The influence of genre on ethics
Mike Daisey, documentary truth, and postmodernity
Postmodern documentary can be seen as presenting ‘truth’ even when facts are false. Where an audience’s expectations of the ‘truth’ of a genre conflict with those of the author, however, a disjunction is created that can subvert the impact of the message. This argument will be examined in the context of “Mike Daisey and the Apple Factory”.

(Daisey)
The show

- On 6 Jan 2012, This American Life aired a program devoted to “Mike Daisey and the Apple Factory” (Chicago Public Media and Glass, Mike Daisey and the Apple Factory), originally a one man stage show. The program detailed numerous abuses in Apple’s Chinese factory, owned by Foxconn.
- Daisey spoke in the first person, offering details of his experiences in China, to support his criticisms: “But I do know that in my first two hours of my first day at that gate, I met workers who were 14 years old, 13 years old, 12. Do you really think Apple doesn't know?”
- This American Life claimed in the broadcast that they had “fact checked everything that was checkable” and had only a “few quibbles”. The show was presented as factual documentary.
Rob Schmitz, China correspondent for Marketplace, investigated Daisey’s story and found numerous factual errors (“lies”). Yet “the things Daisey lied about seeing are things that have actually happened in China”.

“His story was initially a success because it satisfied so many of our casual assumptions about China and Apple” (Osnos).

So Daisey’s show contained both lies and truth, though only truth had been explicitly and implicitly presented.
The retraction

• On 16 Mar 2012, This American Life (Chicago Public Media and Glass, *Retraction*) devoted its full program to a retraction of the previous show. While This American Life maintained the information about Foxconn was accurate, “As best as we can tell, Mike's monologue in reality is a mix of things that actually happened when he visited China and things that he had just heard about or researched, which he then pretends that he witnessed firsthand.”

• Mike Daisey said on the show: “I'm not going to say that I didn't take a few shortcuts in my passion to be heard. But I stand behind the work. My mistake, the mistake I truly regret, is that I had it on your show as journalism. And it's not journalism. It's theater.”

• Even though Daisey (now) claimed the work as theatre, it had been presented as journalism.
What went wrong?

• Like many such cases, Daisey claims that his work wasn’t intended to be factually accurate, but something else. It was “theatre”. So why are people shocked and scandalised?
• Most audience members hadn’t been to China. Daisey’s show was presented as a first-person experience that actually took place. It presented as documentary, *not* theatre. It offered signs of truth: it was plausibly “factlike” and intertextually related to the genre of documentaries (Alexander 380-381).
• He broke the implied contract between himself and his audience (Cowan 156) as he himself later admitted (Daisey) by presenting one genre under the guise of another.
• Yet news in a postmodern world is always a fiction, intended to provide truth about our condition (Ericson 93).

• We assess narrative facts on the basis of their context (do they “fit together”?) and within a certain cultural framework (Brunner 24-25).

• Texts are a “multi-dimensional space” containing numerous meanings, not just one (Barthes 170). It is the reader that inscribes meaning to texts (Barthes 171). These meanings are not always the author’s, nor those of other people.

• Daisey’s narrative intended to force us to confront our reliance on ‘slave’ labour, to question the nature of biopolitical power that underlies our consumer society (Madison 238), but there was no need to lie about events to do this. His work already contained “essential truth” but the audience saw “factual truth” (Madison 239).
Conclusion

• Daisey did indeed relate a truthful tale in “Mike Daisey and the Apple Factory”, but it was one that was encoded implicitly with, and included, documentary-style facts that were both false and unnecessary to his argument.

• Discovery of these errors (lies) led to audience conflict about what sort of narrative framework they were engaging in with Daisey.

• This disjunction broke the author/audience contract and, once revealed, also lessened the impact of his intended message.


