**Introduction: Music, Sound, and the Nonfiction Aesthetic**

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Music in fiction film helps the audience to relax and fully engage with the stories unfolding before them. With this in mind, theorists have developed a rich and productive discourse that demonstrates the unique narrative, emotional and practical power of music in fiction film. But what happens when the images presented are promoted as “real”; as a (mediated) representation of the world beyond the camera? What can be the role of music in such a world? As soundtracks become an increasingly important part of documentary filmmaking, questions of authenticity, authorship, audibility and reception are pushed into the foreground.

A great deal of critical attention has been paid to the fragile boundaries between fiction and nonfiction cinema. But attempts to identify a clear and consistent documentary aesthetic have often been thwarted by the porous nature of the borders that distinguish films that document real-world events from those whose imagined landscapes promise fictional escapism: “Documentary as a concept or practice occupies no fixed territory” writes Bill Nichols: “It mobilizes no finite inventory of techniques, addresses no set number of issues, and adopts no completely known taxonomy of forms, styles, or modes.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Elsewhere, however, Nichols acknowledges a constant that initially appears to underpin many nonfiction feature films: “The documentary tradition relies heavily on being able to convey an impression of authenticity.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

This notion of “authenticity”—a word so heavily laden, that I use it here with extreme caution—has problematised the use of music and creative sound design in many documentary features, as the inclusion of a voice from beyond the profilmic can call into question what is being shown. Many working in the early *cinéma vérité* tradition or adhering to the direct or observational styles of documentary filmmaking, for instance, were particularly astute in their drive for an “impression of authenticity”, promoting minimum creative intervention in order to produce the illusion of a naturalistic chain of events that appears to have little to do with the presence of a director: events would have unfolded in this way, these directors imply, with or without the presence of a camera. The freedom of movement enabled by the more-recently available lightweight, hand-held cameras made the move from studio-based practices to location shoots with small crews easily attainable in the late 1950s and early 60s; and the development of synchronised sound equipment encouraged not only a greater sonic fidelity, but also a closer relationship between filmmaker and subject. Albert Maysles, for instance, recalls how he refrained from using techniques such as shot-reverse-shot to ensure that the images unfolded in a way similar to that of human sight in order to achieve what he describes as “a closeness to what is going on”.[[3]](#endnote-3) With a similar intent in mind, Indian documentarist Rakesh Sharma explains how he prefers to shoot people that “I’ve never met in my life before” in order to achieve a truthful and immediate view of events: his use of a “tiny handicam”, along with the avoidance of external microphones or artificial lighting, helps to make his subjects “completely comfortable”, in order to give them the space to act in as natural a way as possible.[[4]](#endnote-4) Such forms of apparent non-intervention have been taken to extremes recently in films such as *Restrepo* (Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington, 2010), a documentary shot on hand-held cameras that follows a small troop of soldiers on location in the military occupation of Afghanistan and offers a highly guttural (and, at times, disturbing) form of authenticity. When combined with a lack of voice-over or music, such observational techniques create film that “appears to leave the driving to us” (Nichols).[[5]](#endnote-5)

But what role does music have within the realist, unmediated aesthetic of such documentary practice? For many filmmakers, the answer is simple: it has no role. If nonfiction film must document, why place an outside voice against the factual representation of the images? According to the dictates of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema, for instance, only synchronous—or diegetic—sound was permissible: this could include music so long as it was created from within the film’s diegesis—think of Frederick Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies* (1967), where the prisoners engage in various forms of music making (figure 1), Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County U.S.A.* (1976), in which diegetic folk music and songs by local artist Hazel Dickens highlight the plight of the miners, the rapping army recruits in Nick Broomfield and Joan Churchill's *Soldier Girls* (1981) or, more recently, the guitar-playing soldier in *Restrepo*. <FIGURE 00\_Rogers, Figure 1 HERE> By contrast, dramatic—or nondiegetic soundtrack music—as an element of postproduction, is an addition that can jar with the present tense of nonfiction filmmaking. Although source music has always been employed, then, dramatic music is less common. It is feared that music may contradict the apparent spontaneity and naturalism of the documentary aesthetic. Although Stan Neuman has made several documentaries that make use of music, for instance, he has also made others “where there’s very little, because I think the documentary image doesn’t support music that well. Music within a documentary tends to diminish the image.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Michel Brault, direct cinema pioneer and cameraman for *Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch, 1960), is even more clear in his dislike for dramatic scoring, explaining that for him, “Music is an interpretation, it’s the filmmaker who says, alright I’m going to make you listen to music here on top of these images to create a certain impression. It’s impressionism. I don’t think documentary is a form of impressionism. It’s realism, and music has no place there.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Brault’s separation of realism (he was a promoter of the hand-held camera) from sonic representation is misguided in several ways. First, documentary may be underpinned by a realist aesthetic, but it often remains persuasive, subjective, emotional and narrative. As soon as an aesthetic decision is made, the line between the real and the fictional begins to flex. Second, our understanding of realism in relation to sound and music in the digital age has become highly complex. Ubiquitous music in our everyday lives, in shops, on TV and on mobile media has highly attuned our sonic awareness. In addition, the saturation of music in fiction cinema has formed audiences highly accomplished in processing images with the help of musical signification. Lastly, music in film is one of the most powerful illusory persuaders that what we are watching is, in fact, yet rather paradoxically, as real as possible. Unlike fiction film, documentary rarely tries to conceal itself as a constructed product. The role of music, as it is understood by many mainstream fiction directors and composers, is therefore obsolete and can “diminish” the “realism” being presented: an audience doesn’t need to buy into the fiction of the images. However, although pertaining to an “impression of authenticity”, documentary film is, for many, about persuasion. And the emotion, historical referents and rhythmic persuasion of music makes the use of creative sound an extraordinarily compelling device for many nonfiction filmmakers.

Of course, music does not stand alone in its ability to add a creative, transformational adjunct to the profilmic image. Despite techniques to give the illusion of non-interference, in truth most documentarians exercise a great deal of control over the variables of any given situation. For this reason, Werner Herzog, a director proficient in both fiction and documentary styles, has often warned that “the word ‘documentary’ should be handled with care”.[[8]](#endnote-8) Non-intervention, even in the fly-on-the-wall style, is always compromised: the choice or shot, angle, focus, point-of-view; the lingering camera; the ways in which those being filmed change their behaviour when confronted with a camera, however small and discrete; and the creation of dramatic trajectories and character development in the editing room. Such interventions belie, at various levels, a creative directorial presence. Because of this, other directors have considered an objective viewpoint impossible to achieve and have aimed instead for a more poetic relationship with their subject matter: “I really don’t believe in *cinéma vérité*”, claims Agnès Varda; “instead I believe in a sort of *cinéma mensonge*”.[[9]](#endnote-9) Errol Morris embraced the idea of a *cinéma mensonge* in his 1978 film about a pet cemetery business, *Gates of Heaven*, for instance, when he designed an office for one of the cremation bosses that existed only as “part of his fantasy world”, giving us not what was actually there, but rather providing a glimpse into the mind of one of the key protagonists.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The difficulties of objective representation have provided the starting point for many theoretical explorations into the documentary aesthetic, from John Grierson’s famous promotion of documentary in the 1930s as the “creative treatment of actuality”, to Nichols’s understanding of the form as a “representation of the world we already occupy” rather than as a “*reproduction*” of it:[[11]](#endnote-11)

Were documentary a *reproduction* of reality, these problems would be far less acute. We would then simply have a replica or copy of something that already existed. But documentary is not a *reproduction* of reality, it is a representation of the world we already occupy. Such films are not documents as much as expressive representations that may be based on documents. Documentary films stand for a particular view of the world, one we may never have encountered before even if the factual aspects of this world are familiar to us.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Along similar lines, Michael Renov has described the representational qualities of documentary film in terms of four overlapping functions: to record, reveal, or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyse or interrogate; and to express. Underpinning these functions are interventions that result from the creative vision that transfigures reality through the location, duration, lighting, sound environment and *mise-en-scène* of the finished film; “moments at which a presumably objective realisation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention” as though the spheres of fiction and nonfiction “*inhabit* one another”.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The blurred styles of documentary and the fiction feature encourage what Paul Arthur calls a “tangled reciprocity” of aesthetic intent and reception.[[14]](#endnote-14) Fiction films that feature untrained actors (*Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Shadows* (1960) and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)) can create a greater sense of “authenticity”, or gritty realism, for instance, while the hand-held camera style and lack of nondiegetic music in *The Blair Witch Project* ([Daniel Myrick](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0617130/?ref_=tt_ov_dr) and [Eduardo Sánchez](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0844896/?ref_=tt_ov_dr), 1999) *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigalow, 2008) and *Argo* (Ben Affleck, 2012) creates a deceptive sense of unmediated vision (during its early release, the jittery shots and improvised dialogue of *The Blair Witch Project* allowed its directors to promote it as real, found footage from an abandoned video camera, thus creating a degree of hysterical fear amongst its audiences, this author included).

But, as we have seen, the necessity for creative invention in the documentary feature opens a reciprocal flow of influence, and stylistic elements from mainstream cinematic traditions can be found in many works of nonfiction. From the self-reflexive, essay-style of modernist documentary, through to the performative, interactive and democratised phase of digital nonfiction work, the subjective has become a more welcome and established part of the process for many documentarians, securely enmeshing the “two domains” (Renov) of documentary and fiction.[[15]](#endnote-15) But while observational styles promote the realistic possibilities of documentary, others lean more heavily on the inventive, or poetic, possibilities inherent in the “tangled reciprocity”. Many of the most successful documentary films have a style that pertains to the condition of the mainstream fiction film: highly edited, expensively-shot competition documentaries such as *Spell-Bound* (Jeffrey Blitz, 2002) and *Mad Hot Ball Room* (Marilyn Agrelo, 2005), for instance, make use of well-used narrative and musical structures to create highly marketable dramatic arcs familiar to fiction film, forms of tension and release that forge a new, hybrid nonfiction style dubbed the “docutainment”.[[16]](#endnote-16) At the other end of the spectrum, poetic ruminations move the profilmic into a highly creative and personal realm. During a retrospective at the Minnesota’s Walker Art Center in 1999, Herzog—one of the most outspoken of the poetic documentarians— issued his *Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Filmmaking*, a “somewhat tongue-in-cheek” list of twelve points that demonstrated his dislike of *cinéma* *verité* and its superficial “accountant’s truth”.[[17]](#endnote-17) The fifth point encapsulates his understanding of authenticity and truth particularly well: “There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as a poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization”.[[18]](#endnote-18) In many cases, for instance, Herzog’s fly-on-the-wall approach is clearly staged, something that draws attention to the highly mediated quality of his documentaries: “I rehearse and I shoot six times over, like in a feature film” explains the director; “And sometimes I create an inner truth. I invent, but I invent in order to gain a deeper insight”.[[19]](#endnote-19) It is at such moments of “fabrication and imagination” that creative sound design and music becomes particularly noticeable. Not only are Herzog’s documentary images propelled by intricate and audible soundtracks: at pivotal moments, the visual narrative stalls to make room for musical tableaux; for music in and of itself (notable examples include *Death for Five Voices*, 1995, which includes numerous scenes of music performance and listening and *Encounters at the End of the World*, 2007, where Henry Kaiser fulfils the dual role of underwater cameramen and composer: figure 2). <FIGURE 00\_Rogers, Figure 2 HERE> Herzog’s promotion of filmic artifice brings him closer to documentary’s etymological root in the Latin *docere*: his aspiration is not to show but rather to teach, something articulated in the fourth point of his declaration, which states that “[f]act creates norms, and truth illumination” (Herzog, 1999). The desire to reach for a “poetic” truth that lies beyond, or within, the profilmic can be found in many other personal, and highly musical, nonfiction works that also question the nature of authenticity and historicity, from the audiovisual, found footage poems of Jonas Mekas, to Iain Sinclair’s prosaic journey films and to musical escapades, such as Godfrey Reggio’s environmental tone poem *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (1982), with its insistent, driving score by Philip Glass.

Several documentaries have played with these boundaries in explicit ways. Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012) explores the memories of a group of small-time Indonesian gangsters, led by Anwar Congo, who became part of a fully-fledged death squad responsible for the execution of over a million people in the 1960s. The director explains that his film is “about killers who have won, and the sort of society they have built. Unlike ageing Nazis or Rwandan génocidaires, Anwar and his friends have not been forced by history to admit they participated in crimes against humanity. Instead, they have written their own triumphant history, becoming role models for millions of young paramilitaries”.[[20]](#endnote-20) Obsessed with cinema, the executioners would use techniques seen in their favourite films: and in this documentary, Oppenheimer invites the now elderly squad to reenact their atrocities in the style of gangster movies, westerns, and, significantly, musicals; “We created a space in which they could devise and star in dramatisations based on the killings, using their favorite genres from the medium. We hoped to catalyze a process of collective remembrance and imagination. Fiction provided one or two degrees of separation from reality, a canvas on which they could paint their own portrait and stand back and look at it.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

**Music and the Documentary Aesthetic**

When these instances of “ecstatic” truths and “collective remembrance and imagination” include music, an entirely new and highly interdisciplinary realm of meaning and discourse opens up. Speaking of nonfiction film, Nichols reminds us that “[t]he centrality of argument gives the sound track particular importance in documentary … most documentaries still turn to the sound track to carry much of the general import of their abstract argument.”[[22]](#endnote-22) For Nichols, the soundtrack resonates with the spoken word in the form of voice-over commentary or dialogue taken on-site. But, more significantly, it is the unspoken moments that hold the most power in the construction of documentary persuasion.

The mediation of the profilmic through various “strata of truth” (Herzog) is *always* at play when creative sound and music are employed in a documentary film. Since its earliest days, fiction film has been awash with music, its role, it has often been theorised, to lessen our awareness of the technological construct that unfolds before our eyes; to encourage us, the audience, to enter into a contract and believe, on some level and temporarily, that what we are watching is real. To do this, edits, geographical and temporal cuts and evidence of the mechanics behind the film, have to be concealed, something easily achievable through a continual flow of synchronous sound. In addition, well placed music can draw out a narrative, highlight the aesthetic strands between scenes, focus attention on one thing to the exclusion of others, and help promote intense aesthetic bonding with certain characters or themes. Whether music is concealing editing cuts, or heightening emotion, however, its main role is to remove an audience from the auditorium and transport them into the heart of the story. And herein lies the paradox: our everyday lives are not ordinarily accompanied by music (we can recall Hitchcock’s question to the composer of his 1944 film *Lifeboat*, David Raskin: “But they’re in a lifeboat out in the middle of the ocean; where’s the orchestra?”, to which Raskin replied “behind the camera!”); and yet, in fiction film, music is used to help us believe that what we are watching is real and encourage us to develop empathy with the characters.[[23]](#endnote-23)

But, as we have seen, the documentary feature, although “enmeshed” with fiction film, leans towards a completely different aesthetic. Documentary is often reactive, created in the moment. Recording actual events, nonfiction filmmakers do not need to erase awareness of the materiality of their projects; camerawork frequently responds to unexpected action and can be jittery, unfocused and fast moving; the director can be in shot; and the people being filmed are invited to break the fourth wall and directly address the viewer. Such gestures are all apparent signifiers of authenticity and objectivity. Like documentary images, sound recorded on location is similarly responsive and can operate very differently to the heightened and clear points of audition that characterise the highly post-produced sound worlds of fiction film. Documentary directors either work the sound equipment themselves, or perhaps use a single sound person who must be quick on her feet, as Chilean director Patricio Guzmán explains: “There’s nothing better than being in tune with your cameraman and soundman. When you’re united by an invisible cable, it’s amazing, it’s like jazz”.[[24]](#endnote-24) British filmmaker Kim Longinotto speaks in similar ways about audiovisual harmony: “I think that sound is like the heartbeat of a film, if the sound isn’t good then the film’s thin … the sound is where you get the emotion of a film”. Speaking of her attempts to film in the noisy and chaotic classrooms of *Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go* (2007), for example, Longinotto describes how her soundwoman had to perform like a “ballet dancer” in order to capture the relevant sounds while attempting to physically stay beyond the limits of the camera’s viewfinder.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Nevertheless, the result can be confusing. The distinctions between sonic background and foreground are difficult to negotiate under such circumstances, even with the use of shotgun or directional microphones, as Jeffrey Ruoff reminds us:

One of the major stylistic characteristics of documentaries that use sounds recorded on location is the lack of clarity of the sound track. Ambient sounds compete with dialogue in ways commonly deemed unacceptable in conventional Hollywood practice. A low signal-to-noise ratio demands greater attention from the viewer to decipher spoken words. Slight differences in room tone between shots make smooth sound transitions difficult. Indeed, listening to many of the scenes of observational films without watching the screen can be a dizzying experience. Without recognizable sources in the image to anchor the sounds, we hear a virtual cacophony of clanging, snippets of dialogue and music, and various unidentifiable sounds, almost an experiment in concrete music… While Hollywood sound tracks are typically easier to understand than sounds in everyday life, documentary sound tracks are potentially more difficult to follow than sounds in everyday life.[[26]](#endnote-26)

As Ruoff points out, it is easy for sounds recorded under such conditions to become dissociated from their points of visual reference; visual and aural points of view may not be the same and, as sounds coalesce in the aural middle ground, run the risk of becoming not only “more difficult to follow than sounds in everyday life”, but also, and rather strangely, less realistic to ears attuned to the artificial sonic clarity of the fiction film. Sound design in fiction film ensures that the relevant information is always audible; and the supporting sounds are in no way confusing. In documentary, noise often operates at the opposite end of the spectrum. And, as all sounds coalesce into the middle ground, they run the risk of becoming dislocated from their visual points of reference, moving instead into the non-referential realm of music, as we shall see in the chapters to come.

Dramatic music can be used by documentarians for many reasons. Soundtrack music can help to add spatial depth to chaotic actuality sound: but it can also operate in ways very similar to those of mainstream fiction film from the earliest examples of composed scores (such as Virgil Thomson’s lavish and highly filmic scores for Pare Lorentz, or Aaron Copland’s music for Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke 1939 documentary, *The City*, as we shall see in Julie Hubbert’s Chapter) to the more recent instances of compiled music, which introduce previous histories and cultural resonances (most notably the prominent ragtime and boogie-woogie soundtrack of Terry Zwigoff’s *Crumb* (1994), James Marsh’s choice of Michael Nyman’s pre-existent music to heighten the tension in his Oscar-winning *Man on Wire* (2008) as John Corner shows us later in this collection, and the songs from Radiohead’s back catalogue that populate Jon Shenk’s 2011 film, *The Island President*).[[27]](#endnote-27)

Music can hold things together and tell the story; it can lead viewers into narrative and emotional positions in a way akin to mainstream fiction film soundtracks; and it can help to turn each visual representation into a highly personal vision. As we shall see throughout this book, choices such as musical style, instrumentation, structure, texture, mode, history and genre, familiarity, text / lyrics and audiovisual synchronicity or dissonance can fundamentally change the reception of the unfolding images. Narrative or aesthetic strands can be forged between scenes, an audience can be compelled to focus on one character or emotion in particular, even within a crowded image, and strong empathy can be encouraged with certain viewpoints or personal endeavours.

The power that music holds over an audience’s interpretative juices is perhaps most obvious within documentary films of persuasion. Music has frequently been used as a powerful propaganda tool, for instance, propelling many examples of early documentary such as *The Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, with a soundtrack compiled from Wagner’s music, 1935) and many World War II films, which were scored by well-established concert hall composers such as Benjamin Britten (Harry Watt's *Night Mail* in 1936) and Gail Kubik (William Wyler’s *Memphis Belle*, 1943, George Gercke’s *Men and Ships*, 1940, Sam Spewak’s *The World at War*, 1942 and Jerry Chodorov’s *Earthquakers*, 1943 amongst others), who insisted that “the use of creative music in the documentary film is based upon the premise that creative music, like any other creative art, has the power to move people…”.[[28]](#endnote-28) His scores, maintained Kubik, contributed to the fight for democracy represented in the images via the very process of creative composition: “Music in the documentary film aids democracy to the extent that it is creatively composed music … Music *really* aids democracy to the extent that it reflects the feelings of a free and unrestricted personality.”[[29]](#endnote-29) In these instances, the persuasive abilities of music are paramount: and yet, music also holds an ambiguous role in the presentation of nonfiction images.

As we have seen, the 1960s saw a move towards a more observational aesthetic, a search for (at least an illusory) non-intervention that led to a silencing of the musical soundtrack. Documentary entered a period of non-musical synchronous sound, although the rise in popularity of the music documentary and the concert film ensured that many nonfiction films still remained highly musical (as Jamie Sexton reminds us in Chapter 9): think of the Maysles Brothers’ *What's Happening!* *The Beatles in the U.S.A* (1964) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970), Richard Leacock's *Stravinsky Portrait* (1964), D. A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1966) and *Monterey Pop* (1968), and Michael Wadleigh's *Woodstock* (1970). When documentary filmmakers again began to include music in their work, the reinstatement of a soundtrack became highly noticeable and, as a result, increasingly cinematic. In his work on music in documentary film, John Corner makes two insightful observations regarding the function and techniques most common to soundtracking the nonfiction image. First, he points out that dramatic music is more copiously included in films about travel and animals where the message is less political, and the tone less persuasive: “a strong tendency has been for music to be employed more frequently the ‘lighter’ the topic and/or treatment. Right from the 1950s, this can be seen in documentaries seeking to place a comic, sentimental or lightly ironic framing on their subjects.”[[30]](#endnote-30) Some recent examples are George Fenton’s opulent scores for David Attenborough’s *The Blue Planet* (2001) and *Planet Earth* (2006), which will be explored by Mervyn Cooke in Chapter 6, and Alex Wurmen’s (re-)scoring of *March of the Penguins* (2005), which currently sits second in the lifetime gross list for documentary film. By this reasoning, the scores of Fenton and Wurmen are not designed to lead spectators into certain narrative positions, but rather, they are intended to accompany and highlight the images, replacing location and actuality sound with highly evocative, sweeping scores that seek, in places, to humanise the creatures depicted and to familiarise the otherness of the filmed wilderness for an audience located on warm sofas many miles away: to create empathy and to promote a stronger form of engagement with the rhythmic alignment of audio-visual elements (such programmes come closest to the micky-mousing aesthetic found in many cartoons); and to blend together transitional sequences and montages to enable a greater flow in programmes that frequently jump between terrains and activities. This last point is particularly important. Music’s ability to stitch things together is especially welcome for filmmakers working with footage caught on the run: “a documentary film can sustain far more gaps, fissures, cracks, and jumps in the visual appearance of its world even though it represents the familiar, historical world”, writes Nichols: “People and places can appear in a manner that would be disturbingly intermittent in fiction. An intermittent representation of people and places, based on the requirements of a logic, can, in fact, serve as a distinguishing characteristic for documentary”.[[31]](#endnote-31) In such cases, music that spans several scenes can help to alleviate the disquieting potential of visual rupture.

However, Corner also points out a prevalence of music for “programmes which operate confidently within a sense of themselves as artefacts, as authored ‘works’. This need not mean a claim to high aesthetic status, it simply indicates a level of self-consciousness about the crafting and styling of the account, the degree of creative and imaginative freedom exercised in its construction.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Music, he argues, performs two roles in documentary film: it can add a sense of fun, or comedy; but it can also signify a departure from actuality, or reportage, and a movement towards the “illumination” and personalised depiction sought by Herzog above.

The notion that music can readily be found in an “authored” documentary, in which the director’s presence, or signature style is clearly evident, is supported by the prevalence of music in feature documentaries that have been commercially successful. Box-office hits often hover, at least in terms of available technology and budget, between fiction and documentary styles. As we have seen, *March of the Penguins*, with its sumptuous score, currently sits second only to *Fahrenheit 9/11* in terms of its lifetime gross, while other successful documentaries that feature a prominent nondiegetic soundtrack to suture together scenes, encourage empathy with certain characters or emotional states, or emphasise a particular narrative trajectory of tension and release include *Hoop Dreams* (James with Ben Sidran, 1994), *Spellbound* (Blitz with Daniel Hulsizer, 2002), *Touching the Void* (Macdonald with Alex Heffes and Bevan Smith, 2003) and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Herzog with Ernst Reijseger, 2011).[[33]](#endnote-33) In *The Act of Killing*, the most devastating re-enactments are the musical scenes, in which Anwar, explains Oppenheimer, “was very much in the driver’s seat: he chose the songs and, along with his friends, devised both scenes.”[[34]](#endnote-34) In one scene, for example, the characters dance infront of a waterfall to a version of Matt Munro’s “Born Free”, originally used for James Hill’s 1966 film of the same name. Paradoxically, the cinematic excess provided in these opulent scenes produces a particularly uncomfortable reminder of the unutterable truth that lies beneath the music.

The use of music to provide a connective web around disparate scenes and locations—of “intermittent” representation—is a technique common to the fiction film and the nature documentary; but also one familiar to the narrative nonfiction film. Several recent examples demonstrate the connective power of music by presenting complex and fragmented visual narratives that progress without the help of voice-over. In Thomas Balmès’s creative documentary *Babies* (2010), for instance, the original score by Bruno Coulais takes centre stage, vying only with occasional dialogue and diegetic sound to suture together, and promote, poetic and cultural connections between the snippets from the lives of four youngsters growing up in different parts of the world (figure 3). <FIGURE 00\_Rogers, Figure 3 HERE> Similarly, Antonio Pinto’s haunting soundscape for *Senna* (Asif Kapadia, 2010) helps to conceal the technological and stylistic differences inherent in the collage of newsreels and race footage used to construct the Brazilian racing driver’s story, while the eclectic variety of home footage that populates the crowd-sourced YouTube film, *Life in a Day* (Macdonald, 2011) is made less jarring by the consistency of Harry Gregson-William and Matthew Herbert’s composed sound world (although this too includes raw crowd-sourced sound). Music, in other words, can heighten a nonfiction world in ways reminiscent of the construction of fantasy in mainstream cinema.

But as we have seen, music in mainstream fiction film assumes the paradoxical role as a tool with which to add verisimilitude to moving images, despite the lack of soundtrack in many people’s everyday lives: it can make us less aware that what we are watching is fiction and allow us more readily to empathise with the characters we have just met. In documentary film, spectators do not need to be drawn into an imaginary world, and yet there are moments when a form of transportation is required. One particularly popular musical technique that can initiate such a transformation is the use of music to suggest a move back in time in the form of a re-enactment to illustrate the recollection of an interviewee. Although this form of musical suture is also prevalent in the fiction film style, from Max Steiner’s reworking of “As Time Goes By” in *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942) to Ennio Morricone’s score for *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Leone, 1968), in documentary the passage is not only temporal, but also takes the viewer away from actuality and into a state of imaginative recreation. Despite his desire to both penetrate and reveal, Errol Morris, for instance, insists that the aim of nonfiction film is to document: “the truth”, he says, is not “up for grabs”.[[35]](#endnote-35) And yet he famously displays a penchant for recreation, a fondness for re-enactment perhaps most clear in his investigation into the 1976 shooting of Dallas policeman Robert W Wood in another box office hit, *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), in which the move between an observational style and that of a mainstream aesthetic is immediately obvious (figure 4). <FIGURE 00\_Rogers, Figure 4 HERE> Here, interview scenes and talking heads are interspersed with highly interpretative, even poetic, escapades that suggest how the murder may have unfolded (it turns out that Morris’s theory—that the wrong man had been incarcerated—was in fact accurate). For Morris, re-enactments are details, or moments of contemplation: “the re-enactment is not re-enacting anything, it’s there to make you think about reality, about what we take to be reality, what we think is reality, what claims to be reality … I like going after odd details … and those are constructive, but underneath it all is some pursuit of truth”.[[36]](#endnote-36)

An original score by Philip Glass is heard throughout the film; however, the heavy and highly persistent minimalist track is particularly audible leading into, and during, these re-enacted scenes: “I don’t like music that is supposed to tell you what to think. But I do like music that creates a bed where things are driven forward. The soundtrack to *The Thin Blue Line* is, I think, one of the best things that Philip has ever done. It is essential to the movie. If this is a nonfiction film noir, that idea of inextrability, that idea of being trapped in a web of fate, those ideas are really driven home by the soundtrack, by the Philip Glass score.”[[37]](#endnote-37) But whose musical voice is this? And what does it do to our relationship with the unfolding images? Is this fact or fiction? The music signifies that we are no longer in the present tense; but also that the subjective opinion of the director is now taking precedence.

Still a popular technique, the use of music to heighten and distinguish re-enactments from nonfiction elements of a film can be seen in *Touching the Void*, a film about two mountaineers attempting to scale a monstrous peak in the Peruvian Andes. The film, explains director Kevin Macdonald, combines “some elements of drama with elements of documentary…”.[[38]](#endnote-38) As the mountaineers reminisce about their terrifying adventure, their recollections are played out via opulent and highly realistic re-enactments. During these re-enactment, the use of sound and music is particularly compelling. The film had two composers: Alex Heffes provided the acoustic score; and Bevan Smith the electronic music. Sound designer Joakim Sundström (who later worked on Peter Strickland’s 2012 sonic extravaganza, *Berberian Sound Studio*) then wove the two musical voices together: at the start of the film, we hear a soundscape created from voices, wind sounds and highly ambient electronica; but after several minutes, the electro-acoustic sounds gradually morph into an increasingly symphonic acoustic track. At other times—and particularly towards the end of the film—we are left with real-world sounds that have been enhanced into a disturbing musical wash. Here, actuality sounds (or those created in the studio to appear thus) are elongated into a musical score, thus leading the viewer into the fictional recreations by softening the edges between the documented and the fictional (Marion Leonard and Robert Strachan explore this form of sonic elongation in more depth in Chapter 10).

And yet, despite the attempt to conceal the imaginative realm in *Touching the Void*, the inclusion of a voice as strong as music that emanates from beyond the screen world nevertheless questions the role of an emotional artform in factual programming. Music afterall (and as our colleagues working on the soundtracks of fiction film have amply demonstrated), is never neutral. By using the techniques of “suggestion”, or technical effacement, common to the cinematic use of music in the fiction film, feature documentaries remove themselves from the observational fidelity of the unmediated image. What is it that we are hearing? If our eyes are given real events, what happens when our ears are offered a sonic elsewhere? In fiction film, both image and music are conjured forth from another place; but in nonfiction features, the elsewhere signified by music appears to conflict with the present tense of the images. This can be put another way: in fiction film we have to suspend our disbelief; in documentary, we have to keep it activated and hold together in our minds two worlds at once. But when nondiegetic music is used in documentary film, this form of activation is problematised.

**Music and Sound in Documentary Film**

Those attempting to contextualise and theorise documentary film have often shied away from the sonic aspects of these mediated presentations. And yet, the paradoxical combination of “real life” images with the openly fictional narrative voice of music opens up a significant area of theoretical investigation that could fundamentally change how we think about the documentary aesthetic: once music is taken into account, in other words, the radical and much theorised divide between documentary and fiction film needs to be revisited.

The authors in this collection work in various related disciplines, from music to documentary, from communications and new media to cultural studies. Their chapters trace the merging of music and image in nonfiction audiovisuality from the earliest examples of documentary film to the most recent forms of expanded technology and explore the fragile and mobile boundaries between music, sound-effects and voice, which are so important to the construction of a nonfiction, audiovisual aesthetic. Does music bring documentary film closer to its fictional counterpart? Or does it create different modes of engagement? Does music contradict the apparent spontaneity and naturalism of documentary? And how can real-world sounds assume an emotional and narrative role akin to a musical soundtrack?

Acknowledging the role of music and sound as integral to the creation of the documentary aesthetic, *Music and Sound in Documentary Film* formulates a multi-faceted theory of audio-visual narration for realist and factual programming. Some chapters consider documentaries that are about, or promote, musical performances; others focus on nonfiction works with sumptuous soundtracks that problematise the very nature of documentary and question exactly what it is that is being documented; and the remaining explore the boundaries between the creative treatment of real-world sound and traditional musical scores.

Carolyn Birdsall opens the book with an essay on the city film. She posits the city as a site through which to understand the aesthetic uses of sound in urban documentaries from the late 1920s through the early 1930s. Using the idea of the “symphonic” motif and the creative elongation of urban sounds, Birdsall explores the differences between early outdoor and studio recording techniques in the work of Dziga Vertov, Joris Ivens, John Grierson’s GPO Film Unit and Walther Ruttmann. The symphonic structure of these urban documentaries, she argues, can be mapped onto a metaphor for the social body, a structure that opens the doors for the development of a new, and highly experimental, form of documentary sound and music.

Taking a different approach to early documentaries, James Deaville traces the inclusion and “fetishisation” of sound and music in the first sound newsreels for theatrical release in the U.S. (1927-1929). With the newly-emergent sound-on-film technology, newsreel producers—and those working on the Fox Movietone newsreels in particular—showed a keen interest not only in including diegetic sounds in their work, but also for embracing extended scenes of musical performance. In fact, popular music, jazz and band performances featured so heavily in these early nonfiction products, that Deaville is able to suggest that the American awareness of the world at this time was in part shaped by these (most often staged) musical scenes, which lent heavily towards entertainment value in an attempt to sensationalise the news and shape public opinion.

Moving forward to the 1940s, Julie Hubbert concentrates on the documentary depiction of ideology, place and race, tracing the ways in which the American nonfiction film style evolved before and during World War II. With reference to the rediscovered documentary *One Tenth of Our Nation* (Film Associates, 1940), a rare example from this period of a film that explicitly tackles the problems of race, Hubbert investigates the role that music played in early American documentaries, an investigation that feeds into a bigger discussion concerning the appropriation and quotation of folk song and spirituals in contemporary music of the time.

Working in the same decade, Thomas F. Cohen turns his attention to postwar British educational films, and takes a contextual look at the links between documentary as a pedagogical tool and as a marker of developing reforms in education. Educational films are notable for their fidelity to what is in front of the camera, and are characterised by strict audiovisual synchronicity in contrast to the creative treatment of locational sound that Birdsall uncovers in the Symphony film. Cohen’s two examples—*Instruments of the Orchestra* (Mathieson, 1946) and *Science in the Orchestra* (Strasser, 1950)—offer contrasting views on the musical arts in post-war Britain: the first aims to encourage children to engage with music while reasserting the social order from a previous age; the second responds to the cultural and political climate by using music to recruit potential scientists.

Orlene Denice McMahon takes a different approach to film sound in her investigation of documentaries by Chris Marker created in mid-twentieth century Paris. With reference to two travelogues—*Dimanche à Pékin* (1956) and *Lettre de Sibérie* (1958)—and two political essay films—*Description d’un combat* (1960) and *Cuba sí!* (1961), McMahon explores the ways in which sound and music can be used to play with visual perception in documentary filmmaking. Marker’s ironic placement of sound against image, and his unusual treatment of voice over, opens up a larger discourse about the objectivity of the documentary tradition in general, and the essay film in particular.

Mervyn Cooke’s chapter acts as a pivot point in the book, propelling us from the 1950s—Jacques Cousteau’s *Le Monde du silence* (1953)—to the early 2000s—

*Deep Blue* (Alastair Fothergill and Andy Byatt, 2003)—in the first of our maritime investigations. In his comparison of the musical tropes that have become associated with the maritime documentary and the similar soundscapes of ocean-located fiction films, Cooke notes the overwhelming presence in both of harp glissandi and the use of circus-like music or waltzes to capture the dance-like nature of the underwater kingdom. His discussion feeds into several of the book’s larger considerations. First, the relationship between locational sound and dramatic music forms a compelling entry point into the films discussed. Cooke identifies many instances in which instruments mimic real-world (or, rather, those imagined to be true) noises, a trope that constantly recurs in subsequent chapters. Second, Cooke’s consideration of the uncreative treatment of voice-over in his casestudies provides a useful counterpoint to McMahon’s consideration of the poetic treatment of the device in the essay film and points towards a later discussion of narration by Jamie Sexton.

The relationship between the music for documentary and fiction film continues with the next chapter. Here, John Corner explores the various forms of sonic engagement initiated in recent feature documentaries, arguing that despite some initial similarities to fiction film soundscape, music in the cinematic documentary has the ability to navigate boundaries between aesthetics and knowledge: but it also possesses the unique ability to enter into the argument of the film. Focusing on the ways in which documentary music engages with viewer consciousness, Corner offers an analysis of James Marsh’s *Man on Wire* (2008), Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and Charles Ferguson’s *Inside Job* (2010).

K.J. Donnelly takes a different approach to the documentary form. Comparing the original, orchestral music for Robert Flaherty’s fictional documentary, *Man of Aran* with a new score by English indie band, British Sea Power (2009), he demonstrates the ways in which a change in soundworld can not only influence the reception of a film, but, through a process of “masking”, can also problematise documentary as an object of historical value. New scores such as this, he argues, can contemporise a film in order to enhance its accessibility to a modern audience; but they also run the risk of creating a rupture between diegesis and ‘real world’ as the disconnect between sound and vision can dramatically age the images.

Sexton runs with the idea of indie culture in his chapter, in which he explores the ways in which fan-based media and YouTube have contributed to an expansion of musical material in American indie music documentaries. Referring to the expanded range of available archival material (which can include amateur found footage and fan footage), he points out a rejection of voice-over narration, which can create the feel of objectivity and distance, for a more subjective approach; and the embrace of hybrid technologies to form a inconsistent style particularly applicable to the variety of modern platforms on which such documentaries can be viewed.

Marion Leonard and Rob Strachan take our attention back to the very nature of audiovisual, nonfiction aesthetics in the first of two essays that build on Birdsall’s ideas to consider the ways in which real-world sounds can aspire to the condition of musical soundtrack. Here, the authors consider films that tread the stylistic and aesthetic boundaries between documentary and European art film. Through close analysis of two poetic landscape documentaries, *sleep furiously* (Gideon Koppel, 2008) and *Silence* (Pat Collins, 2010),Leonard and Strachan explore the ways in which ambient soundscape is highlighted through volume and changing audio qualities to such an extent that film goers are encouraged to listen aesthetically. Such concentrated listening allows real-world, ambient sound to become a signifier of emotional and thematic intent in a way similar to a nondiegetic score.

Like Leonard and Strachan and McMahon, Selmin Kara and Alanna Thain consider the ways in which visual perception can be complicated or undermined, through sound. Referring to the unusual sound design in *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012), an experimental documentary that also acts as a sonic ethnographic study of the deep-sea fishing industry, the authors return to our maritime theme, exploring how the placement of small cameras and microphones in unusual locations results in a multi-sensory confusion that draws attention from the images and places it instead on the other senses. This initiates, argue the authors, a disconnect between hearing, listening and perception.

To finish off, Anahid Kassabian draws out the main themes woven through these chapters, before outlining some new directions in recent forms of documentary audiovisuality. Her consideration of the use of sound and music in viral videos and video blogs shows how new media further problematises the audio and visual boundaries between fact and fiction.

In these chapters, then, are many divergent themes. The essays can either be read as a historical narrative that runs from the earliest forms of documentary filmmaking to the most recent varieties of new media: or they can be experienced in complementary groups; city films (Birdsall and McMahon); seascapes (Cooke, Kara and Thain, Donnelly); histories of early documentary sound (Birdsall, Deaville, Hubbert, Cohen); the relationship between voice-over and music (McMahon, Cooke and Sexton); ruminations on rural life (Donnelly and Leonard and Strachan); and contemporary forms of nonfiction filmmaking (Corner, Sexton and Kassabian).

1. Bill Nichols, *Representing* *Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), xiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Albert Maysles quoted in *Capturing Reality: The Art of Documentary* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008), 1.00’. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Rakesh Sharma quoted in ibid., 55’. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary”, in *Film Quarterly*, 36:3 (1983), 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Stan Neuman quoted in *Capturing Reality*, 1’19’’. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Michel Brault quoted in ibid., 1’19’’. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Werner Herzog, “Minnesota Declaration”, at <http://wernerherzog.com/main/52.html> (accessed 1 September 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Agnes Varda quoted in Claudia Gorbman, “Finding a Voice: Varda’s Early Travelogues”, in *Substance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*, 41:2 (2012), 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Errol Morris quoted in *Capturing Reality*, 33’30’’. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. John Grierson quoted in Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 6; Nichols, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Nichols, ibid., 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Michael Renov, “Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction”, in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Renov (Routledge, New York and London, 1993), 2-3, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Paul Arthur, “Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)”, in *Theorizing Documentary*, 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Renov, “Towards a Poetics of Documentary”, in *Theorising Documentary*, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See, for example, Ruby Rich, “Documentary Disciplines: An Introduction”, in *Cinema Journal*, 46:1 **(**2006), 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Werner Herzog’s first point states that “by dint of declaration the so-called Cinema *verité* is devoid of *verité*. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants”: Herzog and Paul Cronin (ed.), *Herzog on Herzog* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 238, 239. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Herzog and Cronin, *Herzog on Herzog*, p.301. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Herzog quoted in Dave Davies, “Filmmaker Herzog’ Grizzly Tale of Life and Death”, on *National Public Radio* (13 Jan 2006): <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4774946> (accessed 7 February 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Joshua Oppenheimer, “Background”, at <http://theactofkilling.com/background/> (accessed 10 February 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Nichols, *Representing* *Reality*, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. David Raskin quoted in Robynn J. Stilwell, “Breaking Sound Barriers: Bigelow’s Soundscapes from *The Loveless* to *Blue Steel*”, in *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor,* ed. Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond (London, Wallflower Press, 2003), 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Patricio Guzmán quoted in *Capturing Reality*, 1’01’’. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Kim Longinotto quoted in ibid., 1’01’’. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Jeffrey Ruoff, “Conventions of Sound in Documentary”, in *Cinema Journal*, 32:3 (1993), 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. The documentary film scores by Thomson and Copland are some of the only to have received scholarly attention. See for example, Neil Lerner, “Aaron Copland, Norman Rockwell, and the ‘Four Freedoms’: The Office of War Information’s Vision and Sound in *The Cummington Story*(1945),” in *Copland and His World*, ed. Carol J. Oja and Judith Tick (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 351-377; Lerner, “Damming Virgil Thomson’s Music for *The River*,” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 103-15; Lerner, *The Classical Documentary Score in American Films of Persuasion: Contexts and Case Studies, 1936-1945* (Unpublished PhD thesis: Duke University, 1997); and Claudia Widgery, *The Kinetic and Temporal Interaction of Music and Film: Three Documentaries of 1930s America* (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Maryland, 1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Gail Kubik, “Music in Documentary Films” (1945), in *The Hollywood Film Music Reader*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 148. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. John Corner, “Sounds Real: Music and Documentary”, in Popular Music, 21:3 (2002), 362. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Nichols, *Representing* *Reality*, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Corner, “Sounds Real: Music and Documentary”,362. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Box office figures at <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm> (accessed 1 September, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Oppenheimer, “Background”. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Morris quoted in *Capturing Reality*, 40’. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 108’. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 120’. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Kevin Macdonald quoted in *Capturing Reality*, 108’. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)