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Post-Classical Hollywood Realism and "Ideological Reality"

The critique of realism as it was practiced by film critics and scholars in the late 1960s and 1970s has fallen rather dramatically off the film studies map. There are some reasons for this disappearance. For example, the emphasis on perceptual and cognitive frames of realism explored by cognitive film theorists has greatly refined film studies' approaches to realism.[1] As well, rather than critiques of realism, defenses of realism have risen to the fore, especially in terms of a reassessment of Bazin's theories.[2] Alongside this renewed advocacy of realism, however, for large parts of the film studies community questions of realism seem more irrelevant than ever, especially insofar as special effects and CGI animation have tended to take centre stage in Hollywood blockbusters over the last fifteen to twenty years. For those who have celebrated the triumph of digital special effects over analogue indexicality, realism has well and truly been put to rest. The celebration of the digital has thus been one way of doing away with the critique of realism, for if there is no longer any realism, there is no need to critique it.

With these positions in mind, I want to revisit the critique of realism here with a few particular points in view. First, I want to claim that many contemporary special effects films and CGI animated features can be called realist in ways that are related, albeit in modified ways, to the realism associated with classical Hollywood. My intention in doing so is to claim that these films cannot be dismissed as either fantasies or escapes—a typical advocate of realism, for example, might dismiss special effects films as irrelevant departures from reality. In other words, a major reason for revisiting the critique of realism is because contemporary Hollywood films cannot be easily celebrated for their anti-realism or their digital surpassing of analogue realism. My aim instead is to argue that these films can give valuable insights into the kinds of realities we currently inhabit. And while it is true that I am going to be somewhat negative about, and critical of, that reality—I am revisiting the *critique* of realism, after all—I do not wish to be critical of the films themselves. Rather, the films I discuss here—and I rely on some approaches made by other scholars—shed valuable light on the kinds of realities we have begun to take for granted.

Some sense of what I am aiming for here is provided in my book *The Reality of Film* (2011). There, while discussing a range of film-related scholars, I argue that rather than providing departures from reality, films can be said to provide us with ways of understanding, conceiving, navigating, and imagining reality. In other words, instead of trying to claim that some types of films express reality well—call these "realist" films—while others fail to do so, I make the claim that all films present us with realities of one sort or another. What is at stake in such an approach is an attempt to discern *what kinds of realities* are made available by a particular film or films. From such a perspective, reality is not just what we see or perceive, nor is it merely what a camera might record or capture. Rather, reality is about imagining, dreaming, fantasizing, and conceiving what kinds of realities might be possible, though seeing and perceiving understandably fall within such frameworks as well. My question might therefore be: what kinds of realities are made available in contemporary Hollywood cinema?

Conceptions of classical Hollywood realism still seemed appropriate up until approximately ten years ago. Warren Buckland, for example, in a contentious piece on *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993), defined what he called a "new aesthetic realism" that had been made available through digital imaging. Buckland argued that a range of realist conceptions, many of which were indebted to André Bazin and other *Cahiers du Cinéma* writers of the 1950s and 1960s, were applicable to contemporary special effects films, even more so with the added realism that could be obtained by way of CGI effects, such as the realism of Spielberg's digital dinosaurs. Even more to the point, Lev Manovich's *Language of New Media* (2001) posited a his-

1. See Anderson, Currie, and Grodal.
2. See Andrew, Crouse, and Morgan.

torical trajectory that began with the Renaissance invention of linear perspective—long considered the origin of realism in the cinema—only to develop through the photographic and cinematic camera, and to end in conceptions of digital worlds that adopt the very same language indebted to a perspective-based realist conception of the world.

Today, however, the question of realism in digital special effects blockbusters seems more or less irrelevant. Scholars are instead tackling the myriad divergences and complexities that have emerged with cinema's digitization. There are some key moments. Kristen Daly, for example, enthuses over the possibility of "Cinema 3.0"—an updating of Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* (1986; 1989)—by arguing that if "old" cinema had to contend with the mechanization of everyday life, then in the digital era, "the cognition of the audience must be synchronized with digital logics" (Daly 86). The digital age ushers in new senses of the world so that the old mechanical and industrial categories no longer apply. From such a perspective, realism belongs to the debates of a bygone era. Nevertheless, here one might begin to sense that the question of reality becomes a pressing one: what kinds of reality can be conceived by way of digital cinema and "digital logics"?

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Along with the quest to discover what kinds of reality are at stake for digital cinema—and Daly posits various modes of "play," "navigating," "searching," and "figuring out the rules of the game" as essential to the digital's "database" logic—there is a sense that narratives are not what they used to be. Daly contends that "the dominance of narrative…is waning" in favour of a range of other modes of audience interaction with the digital text (83). Like Daly, other scholars have noted the replacement of classical narratives with other modes of filmic organization. Manovich, for example, refers to the interfaces or information spaces of digital media (326), while David Bordwell theorizes what he calls "network narratives." Suffice it to say that, along with a turning away from questions of realism in digital cinema, there has also been an embracing of new forms of narrative, forms that differ substantially from their classical Hollywood predecessors.

Alongside such interventions, Kristen Whissel has published two key articles investigating the relation between digital cinema's aesthetic strategies and the potential socio-cultural significance of those strategies.[3] One angle she pursues when discussing what she calls the "digital multitude"—the many films that feature digitally produced crowds of people (or aliens, or robots, and so on) that can number in the thousands or hundreds of thousands—is that, "more often than not, the multitude's appearance heralds 'The End'—the end of freedom, the end of a civilization, the end of an era, or even the end of human time altogether" ("Digital Multitude" 91). Whissel thus pinpoints one of the key narrative tropes of digital cinema: that a great many films seem to posit "the end of the world" as an organizing frame. What this necessitates in the films she discusses[4] is a bonding together of humans in the face of extinction: "To become the agents of a new history," Whissel contends, "the protagonists must temporarily prioritize the collective over the individual and trade self-interest for united, self-sacrificing, bloody engagement with an enemy" (108). In these films, the strategies of discovering a new collective spirit in order to prevent the end of the world offer a response to the threat of the digital multitude and

its aims for human destruction. Additionally, for audiences, those strategies also suggest ways of coping with the anxieties involved in the expansion of the digital world over the last twenty years or more. Whissel points to a key narrative strategy that has emerged in the digital era that defines a reality of the present for its audiences: that we need to band together to defeat our enemies, enemies that seem to have emerged only in the digital era—whether these are suicide bombers, "evil" regimes, or computer systems themselves.

Thomas Elsaesser offers yet another perspective. In terms of narrative, he claims that contemporary Hollywood films increasingly seem to favour puzzle narratives—dense, multi-layer narratives that scramble in myriad simultaneous directions and often feature sudden reversals of assumption ("Mindgame"). One of Elsaesser's examples of this kind of puzzle narrative is *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009). In discussing the film, he makes some startling claims about the ways in which contemporary audiences approach narrative meaningfulness. He claims, for example, that there are a range of ways into and out of the narrative, so that one almost reaches a point at which *one can make whatever one wants* of it; it is a film, he argues, that offers "access for all." The proliferating layers of antithetical or even contradictory storylines—what Elsaesser calls "cognitive dissonances"—end up delivering to the spectator a sense of satisfaction at merely having managed to decode something from the film. In fact, "the cumulative effect of these cognitive dissonances," writes Elsaesser, "is to provoke the spectator into actively producing his or her own reading" ("Access for All" 260). In other words, one can be for or against the film, one can see it as a narrative of noble savagery, of corporate control, or any range of other options. The film encourages such "freedom of interpretation" and actively courts opposed or contradictory stances on the film's meaning or message.

With a film such as *Avatar,* then, there have emerged variable forms of free-floating and free-choosing subjectivities. And yet, Elsaesser goes on to claim that it is the narrative's "management of contradictions" (256) that is key to *Avatar*'s success with audiences: it makes it seem as though spectators are choosing their own perspectives on the film, but all the while the film is carefully managing those perspectives. For Elsaesser, *Avatar* delivers only "the illusion of 'empowering' the spectator" (260), and ultimately its narrative, its contradictory story lines, are all so many "images [that] are instructions for actions" (261); the film is controlling us, even as it appears to be offering us choices.

Elsaesser's point is a complex one, but again he is trying to identify the ways in which a film like *Avatar* is defining the kinds of realities we have come to inhabit over the last twenty years or more, realities defined more and more, it seems, by digital technology and its logics. One way of defining that reality, if we take Elsaesser's point a step further, is to declare that the digital age has managed the feat of making us feel like we are in control of our lives to an unprecedented degree, while in actuality it is really "digital logics" that are controlling us, siphoning our choices, directing our aims and choosing our goals.

For Elsaesser, as with the other authors I have discussed, realism is not a central issue. And yet, Elsaesser's argument begins to move very close to the kinds of arguments that were once made apropos of a "critique of realism." If we accept Elsaesser's conclusion, then *Avatar* is doing nothing less than expressing what was once called the "dominant ideology"—in fact, Elsaesser claims as much (261). Such a stance was one of the key tenets of the critique of realism: that "cinema reproduces reality," but in so far as it does so, all it can do is reproduce the prevailing ideology. Jean Narboni and Jean-Louis Comolli make such a point in their 1969 editorial for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, "Cinema / Ideology / Criticism." In that editorial, the authors set in place the criteria for a critique of realism that were to become extremely influential well into the 1980s (and, indeed, their influence can still be felt in some circles today).

Classical Hollywood Realism

Classical Hollywood realism has three main characteristics: it privileges aesthetic strategies of transparency; it produces a fixed spectator-subject; and it is unable to adequately portray the contradictions of society. For critics of realism, these features are all geared towards reproducing reality, but by extension, they thereby reproduce the prevailing ideology as well. Films that do this—the bulk of which can be considered classical Hollywood realist films—reproduce "'bourgeois realism' and the whole conservative box of tricks," as Comolli and Narboni rather bluntly put it (26).

If we look closely at the three key terms above—*transparency*, *fixed spectator-subject* and *contradiction*—then it will at first glance appear that for contemporary scholars such terms are no longer useful ones. First, the foregrounding of aesthetic techniques in the digital age has made simple distinctions between transparency and aestheticism much more difficult, especially insofar as rapid editing, mobile cameras, and special effects all render the notion of a "transparent window on the world"—central to Renaissance perspective no less than classical Hollywood realism—less and less relevant for contemporary Hollywood films. Second, the fixed spectator-subjects of classical Hollywood spectatorship also seem to have been superseded by mobile, freely-choosing spectators who are no longer passive consumers, but who actively work to figure out and make the connections that constitute a film (as both Elsaesser and Daly have argued). From Whissel's perspective, the fixed Subjects (with a capital "S") of classical Hollywood (and, needless to say, of Althusser's analyses)[5] have been replaced by a new sense of collectivity that eschews "too much individualization and self-interest" ("Digital Multitude" 108). Finally, the rise of puzzle narratives has enabled Hollywood films to portray contradictions, even if this contradictoriness is tempered by what Elsaesser notes is an ongoing

3. See Whissel, "Tales of Upward Mobility: The New Verticality and Digital Special Effects" (2006) and "The Digital Multitude" (2010).
4. Whissel discusses a large number of films including *The Mummy* (Sommers, 1999), *The Matrix* (Wachowski Bros., 1999), *I, Robot* (Proyas, 2004), *Troy* (Petersen, 2004), *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008), among others.
5. See Althusser; cf. Baudry.

mode of control exercised by films like *Avatar*. For Daly, Whissel, and Elsaesser, these complexities definitively separate the films of contemporary Hollywood from those of the classical age.

These are strong claims: that the terms posed by classical Hollywood realism no longer apply for contemporary Hollywood films. At the same time, however, there is no sense that ideology has been done away with. Neither Daly, Elsasesser, nor Whissel mention ideology as a term of detailed analysis, but all offer ideological perspectives: Elsaesser's critique of *Avatar* is decidedly negative on ideological grounds; Daly's defence of "Cinema 3.0" is resolutely positive—the films she discusses act as "a counter of commodification" (98); and Whissel sits on the fence somewhat, though her invocations of "multitudes" and "collectivities" take up issues of ideological significance. So where or what is the ideology of these contemporary Hollywood films? And how might it be related to realism?

In *The Reality of Film*, I argue that, for film studies, the great breakthrough made by Slavoj Žižek was his reinvention of the term *ideology*. For Žižek, without ideology there is no such thing as reality per se—our sense of reality can only exist if it is experienced through the filter of ideology. In short, reality is always already ideological (Rushton 148-171). My guiding claim, then, is that there is no point opposing ideology to something else that might "cure" ideology—for example, an Althusserian science—nor is there much point in opposing reality to something else, of saying that there might be a reality that is non-ideological, or alternatively claiming that if reality itself is ideological, there might be something "beyond" that would be cleansed of ideological reality (e.g., a proletarian utopia). Various competing ideologies define the kinds of realities we inhabit, and there is no way to break through to a domain that might be ideologically exempt, for if we do, reality itself will cease to exist.

Therefore, the question to be posed is: what realities might be discovered in contemporary films that shed light on contemporary ideologies? Or, what kinds of ideologies might be discovered in contemporary films that shed light on our contemporary reality? Michael Bay's *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, second only to *Avatar* at the 2009 box office, offers an interesting case. At one level, the film shows something approaching contradiction—as Roger Ebert put it quite simply, "The plot is incomprehensible" (*Chicago Sun-Times*). Yet, *Transformers: Revenge* is hardly the first Hollywood film to feature complicated plotting. Indeed, Daly points to a reviewer of *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (Verbinski, 2007) who had to confess by the middle of the film that he "hadn't the slightest idea what the hell was going on" (qtd. in Daly 84). Narrative incomprehensibility might, therefore, be one of the defining traits of our age, a point that Elsaesser also tries to make. Daly eventually defends such a perspective as being one that contemporary audiences have become comfortably acquainted with: "Digital consumers are accustomed to not quite grasping the links, to knowing that only a computer could make such a link…This vagueness is commonplace and accepted by the digital user" (96). This might be a first step towards defining a contemporary ideological reality: that films, no less than the digitized world itself, have become incomprehensible in ways that we have begun both to acknowledge and accept. And this might certainly be one way of conceiving of contradiction: that there is no longer a smooth, easy, or linear reality mapped out by films in terms of a beginning, middle, and end, and equally, that there is no reality "out there" that can be so easily shaped into a past, present, and future. Perhaps this is a first step towards defining a contemporary ideological reality.

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Such a perspective leads to interesting conceptions of subjectivity. For Elsaesser, a film like *Avatar* only appears to offer a spectator myriad choices. In a similar way, Daly's "Cinema 3.0" does away with "following a linear narrative" and instead offers the spectator a range of games and puzzles that "put the viewer to work" (86). Here we have an active —indeed, an interactive—viewer rather than the passive or "fixed" spectator associated with classical Hollywood. And for Whissel, as we have seen, examples from contemporary films demand that conceptions of the individual subject be put aside in favour of collective action.

Transformers: Revenge presents difficulties for any straightforward conception of subjectivity. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to go into much detail on this point, except to declare that what seems like a mode of interactivity for Daly, might turn out to be a more insidious form of passivity than even classical Hollywood cinema could provide. Daly states that contemporary consumers are accustomed to having machines make their decisions for them. *Transformers: Revenge* makes a similar point: its hero, Sam Witwicky (Shia LeBeouf), has visions of "cybertronian symbols," visions that he has no control over, but that, on the contrary, achieve their aims *through him*, by using him. These cybertronian symbols allow Sam to locate

the "Matrix of Leadership," thus delivering to him the tools necessary for the plot's resolution. The film's basic message is that it is not his actions, skills, or motivations that bring about a resolution to the story; rather, it is simply that it is Sam's destiny to do so, a destiny facilitated by the technology that works through him. This, therefore, is one way of isolating the ways that technology "does things for us," above and beyond what is possible or even desirable for us to do.

But it is by way of the character Galloway (John Benjamin Hickey), a federal government bureaucrat, that aspects of the film's ideological reality come most sharply into perspective, especially in terms of what "subjects" may or may not be capable of. Looking outside the film, Galloway might, on the one hand, refer to George Galloway, the renegade "socialist" member of the United Kingdom parliament who came to public prominence in 2003 when he quit the Labour Party because of his vehement opposition to the UK's involvement in the invasion of Iraq. He was also an outspoken critic of the George W. Bush regime, especially its foreign policies. In the US, he was implicated in an "oil-for-food" scandal in 2005, allegations that he ardently denied. In summation, Galloway is short hand for a leftist-pacifist, anti-American critic of war, especially of recent American-led invasions.

Transformers: Revenge clearly knows what it is doing here; the name of the character Galloway, constantly mocked throughout the film, has not been chosen by accident. If George Galloway provides one allegorical connection, then another Galloway, this time from Hollywood cinema, might provide an additional point of comparison. Lieutenant JoAnne Galloway (Demi Moore) is a key character in Rob Reiner's 1992 thriller, *A Few Good Men*. Galloway, in this film, is a military lawyer who fights for truth and justice. By contrast, Lieutenant Dan Kaffee (Tom Cruise) starts out as a slacker lawyer who insists that discovering true justice is far too difficult an option and instead seeks deals and plea-bargains. By the time the film reaches its climax, Kaffee has been brought round to seeing Galloway's point of view: that truth and justice are goals worth pursuing. The film's central theme is one that offers the pursuit of justice as a critique of power, especially the military power that aims to bypass legal and ethical standards in the name of "getting the job done."

In *A Few Good Men*, Jack Nicholson's character, the high-ranking Colonel Nathan Jessep, is a military leader who does whatever it takes to "get the job done." At the military inquiry that acts as the film's apex, Jessep is under pressure to admit to irregularities that may have led to the death of an army cadet. But he resists disclosing the truth and famously exclaims: "You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!" What is implied by this exclamation is that the military does and should act in ways that are above the law, that it needs to act in these ways in order to function efficiently and effectively. If we really knew the truth, Jessep concedes, we would not be able to handle it, so it is best that we do not know at all.

This is precisely the kind of difficulty the character of Galloway comes up against in *Transformers: Revenge*. He questions the need for brute military offensives and asks that the military options be downgraded or decommissioned altogether, and for this the film repeatedly mocks him.[6] The film's strategy, in contrast to *A Few Good Men*, is to insist on going above the law, to ignore the dictates of the government so that the military is free to function without constraint. By the time we reach the end of the film, we have been convinced that those military men made the right choice: their military power has allowed the world to be saved. The implication is that, if Galloway had gotten

6. Towards the end of the film, for example, Galloway is emasculatingly ejected from an airplane while one of the military jocks calls him a "dumb ass."

his way, the world and the human race would have been destroyed.

Things turn out very differently for the Galloway of *A Few Good Men*. Here, the film ends with truth and justice victorious over the might and convenience of military deception. This means that for the ideological reality of the film—and *A Few Good Men* is unexceptional in its acceptance of the codes and conventions of classical Hollywood realism—one could have characters like Galloway able to reprimand characters like Jessep for their misappropriations of power. In other words, trying to convince others of the difference between right and wrong, or justice and injustice, was still an option for classical Hollywood films, as much as it might have been for reality itself. The Galloway in *Transformers: Revenge*, on the other hand, suffers entirely different consequences. It is as though the film is declaring that anyone who searches for truth, especially when we are dealing with classified intelligence in the realms of national or international security, most likely will not be able to handle it, especially if those searching for the truth are government bureaucrats (and the film makes it clear that Galloway is supposed to be a representative of Barack Obama's government).

A number of distinctions come to the fore here: the clarity or "transparency" of narrative storytelling in a classical Hollywood film like *A Few Good Men* is one that takes us by the hand so as to teach us about truth and justice and to make us believe that such ideals are possible. These are certainly ideological ruses, but they go some way towards making an argument about how we might be able to distinguish good acts from bad ones, right from wrong. *Transformers: Revenge* occupies a very different territory. Eschewing a straightforward cause-and-effect linear narrative, the story instead bamboozles its audiences and serves up shock and awe in abundance. There is not much to teach us here, and there is no rhetoric about how to distinguish good acts or people (or robots) from evil ones; rather, we are merely shown what strong military might and hi-tech weaponry can achieve when left to their own devices, and that "good" and "evil" are absolutes over which there can be no debate.

Post-Classical Hollywood Realism

With such issues in mind, *Transformers: Revenge* might be considered a very "realist" film. It is not avoiding reality; rather, it is presenting reality to us in a straightforward way. The reality it presents is certainly ideological, but that in no way makes it false. To call such an ideological reality false would be to turn one's back on the reality we inhabit, especially insofar as reality will always already be ideological. The authors I have briefly discussed here indicate a number of ways that some contemporary ideological realities might be comprehended. Elsaesser demonstrates, for example, that the complexities of contemporary puzzle films offer the kinds of contradictions that classical Hollywood realism could not. So the foregrounding of contradictions might be one way of accounting for today's ideological realities. And yet, whereas the critics of classical realism thought the exposure of contradictions would open up the possibility for human emancipation, Elseasser contends that, in the context of contemporary cinema, no such thing has happened. Instead, the contradictions of contemporary narratives—*Avatar* being exemplary for Elseasser—merely deliver the appearance of freedom. The exacerbation of complexity or contradiction in contemporary Hollywood narratives is merely another way that Hollywood keeps us captive.

In contrast, Daly argues that contemporary forms of cinema do offer modes of empowerment to viewers (98). Many of the conclusions she makes, however, are problematic to say the least. Near the end of her article, she invokes Gilles Deleuze, stating that he envisioned a future of cinema that would no longer be predicated on "looking through a window on the world," but that would offer instead "a table of information" (qtd. in Daly 97). Thus, Deleuze presents one way in which a realist perspective can be replaced by an "informational" one. But whereas Daly takes this to be a positive prediction, Deleuze, in fact, saw no such thing; indeed, he could hardly have been more critical of what he called "information," decrying at one point that "When you are informed you are told what you are supposed to believe" ("Creative Act" 320). The information world is one in which we can no longer believe; we must simply accept what we are told to believe. Deleuze would eventually call such a state of existence a "control society,"[7] and Daly's article, no less than *Transformers: Revenge*, very accurately charts the contours of such a society.

Whissel offers a more nuanced approach to contemporary cinema, especially if we conceive of such films in terms of their ideological realities. Yet, in defining contemporary forms of collectivity, she refrains from making any judgments about the possibilities entailed by such collectives. The next step is to ask why so many of the films she discusses—and *Transformers: Revenge* is pertinent here—all posit "the end of the world" as a framing device. Classical Hollywood films, by contrast, typically posit the beginning of a new world, the founding of a new civilization or the birth of a nation, rather than "The End." The implication is quite possibly that the hope of founding or re-founding a civilization of the "good"—a civilization founded on the ideals portrayed in *A Few Good Men*—is very much a thing of the past. Such insight is definitive for the ideology of contemporary Hollywood cinema as much as it is for the reality of the contemporary world: that the possibility of imagining a better kind of world is gone; all that remains is the hope that "our" enemies will be defeated and that "our" military will keep us alive.

7. See Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies."

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