

***New Nonfiction Film: Art, Poetics, and Documentary Theory*, Dara Waldron**

Reviewed by

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Originally published in 2018, Dara Waldron's *New Nonfiction Film: Art, Poetics, and Documentary Theory* weaves together perceptive, close analyses of varied films, which each traverse the overlapping subjects described in the subtitle. Released in paperback in January 2020, this relatively short and now affordable academic publication explores Waldron's concept of 'new nonfiction'. Discussion draws from documentary theory with occasional recourse to art and philosophy. Reflecting recent turns in documentary studies, the book contributes a pluralised adaptation of the long-established term 'non-fiction' that focuses more on films in and of themselves as opposed to using filmmakers or documentary forms as modes of classification. Waldron builds his concept of 'new nonfiction' using what he terms 'the three S's' (12-15) – subject, story, and sense – which form sibilant touchstones for the seven case study chapters on works by John Akomfrah, Chantal Akerman, Pat Collins, Abbas Kiarostami, Gideon Koppel, Ben Rivers and Ben Russell. Traversing genres between cinema, documentary, art and installation, Waldron's case studies connect with other sub-genres, such as the essay film, or the interconnecting disciplines of experimental film/video and artists' moving image.

During the course of his descriptive analyses, Waldron posits new nonfiction as a 'speculative mode of enquiry' (24-27) that challenges the forms and formats of documentary (13). This mode involves the fictive treatment of real subjects according to three criteria, the first of which outlines that the subject, 'as opposed to the actor' (25), is asked to perform as a 'modèle' – adapting a term from writings on filmmaking by director Robert Bresson.¹ As

Waldron writes, Bresson believed that a cinematographer differed from a dramatist, and takes up Bresson's 'emphasis [...] on the actor as modèle, a use of actors that differs from dramatic storytelling' (6). The second of Waldron's criterion, outlines how the director/artist 'speculates as to the "character" of that subject, while entering into a collaborative creative process' with them, through which they co-create the film/work and present an observational-style version of the character/subject, a story that is not quite truth, not quite fiction (25). Finally, a 'dialectical relationship opens up between [the] director and this subject/character as modèle, which involves the mutual recognition and appreciation of the aesthetic aims of the project' (25). New nonfiction is, according to Waldron, a method of making and a speculative modality unique to this fictive portrait.

Early chapters explore the subject, which as an idea is rooted in the practices of British artist Ben Rivers and American artist Ben Russell via their collaboration on *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness* (2013). Subsequent chapters examine the concept of story and sense in relation to time, via the 'utopian promise' of *Handsworth Songs* (1986), directed by British artist John Akomfrah as part of Black Audio Film Collective and his more recent film, *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013). Two central, longer chapters unpack 'nonfiction' 'before' and 'after' the work of the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, examining the blurred boundaries between documentary reality and fiction in *Close-Up* (1990) and the *Koker trilogy*, which includes *Where is the Friend's Home?* (1987), *Life and Nothing More...* (1992) and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). Using Kiarostami as a central pivot, the discussion then examines the superbly fictive meta-documentary *Kiarostami: The Art of Living* (2002) by Irish artists Pat Collins and Fergus Daly, in which Kiarostami participated. Following this, Waldron discusses the obscure concept of sense less successfully, but this section is nevertheless interesting due to the detailed close-descriptions of both the single screen version of *D'est* (1993) by Belgian artist/filmmaker Chantal Akerman (the only female practitioner explored),

and *sleep furiously* (2008) by British artist/filmmaker Gideon Koppel. Within all these contrasting examples, 'story' plays a significant role, though this S is lesser discussed than sense. Finally, Waldron outlines that the three S's are a nodal cluster and that when taken 'in this way, "the new nonfiction film" emerges as a refined sensibility, an intense cinematic rhythm that comes out of scepticism towards forms of documentary seen to engender hegemonic relationships between director and subject, knowledge and sense, story and reality, and finally, time and space' (188).

Rather than focussing on the expanded historical context surrounding these works, Waldron's criteria and analyses are refracted through the frame of his personal impressions, including the death of Kiarostami in 2016 when Waldron was writing the book (see Chapter 5), and Akomfrah's keynote speech at the documentary conference 'Visible Evidence' in 2015 (see Chapter 3), along with other anecdotal episodes that anchor the book's perspective to the documentary film festival circuit. This industry-oriented lens of personal encounter gives the overall study a strange temporality all of its own, enhanced by the fact that several chapters were previously published as articles, and reflected by the varied artworks mentioned and analysed. Waldron constantly refers to the context in which he writes, i.e., when these core examples were either made (the late 2000s/early 2010s) or were the subject of revivals, solo exhibitions, screenings or retrospectives. In this way, *New Nonfiction Film* offers a snapshot of sorts, encapsulating a wider moment that re-examined 'documentary across disciplines' – to use the title of another interconnected study, also published in 2016, just as Waldron was writing this series of new nonfictional studies.ⁱⁱ

The chapters adapt discourses from well-known innovators of documentary and avant-garde cinema, whose early experimentation with mediums, form and spectatorship reflect the artist/artwork studies. The book builds upon Bresson's notes on the concept of the 'modèle' (25) as also discussed/applied by Rivers and Russell in their portrait of black

metal musician Robert A. A Lowe in *A Spell to Ward of the Darkness*. The collaborative ways through which filmmakers and subject construct an alternative self as 'modèle' in the latter film, are examined in this first chapter through a rich comparative framework that puts the extended project of River's portrait of the character Jake in *Two Years at Sea* (2011) in discourse with Russell's depiction of a ritual/journey by two brothers in *Let Each One Go Where He May* (2009). Waldron unpacks the interplay between filmmaker and fictionalised subject in each filmic portrait, outlining that the active participation of the subject in collaboration with the filmmaker(s) is fundamental to new nonfiction. In this way, makers and subjects consciously co-create a fictive, aestheticized portrait as opposed to an observational account of the self. This is the subject as 'modèle' to which Waldron returns in subsequent chapters.

By positioning these works in methodological dialogue with one another, and expanding this to show the exchange between the artists and their subjects in constructing a modèle (of the subject/person of/in the film), Waldron indicates that despite this seeming structure, the criteria for new nonfiction are adaptive to other documentary/works made around the same time. For this reason, the book connects to wider contextual examples, such as the feature *20,000 Days on Earth* (2014), another relevant fictive portrait of musician Nick Cave by UK artists Ian Forsyth and Jane Pollard. The introduction draws directly from a panel on hybrid documentary, in which Waldron, Forsyth and Pollard, along with Russell, participated. As well as these live discourses, the book charts a wider network of longer-form films and artworks, listed in a filmography at the back of the book. Such comparisons within chapters and across the book echo the film festival context of programming to which Waldron alludes. In this way, the variety of works examined indicates a way of comparing works often characterised by their uniqueness and subjectivity, and which tend to be considered individually.

As indicated by the dates of the many works mentioned in *New Nonfiction Film*, these methods are in fact, far from new, with dates coalescing in hotspots that are located at the transition between the 1980s and 1990s as well as the mid-2010s, and which are often associated with the 'essay film' or artists' filmmaking. This sense of what I would call 'non-new nonfiction' is reiterated by the section on the complex temporalities that converge in Akomrah's works and the other central chapters, positioning nonfiction before and after Kiarostami. Here, the book pivots on interrogations of two key, innovative earlier works, namely Black Audio Collective's *Handsworth Songs*, which was made in 1986 and Kiarostami's *Close Up* of 1990. Although these examples were made and distributed in two very different earlier contexts, they are placed in dialogue with the more recent fictive portraits of/by Akomrah and Kiarostami, and the immediate context in which Waldron writes. Through discussion of Akomrah's innovative use of archival montage, Waldron identifies how *Handsworth Songs*, which was not seen by a huge international audience when it was first made – and which examines media depictions of the race riots that swept through the Birmingham area of Handsworth in September 1985 – gained new relevance in the wake of rioting in London in 2011. Akomrah's *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013) has a historical focus on cultural theorist Stuart Hall, a long-term friend of Akomrah's. This evocative 'project' intercuts portraits of/by Hall, using a method that draws from the disruptive interjections of jazz music, to examine Hall's writings and work with the *New Left Review* and the Open University, and which developed the critical frameworks of Cultural Studies (and which also directly influenced works by Black Audio). These touchstones connect Waldron's study to much earlier histories, but also to the critical methods that have influenced the artists whose works are examined. Although it is not stated quite so explicitly, the exploration of mixed temporalities (in which histories coexist in the present) in this chapter, the section on Kiarostami, and the chapter on Akerman's *D'Est*, are

productively channelled through analyses of the utopian promise of the futures envisaged in the past.

Chapter four explores Kiarostami's *Close-Up*, with Waldron describing how this meta-portrait 'muddle(s) the line between documentary and its other' (74). This early example of docufiction portrays the real-life trial of a man who impersonated the filmmaker Mohsden Makhmalbaf and forms the first core example of Waldron's collaborative 'modèle'. As mentioned previously, this work was made in 1989/1990, an important date for concepts such as 'the end of history' and the past/future temporalities to which Waldron alludes.ⁱⁱⁱ This sense of shifting time underlies many of the examples in this book but it is not quite explicitly addressed nor directly connected to the word 'new' in Waldron's new nonfiction, nor the earlier origins of the works, and the subjects of the works discussed.

As Waldron discusses, after *Close Up*, Kiarostami gained notoriety as a director, a situation which directly informs the layers of meta-fictive interaction examined in Collins and Daly's *The Art of Living*, in which Kiarostami visits the Aran Islands, also the subject of Robert J. Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934). The fact that many of the works selected by Waldron channel multiple mythologies – of documentary form as a form, as well as those perpetuated by its creation and these directors/artists – problematises the framework for 'new nonfiction', as the chapters and examples look back to moments 25 years earlier, before switching back to 2016. Though Waldron does not articulate it in this way, this book reminds us that these methodologies have an ability to be constantly renewed with relevance to future contexts. By contextualising encounters with works in 2016, Waldron aligns the past with the present.

Art is, of course, fundamental to the methodological practices of the filmmakers explored by Waldron, particularly Akomfrah, Akerman and Rivers, who each use innovative multi-screen displays and sound in installation projects or versions of their works. As an art

form that involves research responsive exhibitions and installations, the ways in which these artists use multi-screen, multi-perspective subjects and settings is significant to any consideration of their approach to filmmaking. While Akerman's expanded installation works in relation to the standalone cut of her documentary film *D'est* are mentioned, the expanded contexts in which Rivers and Akomfrah and others create and communicate are not. Such expanded approaches to research, subjects and self-hood utilise varied forms of narrative presentation, innovative ways of engaging the viewer that are audio-visual and spatial, and which require non-conventional approaches to storytelling, as touched upon in Waldron's discussion of both 'story' and 'sense', and would provide rich ground for future development of 'nonfiction' as a concept.

Another important and productive aspect of the works explored in this study is their innovative use of sound. The musician 'modèles' in many of the works could be productively expanded in relation to the concept of 'sense', for example, Nick Cave or Robert A. Lowe, or the score of Koppel's *sleep furiously*, depicting a fictionalised Welsh town over the course of a year, which involved a collaboration with musician Aphex Twin. Although Waldron is alert to the image, exploring montage and visual concatenation, there are only occasional details about music and sound, a missed opportunity in the book. It would be interesting and add further depth to the study to expand the concept of the modèle to examine sonic-spaces and selfhood, particularly in the section on Collin's *Silence* (2012), which follows sound-recordist and real-life screenwriter Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde as he revisits his native Ireland, and is discussed in Chapter 5 in the context of Kiarostami's *The Art of Living*. Sound is not only fundamental to many of these works, it is an integral and transformative modality through which these works reassemble multiple elements, and attending to it further would develop the concept of the 'remix' (and renewal) which Waldron

mentions in discussion of Akomfrah and his long-term collaboration with artist and composer Trevor Mathison.

Whether Waldron's sense of newness is descriptive or prescriptive, applications of the term non-fiction in recent years are often connected to art. The annual 'Open City Documentary Festival' (Open City Docs) in London uses the by-line, 'The Art of Non-Fiction', indicating the wider, sometimes missing contexts, where this intersection between art, documentary theory and non-fiction combine, and which could really expand and develop this study. Where early discussions of art in *New Nonfiction Film* refer to creativity more broadly, and aesthetics are associated with poetic experimental modes, theory or an unconventional attitude to form, the conclusion refers more explicitly to recent turns in art, making productive links to dialogues about artistic practice as research, and research as a creative practice. However, the close relationship between research and practice has always informed documentary as a discipline.^{iv} In art, practice-based research started to emerge in the 1980s/90s, around the time many of the earlier examples revisited by Waldron were made, for example in the work of Akerman and Akomfrah. Though fundamental to Waldron's conclusion, discussion of research as practice would have provided a more robust context for the uncertain definitions of the three S's at the start of the book, which in some ways ends where it should begin. Indeed, Waldron's concluding remarks situate this study as the starting point for further discussions. He ends with key ideas from philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, whose text *Specters of Marx* is significant to the temporality, to the before and after, of Akerman, Akomfrah and Kiarostami. Waldron then discusses Martin Heidegger's notion of the context of a work of art, which 'distinguishes the work of art from the mere equipmentality of equipment, so as to recognize a "world" thought here as the "real," nourished by that which exceeds it as earth' (188). These ideas add depth to the notions of fiction and reality, in particular, Waldron's use of

Hubert L. Dreyfus, who ‘considers art in this Heideggerian sense as a “model of” and a “model for” reality (188).

New Nonfiction Film includes valuable and informative analyses, adding insightful dimensions to scholarship on the works it explores and moving towards a more concentrated analysis and definition of interdisciplinary, and semi-fictional subjects in artworks that use techniques more usually associated with documentary. From the perspective of art, *New Nonfiction Film* describes methods that are not-so-new to artists’ moving image, but significantly, the study boldly seeks a more exacting language for how we approach the art of ‘nonfiction’.

ⁱ Originally published in 1975 in French, Bresson’s *Notes on the Cinematographer* was published in English in 1977. It includes short notes on filmmaking, made throughout his life (b.1901 – d.1999), including the use of non-professional actors.

ⁱⁱ Edited by Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg, *Documentary Across Disciplines* brings together interconnected dialogues from the Berlin Documentary Forum between 2010 and 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ The phrase the ‘end of history’ here refers to the title and date of a text by Francis Fukuyama, originally published in 1989, which was also the same year as the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

^{iv} In 2019 Open City Docs included a panel entitled ‘Research as Creative Practice’, *Open City Documentary Festival* (blog). Available at: <https://opencitylondon.com/events/research-as-creative-practice/> (Accessed 11 November 2019).

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FIGURE DETAILS

Cover of Dara Waldron, *New Nonfiction Film: Art Poetics and Documentary Theory* (Bloomsbury Academic 2018/2020). Cover design by Eleanor Rose. Cover image from Ben Rivers, *The Sky Trembles and the Earth is Not Afraid and the Two Eyes are Not Brothers* (2015). Copyright Ben Rivers and Artangel. Image courtesy of Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.