



REALITY FRICTIONS

by Steve F. Anderson

Press Notes

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ABOUT

Reality Frictions explores the intersection of fact and fiction on the screens of Hollywood, highlighting moments when images, people or events from the real world intrude on the cinematic one.

In an age when generative AI and synthetic imaging provoke anxieties about our ability to tell the difference between real and fake, Reality Frictions demonstrates that spectators have long traversed the boundaries of believability, developing nuanced skills for navigating the pleasures and paradoxes that emerge when reality and fiction collide.

Richly illustrated with clips from more than 100 movies and TV shows, Reality Frictions is an entertaining, but also serious, investigation of media's role in revealing truth and making history.

Set against the historical backdrop of the current fascination with machine learning and generative AI, Reality Frictions also touches on the phenomena of deepfake videos, "latent histories" and image synthesis that reveal the reciprocal relationship of human and machine vision.

Reality Frictions takes a self-reflexive look at the strategies used by filmmakers to strengthen — or sometime challenge - their own truth claims. From background appearances by real people in the stories of their own lives to historical reenactments, Reality Frictions will forever change your perception of films that are "based on a true story."



Director Steve F. Anderson is a filmmaker, media artist and writer working at the intersection of media, history and technology. A former documentary editor for National Geographic and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Steve founded the public media archive Critical Commons in 2008. He has written or edited books on media historiography, technologies of vision and popular documentary. An award-winning media artist, his work has been exhibited in the US and abroad and his video essays have appeared in InTransition, American Literature, Visible Language, and Illuminance. He received an MFA in Film and Video from CalArts and a PhD in Film, Literature and Culture from USC. He currently teaches documentary and digital media arts in the Film School at UCLA. His most recent feature documentary Reality Frictions premiered at the Madrid International Film Festival in 2024.

Director's Statement


Although I have been researching this topic and gathering materials on and off for several years, the project came into focus about a year ago in conversation with members of the Visible Evidence documentary film community, when I invited examples of “documentary intrusions” – roughly defined as moments when elements from the real world (archival images, real people, inimitable performances, irreversible deaths, etc.) intrude on fictional or quasi-fictional story worlds.

The response was overwhelming. In just a few days, I received some 85 suggestions and enthusiastic expressions of support. The documentary community immediately recognized the phenomenon and reinforced many of the examples I had already gathered, while also directing me to dozens more, such as the bizarre and troubling inclusion of Bruce Lee's real world funeral as a plot device in his final film, *Game of Death* (1978). For practical reasons, I decided to limit the scope of the project to Hollywood films and their immediate siblings in streaming media & television, but the international community of Visible Evidence noted the erosion or complication of fact/fiction binaries in many non-US contexts as well.

As the editing progressed, I realized that the real challenge lay in curating and clarifying the throughline of the project without becoming overwhelmed or distracted by the many possible variations on the fact/fiction theme. The conceptual core of the project was inspired by Vivian Sobchack's concept of “documentary consciousness,” described in her book *Carnal Thoughts* (2000). Sobchack's inspiration, in turn, derived from a scene in Jean Renoir's film *The Rules of the Game* (1939) depicting the undeniable, physical deaths of more than a dozen animals as part of the film's critique of the apathetic narcissism of France's pre-war bourgeoisie. Sobchack returned to this scene in two separate chapters of the book for meditations on the ethics and impact of these animal deaths for filmmakers and viewers alike, relating them to both semiotic and phenomenological theories of viewership.

On the advice of filmmakers and friends who viewed early cuts of the film, nearly all academic jargon was chiseled out of the narration, leaving a more watchable and engaging visual essay that embraces the pleasures and paradoxes found at the intersection of reality and fiction. Additional feedback convinced me to stop trying to make my own VO sound like Encke King, my former classmate who supplies the gravelly, world-weary narration for Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003). I've done my best to talk more like myself here, but there's no denying Thom's influence on this project – both as a former mentor at Ca-IArts and for the strategies of counter-viewing modeled in LAPI.

This project also bridges the gap between my first two books, *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past* (2011) and *Technologies of Vision: The War Between Data and Images* (2017). The historiographical focus of this project emerged as an unplanned but retrospectively inescapable artifact of engaging questions of authenticity and artifice, and it afforded the pleasures of revisiting some of my favorite examples, such as Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1996) and Alex Cox's *Walker* (1987), both exemplary for their historiographical eccentricity. An additional, important element of context is the recent emergence and proliferation of generative AI for image synthesis. *Technologies of Vision* addressed some of the precursors to the current generation of synthetic imaging, which has only accelerated the arms-race between data and images, but recent developments in the field have sharpened the need for improved literacy about the way these systems work – as well as the kind of agency it is reasonable to attribute to them.



Reality Frictions also aims to intervene in the anxious discourse that has emerged in response to image synthesis, especially among documentarians who feel confidence in photographic and videographic representation slipping away, and journalists besieged by knee-jerk charges of fake news. While I understand and am sympathetic to these concerns, challenges to truth-telling in journalism and documentary film hardly began with digital imaging, let alone generative AI. It is axiomatic to this project that viewers have long negotiated the boundaries between images and reality. The skills we have developed at recognizing or confirming the truth or artifice found in all kind of media remain useful when considering synthetic images. Admittedly, we are in a moment of transition and rapid emergence in generative AI, but I stand by this project's call to look to the past for patterns of disruption and resolution when it comes to technologies of vision and the always tenuous truth claim of non-fiction media.

Although the format of this project evolved organically, starting with a personal narrative rooted in childhood revelations about the world improbably drawn from TV of the 1970s, the final structure approaches a comprehensive taxonomy of the ways reality intrudes on fictional worlds. Of course the volume and diversity of these instances makes it necessary to select and distill exemplary moments and patterns, all of which provides what I regard as this project's main source of pleasure. One unexpected tangent turned out to be the different ways that side-by-side comparisons trigger uncanny fascination at the boundary between the real and the nearly real. Hopefully without belaboring the point, I aim to parse these strategies from the pleasures of uncanny resemblance to what I view as superficial and mendacious attempts to bolster a flimsy truth claim simply by casting (and costuming, etc.) actors to "look like" the people they are supposed to portray.

Other intersections of fact and fiction are less overt, requiring extra-textual knowledge or decoding clues that transform the apparent meaning of a scene. Ultimately, I prefer it when filmmakers respect viewers' ability to deploy existing critical faculties and infer their own meanings. Part of the goal of this project is to heighten viewers' attentiveness to the ways reality purports to be represented on screen; to dissolve overly simplistic binaries, and to suggest the need for skepticism, especially when dramatic flourishes or uplifting endings aim to trigger readymade responses. While stories of resilient individuals and obstacles that are overcome conform to Hollywood's obsession with emotional closure and narrative resolution, we should be mindful of the events and people who are excluded by the presumptions underlying these structures.

A realization that develops over the course of the video is that the films with the most consistently complex and deliberate structures for engaging the problematics of representing reality on film come from filmmakers who directly engage systems of power and privilege, especially related to race. From Ava DuVernay's re-writing of Martin Luther King's speeches in *Selma* (2014), to Ryan Coogler and Spike Lee's inclusions of documentary footage in *Fruitvale Station* (2013), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), the stakes are raised for history films with direct implications for continuing injustice in the present. For these makers – as for the cause of racial justice or the critique of structural power writ large – the significance of recognizing continuities between the real world and the cinematic one is clear. This is not to argue for a straightforward correspondence between cinema and reality; on the contrary, in the examples noted here, we witness the most complex and controlled entanglements of both past and present; reality and fiction.

In the end, I view *Reality Frictions* as offering a critical lens on a cinematic and televisual phenomenon that is more common and more complex than one might initially expect. Do I wish the final film were less than an hour long? Yes, and I have no doubt this will dissuade some prospective viewers from investing the time, but once you start heading down these paths, there's no turning back. Thanks for reading and watching!

FILMOGRAPHY

127 Hours
Adrift
All the President's Men
All the Way
American Splendor
Amsterdam
And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself
Apollo 13
Bad Education
Battle of the Sexes
Being John Malkovich
Bicycle Thieves
The Big Lebowski
Big Eyes
The Big Short
Black Hawk Down
Black Mirror "Joan is Awful"
BlacKkKlansman
Bohemian Rhapsody
Bontoc Eulogy
Born on the 4th of July
The Card Counter
Carlos
Catch Me If You Can
Cesar Chavez
Charlie Wilson's War
Cinema Verite
City of Lies
The Company You Keep
Contact
The Crown
Cy Kuckenbaker, San Diego series
The Deer Hunter
Detroit
The Disaster Artist
Documentary Now, "Kunuk Uncovered"
Dog Day Afternoon
The Doors
Dragnet
Dunkirk
Elvis
Elvis and Nixon
Erin Brockovich

Eyes Wide Shut
Fargo
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas
The Fifth Estate
The Fighter
First Man
Frost/Nixon
Fruitvale Station
Game of Death
Memo Akten, Gloomy Sunday
Grey Gardens
Grey Gardens
Hidden Figures
Husbands and Wives
The Imitation Game
I'm Not There
Inherent Vice
Invictus
The Iron Lady
I, Tonya
Jackie
J. Edgar
Jerry and Marge Go Large
JFK
Jobs
Jordan Peele, Obama Deep Fake
Judas and the Black Messiah
Julien Donkey-boy
Killer of Sheep
Killing Reagan
The King's Speech
Refik Anadol, Latent History
Lord of the Flies
Los Angeles Plays Itself
Loving
Refik Anadol, Machine Hallucinations
Malcolm X
Medium Cool
The Misfits
Munich
Nanook of the North
Stavros Didakis, Neural Cityscapes
Nomadland

FILMOGRAPHY

On the Basis of Sex
On the Waterfront
Parkland
The People vs. Larry Flynt
The People vs. O.J. Simpson
The Post
Professor Marston and the Wonder Women
The Pursuit of Happiness
Raging Bull
Respect
The Right Stuff
The Rules of the Game
Saving Private Ryan
Selma
Snowden
Soul Surfer
Stardust
The Unbearable Lightness of Being
The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent
Underground
Vice
W
Walker
Watermelon Woman

SPECIAL THANKS

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REFERENCES

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- John Caldwell, "Prime-Time Fiction Theorizes the Docu-Real" (2002)
- Stuart Hall, Encoding/Decoding (1973)
- Saidiya Hartman, Venus in Two Acts (2008)
- Laura Mulvey, Death 24 x a Second (2006)
- Bill Nichols, "Documentary reenactment and the fantasmatic subject" (2008)
- Vivian Sobchack, Carnal Thoughts (2004)
- Brian Winston, "Honest, straightforward reenactment" (1999)

PHOTOGRAPHS

- Levin Corbin Handy, General Ulysses Grant at City Point (1902)
- Unknown, Lunch atop a Skyscraper (1932)
- Unknown, The Ghost of Bernadette Soubirous (1890)
- Frances Griffiths, Cottingley Fairies (1920)
- Unknown, Dominguez Field Air Meet (1910)

MUSIC

End Credits Music: Victoria Lucas
by Moby
Courtesy of <https://mobygratis.com>

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