

The Charge of the Real

Embodied Knowledge and Cinematic Consciousness

I find people's reactions to "real" death and "movie" death fascinating.

—HASKELL WEXLER

The integration of documentary footage into fiction films often causes something of a stir in the popular press. Although the practice dates back to the very beginnings of cinema, what has attracted current attention to it and raised the issue of media ethics is the particular manner in which new digital technologies have transformed this practice by supposedly making such integration so seamless as to undermine the public's ability to differentiate fact from fiction, the real from the imaginary or "irreal."¹ Thus, the media hype: first around the digital wonders of *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), which inserted its eponymous hero into news footage of and conversation with various real historical personages; and then around the ethics of *Contact* (Robert Zemeckis, 1997), which lifted footage from a televised news conference of President Clinton enthusing over NASA's very real announcement that it might have found microscopic signs of life in a Martian meteorite so as to authenticate the film's science-fictional discovery of intelligent life in the universe.

1. I would like to stress here the difference between the *not real* and the *irreal*. Whereas the former is clearly contrasted to our cultural and historical sense of what constitutes the real (as in a patently "impossible," "fantastic," or even "implausible" fiction), the irreal is not contradictory to the real but, rather, contrary to it. Which is to say that the irreal is not judged *against* the real. In our relations to the irreal we do not first posit real existence so as to then make a judgment about the reality of what we see; instead, the real is "bracketed" and put off to the side as a noncriterion of the work's meaning, coherence, or plausibility. For elaboration on this distinction see Jean-Pierre Meunier, *Les structures de l'expérience filmique* (Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, 1969); Meunier's brief phenomenology of our cinematic engagements with the home movie (or *film-souvenir*), the documentary, and the fiction film informs much of what follows here and is introduced and glossed in my essay "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Experience," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Michael Renou and Jane Gaines (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 241–54.

The irony, of course, is that, in both instances, film viewers were hardly confused or fooled. Indeed, *Forrest Gump* depended for much of its humor on our ability to see through its apparently seamless confusions of historical fiction and historical document—that is, to differentiate each logical type of representation so as to delight in their comic fusions and marvel at the film's technical achievement.² *Contact* also provoked this differentiation, albeit in a manner that deflated rather than heightened its drama. Striving for verisimilitude and credibility to ground its science-fictional premise, the film badly miscalculated the effect of using the Clinton footage—less because of the ethical issues it subsequently raised (Clinton was "borrowed" without being asked) than because Clinton's news conference was still relatively fresh in the public's memory when the film was released. Thus, rather than transparently authenticating the narrative's fictional status, the footage undermined and broke our engagement with the narrative's irreal by repositing within it a more familiar realm of existence—namely, that realm we live as real. When I saw *Forrest Gump*, nearly everyone in the theater smiled or laughed at the digitally achieved admixtures of real and irreal figures and events and saw them as part of the game that was the film's outrageous historical revisionism. When I saw *Contact*, however, at the point of the Clinton news conference nearly everyone in the theater who had been intent on the screen and immersed in the narrative seemed suddenly to remove themselves to their seats, where they rustled and murmured at being so abruptly cast back into the immediate historical present. In both instances, despite the unprecedented seamless stitching together of fictional and documentary images, most viewers were clearly able to tell the difference between them. Indeed, after the release of *Contact*, listening to numerous sound bites from debates in which reporters stood up in ethical outrage to protect the supposedly confounded and stupid public (from which, apparently, they were exempt), I found myself wondering just who was fooling whom.³

2. It is worth emphasizing that this differentiation of two logical types of representation are not dependent on textual signifiers of their difference but rather on the spectator's extratextual and cultural knowledge and consequent relation to the images on the screen. Echoing Meunier's phenomenology of cinematic identification, this is to say that what differentiates one logical type (real news footage) from the other (irreal but verisimilar fiction) is the viewer's relationship to the image and its contents and not solely cinematic cues.

3. There is a certain hysteria evident in both popular and academic writing about people (usually never the writer) not being able to tell manipulated images from unmanipulated ones. Although this is a discursive concern that dates from Plato onward in various guises, it has been revitalized by digitization, which homogenizes all input as binary code. Nonetheless, Peter Lunenfeld reminds us in "Digital Photography: The Dubitative Image," in *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000): "The ways in which digital technologies break down whatever remains of our inherited faith in the indexical relationship between the photograph and its object are of obvious importance to the epistemology and politics of an image-saturated culture. This overwhelming attention to the dubitative, to

Although the current question of cinematic ethics has been raised in response to the medium's increasing ability to seamlessly integrate the unreal and real, we might well ask to what extent the unreality of the fiction film has always been both complicit with and subverted not only by documentary footage but also, in its more diffuse appearances, by the real. And, given that fiction and documentary, as supposedly *different* logical types *as genres*, are both reducible to the *same* logical type *as cinematic images*, to what extent—and how—can those of us in the audience tell the difference between them? Certainly, these questions are hardly new to either film theory or practice. Classical film theory gives us not only André Bazin's seminal discussion of the ontology of the photographic image, its physical responsiveness to light and to the world's objects indexically grounding the whole of cinema in real existence, but also Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, which argues that the cinema, even in its fictional mode, "redeems" the world's physical reality.⁴ And film practice gives us not only *Forrest Gump* but also *Forgotten Silver* (Costa Botes and Peter Jackson, 1995), a fictional narrative that, perhaps as much for its obscure subject matter as for its documentary style, was widely taken up as nonfiction. Made in New Zealand and supposedly documenting the discovery of a "lost" early national filmmaker named Colin McKenzie, the film fooled not only a good many foreign viewers but also a significant number of New Zealanders—this despite interior cues that suggested its "mockumentary" status. The most subtle of these was dependent on the spectator's knowledge of certain early photographic processes and the most blatant dependent on a general knowledge of film history. (One woman interviewee is identified as "Alexandra Nevsky"—likely, if not surely, to be a fabulous rather than real person.) *Forgotten Silver* provoked something of a scandal when knowledge of its fictional status became widespread, public anger exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that the film had mobilized a national pride then deflated by revelation of the "deception."⁵

Ultimately, these questions of cinematic trickery point in a direction that looks less to the cinema as a *phenomenal object* than as a *phenomenological experience*. Thus, in what follows, I want to explore some diverse and variable

questions of fraud and forgery, though, tends to obscure the developments in another area of discourse around photography. The breakdown of the indexical relationship between the photograph and its referent, and the concurrent obliteration of photography's assumed truth value, have had the same impact as the destruction of the aura occasioned by the advent of photography itself" (62-63).

4. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9-22; Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

5. For discussion of the film's indigenous reception see Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, "Mocking Silver: Re-inventing the documentary project (or, Grierson Lies Bleeding)," in *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture* 11, no. 1 (1997): 67-82.

experiences in which we engage the cinema as both fiction and documentary—very often in relation to the same film and often regardless of those institutional regulations of spectatorship that would cue and fix our engagement with what we see on the screen.⁶ In particular, and as a dramatic way to focus these issues, I want to emphasize here the fiction film's intersections with documentary—and its quite common arousal (purposeful or not) of what we might call the viewer's "documentary consciousness": a particular mode of embodied and ethical spectatorship that informs and transforms the space of the unreal into the space of the real.

Grounding this inquiry, however, is what seems an inaugural paradox—one that emerges explicitly in my opening remarks. On the one hand, I've said that despite the seamless conjunctions of cinematic fiction and documented fact, we usually know the difference between the two as they exist and interact in the same film. On the other hand, I've also suggested that, insofar as all cinematic objects are equivalently composed of images and sounds be they fictional or factual, there is no necessary difference between the two at all. Certainly, we cannot resolve this paradox if we only look to the film as an objective text. Rather, its resolution lies in our recognition that the designations *fiction* and *documentary* name not merely objective and abstracted cinematic things distinguished and characterized historically by particular textual features but name also—and perhaps more significantly—distinctive subjective relations to a variety of cinematic objects, whatever their textual features. In sum, what the generic terms *fiction* and *documentary* designate are an experienced difference in our mode of consciousness, our attention toward and our valuation of the cinematic objects we engage.

Let me begin first with a brief gloss on those traditional generic discriminations (more stable in theory than in actual experience) that would ground an inquiry into the intersection of fiction film with documentary in the presumption of each as a discrete representational form. Historically, the fiction film has engaged the documentary through a variety of institutionalized practices that explicitly play with the relationship between the two forms and thus point to rather than obliterate their difference.

One such practice is the already-mentioned inclusion of documentary footage within the fiction film: in *Contact* such inclusion was disruptive of the fiction, but we could also point to a fictional work like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Philip Kaufman, 1988), where documentary footage seemed integral to (albeit stylistically differentiated from) the fiction, grounding its urgencies

6. For an extremely useful discussion emphasizing the institutional constraints that affect the spectator's hierarchical ordering of textual features, production of meaning, and affective positioning see Roger Odin, "For a Semio-Pragmatics of Film," trans. Claudine Tournaire, in *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind*, ed. Warren Buckland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 213-26. I am grateful to Jim Moran for bringing this text to my attention.

in the historical reality of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Prague rather than disrupting or challenging the irreality of its romantic drama. Whether this would be the effect for someone much more familiar with the particulars of that invasion as well as with the historical images of its cinematic documentation raises a major question related to issues I will explore further; however, insofar as a viewer recognized the film's documentary footage in its relative specificity—as did American spectators watching the Clinton footage in *Contact*—it is more than possible her or his reaction would be a break with or retreat from the irreality of the fiction. In this regard, there is also the case of *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), in which the documentary footage of both Kennedy's assassination and the jailhouse shooting of Jack Ruby were mobilized with fictional drama into what was an impassioned rhetorical argument that generated great controversy. As Linda Williams puts it, documentary footage was put to the service of what some might call "a grand paranoid fiction."⁷

Another—and more recent—variant on the inclusion of nonfictional footage in a fiction film so as to authenticate its unreal premises has been the use of *earlier film footage of the actor who plays the film's fictional character*: for example, the use of an actor's home movies when s/he was a child. In this regard, and complicating the ontological status of the image as document or fiction even further, some fiction films authenticate the life of a given character by incorporating earlier footage from an actor's *previous* fictions (in which the actor actually played a *different* character but is recognizable and identical to him- or herself as a real person who has changed over time). An example is *The Limey* (Steven Soderbergh, 1999), in which we see clips of its middle-aged character, acted by Terence Stamp, when Stamp was more than thirty years younger and featured in Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* (1967) as a completely different character. What is fascinating here is the ambiguous and quite powerful status of the included footage, which functions as *both* fiction and nonfiction.⁸

The fiction film also has a history of *compositing unreal fictional characters and real historical figures* into the same narrative space so as to blur (but again not obliterate) the line between two ontologically different modes of existence while, in fact, constructing hermeneutic play between two different sets of epistemological criteria. In this regard, seamlessly placing its central char-

7. Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," in *Film Quarterly: Forty Years—A Selection*, ed. Brian Henderson and Ann Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 311. The controversy about use of the documentary footage here was less about mixing fact and fiction than about the nature of Stone's argument itself.

8. A wonderful novel that plays with this confusion and passage through time of both the same real actor and his or her different fictional characters is David Thomson's *Suspects* (New York: Vintage, 1985).

acter at the schoolhouse door with George Wallace, at an anti-Vietnam War rally, and into conversation with Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, *Forrest Gump* may be the most technically advanced example (at least at the time I'm writing this).⁹ Nonetheless, both *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1983) did this sort of thing much earlier and just as effectively in terms of compositing the unreal and the real to advance and complicate the verisimilitude of their narratives as well as the viewer's hermeneutic enjoyment.

Fiction film has also regularly practiced the *appropriation of conventional documentary stylistic conventions* to both comic and dramatic effect: these include voice-over narration; the presence of ersatz interviewers both on- and offscreen; direct address to camera and audience by onscreen characters; interior use of visual materials that are considered "documents," such as photographs and raw film footage; and handheld cameras that often enact "mis-takes" of attention that, in a fiction, would usually be relegated to the cutting room floor. One well-known example of such stylistic appropriation in the comic mode is *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984), a film that parodies the "rockumentary" and presumes its audiences will understand and delight in its fictional play and exaggeration of the music and concert documentary's textual features. *Husbands and Wives* (Woody Allen, 1992), however, uses documentary style to more serious effect; it serves both as an efficient way to elide and distill dramatic time and event and as an overt distancing device that allows interruption of and commentary on its fictional drama. Nonetheless, despite its formal announcements and enactments of its nonfictional status, *Husbands and Wives* is hardly mistaken by most viewers for a documentary (except at certain moments, of which more later, when such a mistake by the viewer is not a mis-take at all). Indeed, despite their respective differences, both these examples presuppose a competent spectator necessarily able to generically and stylistically *differentiate* between documentary and fiction film so as to sufficiently enjoy the precision of *Spinal Tap's* parody or to sufficiently appreciate the strategy in *Husbands and Wives* of constructing ironic contradictions between its characters as they reveal themselves in dramatic action and as they reflect upon themselves for the edification of a narratively projected documentary film audience.

The fiction film has also borrowed from the documentary in yet another—and extremely popular—way that does not necessitate using documentary footage, compositing fictional with documentary images, or appropriating documentary conventions to constitute an existential con-

9. On the implications of digital imaging technologies and their "reality" effects see Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," in *Film Quarterly: Forty Years—A Selection*, ed. Brian Henderson and Ann Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 392–411.

nection to the temporal continuum that is, for spectators, their real historical world. Fiction films regularly cast cultural celebrities as "themselves." The presence of celebrities in the narrative (whether as movie star, news reporter, talk show host, or political figure) supposedly authenticates the fiction as "real" at the very same time they are patently (and sometimes badly) speaking dialogue apposite only to its irreality. As a genre, science fiction films of the 1950s, to authenticate the diegetic fantasy, had a convention of casting actual radio and television news celebrities to report on the global progress of the encroaching menace to the planet. In this, *Contact* was just following a fairly traditional generic practice—except it did not "cast" the real Clinton and have him speak unreal dialogue but used him unawares and appropriated an actual speech he gave on a narratively related topic. (Zemeckis tells an interviewer, "Clinton gave his Mars rock speech and I swear to God it was like it was scripted for this movie. When he said the line 'We will continue to listen closely to what it has to say,' I almost died. I stood there with my mouth hanging open.")¹⁰ As mentioned previously, this nearly contemporaneous inclusion appeared to backfire, however, undermining the fantasy with too much real-world specificity, as well as raising questions about media ethics.

A more common and successful instance of casting "real celebrities" (themselves an oxymoronic "composite" of fictional and documentary images) is *Dave* (Ivan Reitman, 1993), a mild political comedy based on impersonation and the confusion between authentic behavior and performance. This obviously unreal (if verisimilar) narrative about a presidential look-alike who has to perform as the "real thing" (a double role played by Kevin Kline) features a goodly number of cameo appearances by "real celebrities" who double the fun of "impersonation" by authenticating it. The roster includes talk show hosts Jay Leno and Larry King; the bickering televisual McLaughlin Group; politicians such as Tip O'Neill; an array of well-known reporters, including Helen Thomas and Nina Totenberg; and, in one of the film's funniest scenes, filmmaker Oliver Stone attempting unsuccessfully to convince others of a political conspiracy involving the president in an identity switch. Indeed, *Dave's* gentle satire depends on a certain existential ballast to ground its fragile irreality—the real celebrities used not implicitly to verify or authenticate the fiction but rather used explicitly to preserve the fiction by making the real complicit with it (rather than the other way round). Thus, again, the audience was neither confused nor fooled as to who, in the film, were real celebrities appearing as themselves and who were real celebrities playing unreal characters (in this case Klein and Sigourney Weaver).

For the most part, then, we do seem to know the difference between fiction

10. Benjamin Svetkey, "Making *Contact*," *Entertainment Weekly*, July 18, 1997, 24–27.

and documentary, and when both come together in the same film, we enjoy their con-fusion or are jarred by their contact in what emerges as an experienced (if not always intended) *heterogeneity of representation*. Indeed, those conventional or institutionalized generic discriminations made between fiction and documentary film in their respective forms and contents (albeit not in their cinematic substance) allow both filmmakers and spectators a rich and complex play with their admixture. Furthermore, through their practice, such discriminations also overtly acknowledge (and congratulate) the mutual "communicative competence" of both filmmakers and spectators,¹¹ who make the epistemological distinctions necessary to usually arrive at a given film's appropriate—that is, institutionally sanctioned—cinematic status and meaning.¹²

Thus, it is relatively rare when *distinctions between fiction and documentary are purposefully and "really" confused* in the film object itself and the two representational forms so complexly interwoven that they confound the spectator's capacity to discriminate precisely between them, resulting in a rich, if unsettling, epistemological ambiguity. Here the confusion of fiction and fact isn't constituted as a self-congratulatory hermeneutic game in which the players know the rules from the start; indeed, the rules themselves are challenged—albeit not changed. Certainly, it is this unsettling epistemological ambiguity that not only structures but also constitutes the titillation, ethical outrage, and moral charge generated by the undecidable status as document or fiction of the "snuff" film, which concretizes in the most vital and visceral way the conundrum of representation qua representation, of "not being able to tell" what the ontological status of an abstracted cinematic image "really is."

In a few instances the aforementioned mockumentaries are also constructed in such a manner that they are not easily (and, for some, not at all) identifiable as such. As Arild Fetveit has put it, a "fake documentary" such as *Forgotten Silver* "invites its audience to discover its falseness," first using con-

11. On "communicative competence" see Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1979). For discussion of this competence as it relates to film spectatorship see my own *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 6–8.

12. Odin, "For a Semio-Pragmatics of Film," discusses this notion of sanction central to the institution of cinema as a socially symbolic network. For example (and I will deal with this further), he writes: "Boredom will be the sanction pronounced by someone going to see a documentary in the frame of mind of someone going to see a fiction film. Inversely, someone going to see a fiction film in the frame of mind of the reader-actant of a documentary would probably be considered 'insane,' for he would be accused of confusing different levels of reality. It can be seen that the sanction may apply to the film itself, if its treatment of the material is unacceptable to the institution within which it is meant to operate, or the reader-actant, if he infringes the institutional determinations that are imposed on him" (220).

ventional textual features and the spectator's lack of contextual knowledge about the subject matter to engage the spectator within a documentary hermeneutic. It then proceeds—through small challenges to its own veracity—to make its documentary status less clear and increasingly suspect, ultimately shifting the spectator's hermeneutic approach to one more consonant with fiction.¹³ Nonetheless, given the viewer's contextual knowledge, or lack of it, and his or her particular investments in believing what is on the screen, that invitation to discover the film's falsity may not be recognized or accepted. Indeed, here in the United States I recall several postings on an electronic list for film scholars concerning *Forgotten Silver*, the first revealing a poster's initial excitement at seeing this film about an important New Zealand film pioneer he'd never heard of before. However, after a number of responses that both indicated and warranted the film's mockumentary status, he publicly announced his very real embarrassment at having been completely fooled. In New Zealand, however, belief in the veracity of the film was not a function of viewers not having sufficient contextual knowledge to doubt it but, rather, a function of the desire to bolster national pride and major participation in the making of "film history."

A much more complex example of the fiction film's "problematic" appropriation of and confusion with documentary is Haskell Wexler's provocative *Medium Cool* (1969). Narratively focusing on a television cameraman who must make choices between professional voyeurism or personal participation in both his unreal narrative life and the real social upheaval that surrounded the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, *Medium Cool* both incorporates documentary footage of the convention and appropriates documentary style. However, it further complicates any clear distinction between the irreality of its fiction and the historical reality of its mise-en-scène by using footage of the film's actors (playing characters) shot during and at the convention and the events surrounding it. This, then, is a fiction that enacts much of its irreality at the real scene and in the real time of actual historical events.¹⁴

Indeed, other than a minimally structured narrative and a fairly conventional focus on certain key figures who, through that very focus are understood as characters, *Medium Cool* provides the viewer relatively few clues or textual determinants to secure the fiction precisely as such. Although it is true that even these few narrative features are sufficient for a competent

13. Arild Fetveit, "Mockumentary: Charting the Topography between Fiction and Documentary" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies, West Palm Beach, FL, Apr. 1999).

14. This is quite different and much more ambiguous than the quasi-documentary effect of those films that mobilize real historical actors after the fact of a historical event to reenact it for representation.

viewer to decide in favor of the film's overall status as a fiction, the epistemological nature of its parts is highly ambiguous. Indeed, Wexler points to this ambiguity as it exists not only in the film and its reception but also in the historical context of which making the film was a part. In the first instance he sounds a bit arrogant (if also accurate) when he tells an interviewer: "I feel confident enough to defy anyone, after they have seen *Medium Cool*, to discriminate between an actual happening and a rehearsed scene." In the second instance, pointing out that the script for the film was written and registered with the Writers' Guild well before the Democratic Convention and its surrounding events, he further describes the ambiguity the film generated offscreen: "In the making of *Medium Cool*, the FBI came to me and to Gulf and Western Corporation with the accusation that I had intentionally caused riots in the streets of Chicago for purposes of my film. It was necessary for me to sign affidavits saying that nothing that I photographed in Chicago, in relation to the riots, was staged by me."¹⁵ *Medium Cool's* particular and highly complex admixture of fiction and documentary is a rarity within the institutional circumscriptions of dominant cinematic praxis and social agreements that determine and fix the status and function of the cinematic object and its perceived relation to the extracine-matic real. Indeed, *Medium Cool* unsettles these determinations, brings to the foreground an overt interrogation of these kinds of circumscriptions, and explicitly shows up their tenuous and provisional nature.

We are, in effect, thus led back to the worries (however simulated) expressed by the press in relation to cinematic (and now digital) legerdemain that would, through sleight of the eye, erase the boundaries that supposedly enable us to distinguish the unreal from the real. Yet, indeed, distinguish them is what we actually do almost all the time at the movies—although we do not always do it only according to those semiotic and institutionalized regulations of spectatorship that would fix our generic engagement with what we see on the screen. To the degree, however, that we raise such matters as documentary's interpolation into fictional texts or fiction's appropriation of documentary style, the differentiated experience of fiction and documentary as primarily grounded in objective, discrete, and conventional representational forms is presupposed—and it is just this presupposition that, it seems to me, our actual experience of taking up a film image as real or unreal puts into question.¹⁶

15. Renée Epstein, "An Interview with Haskell Wexler," *Sight and Sound* 45, no. 1 (winter 1975-76): 47.

16. I use the expression *taking up* rather than *understanding* to emphasize the active process of the spectator's engagement in the production of meaning. That is, the film image is never mere objective *data* but is always also the *capta* of an intentional *act*. *Taking up* is also to be distinguished from *making up*. Given that s/he is always an embodied social and historical being,

In what follows, then, I want to reconsider the distinctions we usually make between fiction and documentary film from a *pragmatic* and *phenomenological* perspective—that is, from a perspective that recognizes the dynamics and contingency of actual viewing experiences and from these experiences goes on to thematize and interpret some of the conditions under which the cinematic image may be “charged” for us with an *embodied* and *subjective* sense of what counts as the *existential* and *objective* “real.” Although this broader and less determinate reformulation still allows for the differences we experience in our engagement with a variety of cinematic representations, it also suggests a much more labile and dynamic engagement than generic categorization and formal analyses of film texts generally admit or allow. That is, it suggests that our engagement with and determination of film images as fictional or real may be experienced either preconsciously or consciously, idiosyncratically or conventionally, momentarily or for relatively sustained periods of time—and, furthermore, it suggests that whatever the textual incentives offered by the film, this engagement and determination depend always on the viewer’s existential knowledge of and social investments in the context of a lifeworld that exceeds and frames the text.

To illustrate this point in a fairly dramatic way, let me move to a concrete illustration I’ve used before: the death of a rabbit, which, for me, dramatically ruptured the fictional (if realist) space of Jean Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* (1939).¹⁷ Although the rabbit scene is like the Clinton news conference in its sudden demarcation of different orders of existential and cinematic space, my experience of such a rupture was a great deal more intense in *Rules of the Game*. This was because the Renoir film did not merely appropriate a real creature’s life for its fiction but also appropriated its death. Indeed, the onscreen death of Renoir’s rabbit haunts me still—neither because of any particular sentimental feelings I might have for small, furry, innocent creatures nor because of any conscious ethical concern I might have for the violation of animal rights by a film that, at the time, didn’t know any better. Rather, Renoir’s rabbit stays with me because it raised startling and basic questions about the difference between documentary and fiction even as they are objectively constituted on the same representational terrain. Thus, although long dead, the rabbit (at least for me) has not yet been laid to rest.

Let me rehearse the pertinent moments in the Renoir fiction. There are two death sequences in the film: the first, a lengthy hunting sequence in

the viewer is an *active* participant in making meaning, but that does not mean that s/he is completely *free* to make *any* meaning—as indicated by Odin when he speaks of various social sanctions on spectatorship (see n. 12 above).

17. See my “Inhabiting Ethical Space: 10 Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 4 (fall 1984): 283–300, revised for the present volume.

which the rabbit is shot and killed; the second, a shorter and plot-culminating sequence in which André Jurieu, a human character, is shot and killed. Objectively, both deaths occur in a stylistically coherent narrative that posits the complete autonomy of an irreal—if verisimilar—world.¹⁸ Both deaths are linked thematically. Not only is the aristocratic and cavalier cruelty of the hunt figured early in the film as parallel to the extramarital sport for which the naïve Jurieu is “fair game,” but also, after Jurieu is shot, one character explicitly describes to another how he was killed straight away and “rolled over like a rabbit.” On objective grounds then, one might expect that both deaths would be experienced by the competent viewer as occurring in the same diegetic world and as the *same logical types* of representation. One might also expect, by virtue of Jurieu’s humanity and the culminating place and function of his death in the narrative, that his death would be experienced as more shocking than the rabbit’s—or, since one could argue that the shock of his death is absorbed by our satisfaction at the death’s concretization and resolution of narrative elements, if not more shocking then at least more deeply felt.

For me, however, none of this was the case—nor has it been for most others who have been engaged by *Rules of the Game*. (Boredom and general disengagement from the film set up another experiential circumstance, to which I will return.) For me the rabbit’s onscreen death was—and still is—a good deal *more* shocking and disturbing than the death of the human character. And this, I would maintain, is because the rabbit’s death ruptures the autonomous and homogenous space of the fiction through which it briefly scampered. Indeed, its quivering death leap transformed fictional into documentary space, symbolic into indexical representation, my affective investments in the irreal and fictional into a documentary consciousness charged with a sense of the world, existence, bodily mortification and mortality, and all the rest of the real that is in excess of fiction.

Here I would point out that whereas I have referred to Jurieu as a *human character*, I have *not* referred to the rabbit as an *animal character*. It is likely that prior to the rabbit’s death I experienced the fauna beaten out of the forest for the hunt in some generalized and diffuse way as “quasi characters,” functioning in the service of the narrative and on the premises of the irreal world of the fiction. But if this is so, it follows that I also perceived them, to some degree, as never *completely* characters. Prior to the moment of the rabbit’s death, I had bracketed its real existential status—that is, put it, quite precisely, “out of play” and on the “sidelines” of my critical consciousness. At the moment of its death, however, the status of its existence abruptly came back

18. Indeed, Renoir’s “perpetual hobbyhorse” in relation to cinematic realism was precisely to create the “unity” of a narrative world. See Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny (London: Collins, 1974), 277.

into play for me and stopped the game of fiction. The mortal gravity of the filmed event transformed the irreality of fictional space into a different ontological order of representation—namely, into the reality of a documentary space suddenly charged with existential and ethical investment. Now, in no way would I deny that the spectator's fictional consciousness is also existentially and ethically informed at the movies—and, indeed, fiction films almost always dramatize and provide us a wide variety of ethical scenarios and subject positions that we, as viewers, vicariously inhabit to explore and test our own ethical values and possibilities.¹⁹ Nonetheless, except in extreme instances (and the rabbit's death is one such), we are not aware of being ethically accountable to—and for—the fictional situation in the same way or to the same degree that we are in a mode of documentary consciousness.

Like other verisimilar cinematic fictions, *Rules of the Game* presents us with a structure of representational cues that mark it sufficiently as what kind of film it is: there are characters, a plot, a narrative arc, privileged views of action, transparently conventional editorial practices such as cutting on action and matching sight-lines, shot/reverse-shot sequences, and so forth. But this sufficiency of kind is not necessity. That is, independent of representational cues but dependent on and charged with our embodied and acculturated knowledge of the extratextual world in which we live, as we watch this particular sequence in this particular film, most of us preconsciously "unbracket"—and "re-posit"—the rabbit's real existence. As the event occurs before us, we know the rabbit dies not only *in* but also *for* the fiction—in *excess* and *outside* of the irreal fictional world, in the space of the real, where death counts because it is irreversible. At the moment of its death, then, the rabbit loses its ambiguous status as a quasi character and becomes a real—and now definitively dead—once-living creature. Conversely, the human character Jurieu dies only *in* the irreal space of the fiction. His existence as an actual person is never posited by us—neither in his life nor in his death—because Jurieu, the character, exists nowhere else but in and for the fiction.²⁰

Such an extreme and sudden shift in our relation to an onscreen fiction

19. An excellent dissertation has been recently written on the great contribution that fiction films make to our ethical life. See Jane Megan Stadler, "Narrative Film and Ethical Life: The Projection of Possibilities" (PhD diss., Murdoch University, 2000).

20. Although, of course, his character's life might be continued in another fiction—most commonly, in horror-film sequels where there seems little compunction about raising characters from the dead. Nonetheless (with the exception of certain fan subcultures that extend the "life" of fictional characters in their own narratives), this nonpositing of a fictional character's existence is why we usually don't ask or expect serious answers to questions that delve too deeply into their backstory: Did Charles Foster Kane date much when he was a teenager? Such a question has no determinate answer within the fiction and no extratextual reference in the realm of the real. (Such questioning and delving into the extratextual—although not extracine-

is not all that exceptional even as it always seems shocking. Thus, filmmaker Haskell Wexler tells an interviewer:

I find people's reactions to "real" death and "movie" death fascinating. For example, in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* [1967], perhaps twenty people are dramatically killed. But there is one scene in which the throat of a pig is cut. I have seen the film several times, and each time that scene appears, the audience gasps. They know that they are seeing an animal die. They know that, unlike the actors, when the director says, "Cut," the pig will not get up and walk away.²¹

In sum, however latently, we are aware that relative to the irreal cinematic events with which we are engaged, the human actor survives the death of his character. Thus, the character's death does not merit the same order of care we may suddenly feel for the rabbit's or pig's. It does not elicit the same level of subjective and physical shiver we feel as our very bodies "know" the existential difference between the character's and the rabbit's or pig's death. Furthermore, the character's death does not cause in us the diffuse sense of guilt we perhaps feel, as spectators of the spectacle, about our own small responsibility for the rabbit's and the pig's death. Which is to say that, however latently, we know and understand that an actor may die a thousand deaths, but this rabbit and this pig only one.

It is important to emphasize that the knowledge that informs these distinctions between the existential status and fate of both the actor and the rabbit is primarily extracinematic and extratextual—and it is this knowledge and the values entailed by it that allow us to remain engaged with the irreal-ity of fiction or pull us back into the world we inhabit as real not only because we are physically bound to it but also because we are ethically implicated in it. Furthermore, as I have suggested, this extratextual knowledge informs our cinematic experience generally and at a preconscious level—until, that is, it is explicitly raised to consciousness by something so specifically shocking and existentially particular as, in the case of the Renoir film, the death of a rabbit. Unlike Jurieu's death, the experiential moment of the rabbit's death gains its specific axiological charge of affects and values from an existential and cultural knowledge that exceeds—and contextualizes—the homogenizing devices of both cinematic and narrative representation. Indeed, the rabbit's death *challenges* these devices, not only pointing to but also opening into a perceived domain of the real, a documentary space where, in this instance, aesthetic values are suddenly diminished and ethical ones are greatly heightened.

matic—lives of characters is the grounding conceit of film critic and novelist David Thomson's *Suspects*, mentioned above.)

21. Epstein, "Interview with Haskell Wexler," 47.

In regard to this spatial transformation and shift in aesthetic and ethical values, it is worth considering, however, how cinematic history and genre qualify our responses and investments. Consider, for example, the effects of disclaimer crawls that now appear at the end of American films, informing us that no animals were mistreated during filming. (We know, however, that in a French film made in the 1930s, an animal was.) Our present knowledge that these disclaimers will be there "at the end" allow us to experience—with less ethical discomfort and concern—narrative scenes of an animal's mistreatment or death as "enacted" abuse. And, in terms of genre, we might consider a fairly notorious counterexample to the transformation of space and shift in values at the death of Renoir's fictional rabbit—this, in Michael Moore's controversial documentary *Roger and Me* (1989). In the "Bunnies as Pets or Rabbits as Meat" sequence of that film, the killing of a rabbit is still a shocking moment when it happens in front of the camera, but it does *not* transform the ontological status of the cinematic space, the events that occur within it, or the dominant mode of ethical valuation that informs our judgment as spectators. This is because we have been, from the first, in the realm of the real and its moral charge of the image and thus, from the first, in a mode of documentary consciousness and judgment. Even as the rabbit's death in *Roger and Me* shocks us—its existential finality darkening the generally light, if ironic, tone—its event does not cause a shift in our axiological attitude toward the filmmaker and the film. Hence, the ethical controversy surrounding this film—a documentary—was generated *not* by the death of a real rabbit, which might have lived on as a bunny were it not for the film, but by what was seen as Moore's cavalier and "dishonest" alteration and manipulation of the temporal sequence of real events that had nothing to do with the rabbit but everything to do with his fictionalization of real events for dramatic purpose.²²

If we acknowledge the viewer's extracinematic and extratextual knowledge (both socially conventional and personally idiosyncratic), and if we acknowledge the variable pressures this knowledge exerts on the viewer's experience and valuation of a given cinematic object, then we might argue that there is no such "thing" as a documentary or fiction film. Or, perhaps more accurately, we might argue that what we call documentary or fiction films are *only* "things"—that is, the sedimented and *reified objects* of a much more dynamic and *mutable experience* that is not adequately described by such binary generic terms. This is *not* to say, however, that what constitutes a fiction or documentary film is determined solely by—and within—the experience of the individual spectator. The individual spectator is always also

22. For discussion of the ethical issues surrounding Moore's film see Williams, "Mirrors without Memories," 118–19.

immersed in history and in a culture in which there is general social consensus not only as to the ontological status (if not the interpretation) of what stands as profilmic reality but also as to the regulative hermeneutic "rules" that govern how one is to read and take up its representation. Thus, although an individual or small group of spectators could take up and experience *Forgotten Silver* as a documentary, their judgment of the film would be (and was) deemed "mis-taken" and gently corrected—that is, regulated—by a larger and more "knowledgeable" social body. It is important to realize, however, that this cultural reading of a "misreading" is achieved through a historical and conventional set of *regulative*—not *constitutive*—hermeneutic rules; the former open to ambiguity and challenge, the latter foundational and determining. Thus, *Forgotten Silver's* documentary style cues the regulative rules for a certain interpretive framework but does not determine either the spectator's interpretive strategy or the produced reading.²³

In sum, however weighted on the side of social consensus and convention, our actual viewing experiences are best described as containing *both* documentary and fictional moments co-constituted by a dynamic and labile spectatorial engagement with *all* film images. And although the nature of these moments may be cued, structured, and finally contained by conventional cinematic practices, ultimately it is our own extracinematic, cultural, and embodied experience and knowledge that governs how we first take up the images we see on the screen and what we make of them. It is just such knowledge that constitutes ethical care of a different sort in relation to each of the deaths in Renoir's film. And it is this embodied knowledge and ethical care, not some objective stylistic change in the image or in the film's narratological structure, that charge the image (and are charged by it) to momentarily rupture the autonomous coherence and unity of Renoir's fictional world.

The knowledge and care that transform fictional space into existentially shared and ethically invested documentary space simultaneously transform the fictional consciousness of the viewer, in which existence is nonposited and unreal, into documentary consciousness, in which existence and a world are posited in all their specific gravity and shared consequence. Generally incommensurable in structure and investment, both fictional and documentary consciousness and space, then, can be constituted from the *same* cinematic material and emerge in the *same* film. Each, however, is of a *different* axiological order whose existence and value are determined as much—

23. Even in this still young digital era in which we see the beginnings of a major epistemic shift, photographic verisimilitude in the cinema in its indexical representation of the real is still perceived as foundational and *constitutive* of both documentary and fiction; here, then, we have a *historical episteme* that currently constitutes, governs, and *determines* (rather than merely regulates) our relation to *all* cinema (even in its "negative" instances, such as animated or abstract films).

if, indeed, not more—by social and contingent experience than by abstract codes or regulative rules of representation. For example, a few people I surveyed were not particularly shocked by the death of Renoir's rabbit. Although still somewhat affected by it, they did not feel that the quality of either the film's cinematic space or their attention was transformed during the hunting sequence. These same spectators, however, expressed overall boredom with the film and indicated that they had watched the whole of it in a general and diffuse state of detachment. Never engaged by, or at some point disengaged from, the irreal fictional world before them, existence was never bracketed or put out of play. Refusing both their own usual spectatorial transparency and the irrealty of fictional characters and events on the screen, they were aware not only of their own existence in their seats but also of the existence of the real actors and the rabbit as such. Thus, much like the spectators of *Roger and Me*, even if they were somewhat shocked by the death of the rabbit, they were not shocked by a shift in their mode of consciousness or by the spatial transformation of fictional into documentary space—and this because, not engaged by the fiction, they remained in the space of the real from the start, or their eventual disinterest repositioned them there.²⁴

Indeed, all of us, at one time or another bored with and wandering from the fictional irreal, have found ourselves suddenly watching actors rather than characters, looking at sets and locations rather than inhabiting a narrative world, gazing at scenes and histrionics rather than participating in significant events and feeling intensified emotions. When we are alienated from or bored with our engagement in a fiction, we no longer bracket our sense of the real; our consciousness of our own lifeworld intrudes on the fictional world and restructures it. The result is that a supposedly fictional space is experienced—and evaluated—as documentary space. Conversely, in the instances when we suddenly feel the shock (most often merely the nudge) of the real, what has been our transparent and full engagement in an irreal fictional space is abruptly contextualized and ruptured by our latent extracine-matic and extratextual knowledge—whether our recognition that a rabbit or pig has really died before us or that the real Bill Clinton has been mobilized by and for an irreal fiction. In these moments the emotions we feel and judgments we make of the events we see become charged with and informed by our present investments in our own lifeworld.

Indeed, this transformation of fictional to documentary consciousness is a more common experience at the movies than we might think—to be sure, it is gentled by its very ordinary and less dramatic occurrence. Here let us

24. Boredom and disengagement from the narrative world are not equivalent to the kind of distance generated by reflection on the narrative world—the latter, a metalevel engagement with the irreal world onscreen. Thus, we can wonder what will happen next or recognize a thematic recurrence or ponder the meaning of a narrative action within fictional consciousness.

remember those moments in our engagement with the autonomous irreal-ity of a realist fiction when our consciousness diverts its primary attention from the specific fictional characters and events to the film's more general referentiality to the existential world. For example, we might be following a specific fictional character as she walks on a crowded city street and be drawn, on occasion, to shift our attention from this "character" to those "people" surrounding her to wonder if they know they're in a movie. As we scrutinize their faces for signs of possible awareness of the camera filming them or of what suddenly becomes not the character but the actress acting in their midst, they no longer are generalized in status, no longer merely quasi characters necessary to the verisimilitude of the realist mise-en-scène. Rather, they become for us real people, ambiguous existential ciphers. That is, we recognize them as not completely given to us as is the narrative's heroine, who is fictional and who, if she is ambiguous, is so only as the character meant for us as viewers. These real people on the street, although caught up in the irrealty of a fiction, are much more absent from us than is the character; we are aware of them going about the living of their own lives far in excess of the character's life and the film's world. For a moment, then, in the midst of a fiction, we find ourselves in a documentary. This quite common experience demonstrates that although documentary and fictional consciousness are *incommensurable*, they are *compossible* in any given film. Furthermore, it demonstrates that documentary and verisimilar fictional space are constituted from the same worldly "stuff"—the former giving existential ballast to the "realism" of the latter even as its specificity is usually bracketed and put out of play and on the sidelines of our consciousness.

Let me turn to a much more dramatic and highly charged example: the aforementioned Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives*. It is, on the one hand, an obvious and perhaps trivial manifestation of how extracine-matic knowledge transforms fictional into documentary space, yet, on the other hand, it is also quite complex in that its fiction explicitly appropriates and foregrounds documentary codes of representation as its structuring narratologic. When the film was released, much was made of "art imitating life"—Allen's real and highly publicized breakup with Mia Farrow, occurring coterminously with the marital breakup of the fictional characters Gabe (played by Allen) and Judy (played by Farrow). Here the viewer's extracine-matic (although not necessarily extratextual) knowledge of the Allen-Farrow scandal, and of the fact that Allen wrote and directed the film in addition to acting in it, is hardly on the order of the diffuse but existentially powerful knowledge that informed the viewer of the rabbit's death in Renoir's film. Nor is it on the order of the diffuse and common knowledge of existence that often emerges to rupture the irrealty of fiction when we wonder at onscreen passersby or recognize a restaurant at which we've once dined. Here, in *Husbands and Wives*, and in like response to the documentary footage of Bill Clin-

ton in *Contact*, our knowledge is initially more conscious than preconscious, more specific and focused than general and diffuse, more local than global, and more intertextual than personal. It is the kind of knowledge that also informed (albeit to much lesser degree) some viewers' experience of *Made in America* (Richard Benjamin, 1993), in which contemporaneous publicity about Whoopi Goldberg and Ted Danson's torrid offscreen romance transformed the fictional space of their characters' onscreen interracial kiss into a more compelling documentary space—inhabited not by the characters but by the actors who were perceived not as kissing "irreally" in a fiction but as kissing "for real."

Indeed, one can look back over the history of cinema and its publicity mills and find many examples of such specific, local, and usually ephemeral, transformations of spectatorial consciousness and cinematic space—particularly in relation to stars. There were Greta Garbo and John Gilbert in three successive and scorching melodramatic screen romances—*Flesh and the Devil* (Clarence Brown, 1927), *Love* (Edmund Goulding, 1927), and *A Woman of Affairs* (Clarence Brown, 1928)—all of which, for contemporaneous viewers, "documented" an offscreen relationship widely and happily publicized by MGM. There were also Liz and Dick in *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963), the fictional spectacle of distant and overdressed ancient history matched—and mostly overcome—by the documentary excess of the stars' smoldering passion in our—and their—own present. One can also point to Warren Beatty and Annette Bening in *Love Affair* (Glenn Gordon Caron, 1994)—not merely engaged as characters in an updated remake of an old romantic fiction but, indeed, as actors displaying a documentary consumption. (Roger Ebert, for example, writes of the film's "teasing parallels with real life" and continues: "When Warren Beatty tells Annette Bening, 'You know, I've never been faithful to anyone in my whole life,' you have the strangest feeling these words might have passed between them on an earlier occasion.")²⁵ In sum, it is quite clear (although relatively unconsidered) that Hollywood cinema has long played with and depended on the transformation of its fictional space into documentary space. That is, in a commercial rather than intellectual way, it has understood how the unreal can be charged by the real and how the voyeuristic pleasures of prurient interest can find both their satisfaction and their "alibi" within the general compass of a disguising fiction whose titillation is generated by its documentation of real rather than histrionic "goings on." It is hardly surprising, then, that TriStar Pictures exploited the Woody/Mia scandal by opening the film on many more screens than was typical of a Woody Allen release—"hoping," as one

25. Roger Ebert, review of *Love Affair*, dir. Glenn Gordon Caron, *Cinemania 1996*, CD-ROM (Microsoft, 1996).

review put it, "that mainstream audiences would feel compelled to see the film and scour it for clues about the real-life drama unfolding in the tabloids."²⁶

So Woody/Gabe and Mia/Judy are, in many respects, old news. Nonetheless, like *Rules of the Game*, *Husbands and Wives* stands as a particularly relevant instance of foregrounding the dynamic and mutable relationship that exists between fiction and documentary within the context of a single film. What I find most fascinating about *Husbands and Wives*, however, is that although the film explicitly borrows on formal features associated with documentary practice, it is *not* the stylistically documentary moments that rupture its fiction or arouse the viewer's documentary consciousness. Formally, the film is heavily marked by vertiginous, handheld, cinema vérité cinematography (about which many spectators complained), interviews that include offscreen questions to the character on camera, direct address of the camera by the characters, some voice-over narration, and a chronological temporal structure interrupted by commentary and choric asides. The film is also marked by well-known performers whose presence as "characters," to great degree, overrides the film's style to announce it as an unreal fiction. Thus, in relation to the whole, there were only a few moments or scenes in which I found myself watching Woody and Mia rather than Gabe and Judy—but these moments had relatively little or nothing to do with the film's documentary style or, indeed, with any differentiation in its mode of representation. Rather, these moments emerged from an exacting specificity in the film's dramatic content insofar as the latter was related to my extracinematic knowledge of the Woody/Mia scandal.

Consider an early scene filmed in the mode of classical realist fiction—not documentary—film style. During a bedtime conversation in which the couple discusses the sudden marital separation of close friends, Judy asks Gabe, "Do you ever hide things from me?" With those words she was suddenly transformed for most contemporaneous viewers into Farrow—and the space ethically charged with Allen's (not Gabe's) hesitant response, "Of course not." Most of us in the audience *knew this response to be a lie insofar as Allen was concerned*—and our comprehension and judgment of his documented onscreen lie to Farrow far outweighed our interest in the fictional response of a character named Gabe (not Allen), *whose veracity we were not yet able to judge for lack of fictive information either about him or his marriage*. This was a brief moment of interchange in a longer and stylistically homogenized scene, but fictional space was nonetheless ruptured and restructured as a space of the real. Only continued action and a conversation of less charged content allowed most of us in the audience to refocus our attention, bracket

26. CineBooks' Motion Picture Guide, review of *Husbands and Wives*, dir. Woody Allen, *Cinemania 1996*, CD-ROM (Microsoft, 1996; emphasis added).

the existence of Woody and Mia in their historical situation, and reengage them as the irreal Gabe and Judy.

Some later and more pointed dialogue again ruptures the fiction when Gabe is being "interviewed" and directly addresses both the camera and an offscreen questioner. Asked about the breakup of his marriage and why he didn't tell his wife what was going on much earlier, Gabe replies: "How could I be one hundred percent honest with Judy? I knew that I loved her and I didn't want to hurt her. And so what am I gonna do? What am I gonna say? That I'm becoming infatuated with a twenty-year-old—that I see myself sleepwalking into a mess and I've learned nothing over the last thirty years?" It was, of course, not Gabe but Allen whom we saw saying this within the contemporaneous historical moment—and thus he says it in a documentary space constituted not *from* the film's pretense of documentary construction but *in* the documentary consciousness of a historical spectator whose ethical judgment not only used the real to assess the fiction but also in-formed the fiction with a transformative "charge" that changed its ontological and axiological status. Indeed, throughout *Husbands and Wives* the fictional status of Gabe and Judy is charged with instability. And, hence, a reviewer can read the film—without quarrel—as Allen's "apologia for the relationship he has entered into with Farrow's adopted daughter."²⁷

This, of course, suggests that our engagement with and co-constitution of cinematic fiction and documentary is always historical and provisional, prone as much to the vagaries and ephemera of contemporaneous real events, publicity, fashion, and idiosyncrasy as to our habituation to cinematic codes or to prevailing existential verities such as birth, death, bodily excretions, and the difficulty of teaching babies and animals to act in accordance with fictional desire. In the first instances the charge of the real will eventually pass; our proximity to past historical contexts distanced; our ethical interest less focused and less invested; our sense of responsibility for ethical judgment diffused. Consider, for example, *The China Syndrome* (James Bridges, 1979)—a thriller about a nuclear power plant accident. In a dramatic instance not of "art imitating life" but of "life imitating art," twelve days after the film's release an actual nuclear reactor accident and near meltdown occurred at Three Mile Island, near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Like the malfunctioning gauge indicator on an instrument panel that inaugurated the contingencies of the film's central narrative, the contingent extracinematic conditions that contextualized the film's fiction were stunning and transformative in their effect: the contemporaneous viewer's highly invested existential care in these very real and consequential events suddenly—and

27. Roger Ebert, review of *Husbands and Wives*, dir. Woody Allen, *Cinemania 1996*, CD-ROM (Microsoft, 1996; emphasis added.)

widely—restructured the fiction within a documentary consciousness that called for the assumption of social responsibility. Obviously tapping into public anxiety about the peaceful use of atomic energy and bringing together two major stars (Jane Fonda and Jack Lemmon), *The China Syndrome* was extremely popular at its debut before the accident. However, its fictional situation—and hence its realism—was also immediately discredited by pronuclear constituencies. One Southern California Edison executive claimed the film "had no scientific credibility and is, in fact, ridiculous." Nonetheless, after the real extracinematic crisis the increased popularity of the film "sparked a move to pull the plug on the nuclear-power industry." We are told that "in the following months, several power plants were shut down as safety precautions, while plans to build others were scrapped."²⁸

Today, however, most viewers who see the film on video have forgotten or never knew about the contingent coincidence of the film's fictional text and its mirror-image historical context. Indeed, were I to show it in a film class, *The China Syndrome* is likely to have completely lost the charge of the real, engaging students only in the autonomous threats and thrills of the irreal in which their present existence and possible peril is put out of play. Which is to say that most of us no longer engage the Gilbert and Garbo kisses of *Flesh and the Devil* with documentary consciousness and that *Husbands and Wives* will remand itself to fiction as we ourselves lose sight of its charged cultural context. Although such historical provisionality in the co-constitution of cinematic consciousness and the ontological status of cinematic representation is certain, this provisionality is itself qualified by certain essential material conditions of embodied existence that persist in human experience: birth, death, bodily functions, and the general spontaneity of young babies and most animals. Hence my ongoing concern for the death of Renoir's rabbit—and the likelihood that, despite the passage of time, it will outlast my concern for the travails of Woody and Mia.

In this regard my previous description of the restructuring of fictional into documentary consciousness and space by the charge of the real may be phenomenologically accurate, but it still does not go quite far enough. For while it may be easy to circumscribe the experiences of this transformation as they depend on local, highly publicized, and conscious knowledge such as that mobilized during *Husbands and Wives*, it is much more difficult to grasp and describe this transformation as it depends on the more global, diffuse, and preconscious existential knowledge belonging to every competent film viewer. However culturally and historically inflected, this is a deep and embodied knowledge that posits existence latently and in general—not of the irreal characters and events that constitute narrative and fictional worlds

28. Michael Sauter, "A Nuclear Reaction," *Entertainment Weekly*, Mar. 20, 1998, 104.

but certainly of the real-world trees, sky, mountains, and rabbits that make them visible, give them substance, and thus substantiate them. This is that existential knowledge of the real that the viewer puts out of play and into the background of consciousness so as to co-constitute and enter into fictional space and play. Posing existence in general rather than specifically, diffusing it as the background—or *premise*—for the meaningfulness of the fiction, allows aesthetic judgment to emerge, to qualify, and often to dominate the nature and intensity of ethical judgment. As a consequence, the viewer is most often invested differently or to a different degree in the events of the fiction than she would be in those of her own lifeworld. Thus we might ask under what conditions—other than boredom and alienation—this existential knowledge turns from the latent and general to the manifest and specific and momentarily troubles or annihilates fictional space, effecting a change in the kind and quality of spectatorial judgment.

I want to address this issue through Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978), a fiction rife with images and events that not only generally reference but also specifically figure the real and spontaneous "natural" environment in equivocal relation to human design and melodrama. Let me point to two sequences in particular: the first, a brief one in which we watch the time-lapsed and close-up germination of a wheat seedling; the second, a much longer and narratively critical sequence in which a plague of grasshoppers descends on a farm to consume the mature wheat fields, the insects' activity seen in long shots and extreme close-ups that document both their feeding on the wheat and their eventual immolation by fire. What seems to complicate my present argument is that these sequences, at least for me, do *not* rupture and transform fictional space and call forth in me a documentary consciousness. And this despite, in the one instance, what might be seen as the film's "scientific" and documentary gaze at the germinating seedling and, in the other, its presentation of visible images of what I know must be real wheat eaten by real grasshoppers that are eventually really burned alive before my eyes. Despite the quite specific existential reference of these images, my consciousness of them remains primarily fictional and the dominant quality of my investment in watching and judging the events before me is aesthetic and related to the unreal narrative and its characters and thematics. Thus, my extratextual knowledge remains bracketed and general—latently and diffusely providing a phenomenological sense of verisimilitude and "realism" to what I watch but never surfacing to challenge or undo its fictional irreality. The big question, of course, is why not?

Here, it is tempting to perversely lose myself in a discussion of the way in which *Days of Heaven*, as a particular film, constructs—through its stylistic choices—a dialectic between the unreal of its autonomous fiction and the real of the viewer's referenced environmental lifeworld, resolving the incommensurability of the real and unreal at the metalevel of a philosophical med-

itation on the relationship between the brute and random "being of nature" and the willful and unselfdisclosed "nature of being," between ontology and epistemology, between "naturalism" and "melodrama." But I will not succumb, for, interesting as such a discussion might be (and it would not undermine what I'm arguing here), it would deflect attention from the experiential questions I've raised in the present context. Why, when I know for certain it is real, does the wheat seedling in *Days of Heaven* germinate in a fictional and highly symbolic space? And why does a rabbit, but not a grasshopper, transform my consciousness and my engagement with fiction to die a documentary death?

In response, I want to explore further the notion of existential generalization introduced earlier. I have already suggested that, in bracketing existence so it is latent and put "out of play," our fictional consciousness tends to *generalize* those particular existents like trees, rabbits, and grasshoppers that make up fiction's autonomous and specific self-referential world but that—unlike characters—also exceed it. Which is to say that, in fictional experience, unless something happens to *specifically* particularize these existential entities as in some way singular, they will be engaged as what philosophers call *typical particulars*—a form of generalization in which a single entity is taken as exemplary of an entire class.²⁹ Thus, although they retain a diffuse existential "echo" (one that generally grounds and verifies the verisimilitude of the particular fiction), trees and rabbits and grasshoppers in fictional consciousness are not taken up by us in their individual and specific particularity as are fictional characters. Rather, we see them as "standing in" for the more general and typical ground of existence that constitutes the unreal world of realist fiction: namely, those material things and plants and creatures that in their very particularity typically make up the world we live outside the theater as real.³⁰ And this is how we engage them—until some textual or extratextual event in the cinematic experience foregrounds their specific, rather than typical, existential status for us and restructures the kind and quality of our investment in them.

29. For elaboration see the chapter "Generalizing" in Hubert G. Alexander, *The Language and Logic of Philosophy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), 230–56. Of the "typical particular" Alexander writes: "A single object or event may be thought of as a generalization if it is considered as exemplifying a class. One would have to consider the individual to be a sort of prototype or model for the whole class, that is a *typical particular*. Thus a very ordinary chair, but a typical chair, might be called a generalized chair. In this case, however, the group idea is no longer explicitly present, and the meaning of 'general' is in effect transferred to its opposite, namely, to a particular" (233).

30. The operation of our latent documentary consciousness here bears some parallel to Walter Benjamin's description of the "optical unconscious." For a gloss relevant to the concerns of this essay see Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique* 40 (winter 1987): 179–224.

In *Days of Heaven*, then, I engaged the germinating seed and the plague of grasshoppers not in their existential and specific particularity but generally—in their typical particularity—although each sequence solicited, appealed to, and maintained my fictional consciousness in different ways. In the instance of the seed, employing an explicitly technological mode of vision (time-lapse cinematography), the film onscreen spatially and temporally abstracted the seed's germination from its situation in the world as I humanly live it. At the same time I, the viewer, took up the seedling's abstracted and minutely scrutinized particularity as typical of all seedlings and judged it a general—and, in this instance, aesthetically symbolic—gloss on the film's narrative and themes. That is, the time-lapse close-up not only signaled a general comprehension of the seedling's standing for a change of season and the coming of spring, but also—in the “unnatural” and aestheticized specificity of its temporal and spatial germination—it typified in its particularity the mysteries of nature, of life as a becoming. In effect, the seed germinated more than itself; it germinated a generalization and an aesthetic attitude in the fictional consciousness that took up its *typically* particular presence and meaning without positing its *uniquely* particular existence. For me, then, there was no rupture in fictional space (although, of course, there might have been were I a farmer or a botanist).³¹

In the grasshopper sequence, this kind of heightened abstraction and more consciously grasped generalization is not present. Nonetheless, I also engaged the grasshoppers in their typically particular generality—not just in swarms but even in close-ups of individual insects eating and dying. Indeed, I engaged them in much the same way that I initially engaged Renoir's rabbit and the other fauna beaten out of the forest for the hunt in *Rules of the Game*—until, that is, the moment when the rabbit lost its typical particularity in the specificity and uniqueness of its singular death. Yet I felt no such transformation from the general to the particular in my engagement with the grasshoppers, no rupture of my fictional consciousness and the cinematic space it beheld. The grasshoppers in *Days of Heaven* die also—quite horribly and quite particularly, en masse and individually, in long shot and in close-up. Why, then, do they maintain their generality and unreal fictional status for me in the moments of their very real and uniquely particular deaths? Again, the answer to this question is not to be found in the film but in the level of ethical investment that I have in the life and death of grass-

31. It is worth noting here that a similar time-lapsed representation of a germinating seed in a film initially taken up as a documentary would, in all likelihood, also function as a generalizing *typical particular*: That is, it would probably stand in for *all* wheat seedlings as a class. What might be quite different, however, is the axiological charge of the image in this more factual context. Here, aesthetic value would be probably lessened; that is, the seed might function as a generalization, but it would not have the symbolic richness of its presence in a fiction.

hoppers. In the extratextual world I inhabit, however real and uniquely particular its event, the death of a grasshopper is not likely to move me (or most others in my culture)—unless, that is, I were to feel it squish beneath my shoe. Here, however, my bodily response would be more indicative of aesthetic revulsion than of ethical care (more, that is, about me than the grasshopper). And thus the death of a grasshopper does not matter enough to mobilize my ethical judgment so as to rupture the space of fiction. (Of course, were I a farmer or an entomologist, I might well feel otherwise.)

But this, too, does not exhaust or completely put to rest the charge of the real that informs fiction and my differing responses to the rabbit and the grasshoppers in two quite different films. I have already suggested that the rabbit's death not only awakened my sense of ethical care—my *responsibility*, as it were—but also that it awakened my sense of my own body's *responsiveness*. That is, the rabbit's abrupt death leap inscribed itself on my body as a deep and empathetic recognition of my own material and mortal possibilities.³² Although I would argue that my own slight physical recoil as it was shot was not sufficient (or necessary) to transform fictional to documentary consciousness and space (after all, our bodies are very often also mobilized in sympathy with what happens to the bodies of characters in fiction), it was sufficient to create an ambivalent and transitional space between my sense of the unreal and real, an algorithmic moment between two possible modes of engagement when my consciousness might (but then, again, might not) restructure both itself and the value and meaning of the object or event that provoked it.

Thus, I was not quite honest when I said that the grasshoppers did not move me in *Days of Heaven*. There was, indeed, one brief moment in which they did—albeit not into ethical judgment and not into documentary con-

32. Here I am reminded of childhood, when our curiosity about the embodied nature of existence is at its most explicit and experimental and at its least ethically charged. A dominant image as I write this is not only of the beginning of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, in which a group of children torture a scorpion, but also of some of my friends and I killing ants on a concrete driveway with the heat from a magnifying glass. Certainly, the exercise of our power was central to our cruelty. Although we were likely to cry if we saw a dead dog (or bunny), we were also fascinated in a major way by materiality and mortality. We felt no bodily sympathy with the ants—yet we might well have felt some deeper (and more horrifying) bodily empathy with them. That is, we understood their status as living creatures, and I remember thinking about and imagining their busy social world that we were destroying (all those efforts to move a crumb) and somehow recognizing some microcosmic similarity to my own in both its generality and particularity. Indeed, could we have been so intensely interested in killing them were we not aware at some level of an uncanny common mortal bond between us, were we not somehow deeply invested in repudiating and disavowing the horror of our common status as living creatures in what seemed an awful notion of infinite regress that had adults on the one perceptible end and ants on the other—and thus included us vulnerably “in” rather than powerfully “out” of the scene?

sciousness and space. At the very beginning of the plague sequence, the grasshoppers make their first significant appearance as a young girl prepares vegetables in a kitchen and, in an adjoining shot, a woman bathes her face from a basin. Each, in close-up, picks up an insect with her fingers and then quickly drops it. Both times, my own body, if only momentarily and only slightly, recoiled in my theater seat—not in existential sympathy with grasshopper bodies but with the aesthetic revulsion felt by human fingers. At that moment, the grasshoppers were no longer generalized as typical particulars but became specifically particular, real, and embodied as other. At that moment I ambivalently occupied a transitional space that connected me both to my own body and the real world in which I lived and to the unreal world of the fiction. Although the connection lent the fiction existential weight and gave it *substance*, it placed on me no compelling moral charge, no ethical responsibility for my own disgust, and thus did not fully rupture the fiction for me.

At its most potent, then, the charge of the real that moves us from fictional into documentary consciousness is always more than a generalized existential in-formation of the image or the mere "response-ability" of our actual bodies. The charge of the real always is also, if to varying degree, an *ethical charge*: one that calls forth not only response but also responsibility—not only aesthetic valuation but also ethical judgment. It engages our awareness not only of the existential consequences of representation but also of our own ethical implication in representation. It remands us reflexively to ourselves as embodied, culturally knowledgeable, and socially invested viewers. Thus, in those moments in which fictional space becomes charged with the real, the viewer is also so charged. The charge of the real comprehends both screen and viewer, restructuring their parallel worlds not only as coextensive but also as ethically implicated each in the other. As much as the documentary space that emerges to rupture the autonomy of a fiction onscreen always points offscreen to the embodied viewer's concrete and intersubjective social world, it is always also a space co-constituted by and "pointed to" by the viewer whose consciousness re-cognizes and grasps that onscreen space as, in some invested way, contiguous with her or his own material, mortal, and moral being. In this documentary restructuring of a relationship to fictional screen images, the viewer takes on and bears particular subjective responsibility for the actions marked by—and in—her or his vision: responsibility for watching the action and, as justification for watching, responsibility for judging the action and for calling into account—and consciousness—the criteria for doing so.

Thus, I jump slightly with the rabbit and die a little of its death every time I see it being sacrificed for my narrative pleasure. Thus, I silently "tut-tut" at certain moments in *Husbands and Wives*. Thus, the grasshoppers die not for me but for a fiction (since I regard them as other and expendable and refuse

the significance and charge of their deaths even as I "know" their mortality). In sum, embodied and extratextual knowledge, posited and particularized existence, and personal ethical responsibility are *all* necessary to the full constitution of documentary consciousness on one side of the screen and documentary space on the other. Charged with the real (and the obligations it imposes), this space and the form of consciousness that structures its meaning are ever-present possibilities in *every* film experience—even when that experience begins and ends as a designated fiction.³³

33. I would like to extend my gratitude to Arild Fetveit for early and insightful commentary on this chapter.