

## Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

# Where is the boundary between reality and fiction?

*Featuring Constantine Nakassis with Stanton Wortham (host) and Michael Lempert (commentator)*

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### **Stanton Wortham** 0:00

Welcome back to another episode of Pulled Up Short. This week, we're very happy to have with us Costas Nakassis from the University of Chicago, and Michael Lempert from the University of Michigan. Costas is going to talk to us about the distinction between fiction and reality in film and other realms. And I know it's going to be provocative. So, Costas, please.

### **Costas Nakassis** 0:29

Thank you, Stanton. Let me just maybe start with a story that was told to me when I was conducting fieldwork. I did my fieldwork in South India in the state of Tamil Nadu. And specifically for this research, I was looking at cinema, as you mentioned. So this story was told to me by a relatively senior artist, a middle-aged film actress, whose name was Vadivukkarasi. Actually, we were on the set of a television show. And she began telling this story at the prompting of another film actor, a younger male actor. And the story was something of an industry lore. In fact, I later heard her tell a version of the same story on television. So the story begins with the actress, Vadivukkarasi, on a train. And she had just wrapped up a shoot in the town of Dindigul, for a film that she had been working on. And the train is running late, it won't start, she's kind of wondering, what's going on? Why aren't we leaving yet? And eventually, the train conductor comes and asks her to step down from the train. And she's wondering, did they book my ticket wrong? What's going on? She gets down, and when she gets down from the train, she learns that a man has laid down on the tracks in front of the train, and refuses to move until she comes down and apologizes to him.

So it turns out that this man is a fan of one of the biggest film stars of the Tamil industry, an actor named Rajinikanth, with whom Vadivukkarasi had just acted in a popular film at the time, called *Arunachalam*. And in the film, the character played by Vadivukkarasi throws the character played by Rajinikanth out of the household in the narrative, and she humiliates him by calling him "*anātai payalē*", or orphan. And the fan demanded that she get down from the train and apologize to him for cursing his "*talaivar*" or leader, and to promise to never ever do anything like that again, on screen. Interestingly, when she asked him, "Why are you picking on me? Lots of people in films like villains and bad guys fight and curse with a hero like Rajinikanth.", he interestingly said, "Well, they got punished in the film, and you didn't." And so he was demanding that she atone for something that her

character did, precisely because something about the narrative didn't quite resolve things to his satisfaction.

Now, I should mention, just as a footnote, that this reaction of this fan wasn't actually a surprise to Vadivukkarasi. She had already been worried that acting in this film, as this character in particular, would cause this kind of a furor among the fans of this actor. And as it turned out, they never showed her the script when she signed on to the film. But when she found out that she'd have to act in the scene, and when she actually saw her lines and that she would have to say this phrase, "*anātai payalē*" or orphan, to Rajinikanth's character, she initially refused. And she started to beg and ask the directors if they could change her lines. Though, ultimately, they convinced her to do it. And what's interesting to me, what pulled me up short about this example, and a number of examples like it, is that she knew that what she would say in the film, in the fiction, to the character that was acted by this big hero would amount to basically, she, herself saying it to the actor, and that she would be held responsible for what happened in the fiction. And as it turned out, she was of course, right. So for me, in my research, I immediately started to wonder with cases like this, what's going on? How do we explain this? It seems so different from the kinds of expectations that we might have, for example, watching a film in the United States.

#### **Stanton Wortham** 4:25

It's a very interesting example, and puzzling from the outside. Why is it that this fan would misunderstand? Or at least that's how it seems to us. That obviously, she's an actress. She's just doing her job. She didn't really insult the guy. He was acting too. So did he not understand the distinction between fiction and reality?

#### **Costas Nakassis** 4:45

Yeah, I mean, what's so interesting about this case is that you do get this kind of blurring between this on-screen and off-screen, right? So what happens in the fiction between the characters is suddenly being taken as having happened between the biographical persons involved, right? And I think one initial thing that we might think is that, yeah, he got confused, or something like that. Or he got overemotional. But as it turned out, of course, he wasn't confused at all. As he said, there was something that was wrong about the narrative itself, that didn't resolve things for him in the way that he thought it should. And, there are all sorts of explanations for phenomena like this. For example, people sometimes point that viewers in South India watch images of film stars like they engage with images of Hindu deities. Or perhaps that, this poor guy was suffering from some kind of false consciousness, and was being manipulated by an image system or a political system.

But of course, none of these explanations were ever quite satisfactory to me. I mean, as you're indicating, and as I was saying, I don't think this guy was confused at all that he was watching a fiction. He perfectly well knew he was watching a fiction. And nevertheless, all the same, he was holding her to account for it. And what's interesting in these cases—I mean, there are all sorts of other cases that I was also interested in. Like, the character slaps another character, and the actors are held responsible. Or

one character betrays the protagonists in the story, for example, and viewers accuse the actor of himself being immoral for having acted in a film like this. And what's interesting, of course, is when you start to talk to fans, you realize they're not confused. That's not the issue. And if you ask them why they are mad at the actor, and for example, not the director, or the writer who scripted the scene, what they'll say is that the actor still maintains responsibility, because after all, they could have chosen not to act in that scene. That the actress, for example, Vadivukkarasi, had some agency. She didn't have to act in the scene. And yet, she did all the same. And so she ends up becoming responsible in an interesting way.

And the other thing that I mean to say is that actors bear responsibility for their participation. I mean, the other thing to say is, what's interesting here is that what's fictionally represented, as they'll point out, happened. It happened in a theater. Right? The representation, while it may represent a fiction, it itself is real. And something transpired on the screen. So this idea that you would choose to participate in an offensive image is itself part of the kind of way in which people are thinking about why is it that actors are responsible for what they do. And obviously, the image might be a fiction, but that doesn't mean that the image itself wasn't real. And so, what we're dealing with here is in some sense, a very different concept of what counts as real when it comes to representations like film images.

The other reason I'm not actually all that convinced— So I was just saying, obviously, this is a different concept of the real that's at play here. For us, I think, in the United States, for example, we're fed on a steady diet of narrative cinematic fiction. Or things like documentary film or reality television. And I think we tend to assume that fiction and reality are complementary, that something is either one or the other. And when they aren't, we often assume that there's something wrong. Right? Like, viewers get confused, or they can't tell the difference. And so we're often invested in this idea that there's these two distinct realms: fact and fiction; representation and referent. But what's interesting about this case, actually, is that when you start to reflect on it, you start to see that there's not that much that's exceptional, necessarily, about this case. And when you start to look around—both at cinema in the United States, but even beyond cinema—I think you start to see that there are lots of cases where we find that representations, which from one point of view are fictitious, or not actual, that they start to bleed in to the actions that they represent. And I can give examples of that, and we can talk about those.

### **Stanton Wortham 9:21**

So this is very interesting. The initial reaction to your film case that I had, as I said, was, well, he must be confused, this fan. He doesn't get that it was just acting. But you're saying that he understands that perfectly well, that that's acting and that it's not real life. But nonetheless, he's still offended by the fact that the actress chose to participate in this immoral action that was not resolved in the narrative. And you've offered several other kinds of explanations about people in places not fully understanding things, or having false consciousness, being manipulated by the film industry, being confused because of religious belief systems. And it sounds as if in each of those cases, you're able to show that that's really not a plausible explanation of why people are apparently confusing the fiction and the reality. So, this leaves me puzzled. As you say, it's a very basic distinction that we have between what we think is

true, and what we think is just a story. And if you start to challenge that distinction, it makes me feel a little bit unsettled. And now you've got me even more worried, because you're saying that you think it isn't just film. You think that there are various other places where this distinction starts to break down. So can you elaborate that a bit?

**Costas Nakassis 10:36**

Yeah, for example, if you leave cinema, and if you leave fictional narrative cinema in particular, we can find a lot of these kinds of cases. So to just make a lateral move, we might point to rituals of all kinds that involve representations that enact what they seem to represent or describe. So you might think of something like the Eucharist, to take a Catholic example, where, indeed, the ritual and acts of Transubstantiation of wine to Christ's blood and wafer to his body. And for the experience of the devout, it's an experience of the real presence of divinity. Or you might think of national rituals that we have had, and continue to have, like presidential inaugurations, where the presence of the nation and the authority of the office of the presidency come to be palpably felt, and where national myths come alive. And in cases like that, I don't think we would ever describe the religiously devout as confused as to what's going on. Everybody knows, in some sense, that it is wine and it is a wafer, but it's also the blood and body of Christ. Right? And I think there's something similar going on here. It's not that the fan thinks that it's not a fiction. It *is* a fiction. And in addition to that, it's also something else. Right?

But of course, it's not just religious examples. And it's not just examples that require some kind of devout subject, or some kind of assumption of something divine or magical or supernatural. This kind of dynamic, where what we represent or describe seems to become, take flesh and become real—we do it all the time. As when we utter what linguists and philosophers call “performative utterances” or “performative speech”. Examples like, “I promise to give you this watch”, or “I bet you tomorrow it'll be sunny”. Or when the umpire calls, “Out!”, or the judge says, “Guilty.”, in court. These are also cases where something that is not yet real, not yet actual, by being described or represented or narrated, comes to be. And instead of a narrated world, we start to get something happening in the *narrating* world, in the world in which we're representing. And this is a kind of everyday social magic, as it were, that makes representations real through their enactment. So I think in some ways, that's what this comes down to. This question of, “When does representing something come to count as the act of having done that very thing?”.

So just returning to the cinema, but maybe in the United States, when you think of the image less as representation, and you start to think of it more as maybe something like a performative, you start to see it more than you might think. You might start to see those cracks in the so-called “fourth wall”. So for example, I'm often struck by the way in which savvy filmgoers watch action sequences of someone like Jackie Chan, or Tom Cruise, and watch them less as representations of actions in a narrated world, but are looking at them as spectacular sequences of actors doing what they're representing. As when for example, Tom Cruise or Jackie Chan are watched for the stunts that they really did, and that they're actually doing in front of us. And moreover, what's interesting in those cases—what's interesting about someone like Jackie Chan, or Tom Cruise—is not just that they did the stunts, but that they *chose* to do

them. That they chose to take the risk. And by choosing to take the risk, that counts as a certain kind of act by the actor that goes *beyond* the film. It goes beyond *Mission Impossible*. And one starts to interestingly impute characteristics of someone like Jackie Chan or Tom Cruise, either that they're incredibly agile, or they're risk-takers, daredevils, or something like that.

And I also think another place where we see this is surrounding sexuality. Scenes implicating sexuality have something of this kind of quality as well. When the characters kiss, or when they engage in a sexual act, so are the actors. And even there, the issue isn't so much that what was represented was something they actually did, like on set. So for example, you could use a trick shot to make it look like two people are engaging in a sexual act, or you could edit it in a particular way, or through some other means. And even if we knew that to be the case, even if we knew that, for example, maybe their lips didn't really touch, we might still take it as an act for example of eroticism or obscenity, or however we interpret it. So in these cases too, it's not just a fiction in a story. What was done on set, what was done in a narrative starts to bleed over.

So for me, what was interesting is being pulled up short by this example. When I started to look around, I realized that these dynamics are not exceptional to this region. They're not exceptional to this type of cinema. And maybe they're not even exceptional to cinema, per se. And when you start thinking like that, you start to wonder, well, if these aren't exceptions, could they possibly be one of the rules, as it were? And maybe the exception is where we come at it. The way in which we suspend our belief in the reality of images. The way in which we are happy to treat them as if they could just be representations, they could always be held at an arm's distance from us, and not bleed into our own lives in our own worlds. And so that's where it starts to get really interesting for me. When we can start to see this kind of blurring going on maybe all the time, and then ask the question *not*, "Why does it happen?", but, "Why does it *not* happen sometimes?"

### **Stanton Wortham 16:12**

So these are two ways in which you're pulling me up short here, both of them unsettling. So first, we have a pretty stable belief in reality, and we think we can distinguish reality from fiction, or reality from representation. So, you have a film and it tells a story. And it's not true. And I know the actors are real people doing something, but I know the film is fictional, and the actor is different than the film. And when we describe things in real life, we also know that we're talking here about something, but the something out there is separate from us talking about it. And if all of a sudden people are getting offended by what actors did, and what was obviously a fictional setting, that starts to unsettle me a little bit, because it feels like, well, maybe the fiction is part of reality. And that starts to make me a little less clear that I know what the reality is. I want to be able to sit down and be clear about which is which.

And the second way in which you're pulling me up short is it's not only that fiction and reality can't be as easily distinguished so that my view of reality is now a little bit suspect, but it's also, you're saying, that the two of them interconnect with each other. So in your opening case, all of a sudden, this fan

was holding a real actress responsible for something she had done in a moment of creating fiction. And her real life, like being able to get on the train and go wherever she was supposed to go, was interrupted, because there was this issue that involved the fiction that was all of a sudden now a part of her real life. And you've given us these other cases as well, where we have somebody promising something. And the promising seems to be an individual describing some future reality. And we have two separate realms, but you're saying that the promise itself becomes part of the reality. So, the description enters into the reality and modifies it, which causes this blending or blurring. So I can't tell what reality *is*, because you're telling me I can't distinguish between the description of it and the thing itself. And now you're telling me that the reality is itself contaminated by, or bound up with these descriptions, or fictionalizations. And this is all quite unsettling.

So, can you help me get a little clearer on—you're saying that there's something about our society and our view of this, and the problem is that we want to maintain this distinction between fiction and reality. And we're too bound up with that distinction, and that maybe the real world involves this kind of blurring as the natural case. Am I getting that right?

**Costas Nakassis** 18:49

Yeah, I think that's part of it. But what I'm also saying is that we're perfectly happy to have that blurring happen in all sorts of domains. Right? And those other examples, perhaps, we hold them on the margins when we like to think about the question of representation. But in those kinds of cases, it's actually not a problem. It's the way it has to be. It would be very unsettling if when the umpire said, "Out!", or the judge said, "Guilty.", we just took that as just a representation and not counting as the act of authority. Right? So I think part of the interesting question is, why is it that when it comes to certain kinds of representational arts—in this case, cinema, but there are other cases we might think of as well, maybe theater, or other kinds of fictional writing—we try to sequester that aspect of representation, that fact of representation. That representations are also acts. And they can have real-world effects. And that we try to hold it at bay. Keep it away from our everyday realities. And I think that's—what's different in this Tamil case is that in narrative cinema, in these genres of fictional cinema, those two aspects are not necessarily attempted to be held apart. So the question isn't fiction *or* reality. It's fiction *and* reality. And what's interesting is that in this particular case, they're working together very, very closely.

The other thing to say about this example is that it's not as if viewers take all aspects of narrative cinema in this context, in this way. There are plenty of aspects that are perfectly held afar from viewers. And that there's something particular about this case, *because* of the particular actor who was involved. And that there is a certain kind of investment in his public personage. He's a *big* star. He's a celebrity. And so, part of the issue here is that insulting his character comes to be taken as an insult of *him*, because his film stardom is so tied up with his off-screen personality. And so what's interesting, even specifically within Tamil cinema, is how it's the question of fiction *or*, or fiction *and* reality. It's not as if the whole cinema is viewed in this way. It's that in *this* case, a particular kind of film star starts to kind of step off the screen. And so, the question of how we're to think about the relationship between fiction and

reality, it's not only different in different cultural settings, or different film industries. It's also different in different kinds of films, and when it involves different kinds of actors.

And so, when we start to see it in this way, like I said, the question is, why is it that in *this* context, it's worked out this way, and then in some other context, it's worked out some other way? And when it comes to our own kind of experiences of cinema—let's say Hollywood cinema, where the dominant mode is to try to separate out these aspects—we might ask the question, how did that come to be? Was it always that way? And of course, not necessarily. I mean, there is a history to the emergence of a certain kind of realist aesthetics that tries to draw the fourth wall. And it happened in theater in the 19th century. And it happened in cinema in the early 20th century, where a certain kind of relationship of image to reality was cultivated and institutionalized. And so, this kind of example, I think, opens our eyes to all of those possibilities that go beyond how we typically think about these things. And I don't think you should be unsettled, actually, at the end of the day. Like I was saying, in some ways, it *has* to be this way. It would be very strange if it turned out that images have no bearing on our worlds, right? In some sense, what's very strange is this assumption that images are not also actions. Which, if you take a step back and think about it, how could they not be?

**Stanton Wortham 23:14**

Right. So the more basic case is that reality and fiction are intertwined, and that the fictional representations are themselves actions, as you say, that sometimes bleed into the world. And you're describing how in different contexts—both in different cultural contexts, but also in different kinds of movies, kinds of actors, kinds of specific actions—that blending, or that interpenetration of fiction and reality happen in different ways. So it's a very interesting point. Can you tell us a bit about implications that—should we change our way of thinking about life based on the fact that the distinction between fiction and reality isn't necessarily as sharp as we typically assume?

**Costas Nakassis 23:59**

Well, I think one of the further implications for me goes back to this earlier point that I was saying. That it's not just that this is a different culture, and therefore a different kind of experience of images. But also that when we look within, let's say, films in the United States, and even when we look at particular images, what we find is that it's not just that there's diversity between cultures or industries, but more interestingly, that there's a kind of diversity within the image. That images are not necessarily one thing or another. We often find a tension between these kinds of possibilities of the image. Tensions within the question of in what way the image represents something, and in what way does it count as doing something? So I think one implication is also this question that images are bursting with possibility. And the fact that images are not necessarily one thing *or* another also, I think implicates and should make us attune to the fact that the question of what an image comes to be—that say, whether it comes to be a representation or comes to be a certain kind of action—is fundamentally a political question. People fight over it. They tried to change it. And this is evinced again, in the history of United States cinema—like I was saying, the gentrification of early silent cinema—to produce something that looks like what we experience today. It was a class-based political project.

And similarly, in the cinemas of South India, people wrangle over what an image is, and should be. And that's an implication of the fact that images have these multiple potentials. And it's not a case that I've thought through systematically, so I hesitate to, in some sense, bring it in, but I'll do it all the same. When people talk about that we live in a post-truth society, and when they worry over the problem of fake news, I think it's this kind of *possibility* of representations that they're worrying about. And what it points to is that indeed, as we're observing happening even in our own society, particularly around news representation for example, is that, it's not that representations come pre-given to us in one form or another. They have to be *made* to do a certain kind of work. And that political question means—just thinking about the United States context, but it also is true about the South Indian context—that because there's a certain amount of social labor that goes into, as it were, stabilizing an image as one thing *or* another, that we should be attentive to the kinds of work that go into that. To the kinds of institutional work that go into that, the kinds of political work that go into that. And I think a lot of people are thinking very hard about that—certainly in the United States context, for example—about how to regulate the circulation and production of images, and other kinds of content, so that they work within the kind of cultural context and social relations that we see as desirable.

But for me, I think the interesting thing is that we need to attend to the fact that these are fundamentally political questions, and approach them in that way. So I think that's, for me, one kind of major implication. And that we shouldn't try to pre-decide that an image should be one thing or another. But we should ask ourselves the question—for the kinds of worlds that we want to live in—in what ways should we be thinking about how we cultivate images, for example? Institutionalize their production and their circulation. So I don't think we need to side with the iconoclasts or the iconophiles. But at least for me, personally, we can kind of take a page from the American pragmatists and ask the question, what is it that images can do? And how is it that we can cultivate them for the betterment of all of us? So that's a kind of a more abstract, and perhaps a political side of it. But I think it has real bearings. I mean, as you're seeing right now, all that's going on about social media. A lot of it turns on some of these issues.

**Stanton Wortham 28:25**

Yeah, that is a very interesting implication, as you say, directly relevant to debates that, before you raised the issue, I thought I knew the right answer. But now I'm going to have to go back and start thinking about the fictions, the realities and what I believe about them. So this has been very provocative. At this point, I'd love to bring in Michael Lempert. Michael, could you have a couple of questions for Costas?

**Michael Lempert 28:53**

I'm interested in the moral evaluation of attachment to fictional worlds. And even though this moral evaluation looks differently in, say, South India and the Midwest United States, is this judgment made of people, something that occurs generally? I mean, do you think, for instance, that the middle-aged actress who relates the story about the guy putting himself in front of the train, is she complaining about this guy? You know, is she judging him for being too attached? Is it maybe due to what she

thinks is less education, or something else? But is she faulting him in some kind of way, and distinguishing herself from him? Morally? Is she sorting people out in moral terms by scrutinizing how they relate to what is presented as fiction?

**Costas Nakassis** 29:43

That's a great question, Michael. Thank you for asking it. It's interesting that when you look the world over in many different film industries—I won't necessarily say it's a universal, because I think it actually has a historical provenance—you do find this figure of the fan. And when you find the figure of the fan—especially when it comes to cinema and other arts—it tends to have a very predictable profile: the figure of the rube, who just doesn't get it, who's uneducated, who's subaltern in some way, who's overly emotional, has a kind of an excess of affect, and a depletion of rationality. So you can hear all of the antinomies that are so familiar to us. And I think they come down from a certain kind of conception of modernity that we find, of course, at play in South India, and we find it in the United States and in Europe, and all sorts of places, where class divisions get mapped onto faculties of mind. For example, reason and the passions, middle class and subaltern peoples. And that also then gets mapped onto the capacity to distinguish fact from fiction, reality from illusion. So these are kind of very deep tropes that we find both in South India and also in other places. And it's certainly the case that for Vadivukkarasi—I mean, I don't want to speak for her personally—but just in general, there is a kind of a complaint from certain sectors of the film industry. And this is what I was saying, that people negotiate and fight over these issues. Who would *like* for example, to have a quote unquote, more *serious* industry, a more *realistic* film image, one that is governed *by*—and you won't be surprised to hear that this discourse is articulated by directors—one that's governed by stories and narratives, not by big film heroes. And so there is also a kind of—it takes an interesting kind of industrial dimension in the sense that of having to do with the film industry, and its internal politics. And so there is this kind of complaint that happens.

At the same time, however, some of these stars are so big and so revered, that, at another level, actors that I've talked to about these kinds of issues, don't blame the fans, because *they* themselves sometimes also identify as fans. So I'll give you a different example. It was a film called *Mankatha*, where I mentioned it earlier, that one character slaps another, and the other character is a really big film hero. And again, the actor who's a younger guy who had to slap this big film hero, he didn't want to do it. He refused, he begged everybody to let him *not* do it. And I asked him, “What was it that made you so resistant to do it?”. And he mentioned the fans, but the other thing he said is, “How could I hit someone that I'm a fan of, too? Would you slap your own grandmother just because it was for a film? Because someone put you in front of a camera? Of course, you wouldn't! You would feel *horrible* about doing something like that! And you would feel horrible that people saw you do that, and chose to do it *just* for film, or something like that”. Right? And so the other thing to say is that what's interesting about this—and I actually think this kind of pulls us up short too—is that, just like we like to sort fact from fiction, reality from illusion, realist representation from escapist fantasy, or whatever, we also like to sort out film viewers who know the difference, and film viewers who don't.

And what's interesting about this case that I'm just talking about, where the guy says, "Well, I'm a fan too, and I don't want to hit him. And I don't want to be hit by the fans later", right? "I don't want them to come after me." What's interesting is that it points out that the subjectivity of being someone who can see through the representation and the person who can be taken into it, it's actually not hard and fast either. That we all have a little bit of fan in us, potentially, as it were. And we often view the image in two ways at once. We see it for both its aspects. And from one perspective, we look at it and we see it as maybe a kind of rational, cultivated viewer. And sometimes we give ourselves into the image, and we react to it, and we engage with it a different way. So, I guess what I'm saying is, yes, definitely, there is this kind of sorting of people. But that sorting of people isn't just biographical bodies. It's also that we sort aspects of ourselves at different moments. And I think all of us have felt the pull of the image in that way. And maybe we resist it, and maybe we give into it. But I don't think that any of these, none of these potentials, they don't sort in so narrowly into cultures or even types of people. They're more like aspects of the self, I think. The way in which we react to the image as something that represents something, or as something that is doing something *with* us, *to* us, *for* us, etc.

**Michael Lempert 34:38**

That's incredibly interesting. One of the most interesting implications too of what you're arguing—and this is coming back to something that you addressed earlier—is that this isn't just limited to film. That the everyday blurrings of reality and fiction is something you wanted to become alive to. I mean, I was really struck by this that—I mean, you give us the examples of the Eucharist, of political communication. I wonder if you would agree that every time we tell a story—what happened yesterday on the way to work—there's an occasion where the story and storytelling event can be played with, or everytime we inhabit a role, we are in a sense, creating a divide between a representational world and a real world. I don't know if you would be willing to extend it in this way, but I'm very interested in the way in which this plays out in everyday life, outside the kind of filmic—the special case of film. And so, in that respect, I wanted to add one thing onto this. Thinking about the everyday life, and ways in which we have a divide between reality and fiction.

I'm sure this happens to everybody, but in the course of my life, definitely, there's been tons of times where a soundtrack will pop into my head when I'm in the midst of action. Actually, Mission Impossible, in particular. I've seen all the MI films. And you know, sometimes when I'm feeling busy, a little bit stressed, I'd find myself start humming it and that would reframe my stress as excitement. It takes my cortisol-addled body, and says to the stress, "Excitement! I can do this." And it's not like I'm hanging upside down, pulling off a heist to save the world. But remembering that trauma in this kind of small way, transforms the present. And so I'm very much interested in the implications of what you're arguing for our daily experience. Whether it's summoning a little piece of the cinematic into the here and now. But also the ways in which when we take on roles—which we do every time we talk, when we share stories—might also be occasions where we're seeing the dynamics that you're describing.

**Costas Nakassis 36:44**

Yeah, I love that example of the soundtrack appearing so as to reframe. And of course, like we were saying about being confused, it's not like, you suddenly think that you're in Mission Impossible, right? But you're bringing in a little part of a narrative world into your everyday life. And I think you're right to say that we do this all the time. I think if we change our terms a little bit, it becomes even clearer. So, saying "fiction and reality" like we *have* been, already seems to pre-decide the matter, right? Because what we call "fiction", somehow, we already understand to be something that's not real. And so then we are confounded when we see fictions becoming real, as it were. Or having these real-world effects.

Another way...if we reframed it, though, as the issue of imagination. I think that we are constantly imagining possible worlds that we try to open up for ourselves, and we do it in a conversation. Right? When you project the kind of person that you'd like the other person to see you as, and maybe that you'd like to see yourself as. And these are acts of imagination. And if you frame it that way, it has a much less kind of sinister feel to it. So that when we're imagining possibilities for ourselves and others, we're not necessarily confused. We're not necessarily engaging in false consciousness. We're entertaining possibilities. And, that's one way to think of what a fiction is. It's the entertainment of a certain kind of possibility. Now, the fact that we can imagine things doesn't mean that we should only ever be imagining things, or that all kinds of imaginations, just like all kinds of possibilities, or all kinds of fictions, are equal. Right? And I think that's also where the moral question comes in, that I think Stanton was also alluding to and worrying about, which is, if we blur the distinction, then do we not have any criteria anymore? And does everything go? And I think the answer to that is no, it doesn't. Not everything goes. In the same way that entertaining possibilities or imagining possible worlds doesn't mean that we don't have criteria by which to judge the ones that we would like to become real, and the ones we would *not* like to become real. So I think that when you start thinking about it as imagination, like, yeah, you see it everywhere, right? I mean, from a conversation, to the way in which indeed, we can even consume fictions, where we start to, for example, see ourselves in the images of certain kinds of fictions and certain kinds of narratives. Not because we're going to literalize those fictions, but because something *of* them *travels* from that world to ours.

**Michael Lempert 39:29**

This idea of seeing ourselves in fictions also, if I can just ask a little question on that, is intriguing as well, because a lot of that is talking about what people bring to a fictional text of some kind. So let me just give you an example. I have a female friend who, as a child had to do a lot of chores. And to make these chores enjoyable, she started dressing up as Cinderella, and singing the songs. She didn't mean to imply that her mom, who gave her these tasks, was the evil stepmother. But after a few of these performances, it was exactly what her mom thought. And she got *very* upset. So as a girl, she didn't mean this as a commentary on her situation. She didn't mean to provoke a parent. And yet, that is what her performance, was taken as. So, I wonder if we flip things around and talk about the role of listeners, primed and ready to recognize themselves, to see themselves in what's being represented. You can always find similarities if you look for them, of course, but the question is, under what conditions do people start scrutinizing text?

And if I can just put this example in juxtaposition with one other thing is, we all know to scrutinize Marvel film or Disney for what representational work they're doing. Are they sexist and classist and racist as always? Or are there some transformations there? And so I think it's really interesting. There's a prefigurative—technical term for politics: act in the world now as you would like the world to be—so people want film to kind of represent the world they want to be in. And there's a lot of people who know to look for those kinds of film and to to monitor it, and see what's happening. Just think of like, the *Avengers Endgame*, when a very white Steve Rogers, aka “Captain America”, hands his shield over to Sam Wilson, so we get the first black Captain America. And there's a whole Disney series on this. And now, at the end of Daniel Craig being Bond, everybody wants to know who's next, and who that person's gonna look like. And so we *know* to look at some kinds of text and scrutinizing them. Other things, we bring scrutiny, it seems, more idiosyncratically. And so I'm wondering if you had any thoughts about that. What we scrutinize, and what we don't in terms of similarity.

**Costas Nakassis 41:38**

Well, I think that's a brilliant insight. And I think what it points to is that the question of what is it that we take images to be, or that we *want* from them, is responsive to the cultural, but also specifically here, in the political context. And so, there are some times when it doesn't matter who the actor is, to their capacity to act as a character or bring a character to life. Right? And what's interesting is that in the current political moment, people are becoming alive to the question of, it *does* matter who the person is off-screen, that they're off-screen identity *does* matter. And I think that that's an interesting transformation that's happened in the last several decades—linked to a certain kind of identity politics in the cases that you mentioned—but the general issue is that we're always able to bring that aspect into focus, if we're primed in a certain way. To think about like, well, who is it? Who is that person *behind* the character? And can I think about the image in relation to that, and vice versa? Can I think about who they are?

**Stanton Wortham 42:56**

Thanks for listening to these episodes that make up the first part of our second season. We will return with new episodes on January 17 2022. After the holiday break, you can look forward to an episode with Will Damon on purpose, and whether or not purpose is backward, or forward-looking. With Mark Freeman on whether dementia could be a gateway to mystical experienc. With Andy Hargreaves, on whether we've forgotten about social class. With Ken Gergen on whether or not individuality is impossible. And with Karin Nissenbaum, about whether things happen for a reason. Please remember to subscribe so you don't miss our return next year at [pulledupshort.org](http://pulledupshort.org). Have a happy holiday.