude that film is necessarily subjective are restricting their arguments to film. She holds that indeed such commentators believe more broadly that all knowledge claims are subjective. There is no way to finally adjudicate this controversy save by counting cases. But in my favor I would point out that many of the theorists who hold that nonfiction films are subjective are Marxists. And Marxists, one supposes, can't hold that all knowledge claims are subjective insofar as their theory is proposed as being scientifically and objectively verifiable.

Much of Brownson's discussion of objectivity is preoccupied with sketching two arguments (that ultimately collapse into one) that she thinks might be leading commentators to claim that the nonfiction film is subjective. These, moreover, are arguments that I failed to foreclose. Both these arguments have as their crucial premise the notion that language is subjective. Thus, insofar as film is language-like, it too is always subjective.

Frankly, neither of the arguments persuade me, specifically because I do not know what to make of the idea that "language is subjective." Language is a shared tool of a cultural community. A language does not exist solely in an individual's mind. Indeed Wittgenstein has proved that a private language is impossible. What could it mean to say that language is subjective other than that it is in the province of a single consciousness? Indeed, I doubt the idea that language is subjective can be intelligibly interpreted. Thus, I do not believe that either of the arguments that Brownson invents are available for film theorists since both require the either unintelligible or impossible proposition that language is subjective.

The first argument states that since films do not mechanically mirror reality, they are intensional. If they are intensional, they are language-like. If they are language-like, they are subjective. I have already rejected the last proposition in this series as unintelligible. But I don't understand the earlier parts of the argument either. I am not sure that the fact that films don't automatically "mirror" reality shows they are "intensional." Indeed, I am not sure that I understand the meaning of the word "intensional" here. Is it that films must be understood as somehow analogous to referentially opaque contexts. But why? Don't some film

images warrant inferences about things in front of the camera? What does the fact that the camera lens has to be adjusted -- i.e., that the camera does not operate entirely automatically but requires some human manipulation -- have to do with whether or not the reference of the shot is referentially transparent or opaque?

Brownson takes the supposed intensional dimension of film to support the claim that it is language-like. This seems to be very slim grounds for accepting a language/film analogy. And, of course, even if we do accept the language/film analogy, I doubt that sense can be made of the claim that language is subjective.

Brownson's second argument charges that I attribute too simplistic an error to those who believe that films have points-of-view. I argue that theorists are led to this belief either by equivocations on the concept of "point-of-view," or through a fallacy of composition -- every shot has a literal p.o.v., therefore, the film as a whole has a viewpoint. Against my accusation of equivocation, she says that the different applications of the concept of point-of-view are related by metaphoric expansion. I agree. Indeed, some of the expansions are very nice metaphors. But what difference does this make? One can still not jump inferentially from a literal to a metaphoric sense of "point-of-view" and act as though one is still speaking univocally.

In answer to my argument that theorists commit a fallacy of composition when they move from the literal p.o.v. of the shot to the claim that the film as a whole has a personal vision, Carol Brownson suggests I have misconstrued what theorists really have in mind. They actually hold her first argument -- films are not mechanical; thus, they are language-like; thus they are subjective because language is subjective. Again I think that the latter claim is unintelligible. I have rejected the claim that films are significantly language-like elsewhere as have other theorists.<sup>1</sup> And lastly, I think it is a mistake to treat "mechanical" and "language-like" as logical contraries that exclusively carve up the field of inquiry.

Brownson criticizes my approach because I do not allow for gentle criticism in cases such as The Graduate where the character is going in the wrong direction on the Golden Gate Bridge. I am tempted to respond that in the fictional world of The Graduate the relation between the fictional Berkeley and the fictional San Francisco is opposite that customarily experienced by California drivers.

Finally, Brownson seems worried that my way of treating the distinction between fiction and nonfiction suggests an endorsement of a cleavage between pleasure and knowledge. I don't see why she fears this. At several points in the essay I make clear that I do not believe that nonfiction writing and nonfiction film must eschew aesthetic ornamentation and elaboration.

## II

One of Jack Wolf's biggest problems with my paper is his fear that I give film producers too much authority when I assign them full responsibility for indexing films as "non-fictional." At this point, Wolf complains "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 [a] 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." Jack Wolf's dissatisfactions in this matter, I believe, underwrite the reservations he voices to my approach throughout his response. But I am not so sure that there is an outright disagreement between us rather than simply a misunderstanding.

Wolf uses the terms "fiction" and "nonfiction" differently than I advocate. For him "fiction" = "false" or "untrue," while "nonfiction" = "true." Thus, he is worried that a producer empowered to index a film as nonfiction is being licensed to declare the film "true," as if merely saying something is so could make it so. Wolf says if we can show the film is false, then it is fiction — no matter how the producer indexes it.

But I do not correlate nonfiction with the truth, nor do I believe that it is advisable to equate fiction with falsity. It is not false that Scarlet O'Hara lived on a plantation called Tara. It is only — well — fictional. Nor does the fact that Chariot of the Gods is nonfiction make it true. It only makes Chariot of the Gods a candidate for evaluation in terms of literal truth or falsity — something the proposition "Scarlet O'Hara lived on Tara" is not.

We can call the use of the fiction/nonfiction dichotomy to commend or to disparage items as true or false the normative sense of the dichotomy. That is, it honors or ranks or grades the true and the false by means of the appellations "fiction" and "nonfiction." Throughout his comments Wolf has the normative use of these terms in mind. And given this he is upset because he thinks that I am giving filmmakers the right to establish that their films are true no matter what the rest of us clearly know the facts to be. Certainly Wolf is correct to reject such a prospect. But I don't think that my paper opens this particular Pandora's Box.

For I do not use the fiction/nonfiction distinction in the normative sense. I do not think that in indexing a film as nonfiction the filmmaker declares that it is true but only that it is to be evaluated against the standards of truthfulness. Indeed, when measured against those standards, a film that has been indexed as nonfiction may turn out to be false. At that point, moreover, I am not disposed to re-label the film as "fiction" as proponents of the normative usage might. I am contented to say simply that the film is false.

I would identify my use of the nonfiction/fiction distinction as classificatory not normative. To index something as fictional classifies it as belonging to a category of things to which truth and falsity do not pertain. In saying something is fictional I no more mean to chastise the film for being false than I mean to commend the truthfulness of other things by calling them "nonfiction." "Nonfiction" only signals membership in the class of things to which standards of truth or falsity can be applied; the badge, "nonfiction," does not prejudge the outcome of such appraisals.

If Jack Wolf were to review my approach with the recognition that I use the nonfiction/fiction distinction in the classificatory and not the normative sense, I think he might withdraw some of his objections. For, of course, I agree with him that it is utterly absurd to believe that a filmmaker can establish the truth of a documentary simply by asserting that it is true (or by saying it is "nonfictional," where this, inadvisably, is regarded as synonymous with "true").

NOTE

1. Noel Carroll, "Toward a Theory of Film Editing," Millennium Film Journal, #3 (1979). Also see Christian Metz, Film Language (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).