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The Place of Music in *Jazz*

Song is the wind-chime of memory, and these were our songs.
– James Maher (“Swing: Pure Pleasure” 8:45)

Documentary realism is predicated upon a radical distinction between the saying and the said, or more broadly the *representing* and the *represented*, which can also be understood as between the filmic and the real. While the real world does not have a musical score, this does not deny music a place in documentary, but instead locates it either materially in the depicted scene or fully outside the scene as part of the filmic world. Ben Winters’ characterization of diegetic and non-diegetic sound in fiction film will serve as a starting point to consider the complex use of music in Ken Burns’ *Jazz* (2001), a ten-part nineteen-hour expository documentary produced for PBS.

Jazz is an ideal text through which to examine the place of music and the real in documentary film for three reasons. First, and most obviously, music is at its centre, as music is its subject matter. It features musical performances, and musical underscoring is pervasive throughout the series. Second, *Jazz* is not an experimental or avant-garde work. Its manner of address is typical of the expository mode: commentary is addressed to the viewer with images as counter-point, editing establishes rhetorical rather than spatial and temporal continuity, complementary first-person testimonies are counterpoised to create the impression of objectivity, and anecdotal history results in a stockpiling of knowledge (Nichols 34-5). In other words, *Jazz* is conventional and signifies in an easily understood manner. Thus, despite jazz journalist Francis Davis’ reservations regarding Burns’ version of jazz history, which “shows tendencies toward cockeyed legend, cut-rate sociology and amateur psychoanalysis,” she describes the series as “enjoyable television” that is “good for jazz” with “perceptive commentary” and a “wealth of great music” (Davis 78). In a similar vein, Vivien Ellen Rose and Julie Corley observe that Burns relies upon “formulaic cinematography and musical treatments” that are “artistic” while also noting that these same elements “detract from the historical endeavour by confusing past and present” (56). Third, as these com-

ments indicate, *Jazz* is rhetorical – it is an elaborate epideictic, a speech of praise to a genre of music and to America.

In his discussion of diegetic space, Winters claims that underscored music is not necessarily external to the diegetic world and consequently does not only function connotatively. Rather, he argues that even if unavailable to the characters within a diegetic space, music may function denotatively, belonging to or standing as an element within the depicted world. As Winters puts it: “It is not whether or not the characters can ‘hear’ music that dictates whether the music is part of the fictional world (though that distinction is not without interest), but whether the music appears to exist in the time and narrative space of the diegesis; or whether it appears to ‘narrate’ at a temporal distance from that space” (236-7). Consequently, Winters argues in favour of a more nuanced set of categories. He takes inspiration from Gérard Genette’s discussion of narrative levels in literature, and argues that the non-diegetic should be considered in terms of the extra-diegetic and the intra-diegetic. In this schema, extra-diegetic music would reside exclusively on the plane of narration, as is the case during the credit roll. Diegetic music would physically manifest in the diegetic world and would be heard by characters, and intra-diegetic music would belong to the diegetic space even though characters could not hear it (57-8).

Winters does not extend his analysis to documentary. Nevertheless, the concept of the intra-diegetic enhances our insight as to the function of music in documentaries, and will be particularly useful for explaining how films of the expository mode employ what Carl Plantinga refers to as the formal voice. By voice, Plantinga is referring to a filmmaker’s narrational and epistemic authority, and their attempt to make claims about the actual world come across as truthful (106-7). Bill Nichols considers rhetorical argument a better term than diegesis to describe what such films document, because they do not construct a spatially and temporally continuous narrative world, but rather represent aspects of the world in order to deliver a rhetorical argument (121-41). Nevertheless, while documentaries such as *Jazz* do offer arguments, they also offer a world, even if that world is not continuous. The stories told by *Jazz* can be

translated into a series of propositions, but *Jazz* also encourages viewers to experience moments, episodes, and scenes in recent American musical and cultural history.

In *Jazz*, music is rarely diegetic. There are few on-camera live performances or scenes in which music appears to emanate from a radio or phonograph. Furthermore, instances where we see a “live” performance are marked as archival and robbed of depth and presence: they are usually in black and white, grainy, or of poor definition, are interspersed with still images, and subject to voice-over commentary. Consistent with Nichols’ distinction between diegesis and argument, there is hardly a strictly diegetic world in *Jazz* at all, because it does not posit a continuous time and space in which a narrative unfolds. The series consists of heavily edited sequences of photographs and stock film clips interspersed with in-studio, on-camera oral histories and commentaries that are stitched together by an underscore of classic jazz recordings and voice-overs. The “voice-of-God” narrator and the in-studio commentators addressing the camera both recount jazz history and explain its meaning and significance. These interpretations are augmented by the musical underscoring which accompanies photographs and silent film clips, described by Plantinga as elements capable of “providing an experiential, emotional character to the spectator’s experience” (166). This helps to create what Plantinga terms an “experiential envelope’ consist[ing] in part of created moods” that frame the film’s reception (166). In addition, montage is given importance in *Jazz*, with its rhythmic succession of archival photographs, music, and images working together, consonantly or contrapuntally, to create an aesthetic whole that supports the film’s account of the jazz age. This is particularly so because of Burns’ signal technique of ‘animating’ archival photographs by slowly panning and zooming in on them, which not only offers focus and emphasis, but also a sense of movement and presence. Thus the music in *Jazz* does not remain part of the narration, but rather leaks into the depicted world; it sneaks from the pit onto the stage.

Jazz is a historical documentary, but it is also about music that, despite being rooted in a place and time, stands as an aesthetic object in the listener/viewer’s phenomenal present. More precisely, in this series, the musical genre of jazz appears in four ways. First, Burns’ series presents the music to viewers who have the opportunity to witness contemporaneous audiences enjoy it as it happened in that initial moment of reception. Second, jazz music is presented as an object of knowledge. The series offers the viewer musical analyses through interviews and voice-over narrations that express and explain its compelling character. Third, the series offers an historical account, based largely in anecdotal biography, of the emergence of jazz as an art form and historical phenomenon. The account is principally one of struggling artists using their genius and craft to express musically what is ‘real’ or ‘true.’ Finally, and again in the guise of history, this series elicits an affective experience of the

historically situated culture and lifeworld from which jazz springs, responds to, and insinuates itself.

Each of these four methods locates jazz at a different point along a continuum, which Winters describes as ranging from the extra-diegetic to the diegetic (237). Furthermore, musical excerpts (as opposed to underscoring or live performance footage) can operate at a number of places along this continuum simultaneously. Consider the following 80-second segment from the fourth episode: A title that reads “Mr. Armstrong” on a black background appears as the sound of cars fades in softly. As the title fades out, Louis Armstrong emphatically says, “Let’s go,” and his ensemble



begins to play the fast and syncopated “Chinatown, My Chinatown.” Archival footage of cars (themselves deprived of sound) race along New York streets, replacing the title as musician Matt Glaser’s voice over describes the music: “So they’re playing fast, it sounds like they’re nervous.” Onscreen, pedestrians walk (too) briskly, as in sped up old footage. The counterpoint of voice, image, and music continues: “It sounds like they’re having trouble coping with this fast tempo”; onscreen, a commuter train passes; “...the hectic nature of the modern world”; a subway driver’s view of entering a tunnel (and to black). Glaser, now in close-up, looking off-centre to our right, continues to speak: “It’s change, and,” he pauses to hear Armstrong interject: “Look at me cats, I’m gettin’ away, looks like they are after me.” Glaser smiles, looks at the camera and says, “They’re after him...the temporal nature of the modern world, but...” Armstrong says “But I’m ready...” Glaser echoes this: “He’s ready...and now there’s going to be no time when he comes in...suddenly just one note.” Glaser parts his hands, turning palms upward, following Armstrong’s single long held note, then sweeps his arms open in time with Armstrong’s elegant and relaxed solo.



He looks entranced:

Free, completely relaxed, floating above this [hums along]. Sounds like an aria. So, this is a new way to experience the modern world in all of its hectic movement. It’s like the Platonic world has entered for a moment into the modern world. Just relaxation and freedom, and jazz has been dealing with this concept since Louis made this record. I mean, it’s still to this day. Now drummers and bass players and everyone can get into this groove.

We see the traffic again as he concludes: “In those days, he was the only guy to have this idea” (“The True Welcome” 13:12-14:30).

In this segment, Armstrong’s performance paradoxically inhabits 1930s New York even as it comes to presence in our ear and time: the music resonates with, but is not emanating from, the streets that we see. Rather, the music

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stands between then and now; it is outside of the depicted scene as part of the film’s narration, particularly since Armstrong’s name and voice precede the street footage and the music lacks the hisses and pops of a 78 rpm record. The montage does not create a temporally or geographically continuous space wherein the music can be performed and heard. Similarly, nothing indicates that the music emanates from Glaser’s space, although he hears it as we do. It is as if he were within our space. The moment is intimate. Captivated, he glances at the camera, sharing his enjoyment as he explains the significance of Armstrong’s aesthetic genius. Glaser’s explanation motivates a cut to the busy New York streets upon which Armstrong’s music is a meditation. Like Armstrong’s single note, they too are rendered timeless; free from their place in time, space, and history. The music is immediate to us and the music is back there, although those hurried pedestrians cannot hear it. Armstrong’s note is part of their aesthetic landscape and musical experience, even as it mediates and transforms their lifeworld.

Ambiguity with regard to the status and location of musical tracks is pervasive in *Jazz*. It is also central to the functioning of what has been termed the “Burns effect,” that is, the manner in which Burns makes use of archival photographs. As John C. Tibbetts observes, Burns offers sequences of “motionless pictures” which “satisfy our thirst for the *actual* at the same time that they arouse our wonder in the *potential*” (130). Burns not only crops images, but moves over them, shows them in rapid succession, and offers aural cues to give the impression of narrative movement. Thus, at the beginning of “Pure Pleasure,” *Jazz*’s fifth episode, we hear the opening strains of Duke Ellington’s “Stepping into Swing Society” as the camera slowly tilts upward and out from a still of a male dancer’s feet barely touching the floor. Albert Murray speaks over Ellington’s easy swing: “I think it terribly important that jazz is primarily dance music.” Through the montage, the viewer can sense that he and his partner are dancing, although they do not move: the film cuts to a medium close-up of his face, pans along his left arm to hers and then to her face. Murray continues: “And so you move when you hear it. And it always moves in a direction of elegance, which is the most civilized thing that a human being can do.” Cut to another well-dressed couple, frozen in a dramatic dance pose, he holding her leaning back, her head an inch from the floor. Murray adds: “The ultimate extension, elaboration, and refinement of effort is



elegance where just doing it gives pleasure of itself.” Cut to a still of another young couple dancing side-by-side; then to a hugging couple – not as elegantly attired, but smiling as well. “That’s about as far as we can get with life,” Murray, now in close-up, continues: “that’s equivalent to what Ernest Hemingway called the sweat on a wine bottle. If you don’t enjoy how those beads of sweat look, you know, when you pour the white wine out and you taste it, and how your partner looks, and how the sunlight comes through, you missed it” (“Swing: Pure Pleasure” 0:01-1:12).

Like Barthes’s Algerian soldier saluting the French Empire in *Mythologies*, the dancers have been robbed of

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their uniqueness (115). They have become the myth of pure pleasure in jazz dance. The film and music unfolds in time, but they are suspended in motion. Frozen, and so outside of time, they cannot hear. Murray, when commenting on swing dance, generally does not seem to hear either. Nevertheless, the music that we hear invests the dancers with potential energy. The music is ours to move to, but possesses the dancers as well. They are its expression. Dancers and Ellington are united in spirit, sensibility, and possibility, both onscreen and in our imagination. Thus, the music in *Jazz* is what would usually be called non-diegetic: A form of underscoring that functions exterior to the world that the film’s subjects inhabit and lends the film an atmosphere of authenticity. Yet here, not only does music contribute to the pace, mood, and tone of the depicted scene, but is also a necessary component of how these scenes are mythologized and rendered timeless. The aforementioned couple is stepping into swing society when they dance, and the music that we hear would be theirs as well.

Winters justifies the category of intra-diegetic for fiction film by opposing Hanns Eisler and Theodor Adorno’s generally accepted assertion that “film ‘seeks to depict reality’” (228). Winters argues that upon careful examination, both film theory and practice acknowledge at least implicitly that fiction film does not offer an impression of reality but produces narrative worlds in a filmic universe. This echoes Nichols’ observation that the resemblance between a fiction film’s world and our own world is “fundamentally metaphorical” (109). A similar argument may be made for documentary, but the matter is more complex, since documentaries claim to represent our world even while they remain constructed texts. In expository documentaries, the real cannot be fully captured by either the senses or the camera. This mode acknowledges the existence of a quotidian material real, but it is of secondary interest. The real of documentary appears within the spectator’s imagination in an encounter with the filmic text. Underscoring does not violate the premises of this form of exposition. At the very least, it can function within the filmic narration extra-diegetically, directing the viewer’s attention and providing dramatic emphasis. More importantly however, the rhetorical character of interpretive knowledge renders difficult any categorical distinction between the real that is being presented, its exposition, and its cinematic figuration. The real that such documentaries project resides, as with fiction film, in the mind.

Anecdotal moments and music in *Jazz* come together to form a cultural history residing in popular memory. Even as Burns' *Jazz* claims to represent a real, it constitutes it in the imagination. The real of *Jazz* is jazz itself, as a body of works, a genre, an age, and a mood that is both rooted historically and rendered timeless. In this film and in the viewer's imagination, the real has a soundtrack. Music resides within it. Such is the function of *Jazz*, to construct an understanding of the world of jazz within memory, with music as reality's bedrock.

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