NEW NONFICTION FILM

ART, POETICS, AND DOCUMENTARY THEORY

DARA WALDRON

BLOOMSBURY

New Nonfiction Film

New Nonfiction Film

Art, Poetics, and Documentary Theory

Dara Waldron

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America 2018
Paperback edition first published 2020

Cover design: Eleanor Rose
Cover image: Film, The Sky Trembles and the Earth is Not Afraid and
the Two Eyes are Not Brothers (2015) © Ben Rivers and Artangel

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Waldron, Dara, author.
Title: New nonfiction film : art, poetics, and documentary theory / Dara
Waldron.
Description: New York, NY : Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. | Includes
bibliographical references and index. | Includes filmography.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018030778| ISBN 9781501322495 (hardback : alk. paper) |
ISBN 9781501322501 (epdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Documentary films–History and critcism. | Experimental
films–History and critcism.
Classification: LCC PN1995.9.D6 W25 2018 | DDC 070.1/8–dc23 LC record available at
https://lccn.loc.gov/2018030778

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-2249-5
PB: 978-1-5013-6216-3
ePDF: 978-1-5013-2250-1
eBook: 978-1-5013-2252-5

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India

To find out more about our authors and books visit
www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

For John and Mary, for Dad and Mam.
(In memory of John, in memory of Dad, 1945–2016)

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea that pivots *New Nonfiction Film* arose during a conversation with the artist and filmmaker Ben Russell in Dublin in 2014. A book of some sort would have materialized even if I had not had this conversation, but maybe not in its current form. I'd like to thank Ben for planting the seed that day. Much of the content of the book came together on the back of similar conversations and correspondences with the filmmakers whose films I explore in *New Nonfiction Film*: Ben Rivers, Pat Collins, and Gideon Koppel. I'd like to acknowledge the importance of these correspondences to thinking of nonfiction as a category of film. I thank Gideon Koppel also for the critical feedback he offered on early drafts of the book, and Ben Rivers for permission to use the shot from his film *The Sky Trembles* for the book cover.

Much of *New Nonfiction Film* took its first steps, like most academic books, at conferences and symposia. Many of those who participated in the panel debates around these events were vital to the conceptual gestation of the book—from those at *Visible Evidence* in Delhi and Toronto in 2014 and 2015, to *Screen* in Glasgow in 2014, and *Imaginaries of the Future* events in Belfast and London in 2016 and 2017.

It was during a break at *Screen* in 2014 when perusing the many books and bookstands that I bumped into my editor Katie Gallof. Katie was extremely personable, and has remained so since becoming my editor for the book. She has managed, sometimes without knowing, to keep my somewhat obsessional and neurotic tendencies under wraps. I'd like to acknowledge Katie and the Bloomsbury editorial team more generally for their support throughout the publication process.

A large section of *New Nonfiction Film* was written during the summer of 2016 when I was hiding myself away and writing was a nice release from trying personal circumstances. Friends and colleagues were a support at this time, and a number deserve special mention in this regard: Michael G. Kelly, Lorraine Neeson, Robert Purcell, Conal Lowry, Breda Lynch, and Des MacMahon. To write, however, would have been inordinately more difficult without the support of my family. My wife Ylva has shown patience and love, as have Anton and Karl. Ylva's honesty in everything is an inspiration. My sisters Sheila and Kate, my mother Mary, and my Swedish in-laws have

contributed in their own way. Thank you is maybe a small gesture, just to begin.

As an additional note, three chapters rework and extend previously published journal articles. "Nonfiction as a Speculative Mode of Inquiry: Subjectivity and the Films of Ben Rivers and Ben Russell" was published in a shorter form and with a shorter title, "Nonfiction as a Speculative Mode of Inquiry," in *Millennium Film Journal* 66 (October 2017). "The Utopian Promise: John Akomfrah's Poetics of the Archive" was originally published with the same title in the *Imaginaries of the Future 01: Bodies and Media* series in *Open Library of the Humanities* in February 2017. "The Poetic Mode, Depiction and Nonfiction: Sense-Value and Gideon Koppel's *sleep furiously*" originally appeared as "The Poetic Mode as Depiction: Sense-Value and Gideon Koppel's *sleep furiously*" in *Studies in Documentary Film*, Vol. 8 (May 2014). I'd like to thank the respective editors of these journals: Grahame Weinbren, Kenneth White (MJF), and Deane Williams (SIDF) for permission to reprint these articles in an altered form. I'd finally like to acknowledge the Lisson Gallery in London, along with John Akomfrah, for kind permission to use stills from John's films, as well as the acknowledged filmmakers Ben Rivers, Ben Russell, Pat Collins, and Gideon Koppel for permission to reproduce images from their films in this book.

Introduction

New nonfiction film

In April of 2014 I sat on a panel that was given over to discussing the subject of "hybrid documentary" as part of *Darklight* Festival, a yearly Dublin film festival that celebrates new directions in experimental film. The theme for 2014 was "hybrid documentary" and the title of the panel was, somewhat serendipitously, "What's Up Doc?" At the time, I had just published an essay on Gideon Koppel's 2008 feature *sleep furiously* (Koppel, 2008), and was particularly sensitive to the topic under discussion. *sleep furiously* is a film that throws into relief the very categories that appear best suited to critically evaluating the film itself, many of which come from documentary theory, and could well be established as a hybrid form, some way between a work of art and a documentary. Many of the panelists that day were artists, and many, although not uncomfortable with the use of the term documentary as a descriptor for their work, believed themselves (nonetheless) to be working outside the conventional parameters of the form. Many were adamant that they employed fictional processes in the making of their films even when making use of filmmaking methods specifically aligned with the documentary tradition. Or, as some said, they utilized methods of film inquiry specifically understood, within the context of cinematic history, as non-fiction.

British contemporary artists Ian Forsyth and Jane Pollard, two of the panel members, were in the early stages of promoting a just released feature-length portrait film about the Australian singer Nick Cave, *20,000 Days on Earth* (Pollock and Forsyth, 2014), as was Ben Russell, who had codirected, with Ben Rivers, the feature-length *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness* (Russell and Rivers, 2013) that was doing the circuits at festivals around the world. The reception given to both films offers some justification for Forsyth's, Pollard's, and Russell's inclusion in the panel, given that the hybrid, which may well qualify as a mongrolization of the documentary process, is and has been a common term of reference in the critical evaluation of both films.

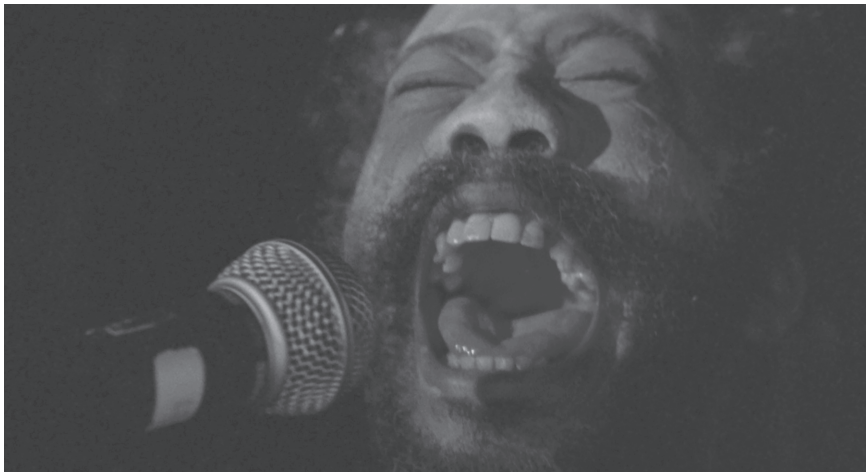

FIGURE 0.1 A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness: *Close-up of Robert A. A. Lowe as he screams into the microphone*

Nonetheless, both films have been nominated or have received awards in categories given over to documentary film, whether at *Sundance* or at other significant festivals. The film *20,000 Days* received the world cinema award in documentary at *Sundance*, even though it has been described as everything from a "mock rock doc" to a "fictitious portrait," while *A Spell*—which is also a film concerning a singer musician though lesser known than Cave, Robert A. A. Lowe—won the New Vision award at the Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival, while it was nominated for the Silver Award for Best Feature Documentary at the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in 2014. Ben Kenigsberg, writing in the *New York Times*, praised *A Spell* for its accessibility, calling it "hypnotic on an intuitive level," yet, at the same time, made little or no reference to its accreditation as a documentary production, a film that documents the wanderings of an American avant-garde musician across the plains of Northern Europe (Kenigsberg, 2014). John Semley, in *Slant*, however, called it a "docu-fictional" exploration, even if neglecting to theorize the properties of the "docu-fictional,"

> When Lowe's character breaks from this space, escaping into the night alone, en route to who knows where, it underscores *Spell*'s central concern: that utopia is a construction, an experience that is made up, not found but created. All social formations are possessive of their own pleasures and problems. But each may contain moments of rare gratification and meaning. In the film, Rivers and Russell prove themselves able to sculpt (or maybe even just reveal) these pockets of meaning. It makes their docu-fictional exploration of community, seclusion, and rejection feel like that rarest of things: a gift. (Semley, 2014)

The panel discussion that day at *Darklight* was purposefully concerned with evaluating the docu-fictional trajectories of much experimental film today, with discussion points on ethics and aesthetics, truth and reality, in the context of cultural production classified as hybrid to any particular degree. A screening of *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer, 2014) and a Q & A with its director, Joshua Oppenheimer, who had been at the receiving end of much criticism for working with the perpetrators of genocide in present-day Indonesia, kick-started the festival, and many of the issues that were raised made their way into the panel discussion. Is a film ethically compromised when the filmmaker has spoken about employing fictional strategies when engaging with the life of a real person: a subject? Taking the subject, as opposed to a film character, to be a subject precisely because they are the same in "real life" as in the film (whether the subject is Nick Cave, Robert A. A. Lowe, or, in Oppenheimer's case, the perpetrators of genocide). Forsyth and Pollock spoke about the challenges faced when working with Cave to script a film purposively "about" Cave, and the fictional strategies used to explore the subject's persona as something perplexing and complex, to get at the deeper truth of Cave within the constraints of the portrait film. I spoke about my conversations with Gideon Koppel concerning the history of documentary. I mentioned Koppel's admission—if it should qualify as such—during a Q & A in 2011 that much of *sleep furiously*, which has also been the recipient of numerous accolades within the documentary field, had been scripted.

I spoke about the disdain shown by many members of the audience when Koppel mentioned that his mother, Pip, who appears in the film's opening sequence teaching schoolchildren to work with clay, had once worked in the school but that the sequence in itself, scripted in advance, was, for want of a better word, staged. It seemed that the common understanding, and I use "common" here because the audience for the Q & A was made up of members of the public as well as students, consisted of a clear distinction, understood as a boundary, between "staged" and real, as if the opposition was anything but arbitrarily defined. And such was the assumption around this that many of the audience members, when I spoke with them afterward, had altered their opinion of the film in light of this admission on Koppel's part. Having assumed that the film they had watched was a documentary feature, many were under the assumption that Koppel had transgressed a fundamental code of documentary filmmaking, and had therefore manipulated the real for aesthetic gain. However, it is worth pointing out, as I was adamant to do that day, that Koppel has never proposed that his film be received as a documentary, when documentary film is set in the context of critical definitions that make clear the distinction between staged and real.

The title for the *Darklight* panel, "What's Up Doc?" is an obvious pun on Bugs Bunny's infamous retort, soundbite even, and is meant to reflect the emerging hybridity of films that, coming to fruition in recent years, makes reference to a crisis in and around documentary filmmaking, documentary

that is being critically challenged by forms of becoming that mongrelize the genre from within. In most cases, or at least many cases, these forms are taken up by artists. However, when I mentioned the research I had undertaken in *sleep furiously*, and my own discussions with Koppel about a history of cinema of which documentary, or the actuality film (as it was known in its heyday), is a formative part of the avant-garde and therefore art canon, I wondered whether certain occurrences and trends within recent art documentary can be understood as a return to earlier filmmaking practices. As opposed to mongrelized hybridizations of the documentary form, I spoke about the origins of documentary in the avant-garde. Documentary—as a type of film—originates with filmmakers like Joris Ivens and Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, who celebrated a genuinely artistic medium that rivals other mediums of art practice. Ivens's masterpiece *The Bridge* (1928) illustrates this point. *The Bridge* is a short film concerned with a newly constructed vertical-lift railway bridge in the city of Rotterdam, revealing the bridge from many different angles while exploring the newfound medium of film in its capacity to "portray" the modernist spectacle of the bridge in the new machine age, of which cinema is an incendiary and formative part. Hence, the camera, as a product of the machine age, is demonstrated helping to explore the magnitude and spectacular engineering of a bridge that is also a product of this age. The film is as much about cinema as the bridge it celebrates. As Ian Mundell notes,

> The film announces its agenda from the very start, with a presentation of three different views of the camera itself, as if in a technical drawing. It then proceeds to examine the bridge from all angles, up and down its towers, along the rails, in amongst the winding gear. But alongside this inevitable, almost abstract mechanical process is a story: a train is speeding towards the city; it must stop and wait for the bridge to be raised; when the bridge descends, it can continue on its way. For all his analysis, Ivens cannot give himself up entirely to the abstract. (Mundell, 2005)

Mundell doesn't zone in on the abstraction of a train crashing through the bridge, with the steam rising from its engine, and the film drawing to an enthralling conclusion. A set of unusually angled shots of the train pummeling at an incredible speed along the bridge is a sudden almost-dramatic twist that suggests some kind of potential disaster is about to occur at the end, only for the train to travel over the rail bridge, and the technology to function as it ought. At this point, and as the film concludes, there is a short abstract shot of a white background with an animated black square that grows bigger and smaller in time. The animation makes direct reference to Kazimir Malevich's masterpiece *Black Square* (1915). *Black Square* is celebrated as a quintessential moment in the history of modernist avant-garde painting, a kind of ground zero in the painterly etching out of the formal boundaries of medium specific artworks. Irrespective of what the painting actually

purports to mean, or the discourse around its reception as an event that marks the emergence of abstraction as a genre of modernist painting, Ivens's decision to reference the painting like this says something of where he situates *The Bridge*. While on the one hand he likens the formal adventures undertaken in the film, by way of unpacking the medium specificity of film, to Malevich's undertaking in *Black Square*, on the other he gives a narrative context to Malevich's somewhat mysterious paintings, which nonetheless demonstrates the affinity his aesthetic adventures have with the modernist avant-garde of which Malevich is a pervasive force. The point in mentioning this, in turning however briefly to this classic of the documentary tradition, is that Ivens, who went on to forge a remarkable career across activist-based reportage documentary, used the film to demonstrate the aesthetic sensibility he shares with Malevich and, in doing so, to identify the specific qualities of the medium, irrespective of its status as fiction or not.

Koppel had mentioned the 1920s avant-garde when situating his own formal concerns in the production of *sleep furiously* in relation to documentary history that day. When responding to the question "What's Up Doc?" as part of the panel at *Darklight*, however, I made reference to this as a way of understanding the poetic, call it fictional for want of a better word, underpinnings of a tradition of filmmaking that has, arguably from its inception, been prey to the kind of hybridity that *The Bridge* demonstrates. For *The Bridge* is a film that, while trying to make specific—in the act of making—its own formal and filmic principles, does so by way of an engaged hybridity: in this case a mutual becoming with the medium specific field of abstract painting. It was only in the years after *The Bridge*, with Grierson's impact and the consolidation of documentary as a type of filmmaking regulated by its own ethical and industrial codes that an industry emerged in which the documentary form was streamlined as a result. The relationship between the documentary tradition and the art-making tradition may well have changed in this time, but it was never broken as such. There was never a significant moment when art and documentary were estranged, when the alignment between film and the avant-garde espoused by European filmmakers such as Ivens and Vertov was broken. There was, as we all recognized that day, an increasing regulation of the documentary film in industry from which emerged certain codes and principles of filmmaking described as "ethical" and an observational approach that included, at least after Grierson, shaping the actual world objectively as opposed to staging a world to fit a particular view of it.

Following the panel discussion that day, on which Ben Russell sat, I was fortunate enough to attend a screening of Russell's and Ben Rivers's collaborative feature-length *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness*, followed by a Q & A with Russell, followed again by a dinner where I was able to discuss the film with Russell in more detail. While the film left an incredible mark on me and for a myriad of reasons, mostly because of the tempo and tripartite temporal structure and the relative silence of the protagonist/

subject, who moves across Scandinavia, I left the dinner intrigued more than anything by Russell's admonition that both he and Rivers, two filmmakers whose films take up a considerable portion of this book, regarded the film as "nonfiction," but not necessarily as documentary. Schooled to think of both categories as interchangeable, as signifying the same "thing," I mulled over this comment for some time, on whether it was simply semantics on Ben's part, or whether there was an argument to be made that nonfiction can be ordained as different to documentary.

The seeds for the present study were born during this discussion. I began, in this moment, to think of nonfiction as a category of art that was caught in the crack between the world of cinema and the world of art making. The interest that I fostered in certain films engaged fundamentally with the real, or at least claiming the real in the sense Brian Winston accords to the documentary impulse, had grown out of an interest in the questions posed to the documentary tradition in these films (Winston, 1995, 246). I left the dinner table to take a plane to Stockholm, and was intrigued by the idea that my interests, which seem to sway between fiction and non-fiction, might converge around what is called nonfiction. I started then to think of this category as a category of art, and the artists working in nonfiction as artists who are trying to get at the relationship between art and truth that goes right back to Heidegger's writings on art.

This concern, however, had grown in tandem with my own interest in the filmmaking notes kept by legendary French filmmaker Robert Bresson,[1] who is an integral reference point in this book and in the new nonfiction film as it is proposed here. My interest in the aphoristic notes Bresson kept is premised on the fact they grew out of a practice bound to a type of filmmaking that sought, to access, via fiction, the truth. Bresson's notes are about cinematography, but he writes about how the cinematographer differs from the dramatist. His emphasis is on the actor as a modèle, a use of actors that differs from dramatic storytelling. Although I explore Bresson's focus on the fictional in Chapter 1 of the following text, it was only after the discussion with Russell that I started to consider my interest in films that took the relationship between fiction and non-fiction from a Bressonian or post-Bressonian position to task that weren't straight up fiction. Nonfiction, not "non-fiction," was something I began to think about in relation to art, generally, but also to art as I saw it in the context of Bresson's contribution to cinema. Could there be a "cinema of nonfiction"? Or a "new nonfiction film" that aspired to the category of art, taking issue with strategies of documentary?

It is not surprising then that Russell has pointed to the influence of Bresson on the preproduction, writing, and casting of *A Spell*, in relation to the aesthetic decisions he and Ben Rivers, his codirector, had taken. This decision is premised on pushing the non-fictional subject to its limits. As such, Robert A. A. Lowe plays himself but is never referred to as Lowe, and doesn't speak at any length in the film. The subject/character dichotomy—a definitive axis

in film—is important in this regard (as is the term "social actor," used by Bill Nichols to describe subjects who act as themselves within the framework of documentary production) (Nichols, 1991, 42). Russell specifically mentions the modèle as inspiration. Bresson would come to rest his filmmaking practice on casting nonprofessional actors in fictional roles, so it is noteworthy that Russell and Rivers reference the fact that Lowe is actually playing himself in *A Spell*. He is a modèle. But he is a modèle of himself. Rivers talks about using film to create a reality in and of itself. Speaking in an interview around the time of *A Spell*'s release, he makes the point:

> It's both actual and fictional, in the same way that Jake is actual and fictional in *Two Years at Sea*. This is what Ben and I both do, we mix actual situations with things we need, in order to make the film that we want. It's about setting up the right conditions to make not a representation, but something that exists on the screen in and of itself. We lived with the people for almost a month so we could find the material we needed. (Fitzgibbon, 2014)

That a film documents reality and is fictional too is of course a paradox. Yet there is no doubt a structural relationship between fiction and non-fiction found in practically all forms of film (irrespective of whether they're called documentary or something else). Rivers's admission that neither he or Russell are interested in representation is vital to understanding documentary considered as inadequate for addressing what they actually do in their filmmaking practice, but also for understanding why Russell prefers the term nonfiction as a critical descriptor for *A Spell*. I believe that representation, although not the essential concern of the new nonfiction film as I consider it here within the framework of art and poetics, cannot be dismissed tout court, and the sense of existing in the cracks between actual and fictional makes the work produced valuable on an aesthetic level. *A Spell* might not be a representation of Robert A. A. Lowe, but neither can we dismiss outright the "fact" that Robert A. A. Lowe is on screen doing things he normally does. It is this abiding conflict, "rift," that is the point of analysis, turning to Rivers and Russell in the first chapter of this book, a chapter that theoretically positions their films under the title of the new nonfiction film.

A certain ratio (of negation)

The word "non-fiction" is characterized by the hyphen that comes between "non" and "fiction" but is often "mistakenly" spelt as nonfiction. Nonfiction is a word that suggests a cancelling, as opposed to rejection of fiction as a structural component. In literature, however, the spelling nonfiction seems to carry more weight as the term of choice. Eric Barnouw's much-referenced

historical compendium of documentary, the book titled *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (1993), gives some indication as to why non-fiction and documentary are interchangeable terms. The underlying assumption is that documentary and non-fiction are the same thing, or that although documentary can exist in multiple realms at once—photography, legal texts, official paperwork—Barnouw's title has, as a raison d'etre, the manifestation of the document in what is otherwise known, as he indicates in the title, as non-fiction film. However, taking this assumption to task is not just a semantic issue, for if we think of "nonfiction" as signifying a cancellation or negation of fiction, we can perhaps alter slightly our understanding of this history to include more experimental forms. We can understand how the use of fictional methodologies built around filming real life can help to get at the truth of the actuality in question, or at least our understanding of an actuality that is always—in some sense—mediated when presented in any film form.

My concern in the following is "nonfiction" as a category of artistic production that can help theoretically position certain "experiments" undertaken in moving image in recent years that engage the three areas of art, poetics, and documentary theory. From a semantic point of view, I'm interested in the idea that Russell seems to get at that "fiction" is actually included in the word "nonfiction" in such a way that it can be read as to suggest someone is saying "non" to fiction just as it muscles its way in.

The book is premised on my own conviction then that films—by directors such as Gideon Koppel, Abbas Kiarostami, Chantal Akerman, John Akomfrah, Pat Collins to name but a few discussed in what follows—are best classified under the category of the new nonfiction film or the cinema of nonfiction, and so the book explores the advances made by these films in the area of art appreciation or understanding. Just one conviction fleshed over the early stages of this book is that "nonfiction" (as opposed to "non-fiction" as theorized from the outset) can be understood primarily as a form of art production that advances the poetics of moving image in relation to film that engages with real people in real situations. Hence, when I refer to documentary theory, I am making reference to a body of knowledge that has evolved in Film Studies and Art Theory around the theory of filming real life truthfully. So, it is important from the outset to note that the book's origins are in the field of the documentary arts although its final contribution may be to art and poetics. The reason this is so is that the body of film that is explored under the umbrella of new nonfiction film is best understood—in my opinion—as a cluster of films as opposed to a specific genre. My concern in addressing this cluster is to begin a conversation that will then contribute to the discourse around film poetics and art. The simple aim of the book as I describe, then, is to expand the discussion around these forms at present, so that they still exist in the margins but are not caught in the cracks.

When, for example, over the course of analysis here (as in the discussion of time in Chapter 3), I turn to award-winning filmmaker and artist John Akomfrah, who has spent most of his working life involved in making films that grow out of the archive, and who has a practice that deals inordinately with the limits of representation (or the potentiality of the archival image to usher forth a coming into being,) I am actually, in this context, exploring systems of representation, challenging the hegemonic means of rendering what's real. Akomfrah himself speaks about the anti-hegemonic nature of his practice, working individually or as a member of the various collectives he has formed, as a rupturing of the given, a kind of inquiry that involves bringing into being, calling forth what is to come, as opposed to simply documenting what is already there. Calling this coming into being truth is a problem in that truth more often than not depends on who is claiming it. The German filmmaker Werner Herzog, for example, rallies against an accountant's truth in his Minnesota Declaration,[2] a text that articulates somewhat confrontationally (when working with real-life subjects in actual situations) his concerns with the ecstatic truth of film in general. Herzog claims,

> There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization. (Herzog, 1995)

Herzog and Akomfrah, Koppel, Kiarostami, and to some extent all the filmmakers discussed in this book, have an unorthodox relationship with "documentary," and are often seen as formative members of the community, but something of "black sheep" within that community. All have, in one way or another, challenged the conventional understanding of film as formulated within, for example, the verité tradition Herzog takes as his point of contention, and all, I argue in this book, try to operate on the "deeper strata" that Herzog calls the "mysterious and elusive" of the poetic. New nonfiction, as I argue in what follows, is tied at the hip to non-fiction and documentary forms, even if its fundamental rhetoric and concern is to channel, as Herzog mentions, a deeper truth borne of the experimentation central to an art practice. Herzog, however, being the contrarian that he is, is also loathe to call himself an artist, preferring to use the term artisan, which brings with it all the medieval associations of the guild. Yet Herzog's concerns with self-classification as a filmmaker, artist, or artisan raises significant issues for what follows in this book. Practically all the filmmakers addressed can be said to navigate between the gallery and the cinema as a setting for their films. It is worth pointing out that galleries have become, in recent years, spaces for the exhibition of independent cinema, given that a significant number of independent cinemas have closed across the Western world.

"The 1990s," Maeve Connolly notes,

> witnessed a resurgence of interest in cinema and the cinematic on the part of artists and curators alike, evidenced by the prevalence of moving image installations within the gallery. Some of these works directly reference the history of film, but others could be described as cinematic because they display notably high production values, involve the use of large scale projection, recall the physical spaces of cinema through installation design, or involved scripted or directed action in front of the camera. (Connolly, 2012, 46)

Connolly is writing specifically about artist film, and more pertinently artists who work with moving image in dialogue with the history of cinema (and by extension, documentary). The past twenty years have witnessed an even greater cross-pollination of cinematic forms in the arts, so that filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami have been invited to install in gallery spaces. In the case of such artists, the gallery has come calling as a direct result of a prestige or prominence within cinema. Chantal Akerman has showed her back catalogue as part of a solo exhibition at the Tate Modern in London recently while Ben Rivers and Ben Russell are both adept in navigating the art and film worlds: film festivals and the black box otherwise known as the gallery. *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness* came in two forms: a cinematic release and a release that formed the backdrop for gallery installation. More recently, Rivers released his Moroccan-based feature-length *The Sky Trembles and the Earth Is Not Afraid and the Two Eyes Are Not Brothers* (Rivers, 2015), at the same time as a major exhibition opened at the BBC in London in the summer of 2015 that reflected in various different ways on the context in which that work was made. The exhibition, in this sense, served as a kind of bridge between the setting for the film and all the research involved in shooting in Morocco, and the cinematic release itself. One of the reasons for turning to the films I do in this book under the rubric of nonfiction is to come to an understanding of the relationship between art cinema, contemporary art, poetics, and documentary theory, around the ever-changing concept of film.

Acts of experimentation …

There are other reasons for titling this book *New Nonfiction Film*, though, which are important to emphasize. There is the sense that the innovation and formal endeavor of all the filmmakers discussed has, as its sine qua non, a concern with the impulse to experiment with film form. But the film form in question is not easily categorized as fiction or non-fiction. In fact, nonfiction