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# CINEPHILE

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Ivone Margulies Reenactment and A-filiation Richard Rushton Post-Classical Hollywood Realism





Scholarly articles in English and French on theory, history and criticism of film and media; book reviews; rare and archival research documents.

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- Daniel Herbert on Art House Video
- Ryan Pierson on Video Arcades
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- Book Reviews

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# Editor's Note

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There is not one, but several realisms.  
Each era looks for its own.  
—André Bazin

Realism is a contentious term. Championed in the '40s by theorist André Bazin as the asymptotic *telos* of the filmic medium, and adopted epithetically by the Italian neorealists to denote the testimonial candor of their post-war cinema, its usage and subsequent connotations came under fire in the '60s and '70s, charged with empirical dogmatism and ideological complacency in the wake of Grand Theory's intellectual vogue. Since then, the term has been held at a cautious remove in film studies, paired often with historicizing prefixes to mark the contours of movements past (*poetic realism*, *neorealism*, *kitchen sink realism*, etc.) but uttered always in retrospective turns, pointing to the finitude of its mimetic prowess—what Christian Metz labelled its “reality-effect.”

Yet in the last decade or so, a reappraisal of realism has risen to the fore. Sparked by the demise of cinema's ontological basis (the existential link between film's corporeal nature and its real-world referent) and the renewed pertinence of Bazin's cardinal question, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, realism has been re-framed as a generative area of study in a parlous digital age, enabling new (or newly situated) discourse on cinematic reportage, authenticity, and representation. Recent scholars who have embraced realism's epistemological subscription—yet managed to traverse the epistemic fissure of a positivist approach—have recognized moments of contingency in contemporary art house and marginal cinemas, rooted either in classical tenets (spatio-temporal integrity, social extension, moral despondence) or emergent ones (“haptic” visuality, profilmic exclusivity, ethical engagement). This issue of *Cinephile* is situated at the intersection of such discussions.

To begin, Ivone Margulies negotiates the ruptures of literal reenactment in the Brazilian documentary *Serras da Desordem*, offering a tempered look at the contradictions inherent in the replaying of cultural erasure and displaced identity. Next, Richard Rushton rehabilitates the critique of

realism in light of digital technology's usurp of analogue indexicality, observing in digital narratives an ideological reality distinct from those exhibited in the classical Hollywood model. Justin Horton then traces the lineage of Bazanian realism in mumblecore entry *Kissing on the Mouth*, mediating its quotidian, sexual frankness with a Deleuzian decoupling of sound and image. Marc Di Sotto's article returns us to the site of reenactment cinema, this time the fictional recounting of the '72 Derry massacre in Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday*, to consider the limitations of historical representation and the aesthetics of trauma. In “Beyond Neo-Neo Realism,” James Lattimer puts the supposed neorealist impulse in recent American cinema into perspective, and finds in Kelly Reichardt's revisionist Western *Meeek's Cutoff* a subtle retooling of Bazin and Zavattini's narrative proponents. And finally, Tiago de Luca engages in a phenomenological reading of Gus Van Sant's *Gerry*, proposing a more embodied version of realism—“realism of the senses”—to understand the text's visionary images.

While not exhaustive of the surfacing strains of realism being considered in film scholarship, this issue of *Cinephile* acts as an insightful survey of at least the most absorbing areas dedicated to this reinvigorated field. My deepest gratitude to the authors for the caliber of their contributions. I must also extend thanks to my advisor Lisa Coulthard and the editorial team for their tireless dedication to an admittedly precarious topic, and the Department of Theatre and Film at UBC for their continued support.

Lastly, when initially mounting this project, I had in mind not only critical analyses but also visual evocations, some kind of testament to cinema's century-long wedding to the photographic medium. I want to thank Hanahlie Beise for bringing this to fruition, her beautiful 35mm photos poised at the start of each article. Enjoy.

—Shaun Inouye

# Contributors

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**Hanahlie Beise** received her B.F.A. from Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2007. In 2008, she worked with *The Sartorialist* in New York and was commissioned by the Frank Gehry IAC building in Manhattan to produce a series of panoramas for permanent installation. In 2009, she was an Artist in Residence at the Banff Centre. In addition to her work as a photographer, she is also a partner in the design studio Caste Projects.

**Tiago de Luca** was recently awarded his Ph.D. in World Cinemas at the University of Leeds, UK. He has published articles in academic journals such as *Senses of Cinema*, *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, and *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. He has a forthcoming chapter on realism and world cinema in the anthology *Theorizing World Cinema* (2012).

**Marc Di Sotto** is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Edinburgh, working on the relationship between memory and authenticity, and how these are reflected in the representations of history in literature and film. This work builds on his M.Sc. thesis, “Speaking in the Voice of Witness: A Study of Trauma and Authenticity in Fictional Representations of the Holocaust” (2008). He is a peer reviewer for the postgraduate journal *Forum*.

**Justin Horton** is a Ph.D. candidate in Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University in Atlanta. His area of research includes classical film theory, cinematic realism, and sound studies. His M.A. thesis, “The Flow of Water: Contemporary American Realisms” (2011), explores how free indirect discourse and the disjunction of sound and image open realism to an oneiric and/or intersubjective realm. Current projects include an investigation of voice-over in animated television, and the convergence of cinema and the “out-of-body” experience.

**James Lattimer** is an M.A. candidate in Film Studies at the Free University of Berlin. He has worked for the Forum section of the Berlin International Film Festival since 2008 and has been appointed to its selection committee for the upcoming 2012 edition. He is currently writing his M.A. thesis on how neorealist theory can be applied to the *oeuvre* of Kelly Reichardt.

**Ivone Margulies** is an Associate Professor in the Film and Media Studies Department at Hunter College (CUNY). She is the author of *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (1996) and the editor of *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* (2003). She has published articles in *Screen*, *Rouge*, *L'Esprit Créateur*, *QRV*, among others, and contributed the essay “A Matter of Time” to the Criterion release of *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (2009). Her recent essay, “Bazin's Exquisite Corpses,” can be found in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and its Afterlives* (2011). She is currently completing a manuscript on post-war reenactment cinema.

**Richard Rushton** is a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Lancaster University, UK. He is the author of *The Reality of Film* (2011), *Cinema After Deleuze* (2012), and co-author of *What is Film Theory?* (2010). He has published articles in *Screen*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, *CineAction*, *Deleuze Studies*, *Senses of Cinema*, among others. He is currently working on a book tentatively titled *A New Politics of Cinema*.





Ivone Margulies

## Reenactment and A-filiation in Andrea Tonacci's *Serras da Desordem*

This essay considers the dystopic dimension of post-*Shoah* (Lanzmann, 1984) reenactment cinema, closely reading the figuration of return, dislocation, and a-filiation in Andrea Tonacci's *Serras da Desordem* (2006).<sup>1</sup> An allegorical meditation on the audiovisual erasures and rewritings of National History, *Serras* tells the story of Carapiru, an isolated Indian from the Awá-Guajá tribe who reenacts events that took place twenty to thirty years earlier, mainly his first contact with non-indigenous Brazilians after an attack ordered by landowners disperses and kills members of his family group.

Carapiru wanders for eleven years and 600 km from the northeast of Maranhão to Bahia, and in 1988 he makes contact with some ranchers and stays with the Aires family until FUNAI, the Indian Services, bring him to Brasília and then back to Maranhão to join remnants of his community at the Caru reservation. When Sydney Possuelo, the person in charge of isolated groups, calls a translator for Carapiru, the young man who comes recognizes Carapiru as being his long lost father. The eventful discovery of a not-yet contacted Indian and the unexpected re-encounter of father and son after eleven years of separation lead to Carapiru's momentary celebrity status.

*Serras da Desordem* freely cuts news and television reportage of Carapiru's first encounter with non-Indian Brazilians into reconstructed and documentary scenes from 1988 and 2006; expeditionary films from the teens and twenties flit by interrupting Carapiru's reenacted present, and an extended montage of institutional newsreels and

films reference the period of Carapiru's wanderings (the "Brazilian miracle" period), turning the film momentarily into an ironic dictatorship-era synopsis. The film advances a radical de-originating agenda, from its inter-textual saturation to the classical self-reflexive staging of the filmmaker meeting Carapiru at the end of the film to "start" it. *Serras*'s hybrid texture, its unexpected temporal shifts, black and white to colour transitions, and various image grains, keep Carapiru constantly unanchored, lost in a forest of images.

This unmooring—real, enacted, and textually multiplied—is my object here. Carapiru's disengaged, incongruous presence among non-Indian Brazilians, his residual group, and the film's surface, is a result both of a violent history of eradication and the effect of a fracturing aesthetic involving recursive repetition and literal reenactment.

Carapiru agrees to replay his story on the condition that the director will bring him back to his reservation. While this anecdote pinpoints charged questions of Indian displacement, the film steadily engages the contradictions involved in mimetically reproducing a going-back in time and place. Deeply entangled with his personal and ethnic history as a survivor of one of the last not-fully contacted Tupi-Guarani tribes,<sup>2</sup> the paradoxes of retracing Carapiru's history of dislocation are many: what does it mean to represent *first* encounters, to re-construct dispossession? How does one maintain the multiple registers of separation and encounter as we see Carapiru revisit the sites and people he met twenty years earlier?

The inherent belatedness of reenactment has been instrumental in the renewed engagement with the real appar-

1. Tonacci is part of the Brazilian Cinema Marginal movement. His first feature, *Bang Bang* (1970), is a spare, self-reflexive road movie. After that, he spent the late 1970s and 1980s working with indigenous tribes experimenting with testimonial and self-ethnographic forms (among many others, *Conversas no Maranhão*, 1978; *The Araras*, 1980-81). He had no illusions about indigenous groups living a pastoral reality.

2. The Guajá had to become nomadic foragers since the 1800s to escape decimation and are at present reduced to around three hundred and sixty members, sixty of whom live in a dwindling forest pressed by multiple corporate interests, in particular the mining company Vale do Rio Doce.



ent in contemporary tactical art and parafictional forms.<sup>3</sup> Critically stretching the reach of testimonials, revising history and registers of authenticity, many of these meta-fictional practices embed a redemptive promise into their re-creations, opening a biography to alternate possibilities (as in *Shulie*, Elizabeth Subrin's 1997 "remake" of Shulamith Firestone's life prior to her radical politics), or testing the activist reach of a political speech into different presents (as in Mark Tribe's *The Port Huron Project*, 2006-2009).<sup>4</sup>

Dealing with Carapiru, an isolated Indian and the prime object of ethnography's salvage paradigm, Tonacci's take on the retroactive potential of reconstruction is necessarily questioning. Used to catch up with a missed event or gesture, reenactment is closely allied with cinema's fictional machinery, with its desire to shape and tame contingency.<sup>5</sup> When deployed to represent the Indian, an entity subjected to constant patrol and territorializing pressure (when not downright extinction), reenactment becomes all-too-easily complicit with the ethnographic tendency to fixate an existing reality anchored in the past: to have the Indian become a piece of folklore relegated to the Nation's past, to try to define an authentic Indian, is the discursive equivalent of policies that statistically count or genetically define the Indian, thus trying to close its case.

Provocatively stating that "In Brazil everyone is Indian except who isn't," anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro brings up the example of the isolated Indian—"the only one who can claim to be really an Indian"—to characterize the senselessness of the contested Indian-identity claims in current Brazilian politics:<sup>6</sup>

Let's go back to the famous categories whose intentions to define temporal stages are evident: isolated, intermittent contact, permanent and integrated contact [Indians]...In whose face does the gate close? An integrated Indian is no longer an Indian...How frequent should the intermittency be that turns an 'intermittent' into an 'integrated' [Indian]. About the 'isolated' [Indian] no one dares to say *he is no longer an*

*Indian, especially because he is not even an Indian yet. He does not know he is an Indian.* (150)

Tonacci's affinity with the performative identity and politics advocated by Viveiros de Castro shows in his approach: to have Carapiru's unawareness count. His unconsciousness of what an Indian is safeguards a zone of silence around Carapiru, making him impervious to insertion in previous extrinsic hierarchies.

When asked about acting his own story, Carapiru told the director that he felt his story concerned no one but him. And yet, Tonacci states that he complied with all the filmmaking demands, lending his self "if solely as physical presence" (Tonacci 120). His description as inert prop raises core reenactment issues we address here: how does the return of a person as actor inflect the film's testimonial impact, and what is the added meaning of this belated return?

*The firebrand, a simple tool when compared to a lighter or match, becomes...a figure for multiple losses and ruptures.*

To what degree does the protagonist's consciousness count in a filmed theatre, and what is transmitted once Carapiru's self-expression is occluded, blocked even? What is the agency of the returning figure, of a figuration of return?

Literal reenactment films raise, above all, the question of agency. The casting simplicity of in-person reenactment—for what could be more obvious than playing one's own story—is tempting for activist filmmakers. Presented in terms of its protagonist's affect and subjective memory, self-performance is easily confused with a public reclamation of one's self and voice, occluding the film's voice and agenda.

Carapiru remains un-translated. The film dissociates in-person reenactment from authentic relay, suspending its protagonist in multiple—temporal, categorical, and expressive—fronts. Invalidating the consciousness-raising mission of classical neorealist reenactment<sup>7</sup> and documentary films, Carapiru is not introduced as a self-driven agent of his own history, and neither is cinema a transparent conduit for his voice nor for eventual onscreen self-awareness. Like other contemporary reenactment films discussed here, *Serras* stages a problematic agency: that Carapiru is there but strangely absent, that his presence is at odds with the present it refers to, is both a result of Tonacci's targeted mobili-

7. For an extended treatment of neorealist conceptions of reenactment as a path to exemplarity, see Margulies 217-230.



zation of reenactment's hesitant temporality and an allegory for an intractable alterity.

### Disrupted Transmission

Carapiru's relay value is linked to recurring images of a firebrand. The film starts, in the manner of process-oriented ethnographies, with an Indian making a fire. We do not yet know that this is Carapiru. A dreamlike sequence prefiguring the attack dissolves into images of Indians choosing a place to setup camp, showing their convivial relationship with their kin and animals. An older native woman hands the firebrand to a child, a detail that gains significance when, later in the film, one of the men in charge of the Indians' protection tells a parable for the film. He mentions an occasion when, concerned with their escape, he asked one of the Indians to put out his firebrand. When it was extinguished, he felt the Indian's pride in carrying it was instantly deflated. The firebrand, a simple tool when compared to a lighter or match, becomes, in this anecdote, a figure for multiple losses and ruptures.

In "The Artifices of Fire" (2008), Ismail Xavier takes stock of this metaphor, pointing to Tonacci's articulation of cinema's role in this break with tradition: "At the end of the film we return to its initial scene, the image of an Indian making fire. Only we now know this is Carapiru and

he comes to the woods to meet Tonacci and the camera" (23). In the last shot, Carapiru addresses the camera while a digitally inserted jet plane passes above him, "an even more inaccessible image of technology" (23).

Carapiru's incomprehensible camera-address persists as the node of obstructed communication and ostensive reflexivity that guides the question of testimonial agency in literal reenactment: can reenactment, like the firebrand, animate any prospect of continuity with the past, or should it be seen instead as a mere prop lit up just for the film? The film oscillates between these options, insisting on a tableau of discrepancy to figure a reality "that cannot be entirely translated into the terms of modern homogeneous time" (Bliss Cua Lim 28). The meeting with Tonacci and cinema at the end of the film completes this rite of passage: Carapiru's becoming-cinema.

This final image of technological super-imposition matches an equally significant parallel between Carapiru and National progress early in the film. Soon after the massacre of his group, Carapiru disappears into the forest. At this point, the scale of the film shifts to the grandiose, incorporating images of deforestation, the building of Transamazonica, Serra Pelada (a gigantic mining site)—large construction projects whose portent can only be measured by crane or aerial shots. An ironic samba scores a dissolve into contestation scenes between Indians and the FUNAI, and against the dictatorship. Collated from institutional films,

newsreels, and documentaries,<sup>8</sup> this inflated montage gels as the prosthetic memory of the military era, ending on a deceptively simple scene—that of Carapiru running. A literal notation of the actual, the run conflates representation and act, a de-dramatized image of liminality. Apposed but of distinct referential densities, these two sequences—Carapiru’s enigmatic, inaccessible subjectivity and the grotesque digest

*We are left to ponder what distinguishes original happenings from replay, routine from event, event from film take.*



of a National history of violence and spoliation—equate incommensurate images of Brazil. More than a synthesis of an era, this juxtaposition creates an imbalance between a single body and its testimonial burden, these constellations of meaning too dense to filter through an individual story.

Such allegorical pressure is constant in *Serras*. No image is allowed to appear naked, divested of its historical and filmic envelope. In one of the film’s most economic scenes, we observe how framing and duplication brackets Carapiru’s testimony. Leaning by a windowsill, Carapiru speaks for a long time in an unbroken, un-translated flow of Guajá. The camera tracks back to show he is alone in an expressive mimicry of transmission. Yet, this desolate image of an inaccessible self is instantly de-naturalized, echoed by a black and white photograph of Carapiru in 1998 from the exact same angle.

8. Among others, *Iracema, a Transa Amazonica* (Bodanzky & Senna, 1977), *Jango* (Tendler, 1984), *Linha de Montagem* (Tapajos, 1982), *Fé* (Dias, 1999), *Jornal do Sertão* (Sarno, 1970).

## “When is Carapiru”

“Where is Carapiru?” asks Ms. Aires, addressing Carapiru as a child in a game of self-recognition, pointing to a faded photo showing him and his host family. The recognition-ploy characterizes this as a revisitation to a prior 1988 stay among the Santa Luzia villagers. But *where Carapiru is* becomes the film’s silent, deeper refrain. We soon become unsure about the when of Carapiru’s actions, uncertain about how to think of him, what he himself thinks.

The narrative moves along two tensioned, temporal axes. One describes the linear sequence of Carapiru’s life up to his encounter with members of his tribe; the second, followed with greater interest, obfuscates linear chronology by injecting the film with a massive mediation, splitting every representation with the same oscillatory temporality that defines reenactment.

The film’s temporal ambiguity is not restricted to the replay of unique, discrete events in Carapiru’s life—like his first contact with the ranchers or when he is reluctantly taken away to Brasilia. The repetition of departure scenes now replayed as theatre conveys a vague violence impossible to locate, to gauge. Rather, his performance registers as most jarring and eventful against the backdrop of banal, regular quotidian tasks.

Routine both absorbs and sets Carapiru’s return in relief. The habitual nature of daily rituals lends itself to generalized abbreviation, and yet, in conjunction with cinema’s pointed singularity, the reference to repetitive behaviour only increases the chronological confusion: like every other day, there is cooking and eating, but when? Scenes are chronologically unmarked, reminding us that cinema can serve as a record of pure contingency, and that without narrative intervention, the internal time of the image loses its links with factual, clock time. At times, a simple adverb mentioned in a line of dialogue—“before,” “then,” “now”—exposes how Carapiru’s figure wavers under a shaky tense. A single line such as “I don’t want him to leave, you won’t leave us will you?” refers to multiple departures. The meal scenes at the Aires family home and at Sidney Possuelo’s home in Brasilia normalize Carapiru’s presence in the direct-time image, but a simple comment about how Carapiru does not fill his plate as much as he did when he first came to their house instantly forks the scene, making it count for then and now.

A masterfully edited kitchen scene construes Carapiru as a spectral visitor. In perfect continuity, black and white and colour shots succeed each other. We watch the rancher’s wife cooking with her back to us. Suddenly a shadow fills the image, Carapiru opens a door, and the film cuts to a colour shot of Robelia, the daughter, coming into the

same space. Yet, another monochromatic shot depicts Robelia in the very act of crossing Carapiru, who now enters the kitchen.

The unnecessarily intricate editing of different days with different clothes (or costumes) in such a simple scene foregrounds the cinematic medium along with Carapiru’s entrance with a haunting effect: he comes in to repeat for the camera what he may have done twenty years earlier when he stayed with the Aires family. The slight delay in the change of shots is all that is needed to spook the image. A simple cut or doorway entry suffices to register a doubt, a flash of a double take—this has happened multiple times before and now it happens once more.

Reenactment, cinema, and Carapiru are equated in this entrance. Carapiru, the inordinate visitor (both when he first made contact and when he returns with the film crew), becomes, against this staged normalcy, a marker of cinema, the very motor of its repetition and his visibility. We are left to ponder what distinguishes original happening from replay, routine from event, event from film take.

Carapiru is not the sole revenant in the film. With remarkable economy, Tonacci replicates reenactment’s strategy to have a single person (or scene) reappear in a new context, eliciting a retroactive foreshadowing, a set of correspondences across time.

The uncanny kinship between past and present is especially highlighted when it targets the circumscribed autonomy of indigenous populations. The second time the Indian community idyllically bathes by the river, it is shadowed by the threat of massacre that follows an Edenic scene in the same location. Similarly, when we first see train footage, it is ominously linked to annihilation: shots of armed men, a spoken line overheard (“the Indian is another humanity”), a man “shooting” with his hand at a sign demarcating indigenous land. Later in the film, the same shot of the train recurs, but a brief pan allows us to identify other passengers, in this case Carapiru chatting with his son as he is brought back from Brasilia to the reservation. Those formerly seen as responsible for the attack (an old captain and his men) are now recognizable as Indian Service agents in charge of Carapiru’s well-being. This second view sets the first, partial one as artifice, and yet they torque each other in an impossible present. Fastened by cinema’s indexicality, the film and the characters split in meaning, creating a paradox: Carapiru, his son, and the old hired hand in charge of attacking the Awá-Guajá group, “victims and aggressors, inhabit a single scene” (De Oliveira 71).

Adding to the unease enforced through shared locations, bodies, and shots, Tonacci threads through the film an archival series that replicates his scenes in content and shape. The kitchen and meal scenes, already traversed by a

deep temporal crisis, are intercepted by a similarly framed 1920s kitchen and meal scene, featuring another family at the table. Edited in perfect match-on-action continuity, these inserts institute momentary but deep rifts in historical consciousness: “What connects the dish served here and the raised spoon there,” affirms Rodrigo de Oliveira, “is nothing less than the perception of a whole, the consciousness that National history is construed by having the image as an involuntary support of memory” (73).



Luis da Rocha Melo remarks that the film’s excerpts, derived mostly from exploration and travel documentaries, interweave and comment on Tonacci’s own gaze (34-42). A flickering archival image of native, uniformed children in a classroom surrounded by white-smocked men intercepts the reenactment of Possuelo’s “first” contact with Carapiru, who watches a rural elementary class for kids. An archival shot of a pig flitting by in a backyard crosses like a fugitive shadow a second shot where, in the present-tense of *Serras*, children run after another piglet. These short bursts of found footage corrupt the film’s neutral base—backyards, classrooms, and the kitchen are visited by someone else’s vision. In many cases, this vision corresponds to Major Luiz Thomaz Reis’ *Around Brazil (Ao Redor do Brasil, 1932)*, a compilation of films by the cinematographer who accompanied Marshall Rondon’s Commission in his scientific explorations of the Brazilian interior.<sup>9</sup>

Complicating the finality of the salvage paradigm in fully determining the contours of ethnographic documentary, Catherine Russell has called for an experimental ethnography that “foreground[s] ‘the time machine’ of anthropological representation” (6), pointing to Walter Benjamin’s vision of allegory as an alternate historiographical model, one in which fragments of other histories bring into play a

9. In charge of surveying the land and laying out telegraph wiring, the Commission created the Service of Indian Protection in 1910 (initially called SPI and Localization of National Workers). This involved recording the integration of the Indian population into the national economy. See Tacca.

non-linear temporality. It is precisely this allegorical model that is embraced in Tonacci's jarring re-appropriation of other visual histories. Inserted with rhyme but with no apparent motive, these naturalized scenes of expeditionary zeal are snippets of gelled historicity. They reveal a visual pattern implicating cinema's complicity in a patronizing gaze that objectifies natives, children, wild landscapes, and animals. Forcing one series of images to be read through the other, they create a noise in Tonacci's "rescue" of Carapiru's story. Erupting as if from a historical unconscious, this interstitial commentary haunts the film's well-intentioned present.

Many of the criteria that grant coherence to a realist discourse—the flashback, memory, reference to a cycle, inherited family traits—all the staples of a shared diegetic world or a coherent psychology—are submitted to significant torques, filtered by Carapiru's opaque subjectivity as well as by the film's relentless fragmentation. Two sequences rehearse the protagonist's affiliation while showing its fitful contours and ruined history: Carapiru's encounter with his son and his dispersal amid other Indians at the reservation.

## A-filiation

It is especially regarding the question of kinship—which lineage can Carapiru claim? Where does he fit and what is the status of an isolated Indian in Brazil today?—that the film most clearly activates reenactment's "anachronic" quality, creating a speculative space to frame and keep Carapiru's apartness alive as a question.<sup>10</sup>

The retracing of Carapiru's loss and return to his group sets into play a continually deferred scenario of integration. The finding of Carapiru's lost son strikes us as momentous in its coincidence, a perfect melodramatic trope. It seems to emotionally set straight the displacements that inform both the reality of Carapiru's life and its textured telling. That against all odds they are indeed father and son, that Benvindo also escaped death in his youth, tinges their former separation with a tragic sense of fate. The real is *troumat*ic—Lacan's pun pointing to the almost missed encounter; after all, another translator was scheduled to come.

Tellingly, the film deflates the recognition scene that could anchor Carapiru's elusive identity and, respecting the inscrutable tone of the actual encounter,<sup>11</sup> Possuelo simply

10. I borrow Christopher Wood and Alexander Nagel's notion of the "anachronic," introduced as an alternative to the historicist description of a work of art as anachronistic. By contrast, to describe a work of art as "anachronic" is to say what the artwork does "qua art." "when it is late, when it repeats, when it hesitates, when it remembers, but also when it projects a future or an ideal" (14).

11. They could not reenact the encounter because Carapiru had an accident in Brasilia and they had to interrupt the filming for six months.



explains what happened. Benvindo hears Carapiru's name and says in broken Portuguese, "This is my father's name... I recognizing his face... He *is* my father." The ultimate proof, an old bullet wound the son knew his father to bear on his back, is shown through a replay of a television reenactment of the encounter in 1988.

Carapiru's body is the screen for recurrent mediations and mis/recognitions. We see television images of American linguists unsuccessfully trying to map Carapiru's language onto a Tupi Guarani grid. We also register our own fantasies of adoption (Carapiru child-like passivity helps) sparked by the reconstituted encounters with benevolent families—the Aires who take Carapiru in and Sidney Possuelo's family with whom he stays in Brasilia. Navigating a field of assumed genetic relatedness, the various encounters with normative orders sets in relief his position as outsider, relegating Carapiru to a second exile, to an *a-filiation*.

Possuelo reveals, for instance, that he at first thought Benvindo recognized Carapiru, not because he is his father, but because they are from the same ethnicity. Threading a risky line—whether an emphasis on ethnic origin and culture would betray or reinforce Carapiru's singularity—Tonacci steers clear of ethnographic explanations.

Loretta Cormier, a Guajá scholar, notes that "genealogies are neither meaningful nor appropriate for understanding the way the Guajá perceive kinship relations" (75). Their belief that they have more than one "biological fa-

See Tonacci, "Conversas na Desordem" 248.

*...these films make clear that there are no natural causes, no genetic or social predispositions; there is only theatre, a claim enacted in and through repetition.*

ther," since for them, "the amount of semen needed to create a child is more than one man alone would normally be able to produce" (xx), not only makes it difficult to consider their system patrilineal, but it weakens the role of paternity (65). The fact that they suffer from genealogical and even structural amnesia, which "refers not so much to the ability to recall but to the social significance of recalling or not recalling ancestors in creating certain types of kinship systems" (75), would also seriously interfere with non-Indian projections in relation to the father-son encounter. That in Guajá (as in the Tupi-Guarani language) one calls oneself "awá" (which means roughly "human") should also matter since that is what Carapiru calls himself; that they consider monkeys and in particular the howler monkey kin (they are literally called "former humans") (89), and that pet creation and adoption constitute a complex form of filiation<sup>12</sup>—all this information that could be harnessed in a traditional documentary to grasp Carapiru's alternate understanding

12. See Cormier chaps. 6-7.

of kinship, goes unmentioned. Signs scattered throughout the film are given in the form of ruin. Seen from an outsider's perspective, this corroded fabric confirms a radical disaffiliation.

Tonacci's representation of an a-filiated Carapiru bears parallel to Nancy Bentley's discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois' invention of a "counterfactual device to register an alternative space and time for those uncaptured by those keeping time" (283). African American writers, she argues, could not rely "on universalist languages of intimate familism or genetic descent," for in so doing, they "would erase the history most in need of representation—that of kinlessness" (a juridical and social condition imposed on non-whites by colonialist and slavery practices, extracting "their bodies, labor, and reproductive capacities...from the sphere of the familial") (276; 270-1). Rather than "bloodlines," the novel stages "the *coexistence* of a distinct zone of experience with a three dimensional world that remains oblivious to it" (281).

This is, of course, Tonacci's, and not Carapiru's, representation of a "distinct zone of experience" and "world obliviousness," and the particulars of Indigenous, African, and African American loss under colonial exploitation cannot be minimized. What interests me in this analogy, imperfect in many ways, is the sense that another dimension may be necessary to express the irreducible singularity of a *contemporary* Indian. In *Serras*, reenactment is appropriate as a tool to shake the naturalized assuredness of lineages and timelines, of familial models and a modern National present.

*Serras da Desordem's* flirtation with instances of recognition and return instantiates the perverse attraction exerted by the question of mimesis in contemporary reenactment cinema. Films like Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1984), Abbas Kiarostami's *Close Up* (1990), and Zhang Yuan's *Sons* (1996) present a reflux, a regurgitation of the real in the form of repetitions that seem unconscious, accidental, and compulsive—reality is itself pervaded by uncanny coincidences, resilient prejudices, strange similarities, hereditary vices. In *Sons*, a family reenacts their ten-day ordeal prior to sending their alcoholic father to a mental asylum, and the film didactically promotes a direct causality between the father's affliction and the sons' violence and addiction. But it explicitly introduces heredity as an insufficient explanation, hinting at a cyclical problem, a national malaise without a clear genetic or social cause.

Exemplifying a trend in contemporary reenactment, these films make clear that there are no natural causes, no



genetic or social predispositions; there is only theatre, a claim enacted in and through repetition.

The juridical *mise-en-scène* and the prosecutorial impetus of post-Holocaust testimonials in *Shoah* and after have generated particularly effective dramaturgies out of the obfuscation of a clear and conscious protagonist's agency. Discussing the need in contemporary art to supplement



documentary modes with fiction given the rare availability of witnesses, Ernst Alphen mentions Tadeusz Borowsky and Charlotte Delbo as writers who have tried to recreate an obsessive interiority through a purely descriptive acuity (206-220). These artists' creation of a traumatic register for their art can be likened to the willed aesthetic sharpness of contemporary reenactment *mise-en-scène*. Crucial for both writers and filmmakers is the productive ambiguity generated by an intensified affective dimension.

This de-realizing aesthetic recommended by Lanzmann so as to ensure that testimonial transmission<sup>13</sup> will be powerful for the viewer, is predicated on a problematic, ambiguous agency, an interrupted causality. As Bill Nichols has noted apropos of Werner Herzog's *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1998) and Patricio Guzmán's *Chile Obstinate Memory*

13. See Lanzmann 44-45.

(1997), in-person reenactment invites a performance "confused" between demonstration and compulsive reliving. Addressing the discrepancy between its sensorial directness and a voided context in which it may be exercised, he notes how this denaturalized intensity takes on a fantasmatic dimension (83).

In *S21, The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), Rithy Panh stages a disjointed *semblant* of a juridical order, having culprits retrace their steps, officers tabulate records, and survivors make impassioned statements.<sup>14</sup> Khieu Ches, one of the Khmer Rouge's ex-guards, unlocks, enters, exits, and locks the door to the cell five times. He "brings" a prisoner back from interrogation, yanks an imaginary shackle and chain, and moves a real bucket. Each imaginary prisoner gets an exclusive abuse, clubbed without the respite of a summary narrative; yet, in a sort of mad tautology, each gesture is doubled by a literal description, a present-tense commentary. Without anchorage in a precise past, these gestures set-off a proliferating iteration, compacting distinct repetitions: the hourly, daily routine, the protocol that disallows thinking, and finally the retracing of these acts in an imaginary time-space. Subsequent functions of the location—a public school turned prison camp turned memorial museum—unfold through this perverse theatre, while a resilient indoctrination is restated in an inescapable script.

*Serras* presents an equivalent sequence of stuck temporality. A cluster of scenes of daily life at the Guajá reservation reiterates contemporary reenactment's propensity to blur present and past into indistinct stases. For fifteen minutes prior to the spectacular ending in which Carapiru takes off his clothes, dons his Indian costume, and heads to the forest to meet the filmmaker and address us under a digitally inserted image of a jet, we witness what is his "present condition." He now appears intermittently and somewhat apart from the others. We witness the Guajá's convivial relation with animals: their preparation of monkeys to barbeque. A fire with monkey bodies piled over it is isolated in a long, single take. Gradually, shots of small kids playing with pointy tools, sticks, and broken mirrors, aiming their bows in mock-battle, accumulate an undercurrent of violence and misery and we vaguely wish this reality were an effect of stylization.<sup>15</sup> An image of a pet animal—a coati tied to a pole—is shown twice circling around and around.

14. *S21* is part of a broad truth and reconciliation effort. The film anticipates the formation of the ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia), an international UN court established to try the Khmer Rouge atrocities. See Panh for essential information. For other excellent analyses, see Boyle, Camhi, and Rachman.

15. Awá-Guajá scholar Uirá Felipe Garcia mentions that the village is exactly as Tonacci filmed it. For an extended analysis of the Guajá relation with monkeys, see Cormier chaps. 6-7.

This miniature captivity exposes a disturbing limbo, a banal yet unplaced sign of alterity.

These images of senseless mimesis, adumbrated in recurrent images of poorly dressed children in oversize logo-bearing t-shirts, repeatedly hitting and learning to hit, defending food and possessions, clinch the film's intervention. As we watch, we enter a humanity circuit, linked to the Guajá as they are to the monkeys they believe to be kin. We are implicated in a shared sense of loss, in "another humanity."<sup>16</sup>

This sequence forfeits the film's earlier textual layering for a sparse aesthetic devoid of explanation or redemptive rhetoric. Minimal metonymical sliding maps a repetitive indigenous experience and a reduced horizon of expectation. Relying on recursive accumulation, bringing Carapiru (and other images) back through one more representational loop, one more cycle of dispossession, Tonacci transforms his apparition. Carapiru's bare, awkward presence can now be understood as an essential element for a critical historiography in the "accounting" of National histories of exclusion.

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Richard Rushton

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

1. See Anderson, Currie, and Grodal.

2. See Andrew, Crouse, and Morgan.

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-



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

### ...what kind of realities can be conceived by way of digital cinema and “digital logics”?

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”?

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.<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup> 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

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.

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)<sup>5</sup> 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

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, Elsaesser, 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

*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...*

past, present, and future. Perhaps this is a first step towards defining a contemporary ideological reality.

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.<sup>6</sup> 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 dis-

tinguish 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, Elsaesser contends that, in the context of contemporary cinema, no such thing has happened. Instead, the contradictions of contemporary narratives—*Avatar* being exemplary for Elsaesser—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,”<sup>7</sup> 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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Justin Horton

## The Sound of Uncertain Voices Mumblecore and the Interrogation of Realism

For André Bazin, realism exists in the plural: “There is not one realism,” he writes, “but several...Each period looks for its own” (“William Wyler” 6). In what follows, I look to a recent example that reflects this ongoing search. Joe Swanberg’s debut feature *Kissing on the Mouth* (2005), a founding film of the polarizing “mumblecore” movement, proves an illuminating case, for it confronts the “problem” of realism on a number of fronts, among them the technological, the inheritance of antecedent realist styles, and the question of taboo and taste as it pertains to that which mainstream realisms so often elide: sex. Moreover, I submit that the film’s most intriguing undertaking lies in its curious interplay between sound and image. Specifically, the sounds, or more aptly, the sound-image relations, found in *Kissing on the Mouth* deviate considerably from a “realist” soundscape and stage a manifold interrogation of the possibilities of realism in a poststructural, postmodern, post-filmic age.

In order to proceed, we must first situate *Kissing on the Mouth* within the context of mumblecore, the now waning microbudget movement that tends to focus on the *ennui* of inarticulate, post-collegiate American hipsters.<sup>1</sup> In addition to sharing a common social milieu, these films are united by a similar aesthetic. Frequently improvised, cast with nonprofessional actors, and characterized by narrative looseness, mumblecore films attempt to make a virtue of their roughhewn visual style. Though Swanberg’s films fit this general mould, they stand out against the others for their graphic inclusion of what appears to be non-simulated sex. The director contends that this is not the gratuitous deployment of skin for shock value; rather, Swanberg claims

that *Kissing* was conceived as a rejoinder to the mumblecore progenitor, Andrew Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha* (2002), a film in which its young protagonist’s awkward flirtations result most often in stolen, awkward, or misaligned kisses (Lim 11). Though both films are concerned with the listless longings of middle-class Caucasians, Swanberg explicitly depicts that which is omitted in Bujalski’s film. In *Funny Ha Ha*, sex is a subject that both the director and his characters seem to hesitantly dance around; in *Kissing*, sex seems more “natural” than conversation, which is often uncomfortable, clipped, evasive. Whereas the verbal exchange is fraught with peril, sex is at least a fleeting moment of shared interest or intersecting intention—intercourse as discourse.

The film’s opening scene immediately cues the viewer that sex is on the agenda, for it depicts the flip side of Bujalski’s chaste coin. Before any dialogue is exchanged, we are presented first with a man and a woman kissing, then a close-up of a condom being unrolled onto an erect penis. The title card of the film then appears over the characters engaging in apparently non-simulated lovemaking. So often associated with callow hierarchies of intimacy (as in the clichéd baseball analogy—first base, second base, and so on), the title registers ironically when placed atop the image of graphic sex. Clearly, the film is dealing with something other than the sexless sweetness of Bujalski.

It would be easy to write off Swanberg if his adoption of a realist aesthetic were merely an attempt to elevate the pornographic to the art house, and, indeed, many have made such a case.<sup>2</sup> Sex is, after all, one of the more “artifi-

1. A sampling of films that fall under the mumblecore heading include *Four Eyed Monsters* (Buice & Crumley, 2005), *The Puffy Chair* (Duplass, 2005), *Quiet City* (Katz, 2007), *Team Picture* (Audley, 2007), among others.

2. Amy Taubin, emblematic of the critical backlash against mumblecore, is one of the most outspoken detractors of Swanberg, whom she describes as a “clueless [narcissist]” whose “greatest talent is for getting attractive, seemingly intelligent women to drop their clothes and evince sexual interest in an array of slobby guys who suffer from severely arrested emotional development” (“Mumblecore: All Talk?”).



cial” of events in the cinema, calculated and choreographed to show some actions while cloaking (the lack of) others. Throughout much of his work, Swanberg counters this tendency with the graphic depiction of various sex acts, most notably in this case, the autoerotic. In one scene, we see Patrick (Swanberg) unobscured and masturbating in the shower, culminating with a close-up of him ejaculating. Instead of the sex acts that are merely suggested in mainstream fare, the depiction of the male climax in *Kissing* serves to “verify” the film’s sexual encounters. As Linda Williams in her path-breaking study on pornography posits, the visualization of ejaculation is the “ultimate confessional moment of [male] ‘truth’” (101), a “truth” that is effaced in the typical Hollywood sex scene wherein both penetration and the male orgasm are implied but not shown. Thus, in that it depicts the “money shot,” *Kissing on the Mouth* confirms the veracity of sex acts on display by indexing the male orgasm.

Though some have charged Swanberg with narcissism, I believe it an error to dismiss the film as sensationalistic on the grounds of its sexual frankness alone. What is most important about the ways in which Swanberg presents sex acts is that he does so in the same matter-of-fact manner that he depicts, for example, the washing of dishes. “We tried,” says Swanberg in an interview, “to make no separation between the way we filmed a body and the way we filmed a computer or a table. We left the imagination plenty of room to wander around when thinking about other elements of the film, but we did not think the imagination deserved anything in regards to the body” (Swanberg). In *Kissing*, graphic sex scenes are often followed by a character taking out the garbage, painting a room, or brushing their teeth.

This tempering of the more explicit elements of *Kissing* with the quotidian is not without antecedents. The focus on the banal can be found throughout a number of realist cinemas, for it subverts the cause-effect chain of classical narratives by leaving in that which is commonly excised in the Hollywood film. We find its origin in the Italian neorealist period—the famous scene of the maid going about her chores in *Umberto D.* (De Sica, 1952) comes immediately to mind—and it has endured as a common aesthetic (and political) strategy in art cinema. Writes Bazin of the De Sica film: “The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of

*...the stutters and swallowed lines from which the moniker “mumblecore” is derived are crucial components of the movement’s interrogative or deconstructive project.*

which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis” (*Umberto D.* 81). The deployment of *temps mort* founded with neorealism can be seen in perhaps its most overtly political articulation in feminist cinema of the 1970s, with Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) being the exemplar. Ivone Marguiles echoes Bazin in her monograph on Akerman: “Along with extended duration,” she argues, “the quotidian is undoubtedly the signifier par excellence of the realist impulse” (23). In this regard, the “money shot” in *Kissing* is hardly scandalous, for the surrounding banality wrests any eroticism or narrative drive from it; within the logic of Swanberg’s film, Patrick’s climax is no more bracketed off than any of the other mundane “instants of life.”

Indeed, throughout *Kissing on the Mouth*, Swanberg seems to be channelling Akerman. The scene in which Patrick and Laura (Kris Williams) paint the walls of a bedroom recalls a similar scene in *Je tu il elle* (1976). Furthermore, Swanberg’s comment about filming the body in the same “way [he] filmed a computer or a table” reflects an approach that Akerman utilizes in her short *La chambre* (1972), wherein the camera’s 360-degree pans pay no more mind to the lone human figure (Akerman), who sleeps, eats, and masturbates, than the tea kettle or chest of drawers.

In addition to this loosened approach to narrative events, *Kissing* utilizes another realist hallmark: the use of

nonprofessional actors, a strategy that also came to prominence with Italian neorealism. Swanberg, like most of his fellow mumblecore directors, employs amateurs in his films in an effort to tamp down the artificiality of trained performance. Moreover, Swanberg relies heavily on improvisation, another common realist approach. Taubin writes: “these non-actors are perfect choices for these films because their insecurity and embarrassment about voicing their characters’ ideas, desires, and feelings is not merely symptomatic of their lack of technique, it dovetails with a defining characteristic of the particular cohort (white, middle-class, twenty-something) to which the filmmakers and their quasi-fictional characters belong” (“Mumblecore: All Talk?”). Taubin alights upon both the effectiveness and stiltedness of this approach: in that the characters are only “quasi-fictional,” the performer never “disappears” fully into his character. Instead, a friction emerges between the “real” of the actor and the construct of the performance and/or the very performativity of “real” self. In some instances, the scene comes off as “natural” in that it lacks the polished style of traditional acting. However, in others, the result is ungainly, pointing to the artificiality inherent in the cinematic endeavour. Hence, the stutters and swallowed lines from which the moniker “mumblecore” is derived are crucial components of the movement’s interrogative or deconstructive project.



As these examples indicate, tactics utilized in *Kissing on the Mouth* are by no means unique, but rather, are inheritances from a number of prior realisms. The nonprofessionals who act in the film hearken back to neorealism and numerous new wave movements throughout the world. Similarly, non-simulated sex can be seen in the works of a

number of art house directors including Catherine Breillat, John Cameron Mitchell, and Michael Winterbottom. Where the film stands out, though, is that it is engaged with the problem of realism not only at a stylistic level, but also in terms of the narrative. The relationship between sound and image and how they interact with questions of representation and ontology become central concerns by film’s end.



Let us briefly recount the plot, slight though it may be. Patrick shares an apartment with Ellen (Kate Winterich), for whom he not-so-secretly pines. Ellen rekindles a relationship with Chris (Kevin Pittman), a former boyfriend, under the condition that it is of the “no strings attached,” sexual variety. Initially, Ellen, aware of both Patrick’s affection for her and his disapproval of Chris, hides these trysts from him. Thus, the narrative sets up a rather conventional love triangle in which the two male leads serve as foils for one another. Their schematic differences, though, are significant.

Both Chris and Patrick are aspiring artists, but their preferred media are in no way arbitrary within the logic of the film. Chris, a budding fashion photographer, is seen throughout the film snapping pictures of various female models ordered into just-so positions. Chris, therefore, dictates both the pose and framing before “freezing” the moment, halting time and space and his model within it. Posing a model against a black backdrop, in one sense, isolates the subject of the photograph; in another, however, it is an attempt to eliminate contingency, to gain tighter control of the subject via direction, and the untameable background through its masking. Key here is the fact that Chris derives his images photochemically.

This, of course, contrasts with Patrick, who compiles a series of audio interviews in which he asks acquaintances



about love, relationships, life goals, and so forth. Unlike Chris, who is associated with an analogue technology, Patrick records and edits his interviews digitally.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, nothing in the text suggests that his project is designed to be anything other than an aural one, for he is never seen

So how, then, does *Kissing* attempt to resolve or intervene in this crisis? The answer lies in a second binary: the audio/visual. Just as Swanberg announces his intentions to redress the staid lustfulness in Bujalski's film in the opening scene, he follows it in the subsequent scene with the

	Chris	Patrick
1. Relationship to Ellen	Sexual	Platonic
2. Domain of Representation	Image	Sound
3. Method of Capture	Analogue	Digital

Table 1: *Kissing on the Mouth's* Male Binaries

capturing or editing images to accompany his collection of spoken interviews. That Kevin's is a visual approach and Patrick's an aural one is of especial importance.

One can see, therefore, that the film organizes the two men vying for Ellen's affection into three binary oppositions (see Table 1).

Though it is tempting to disregard the creative occupations of Chris and Patrick as tropes of the mumblecore genre, I contend it is more productive to think of them instead in terms of the contrasting ontological natures of their respective artistic media and their differing methods of "capture." This dichotomy reflects back upon the very anxiety over the fate of photographic and cinematographic realism, now that the image no longer (necessarily) carries the indexical link between the material object and its representation. After all, Bazin's conception of cinematic realism is tied in part to its photographic derivation—its registering of a trace of an object within the world onto the film-strip. The ontological difference between the technologies employed by Patrick and Chris serve to acknowledge the disquietude the digital turn has wrought to the notions of representational realism. In other words, the "great spiritual and technical crisis that overtook painting" (Bazin, "Ontology" 10) with the advent of photography is visited upon us again, ushered anew by the digital.<sup>4</sup>

introduction of a formal device that marks the film's most striking deviation from our prototypical realist text. In it, Patrick is seen preparing a microphone for an interview with an offscreen subject. As we cut away (visually) from the interview scene, the voice of the subject carries over into the next. The identities of Patrick's interlocutors (a total of four by film's end) are never revealed. Interestingly, Swanberg deploys a seen-unseen dynamic by showing only Patrick, the interviewer, and keeping the interviewees invisible. These lengthy responses are heard exclusively in the form of voice-over narration, and reemerge throughout the film with little to no narrative justification. These voices rarely seem to "link up" to the film's visual content, but yet form a running soundtrack that seems to be related only tangentially and in a thematic way to the visuals or the story.

This audio is curious, for unlike most traditional films, it seems to bear no relationship to what is visualized onscreen. The spectator attempts to unify and to reconcile what she hears and sees, which is why the voice that is heard but is not seen has garnered considerable attention from scholars of sound cinema. For instance, Pascal Bonitzer, speaking of documentary film, argues that the unseen narrator exercises a god-like (and thus, ideologically suspect) authority over the spectator. Along the same lines, Michel Chion has labeled the unseen voice the "acousmètre," a spectral figure to whom he attributes a number of powers—ubiquity, omniscience, panopticism, and omnipotence (18-25). The acousmètre attains these powers by being "present" despite being "not-yet-seen" (21); yet, in *Kissing on the Mouth*, these voices trouble Chion's theory because, despite functioning acousmatically, they *never* reveal themselves, and thus, cannot be linked with their physical sources. In this regard, these voices "issue from a space other than



that on the screen, an unrepresented, undetermined space" (Copjec 184). Hence, by disallowing the voices in *Kissing* the status of third-person, omniscient narration, and also by withholding their "de-acousmatization," Swanberg denies them any of the powers associated with the acousmètre or the authority ceded to the documentary narrator. These are then "intemporal voices: they cannot be situated in—nor submitted to the ravages of—time or place" (185). In short, these voices hang in limbo.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, unlike conventional voice-overs, the audio and the visual elements of the film achieve a certain level of independence from one another; the voices that float over the images are not there to serve as interior monologue or commentary, nor do they align necessarily with the text's dramatic situations, and when they do, it seems more serendipitous than by design. Instead, sound and image operate as equals, neither subservient to the other.

Gilles Deleuze theorized such a relationship between the aural and the visual in his two volumes on the cinema. According to the philosopher, the de-linking of sound from image is a crucial characteristic of the "pure optical and sound situations" of the modern time-image. The shift

5. Per the DVD commentary, the voices heard throughout *Kissing on the Mouth* were not scripted; rather, Swanberg and fellow filmmaker and co-star Kris Williams interviewed several of their peers and transferred this audio into the film. Thus, the interview audio is indeed a documentary, but the film leads one to believe that the people speaking exist within the diegesis. The appropriated voices, then, add yet another layer to the film's already complex interaction between fiction and reality, sound and image.

*Kissing...self-consciously withholds the voices' identities, and in so doing, subverts the customary authority of the acousmètre's disembodied voice...*

from silent to sound cinema allowed for the presentation of "direct" character speech (i.e., speech that is heard and synchronized with the moving lips of an actor, not speech conveyed via title card, which is an indirect method). The sound film, once it had overcome the initially awkward period of transition, developed into its classical form. The rupture initiated by World War II, according to Deleuze, inaugurated the shift from the classical movement-image to the modern time-image, following which, sound "began to "[turn] in on itself" for "it [was] no longer dependent on something which is part of the visual image; it becomes a completely separate sound image; it takes on a cinematographic autonomy and cinema becomes truly audio-visual" (243). By being discrete and autonomous elements, the aural and the visual attain the possibility of entering into a free indirect relationship with one another.<sup>6</sup>

6. Deleuze borrows the notion of free indirect discourse from Pier Paolo Pasolini, though as is his custom, he modifies it significantly. For Deleuze's elaboration of cinematic free indirect discourse, see

Deleuze remarks that within the pure optical and sound situation, “talking and the visual [are] no longer held together, no longer corresponded, but [belie] and [contradict] themselves, without it being possible to say that one rather than the other is ‘right’” (250). This passage is key for two reasons: first, it assigns neither the visual nor the aural a place of supremacy; second, the two components come to contradict or falsify one another. Thus is born the “sound image” or “sonsign,” which exists on either side of “a fault, an interstice, an irrational cut between” sound and image (251). This interval is, for Deleuze, home to the true power of the cinema, for this space between is a locus of possibility, the site of viable becomings. He associates the emergence of the sonsign with a diverse array of filmmakers, from Eric Rohmer to Robert Bresson to Alain Robbe-Grillet. Most surprisingly, he cites ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch as an exemplar. In Rouch’s work, the documentary—the privileged site of the “real”—becomes home to audio-visual contradiction, which for Deleuze, marks the cinema’s greatest political potential. Instead of filling in or providing the aural complement to the image, sound enters into an irrational relationship with it, and out of this reciprocal interplay is born film’s ability to transform or destabilize “reality.” Only when the elements of cinema—the raw materials of image and sound—are divided from one another, may new potentialities be actualized. This irrationality is crucial to our understanding of the interview audio in Swanberg’s film.

We have grown accustomed to the voice-over in fiction film providing information or otherwise framing that which we see, but this authoritative voice is in most cases an identified character within the diegesis. *Kissing*, therefore, self-consciously withholds the voices’ identities, and in so doing, subverts the customary authority of the acousmètre’s disembodied voice—a tension is set up between what we hear and what we see. What I call subversion, however, Deleuze describes as a necessary trade-off: sound, by “entering into rivalry or heterogeneity with the visual images... [breaks] free from its moorings” and “loses its omnipotence but by gaining autonomy” (250).

Deleuze’s notion of audio-visual “rivalry” illuminates the tension between sound and image, and the visible and the invisible, upon which the climax of *Kissing on the Mouth* hinges. Late in the film, Ellen tacitly agrees to pose nude for a photo shoot with Chris after he begins to cajole her with camera in hand. It is implied that Ellen refused his requests to model in their initial, more traditional courtship. Thus, to Chris, her acquiescence signals an escalation in their relationship: he misinterprets the resulting photographic im-



*Sex and speech: both fleeting forms of intimacy, of mutual exchange between people, the recording of which serves the desire to fend off their ephemerality.*

ages as a declaration of intent. However, Ellen balks at any level of intimacy beyond that of a purely physical nature. When Patrick inadvertently uncovers the 35mm negatives from the shoot, he too misreads them. The photos verify his suspicion that Ellen and Chris have been engaging in a sexual relationship, despite her claims to the contrary. Like Chris, he believes these images signal a corresponding romantic attachment, one that Ellen staunchly refuses. Nevertheless, her participation in the photo session enacts an unwitting concession on her part.

In submitting to Chris’s lens, she is “pinned down” via representation and becomes, in a sense, a possession, locked into an ideal pose according to his preferences. Indeed, despite Ellen’s repeated denial of an emotional attachment, she finds herself unexpectedly hurt by Chris’s later rejection of her in favour of one of his other “models.” These photographs become for Ellen a two-fold predicament: primarily, they incorrectly signal to Chris her desire to engage in a bona fide, romantic relationship; consequently, through Patrick’s exhumation of them, she is exposed to his prying gaze and demands to defend her actions. Moreover, because Ellen has no interest in a sexual relationship with Patrick, the pictures become for him a particularly stinging reminder of the unattainability of the object of his desire.

Just as Ellen does with her relationship, Patrick keeps secret the interviews he is compiling, suggesting that he is embarrassed by his preoccupation with love and relationships. Mirroring Patrick’s discovery of her nude photos, Ellen finds and then copies the audio files that Patrick leaves open on his computer, surreptitiously gaining access to his covert collection of voices that flow throughout the film. Echoing our first glimpse of him, in the final scene Patrick is again setting up his microphone and prompting yet another unseen interviewee to tell him about her “last relationship.” Over the ending credits, we hear but do not see Ellen begin to tell the story of her affair with Chris. In so doing, she also submits to the second of her suitors, this time in voice but not in image or body.

Recall for a moment the earlier breakup scene, which suggests that what Chris had been seeking from Ellen was an intimacy of a different sort, one of emotional candour. Chris sits on Ellen’s bed looking over the negatives from their shoot, noting the way the light plays off her body. All the while, Ellen kisses and pets him in an attempt at arousal. “Can we talk?” he asks. “Can we do something other than sex?” Her refusal to provide access to her interiority is precisely the act that ultimately dissolved their relationship. And it is exactly this emotional transparency that she gives to Patrick at the film’s conclusion.

It is Patrick who now “possesses” Ellen’s voice, her thoughts, in a recording that is permeated with the type of intimacy that Chris sought and that Ellen was unwilling to give him. Thus, over the course of the film, Ellen moves from the realm of binaries associated with Chris (sexual/image/analogue) to those aligned with Patrick (platonic/sound/digital), and in so doing, she shifts from carnal, corporeal body to invisible, disembodied voice. Crucially, Ellen’s transformation is not of the physical sort, but rather, a shift in the form of her mediation. For both Patrick and Chris, it is not Ellen’s words or her touch that they seek so much as the representation thereof. Sex and speech: both fleeting forms of intimacy, of mutual exchange between people, the recording of which serves the desire to fend off their ephemerality.

As this essay demonstrates, *Kissing on the Mouth* is a film bound up with the “problem” of realism in the contemporary age, a problem that it engages on the formal, narrative, and technological level. Through its depiction of non-simulated sex, adoption of techniques from various antecedent realisms, and staging of a confrontation between analogue and digital technologies, and indeed, between sound and image, the film questions the relationship between reality and representation in provocative ways. In that it concludes with a moment in which the binaries it sets up are transgressed, reversed, and/or complicated, *Kiss-*

*ing on the Mouth*, for reasons rarely noted in the critical discourse surrounding it, marks a compelling intervention into the problem of contemporary realism.

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Marc Di Sotto

## The Aesthetics of Trauma Authenticity and Disorientation in Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday*

Part of cinema's appeal, Robert A. Rosenstone has argued, is that it is able to satisfy an innate desire to see "history unfold before our eyes" (11). In *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), Siegfried Kracauer is skeptical about the potential of historical film. For Kracauer, historical film depends on a claustrophobic alignment of the spectator's "potential field of vision" with the actual images that appear on the screen. In a film depicting contemporary reality, he argues, the audience is "free to imagine that the camera roams reality itself" because even where the staging of the film might be artificial, it is made to duplicate "real-life surroundings" (78). Kracauer illustrates this phenomenon with the example of Elie Faure's dream of an impossible documentary about the Passion of Christ. Apart from turning its spectators into "eye-witnesses to the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Agony in Gethsemane," this documentary would show what a historical film could not: the "seemingly insignificant happenings incidental to those momentous events—the soldiers shuffling cards, the clouds of dust whirled up by the horses, the moving crowds, the lights and shadows in an abandoned street" (78). Kracauer describes this effect created by the attention to arbitrary detail as the illusion of "endlessness"—a notion dialectical by nature as it depends on the capturing of finite fragments that signify a depth to the reality of the scene that the camera is unable to capture. Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday* (2002) seems to approach this ideal film; through large-scale reenactment and attention to the arbitrary, it convincingly masks the seams of its artificiality as it recreates the events of the Bloody Sunday massacre. This article will focus on the relationship between the aesthetics of authenticity and its critical readings in terms of trauma, as well as explore the limitations of such an approach. There is no question that a community experiencing an event on the scale of Bloody Sunday will be faced with potentially long-term, traumatic

responses,<sup>1</sup> yet when dealing with its representation, the impulse to read the film's aesthetic construction in this way obscures a deeper ambiguity about its politics of history.

*Bloody Sunday* was first broadcast on January 20, 2002 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre. On January 30, 1972, soldiers of the British Parachute Regiment opened fire on an anti-internment march organized by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in Derry. Twenty-seven civilians were murdered or injured. This injustice was a glaring demonstration of the military establishment's failure to those it was supposed to protect; and more than this, when a tribunal headed by Lord Chief Justice Widgery (ordered by the Prime Minister Edward Heath) exonerated the soldiers' abuse of power, a chasm was effectively created between the official historical records and popular memory. Widgery's report (1972) concluded that the British soldiers had come under fire before shooting and that, although none of the victims were handling a bomb or firearm when hit, it was suspected that some had been in possession of such weapons during the course of the afternoon. Both claims were strongly contested by NICRA and the families of the victims—indeed, the aftermath of the massacre and its official whitewashing saw an increase in the recruitment of young men into the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In 2010, the Saville Inquiry overturned most of the conclusions of the report.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, *Bloody Sunday* is situated within a complex relationship between notions of realism and historical

1. See Hayes & Campbell for a salient study of the traumatic effects of the event on the Derry community.

2. In 1998, in the context of the Peace Process and against the background of the 1993 Downing Street Declaration's commitment to overcoming "the legacy of history," the Blair administration's ordering of a new inquiry was an important symbolic gesture. Lord Saville's report, published on June 15, 2010, found that paratroopers fired the first shot, and had fired on unarmed civilians.





film. At the time of its broadcast, the narrative of the event existed outside of official (that is, officially recognized) history; yet, we should not forget that the counter-narrative of the event had, in many ways, already been accepted, corroborated in part by Greengrass's film being one of two films produced for British television to be shown on the anniversary.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, *Bloody Sunday* reflects a moment when the popular opinion of what actually happened was already in transition. With this in mind, it is worth exploring the implications of the film's aesthetic reconstruction

*The emphasis on witnessing relies on the same disavowal of the interpretative procedures inherent in the reconstruction of the world through which the camera moves.*

of historical reality, considering that what constituted this reality was, or was believed to be, contested.

*Bloody Sunday's* authenticity was important to early reviewers, who praised the way it captured the "look and feel of the real thing" and applauded its effort to grant audiences access to "the power and pain of history as it is happening" (Melarkey 24; Dashiell). Lance Petitt describes the film as having "raw footage" texture in the way it foregrounds missed action and obscured, "interrupted" dialogue, like when the camera wanders through crowds over the shoulder of Northern Ireland MP Ivan Cooper, wavering in and out of the frame as he jests with locals (55-56). This rawness is reflected in the editing too, with scenes cut in mid-dialogue or mid-action, often figured in the form of fade-outs to a black screen. The overall effect is one of disorientation and confusion as the viewer tries to piece together fragments of conversations and quick-cut images. Tony Keily argues that this strategy is part of an attack on the "revealing, intelligible patterns and closed-off stories" of the classical realist text aimed at pointing to the caesuras in the historical record (15). In a sense, Keily reads the onscreen disorientation as an expression of conflicting historical interpretations. In this way, the film points to an intriguing entanglement of the endless and the arbitrary, the authentic and the disorientating. It is worth quoting Keily's argument at length:

What Greengrass aims at...is the construction of 'gapped history,' or the de-composition of historical narrative. This can be translated as an acknowledgment that before *Bloody Sunday* there was Bloody

3. *Bloody Sunday* was broadcast on ITV, while Jimmy McGovern's *Sunday* (2002) was broadcast the following week on Channel 4.

Sunday. And before events had a name, there was a series of actions that predated their codification by reactions to them...The strength of this representation is precisely that it pushes back the folds of commentary and history and reminds us of the raw events that had an irreducible shape all of their own. (Keily 15)

Indeed, by focusing on a representation of the day's confusion and resisting a final imposed interpretation, *Bloody Sunday* appears to offer the possibility of seeing the events anew, without the distortion of history's "codification[s]." Keily seems to suggest that by resisting closure, the film can somehow efface the boundaries between the representation and the real, and in doing so, recover a core of truth in the incoherence of reality.

A number of critics have interpreted this mixture of reconstruction and confusion in terms of trauma.<sup>4</sup> Renée Penney's description of the camera as witness during the scenes of the massacre provides a strong example:

In this scene, the camera becomes the memory body, the instigator of a phantasmic primary witness position. The pandemonium induced by the handheld camera that shakes out frames of fractured bodies and disorienting movement provides the most jarring emotional response in the film. ("Bloody Sunday")

It is curious to note that the two key elements that Kracauer focuses on to describe the sense of endlessness in his ideal film—the emphasis on disorientation and the incidental, and the impression of the camera freely moving through space—are central to this traumatic reading of *Bloody Sunday*. In this way, we can note how Penney's and Keily's readings implicitly depend on one another: Penney configures the camera as a free-floating traumatized subjectivity, yet this illusion of witness is dependent on the notion that the world witnessed is somehow objective. In other words, the temptation to speak of the film in traumatic terms is founded on the film's effectiveness in creating the illusion of the past's endlessness—to use Kracauer's term. The emphasis on witnessing relies on the same disavowal of the interpretative procedures inherent in the reconstruction of the world through which the camera moves.

Penney develops her reading of the camera as witness to implicate the viewer who is "asked to bear witness to the trauma to become a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event" ("Bloody Sunday").<sup>5</sup> This language of "bearing witness to" and "co-owning" the trauma is directly informed by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's theory of

4. Aileen Blaney, for example, writes that the film "work[s] through the persistence of historical trauma in contemporary Northern Ireland" by providing the opportunity for "informed viewers to revisit, and uninformed viewers to witness, scenes from the 'past'" (134; 118).

5. See also Blaney, Herron & Lynch.



traumatic transferral, and Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as a structural response mechanism associated with the experience of survival. For Felman and Laub, during the experience of trauma, "the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction" (57). The survivor becomes stranded in a paradox where s/he is possessed by an experience that has not been "experienced *in time*," and is, therefore, not fully known (Caruth 62). As the survivor does not possess the capacity to attribute psychic meaning to the event as it was experienced, the event becomes internalized "without mediation" and resistant to linguistic expression, resurfacing only in the form of flashbacks, which for Caruth, can be understood as a "literal return of the past" (59). Trauma becomes "a literal, nonsymbolic and nonrepresentational *memory* of the traumatic event," a memory that is outside of memory, in the sense that it is not individual memory but something approaching the real inscribed in the mind (Leys 71). For Felman and Laub, it is only through the act of testimony, which involves a transferral of the trauma between the survivor and the listener, that the knowledge of the event finally comes into being; through the act of listening, the hearer becomes a "co-owner" of the trauma, coming to feel "the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (57). From this perspective, a curious overlapping becomes visible between trauma theory's emphasis on the unmediated representation of the event in the witness' mind and its expression through symptom, and *Bloody Sunday's* reconstruction of

*...as a work of fiction, it produces an image of the real in such a way as to suggest, not an effect, but a fact.*

the witness position through an appropriation of the documentary aesthetic.

Derek Paget's discussion of dramadoc/docudrama is revealing here. Paget highlights a crucial dialectic between the "intertextual" and the "indexical" at the heart of the dramadoc/docudrama. He argues that such productions appropriate their authenticity effect by referencing the movements and textures of documentary, which simultaneously point to their origin in the real event (136). Reading Paget alongside Bill Nichols, we can refine our understanding of how this appropriation might work. Nichols argues that one of the central differences between fiction and documentary rests on an inherent disagreement in their relationship to realism: "In fiction, realism serves to make a plausible world seem real; in documentary, realism serves to make an argument about the historical world persuasive" (165). Indeed, for Nichols, this polemical aspect of documentary is essential. Documentary realism, he states, "is not only a style but also a professional code, an ethic, and a ritual" (167). The difference lies not in the misapprehension that documentary presents an unmediated recording of the world, but in the way that, through the editing process, an argument about the world is constructed through the juxtaposing of





seemingly incidental images. Jacques Rancière phrases this in another way when he notes that what distinguishes fiction from documentary “isn’t that the documentary sides with the real against the inventions of fiction, it’s just that the documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood” (*Film Fables* 158). In these terms, *Bloody Sunday*, through its appropriation of the look and feel of documentary, can be seen to perform a crucial doubling back on this relationship; as a work of fiction, it produces an image of the real in such a way as to suggest, not an effect, but a fact.

At this point, drawing on Rancière’s conceptualization of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, we might ask what gets lost in this mode of reading. For Rancière, aesthetics means:

a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolve around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (*Politics of Aesthetics* 13)

In Rancière’s terms, the civil rights march on January 30, 1972 is political in the sense that it asserted the right to speak of a party whose speech was heard only as “noise,” and it was thereby an active attempt to redistribute the boundaries of the sensible. It is interesting, therefore, to reflect on what *Bloody Sunday*’s aesthetic of trauma does or does not allow to become visible. As Kracauer suggested, there is always a limit to the illusion. In this respect, it is interesting to turn to an often overlooked aspect of the film’s design. Throughout, the film employs fades-to-black between scenes and often within a single scene, as if the film itself were passing in and out of consciousness—an idea that reflects Penney’s

notion of the camera as a composite, traumatized subjectivity. Indeed, Tom Herron and John Lynch read these gaps as part of the film’s “quality of stammering, of speaking with involuntary pauses or repetitions” that “marks the point of suffering, of an injustice that can barely be spoken even as it demands to be” (74). Once again, this highlights an ambiguity about the difference between an “involuntary” symptom and a voluntary aesthetic choice. These blank, black spaces perform a variety of overlapping functions.

The first function is to denote the passing of time. This is visible in an early scene in which Gerald Donaghy is seen fooling around on the couch with his girlfriend while babysitting for his sister. The shot is framed by the living-room door and is stationary. The scene, however, is split into thirds, fading to black twice—once to mark the time between the baby waking and Gerald’s girlfriend bringing her to the living room, and once to mark the time between this scene and when Gerald’s sister and husband arrive home. This function is the least contentious and warrants no fur-

*The blank spaces, shaky cameras, and inaudible conversations are not symptoms of what cannot be phrased, but choices not to phrase at all.*

ther explanation, except to say that these ellipses create a passage of time that is important for the illusion of endlessness in that they suggests events occurring offscreen.

The second function is visible in the parallel press conferences of the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association and the Irish Army that opens the film. Here, the black screen fills the brief interludes between shots as the film cuts back and forth between each conference. For Herron and Lynch, this black screen “gives a powerful sense of the incompatibility of the different positions of the spokesmen of two organisations in conflict, as the blackness conveys a sense of chasmic distance between them” (70). These spaces can be understood in terms of ideological distance, and, indeed, this space holds the two sides apart throughout the film, except during the shooting itself, when the soldiers and the protesters come into direct contact.

The third function appears in the final sequence—another press conference, this time in the aftermath of the massacre—as Cooper attempts to communicate the injustice to the assembled media. Again, the screen fades to black numerous times within the scene, except here the respites are used to provide historical context. For example, captions appear stating, “Two days after Bloody Sunday the British

Government set up an Inquiry under Lord Chief Justice Widgery;” or, as Eamonn McCann reads out the names of the victims, the screen fades to black and the caption reads, “Lord Widgery accepted the British Army’s claim that soldiers came under fire from IRA gunmen as they entered the Bogside.” The appearance of these captions, widely used in historical films and documentaries, points to the limits of *Bloody Sunday*’s representational strategy: by attempting to capture the experience of being *there*, in the midst of the action, it forgoes expository details or contextualization with regard to Bloody Sunday’s position in the history of the Troubles and Irish civil rights. For a historical film, we learn very little history from it.

If *Bloody Sunday* is a history, it is not a history in the sense of a narrative reconstruction of historical events, but a history that resists such closures, remaining, as Pettitt describes it, “inconclusive, open-ended, unresolved” (56). It appears to be what really happened precisely *because* it recreates the confusion of the event and resists overarching contextualization. This is particularly revealing when, as Ruth Barton notes, the film “[omits] to have a camera on the spot when the first shot is fired” (172), which remains the very crux of the issue of Bloody Sunday. Indeed, in this way, we can begin to see how the “traumatic” effects of disorientation and blackouts also serve to evade historical judgment. While the stammering and silences of a traumatized individual can be said to be “involuntary,” the same cannot be said of a film. The blank spaces, shaky cameras, and inaudible conversations are not symptoms of what cannot be phrased, but choices not to phrase at all. In Rancière’s terms, political activity is whatever “makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse what was once only heard as noise” (*Disagreement* 30). *Bloody Sunday* refuses to turn the noise of history into discourse; rather, the blackness that permeates the film might be best read in the context of Colin Graham’s observations on a recurrent trope in post-Ceasefire Northern Irish culture, of “an ache which notices, knows, but can barely comment on the cauterisation of the dark complexity of the past, since to point to, or even test out, fragile post-consociational consensus would be to remember a future that is now consigned to history” (568).

If we consider that this violent history was itself a result of conflicting and irreconcilable historical narratives, this “fragile post-consociational consensus” can also be understood as having been “consigned to history.” The black gaps in the narrative allow the film to evade the crucial disagreements about history that precipitated the event. The emphasis on seeing the past in all its confusion enables the film to draw on the authority of history without ever having to commit to a statement about what that history is.

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## Beyond Neo-Neo Realism Reconfigurations of Neorealist Narration in Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff*

Since the widely reported critical wrangling between A. O. Scott and Richard Brody on the merits of using the term “Neo-Neo Realism” to describe a batch of American independent productions released in 2008 and 2009,<sup>1</sup> the term has been largely conspicuous by its absence. Of the various directors deemed by Scott to be bringing American cinema its “neorealist moment,” three have yet to re-emerge (So Yong Kim, Ramin Bahrani, Lance Hammer), two have moved toward the mainstream (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck), and only one, namely Kelly Reichardt, has continued to receive significant attention. Tellingly, however, the considerable quantity of critical discussion on Reichardt’s 2011 film, *Meek’s Cutoff*, has failed to invoke this contentious term, giving credence to the idea that Scott’s “neorealist moment” was of a fleeting nature. Yet, while the intrinsic value of categorizing films based on a movement famed for its *own* lack of a clear definition is debatable at best,<sup>2</sup> neorealist theory can still be utilized as a means of exploring the recent trend of American realism touched on by Scott. If anything, the sheer wealth of academic writing on neorealism comprises a rich seam of theoretical approaches that can easily be applied to contemporary contexts.

Unlike *Wendy and Lucy* (2008)—which has been brought into connection with De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948) and *Umberto D.* (1952) regarding the structuring principle of a search, and the solace offered by a canine companion, respectively<sup>3</sup>—*Meek’s Cutoff* does

not, at least at first glance, invite such obvious neorealist comparisons. Although this can perhaps be put down to the nineteenth-century setting and the more immediate foregrounding of the Western genre, a more detailed analysis reveals a range of neorealist underpinnings. The subtle reconfigurations Reichardt performs on these neorealist elements lead to a shift in their ultimate effect and help to illustrate that the relationship between contemporary realist stirrings and neorealism is more complex than a direct revival.

The following discussion of *Meek’s Cutoff* focuses on the narrative techniques employed by the film and how these relate to various neorealist narrative forms. Rather than get embroiled in the variety of theories pertaining to neorealist narration,<sup>4</sup> I will draw primarily from André Bazin’s conception of neorealist narrative structure in order to analyze Reichardt’s film. Due to Bazin’s frequent referencing to Cesare Zavattini’s own thoughts on neorealism, I supplement Bazin’s comments with those of Zavattini where appropriate. While some of Bazin’s more utopian statements on neorealism are to be treated with caution, his lyrical yet precise approach continues to pay dividends, as the recent surge of renewed interest in his work seems to indicate.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than appearing as a single coherent theory, the two main components of Bazin’s neorealist narration I am interested in are referred to across a range of texts spanning a five-year period, serving to refine the same ideas in each iteration. The first of these is introduced as a lyrical-natural

1. See Scott and Brody for details on the original critical spat; for its subsequent discussion, see Knegt and Bordwell.

2. See Ruberto & Wilson for a succinct account of the problems in defining neorealism.

3. See Gross, Hoberman, and Jones.

4. See, for example, Deleuze, *Cinema 1* 201-220 and *Cinema 2* 1-23, Thompson 197-217, and Wagstaff.

5. For recent examples of this tendency, see Andrew and Cardullo.





metaphor, describing the episodic narrative structure employed by Roberto Rossellini in *Paisan* (*Paisà*, 1946), as a series of events between which “the mind has to leap from one event to the other as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river” (Bazin 35). In more concrete terms, this stepping-stone metaphor can best be understood as referring to a narrative structure consisting of individual events whose exact relationship to one another is not always apparent during the narrative itself (as it only becomes clear in retrospect which particular stones proved decisive in allowing the river to be crossed), and whose overarching construction avoids any overtly contrived quality (as the stones were not placed in the river for that exact purpose).

Bazin later returns to the same idea in more explicit terms to describe the narrative strategy employed in Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* (*La Terra Trema*, 1948) and Genina's *Heaven Over the Marshes* (*Cielo sulla Palude*, 1949), remarking approvingly that “things happen in them each at its appointed hour, one after the other, but each carries an equal weight. If some are fuller of meaning than others, it is only in retrospect; we are free to use either ‘therefore’ or ‘then’” (59). The various occurrences that comprise the plot, thus, each have different levels of significance for the narrative as a whole, with some merely following one another chronologically, while others build on one another to form a narrative progression. Moreover, the respective significance of each occurrence actually emerges only once the whole narrative has played out, as no one occurrence is emphasized more than any other.

It is with regards to this basic episodic structure that *Meek's Cutoff* cleaves closest to Bazin's narrative model. The narrative is structured as a series of episodes whose rela-

tionship to one another moves constantly back and forth between the “then” and the “therefore.” Broadly speaking, these episodes can be placed on a sliding scale according to the amount of narrative information they contain, running the gamut from extended narrative episodes (such as the scene in which the wagons are lowered into the valley), brief episodes showing a single event or interaction (such as when Emily Tetherow gives the Indian food), brief moments of dialogue or incidents inserted into scenes showing the travails of the journey and the daily tasks that go along with it (such as when the Tetherows briefly concur before throwing most of their possessions out the back of the wagon), to the

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many scenes that merely focus on the details of these various travails and tasks (such as the extended river crossing scene that opens the film). The constant shifting between episodes in which something and nothing “happens” serves to give all the various narratively heterogeneous episodes equal weight while also necessitating the same retrospective ascription of meaning described by Bazin. In turn, seemingly innocuous details end up receiving subsequent significance (such as when the shot of water being collected from the river in the first scene is later proven to be of vital importance) and episodes that appear to convey significant narrative information end up leading nowhere (the discovery of gold in the desert, for example, plays no further role other than that of just another crushing disappointment). This feeling that the occurrences or even individual images in the film could end up meaning everything or nothing is further intensified by the *in medias res* ending. Even the developments that do play out over the course of the narrative, such as the feelings of trust that Emily slowly develops for the Indian, are rendered somehow stunted and ambiguous as to their ultimate significance by the complete lack of resolution.

Bazin's second component of the neorealist narrative model was first introduced in an article on De Sica in reference to Rossellini, and refers to the desire for narrative events to be portrayed in accordance with their original duration. As Bazin sees it, narrative structure “must now respect the actual duration of the event” being portrayed, as opposed to reconstructing events according to an “artifi-

cial and abstract” dramatic duration (Bazin 64-65). While this effectively amounts to a utopian, largely unworkable appeal for real-time narratives, which bears little relation to the Rossellini films it refers to, Bazin's subsequent comments do, at least, constitute a qualification of sorts: Zavattini's dream of filming eighty minutes in the life of a man without a single cut is reformulated as an ideal, with *Bicycle Thieves* forming its nearest approximation at the time of writing (Bazin 67). It is *Umberto D.*, however, that represents a yet closer approximation of this ideal, providing Bazin an even better opportunity to elaborate on the details of such durational considerations. In a note on the film, Bazin enthuses that the film offers a “glimpse, on a number of occasions, of what a truly realist cinema of time could be, a cinema of ‘duration’” (Bazin 76). However, a look at the two scenes from the film that Bazin has in mind—the scene in which the protagonist goes to bed after falling ill and the scene in which the maid rises in the morning and makes coffee—demonstrates that duration is not the only marker of their realist significance. A sense of realism arises, not only because these scenes unfold in real time, but also because of the type of activities they show, namely, “the simple continuing to be of a person to whom nothing in particular happens” (Bazin 76).

It is worth mentioning here that Bazin does not provide any clear explanation as to why portraying everyday activities in real time might generate the sense of dramatic spectacle and emotion that he clearly believes them to. While he does not explicitly mention the durational element key to Bazin's model, some of Zavattini's thoughts provide possible explanations to this end. First, that presenting everyday activities in the cinema “will astonish us by showing so many things that happen every day under our eyes, things we have never noticed before” (Zavattini 221); and second, aside from this idea of a new perspective being opened up by having details of the everyday simply shown onscreen, Zavattini describes a more complex reaction that takes place within the viewer:

People understand themselves better than the social fabric; and to see themselves on the screen performing their daily actions—remembering that to see oneself gives one the sense of being unlike oneself—like hearing one's own voice on the radio—can help them to fill up a void, a lack of knowledge of reality. (222)

Apart from the vague sense of didacticism that underlies these comments, Zavattini's idea of a simultaneous identification with, and feeling of, dislocation from the familiarity of the activities shown is interesting, as this critical distance enables the viewer to reflect on the way in which reality is being presented to them.

*Umberto D.* unites the two different threads of Bazin's narrative model: the episodic structure remains evident, but the “events” that comprise it are now the fragments of everyday life. He notes:

If one assumes some distance from the story and can still see in it a dramatic patterning, some general development in character, a single general trend in its component events, this is only after the fact. The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than any other. (Bazin 81)

While the extent to which this description actually tallies with the film itself remains unclear, it is perhaps best to grasp this narrative model as a realist aspiration rather than a tangible strategy, a yet-to-be-reached station along a line that starts at *Umberto D.* and follows the “asymptote of reality” toward Zavattini's dream of showing eighty minutes of real life without a single cut (82).



In addition to the episodic narrative structure and resultant retrospective ascription of meaning, *Meek's Cutoff* also places a strong focus on both daily activities and real-time duration, a combination that might, at first glance, suggest that the film represents a contemporary attempt to push the realist aspirations of *Umberto D.* one stage further. Yet, while all these elements are certainly present in the film, their subtle reconfiguration and interaction with other aspects of the film's aesthetic end up generating effects that actually run counter to Bazin's original realist agenda.

The way in which the film persistently foregrounds the various tasks involved in a cross-country trek clearly motivates the question of how these scenes are to be understood, a question to which Zavattini's ideas provide some interesting answers. Although it is unlikely that a contemporary viewer is going to discover any previously unnoticed

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moments of grace in the repairing of a wagon axle, the collecting of firewood, or the grinding of wheat, the second explanation given by Zavattini as to the effect achieved by portraying these activities proves surprisingly apt for *Meek's Cutoff*, albeit with a decisive shift in focus. While the various iconographical markers of the Western in the film immediately evoke a sense of familiarity in the viewer, the continual emphasis on the chores that allow this Western world to function represents a clear break with the traditional, more event-driven demands of the genre. Thus, instead of such feelings of disassociation and identification emerging due to the inherent familiarity of the chores themselves (*à la* Zavattini), these feelings are generated due to the unfamiliar sensation of seeing chores foregrounded within an otherwise familiar genre setting. The critical distance created here does not, therefore, lead the viewer to reflect upon the (neorealist) portrayal of social reality, but rather upon the standard portrayal of reality in the Western, exposing the mechanics of genre convention before addressing any social considerations. At the same time, however, the intrinsic physicality of these activities does create a link between the viewer and the historical social reality being portrayed, a corporeal identification with the sheer physical harshness of a settler's life that remains undisturbed by any genre confusions. In this sense, *Meek's Cutoff* can be seen to expand Zavattini's identification model to include genre, on the one hand, while still retaining a link to a specific social reality via the body, on the other.

A similarly subtle reconfiguration is also undertaken regarding duration. While the film does, indeed, show certain episodes with the sort of respect for real-time duration advocated by Bazin, the choice of episodes presented in this way actually end up undermining his theory rather than adhering to it. Instead of showing the characters carrying out their tasks in real time, the film insists on presenting *central dramatic episodes* in real time. Perhaps the clearest example of this tendency is the scene in which Emily first encounters the Indian. Having run from the sight of each other, Emily enters a wagon and emerges with a rifle. Over the next minute, she methodically loads the gun, fires a shot, cleans the gun's two barrels, reloads, and finally fires for a second time, a cut coinciding with the second shot. While this scene pro-



vides the most overt example of this durational approach to presenting dramatic episodes, the film contains various narrative episodes in which a similarly pronounced sense of duration is created, such as when Stephen Meek and Solomon Tetherow return to camp with the Indian tied between them, or when Emily cautiously repairs the Indian's shoe.

Although this sort of durational presentation is not the only strategy used to portray dramatic episodes—the ellipses in the wagon-lowering scene, for instance, provide an alternative—its very use in this context brings about a complete reversal of Bazin's theory. The two necessary conditions that led Bazin to consider *Umberto D.* an unadorned presentation of real life are decoupled here: certain dramatic episodes are presented in real time while daily activities are portrayed so as to exemplify their generality, circumventing a fidelity to duration. This decoupling ends up running counter to the aims of Bazin's original model, as the decision to present selective narrative episodes in real time serves, if anything, to underline their significance for the narrative as a whole, giving them precisely the kind of additional weight that Bazin's episodic model is concerned with avoiding. Thus, by pulling apart and applying separately the two components of a narrative strategy whose goal it is to represent reality by converging on reality itself, a new strategy is created that aims to accentuate the narrative's

dramatic construction rather than allowing it to disappear into realist transparency.

Combining the respective theoretical approaches of Bazin and Zavattini produces a set of narrative principles and justifications whose application in contemporary cinema by no means needs to be limited to *Meek's Cutoff*. The narrative analysis of the film also serves to illustrate that transferring past realist strategies into such settings is unlikely to leave their functions unchanged, with comparatively little reconfiguration needed in order to create very different, even contradictory, effects. As such, it is important for any exploration of neorealist elements in contemporary cinema to avoid the temptation to merely reduce their use to basic revivalism. In addition, the inherent plurality of the neorealist canon and the ways in which it resists neat categorization also renders such oversimplified, revivalist arguments problematic: the often drastically different realist approaches employed in Rossellini's War Trilogy, *Umberto D.* in its role as the final flowering of neorealism, as well as subsequent, widely-debated outliers such as Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (*Viaggio in Italia*, 1954) or Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* (*Le notti di Cabiria*, 1957), indicate just how many different variants of neorealism exist, all of which form an equally viable basis for exploring contemporary realist strategies. Finally, with regards to Kelly Reichardt's work, *Meek's Cutoff* can be seen as another example of her penchant for

gently subverting neorealism's legacy, as *Old Joy* (2006) and *Wendy and Lucy* also undertake the same sort of subtle retooling of neorealist approaches apparent here. Yet, while neorealism represents as good a theoretical starting point as any when it comes to exploring Reichardt's deceptively slim oeuvre, it can only be hoped that future analyses go on to address the many wider questions of cinematic realism, genre, feminism, politics, and society raised by her work, and how these fit into and influence both the current state of American independent cinema and contemporary cinema as a whole.

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Tiago de Luca

## Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* and Visionary Realism

In this article, I will look at Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* (2002) as a privileged example of a realist trend in contemporary world cinema defined by excessive adherence to spatiotemporal integrity through allegiance to the long take, eliciting, as a result, sensory-contemplative cinematic experiences embedded in physical presence and duration. In so doing, I hope to shed some light on the main aesthetic principles governing this tendency, including its distinctive reconfiguration of cinematic realism as exemplified by *Gerry*. I will start by contextualizing *Gerry* within Van Sant's career, move on to investigate the ways in which the film adheres to, and departs from, traditional notions of realism, and finally analyze its contemplative long takes in light of a landscape painting tradition and American avant-garde, "visionary" cinema. As I will argue, *Gerry*'s hyperbolic focus on the natural world is designed to enhance the phenomenology of the viewing experience, testifying to cinema's ability to revitalize perception in its full sensory dimension.

### "A New Cinema"

*Gerry* is emblematic of a cross-cultural cinematic tendency across the globe, which I have elsewhere theorized as "realism of the senses" (de Luca), whose representatives include renowned filmmakers such as Carlos Reygadas (Mexico), Tsai Ming-liang (Taiwan), Béla Tarr (Hungary), Lisandro Alonso (Argentina), Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand), Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey), to cite a few examples. These are cinemas, I argue, fascinated by the physicality of animate and inanimate matter, bodies and landscapes, all enhanced by slow and/or static long takes that deflate narrative progression, and through which the perceptual and material qualities of the image are enhanced. As exemplified by films as otherwise distinct as Reygadas's *Japón* (2002), Alonso's *Liverpool* (2008), Albert Serra's *Birdsong* (*El cant del ocells*, 2008), among others, a common trope animating this tendency is the presence of solitary characters wander-

ing through deserted landscapes. Devoid of psychological nuances, they interminably walk, stroll, and loiter, often aimlessly, precluding narrative interaction in favour of phenomenological and sensory experience. These aimless perambulations invite the viewer to protractedly study, in silent long takes, the sheer presence and literalness of the empty landscapes they traverse, a contemplative verve which, I will argue, is carried to its ultimate consequences in *Gerry*.

Before I start with my analysis of the film, however, some remarks on its context are useful. In Van Sant's case, the adoption of this cinematic style was the direct result of his encounter with the work of Hungarian filmmaker Béla Tarr. After his famous shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho* (1998), sandwiched between two similar and conventional films (*Good Will Hunting*, 1997; *Finding Forrester*, 2000), Van Sant's career seemed to have reached its saturation point, exposing a director faced with typical postmodern conundrums such as the impossibility of aesthetic originality. This was, indeed, what Van Sant himself expressed in an essay on Tarr. Entitled "The Camera is a Machine," this was included in the catalogue of a 2001 Tarr retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. In it, Van Sant highlights the inertia of what he calls the "Industrial Vocabulary"—"The cinematic vocabulary of a 2001 television show like *Ally Mcbeal* is virtually the same as *Birth of Nation's*"—and describes his encounter with Tarr's work as marking a watershed in his career, as he found himself "attempting to rethink film grammar" (Van Sant).

And so it is that in 2002, the director released *Gerry*, a film that partly stemmed from a quest to break with conventional narrative cinema.<sup>1</sup> This rupture, in Van Sant's view, is materialized in Tarr's "endless" tracking shots,

1. This formal direction was later cemented with *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005), films which, together with *Gerry*, comprised what the press nicknamed as the "trilogy of death," alluding to their reenactment of real life stories involving young demises: the little known story of a desert murder (*Gerry*), the Columbine massacre (*Elephant*), and the death of rock star Kurt Cobain (*Last Days*).



Figures 1-4: Shot citations of *Werckmeister Harmonies* and *Sátántangó*

whose protracted focus on inconsequential details and actions disregard story progression and exhaust narrative motivation, foregrounding, as a result, the sheer materiality of the image's audiovisual components. Rather than placing "separate fragments...together to form meaning," Van Sant declares, Tarr's meditative long takes result in films "organic and contemplative in their intentions," so much so that "it is like seeing the birth of a new cinema" (Van Sant).

That *Gerry* was inspired by Tarr is further evident in its reproduction of emblematic scenes of Tarr's *oeuvre*, which, incidentally, reiterate the citational impetus of Van Sant's cinema as epitomized by *Psycho*.<sup>2</sup> A sustained take of the bobbing heads of Matt Damon and Casey Affleck (*Gerry*'s protagonists) evokes, for instance, an identical visual composition we find in *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*, 2000) (Figures 1-2). The same applies to another shot in which both characters, followed from behind on a Steadicam, walk against a strong wind for several minutes, reproducing one of *Sátántangó*'s (1994) best-known sequences (Figures 3-4). Far from being solely a replication of Tarr's imagery and camera work however, *Gerry* is also the fruit of an organic and communal mode of production based on improvisation, physicality, and chance, aspects that—at least in principle—connect the film to a cinematic realist tradition.

2. See Staiger 11-14.

### Improvisation, Physicality, Absurdism

*Gerry* employs devices traditionally hailed as the quintessence of cinematic realism, as theorized, not the least, by foundational realist advocator André Bazin. Not only does the film respect the spatiotemporal integrity of reality through a hyperbolic use of the long take, it also testifies to a production process conceived on the premise of location shooting, characterized by improvisation and attention to contingent phenomena which foregrounds the physicality of actors and the materiality of pro-filmic events. However, as I will analyze in this section, this does not translate into a realistic fable in tune with the canons of verisimilitude and logic, but on the contrary, into an absurdist and surreal one, which complicates the categorization of the film under the rubric of realism.

Aiming at a more informal and spontaneous project, Van Sant teamed up with Matt Damon and Casey Affleck, personal friends with whom he had first worked on *Good Will Hunting*, and the trio started sketching the script for *Gerry* based on the news of a boy who murdered his friend in a desert in Mexico. We follow these two young men arriving by car at a desert, both of whom inexplicably refer to each other as Gerry (as a result, I shall be using the actors' names preceding those of the characters heretofore). We do not know who they are, their possible kinship, and what has brought them to this desert, nor are we further enlightened as the film unfolds. Indeed, the only information conveyed is that they are looking for, in their words, "the thing," yet

this search is abandoned as soon as they realize they are lost. We follow, unaware of time lapses in the film, their unsuccessful attempt to find their way back while they wander across monumental landscapes, eventually pausing, talking, and bickering. At the film's end, Damon-Gerry inexplicably chokes Affleck-Gerry to death, and manages to find his way out of the desert and be rescued by a car.

For most of *Gerry*, the viewer is confronted with these characters, weak and hopeless, dragging their way across harsh landscapes and struggling to find water under a blistering sun. In this respect, the film displays a documentary quality springing from the extreme temperatures and ruthless environmental conditions to which the cast and crew were, in actual fact, subjected. Shot entirely on location, mostly in Death Valley and the Utah salt flats (as well as in the Andes, Argentina), the harsh conditions and scorching weather of these locations resulted in a few casualties and

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even prompted some crew members to abandon the shoot. Granted, onscreen physical exertion is conveyed through artifice, as indicated by the large make-up crew credited at the film's end, which no doubt contributed to the despairing, sunburnt look of both actors. Still, *Gerry* attests to what Lúcia Nagib has recently theorized as "physical realism," which she defines as recording processes that "give evidence of an actor's physical engagement with the pro-filmic event" (19). This is what happens, for example, in the scene in which Affleck, stranded atop a rock, jumps off after hesitating for nearly eight minutes. Avoiding the use of montage trickery, this scene is presented in a long shot that foregrounds the physical reality of Affleck's jump, even though a jump cushion had been set up on the ground so as to prevent major injuries.

This allegiance to the reality of the pro-filmic event, with the ensuing incorporation of chance elements during the shoot, was the premise upon which *Gerry* was originally conceived. Shot in chronological order, Van Sant had no idea as to how or when the film would actually end. With a view to endowing the film with a spontaneous quality, its script, jointly sketched by director and actors, was composed of two pages containing around sixty lines and one-word descriptions, to be improvised on the spot by Damon

and Affleck. Examples include "taking a break," "getting bored," "panicking," "looking for trail," "returning the way they came," "writing," etc. (Ballinger 174). This skeletal, open-ended structure thus reveals the organic nature of this project, as well as the importance of Damon and Affleck in the film's creative process. Close friends in real life, they deliver an improvisational acting style grounded in absurdist dialogue.

Theirs is, indeed, a whimsical, obscure language full of made-up jargon such as "dirt-mattress," "rock-marooned," and "mountain scout-about." Their conversations often come across as inconsequential and nonsensical, occasionally lending the film a humorous quality. At the film's beginning, for example, the Gerrys engage in a three-minute conversation about the television program "Wheel of Fortune," recalling with amusement a contestant who "had every letter except for L" in the word "barrelling," but who thought it was a Y. Later on, Affleck-Gerry claims that he "conquered Thebes ... two weeks ago," going on to give the details of the ancient Greek city's conquest to an attentive Damon, a baffling monologue that, the viewer concludes, can only refer to a video game.

*Gerry*'s mode of production, in major respects attuned to the tenets of realist cinema, is thus translated into a fundamentally anti-realist narrative unconcerned with causality or logic. Indeed, the film's absurdist dialogue, delivered by two solitary characters in the midst of nowhere, is in many ways reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's famous existentialist play *Waiting for Godot*, an aspect largely picked up by the press upon *Gerry*'s release. Originally written in French as *En attendant Godot*, and representative of the "Theatre of the Absurd," the play presents two characters engaged in obscure conversations while they wait for the eponymous Godot, which in *Gerry* finds its cryptic equivalent in "the thing." The word "Godot," as noted by Lawrence Graver, encompasses a multitude of meanings and puns, both in English and French, among them the obvious "God," but also "godillot" and "godasses," French words for "shapeless old shoes" and "military boots"—both recurrent visual motifs in the play (41). Interestingly, in *Gerry* it is the word "Gerry" that is endowed with a puzzling interchangeability, a usage supposedly incorporated from the way the actors speak between themselves in real life. Not only do they refer to each other as Gerry, but this word, the spectator learns as the film unfolds, has a semantic and semiotic versatility in their vocabulary: it is used as a verb, an adjective, and a noun, with varying meanings. Hence, in order to express his luck when "conquering Thebes," Affleck-Gerry exclaims that that was "such a gerry." In another scene, Damon-Gerry explains that they "gerried off to the animal tracks," using the word as a substitute for the verbs "wander" or "walk."





**Figures 5-6: Dwarfing the human in *Gerry***

Most notably, *Gerry* stands for the word “fuck” or “screw,” as illustrated in the scene in which Damon-Gerry concludes that they “totally gerried the mountain scout-about.” Thus, *Gerry*’s thin, cryptic plot seems to be encapsulated in the slippery word “Gerry,” whose definite meaning, like the film’s narrative, is impossible to pinpoint.

In reference to Glauber Rocha’s *Black God, White Devil* (1964), a film also shot in desert landscapes (those of northeast Brazil), Nagib discusses the way in which its combination of realist (such as location shooting) and anti-realist (such as theatricality) devices “places presentational truth above representational mimesis, a method that determines, on the one hand, the exposure of the inner workings of fiction, and, on the other, the bodily engagement of crew and cast with real locations” (51). Something along these lines happens in *Gerry*, whose anti-realist narrative devices prevent spectatorial absorption on a representational level, exposing the reality of the filmmaking process itself. Unaided by character psychology and dramatic logic, the viewer is denied identificatory processes and full narrative immersion, being instead asked to concentrate on these actors’ performances in their own right—that is to say, on the reality of acting, as well as on their corporeal interaction with real locations. In fact, real locations in *Gerry* are objects of attention in themselves.

### Contemplative Landscapes

The lack of character psychology and drama in *Gerry* is matched, on a visual level, by its disdain for anthropomor-

*...if these grandiose images lend themselves to metaphysical readings, then they convey...emptiness, nothingness, and meaninglessness, testifying not to God but to the sheer mystery of existence and the physical world...*

phic dimensions. Here, landscapes dwarf human presence to the point where Damon and Affleck occasionally appear as insignificant dots within the frame (Figures 5-6). In these shots, their miniaturized scale renders impossible the reading of facial expressions, gestures, and movements, calling attention, by contrast, to the enormity of the deserts they traverse. Of course, the viewer continues to follow the characters’ trajectory during the film, being occasionally offered dialogue and short-distance shots. Still, this film’s extreme downplaying of human presence asks for some elaboration.

Harris Savides’s landscape cinematography is by far *Gerry*’s most impressive feature. This, however, is certainly not the first film to convey a fascination with majestic natural scenery. Vast dimensions and open expanses are characteristic of the United State’s geography, featuring in countless American films and being a staple of quintessentially American genres such as the Road Movie and the Western. Speaking of the latter, Bazin notes its underlying realist verve insofar as its “predilection for vast horizons, all-encompassing shots...restore to space its fullness” (*What is Cinema?*, 147). Moreover, *Gerry* is the culmination of a landscape sensibility that has consistently informed Van Sant’s work, a reflection of his artistic debt to the Beat movement. As Jack Sargeant notes, films such as *Mala Noche* (1986), *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993)—the director’s independent first features—“all reveal an interest in America—and the vastness of the American landscape—which is similar to that manifested in [Beat writer] Jack Kerouac’s writing” (219). Likewise, these are films flirting in postmodern fashion with the Road Movie and the Western genre. In them, characters are always on the road, which provides the cue for the foregrounding of the United State’s infinite expanses, notably the North and Mid-West. However, it must be noted that their attention to vast landscapes is not only momentary but somewhat peripheral to their diegeses. In *Gerry*, by contrast, vast landscapes assume a central importance, calling attention to their own physicality and asking

to be contemplated for their own sake. Their scale is either in monstrous contrast with that of characters or else they are displayed entirely on their own in overextended shots. In this respect, *Gerry* resonates with a landscape painting tradition.

In his study of spatial representation in cinema, Martin Lefebvre asks whether there is such a thing as “landscape” in film—in the contemplative sense that this term has acquired apropos of a Western painting tradition. Distinguishing between “settings” and “autonomous landscapes,” Lefebvre argues that the spectator may adopt an “autonomising gaze,” taking in, for example, a western setting “in its own right” and transforming it into a “landscape” (29). On the other hand, one may find “landscapes” momentarily, as in the *temps morts* of Michelangelo Antonioni’s films, famous for their long takes of characters aimlessly traversing desolate locations. Implicit in Lefebvre’s discussion is the de-dramatizing function that the distant and silent long take can perform. Of course, the sequence shot can be appropriated for dramatic ends, and this was what Bazin himself praised when expounding on the long takes of Welles, Renoir, and Wyler, which, in the critic’s view, displayed a meticulously orchestrated *mise-en-scène* in strict accordance with dramaturgic logic.<sup>3</sup> However, with Antonioni—and to an even greater extent *Gerry*—we have a different scenario. Here, long takes coupled with distant framings are often utilized so as to produce images evacuated of narrative information and meaning, which enhance, in return, the purely material presence of landscapes.

If, as Malcolm Andrews contends, a landscape painting tradition emerges as a quest “to celebrate the awesome beauty of the natural world” (48), *Gerry* is similarly a film that seems fascinated by the film medium’s ability to capture phenomenological reality as materialized in stunning landscapes. Lefebvre charts the birth of a landscape tradition in the visual arts from the moment when these locations ceased to be a “spatial ‘accessory’ to a painted scene” and became “the primary and independent subject matter of a work” (23)—meaning the literal spatial increase of landscapes in the surface of a painting and the inversely proportional decrease in the size of human beings.<sup>4</sup> In particular, this dwarfing of the human figure culminated in the Sublime painting tradition, a tendency with which *Gerry* specifically resonates.

The defining characteristics of the Sublime were famously proposed by the English philosopher Edmund Burke in *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of*

3. See, for example, Bazin, *Bazin at Work* 11 and Orson Welles: *A Critical View* 80.

4. This, interestingly, would be inverted in cinema, whose over-reliance on the human body as the common denominator for its framing measures is well documented. See Doane.

*the Sublime and Beautiful* (1827), in which he defines it as divesting the human being of control and reasoning, the experience of which, usually found in nature, is inexpressible and unrepresentable. To encounter the Sublime is thus to confront superlative concepts such as “Vastness,” “Infinity,” “Light,” and “Magnificence,” as found in material form in the natural world (Burke). This notion was pictorially translated into landscapes whose monumentality loomed over powerless and minuscule human figures. In Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Monk by the Sea* (*Der Mönch am Meer*, 1809), we encounter more than two thirds of its surface occupied by an immense and formless white sky, which weighs down



**Figures 7-8: The Sublime in Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Monk by the Sea* and *Gerry***

upon the infinitesimal monk at the bottom. *Gerry*’s scenes filmed in the Utah salt grounds uncannily evoke Friedrich’s painting. The whiteness of the salt flats are mirrored by the purplish white sky, resulting in a visual composition whose uniform, expansive paleness is counterpointed only by the diminutive presence of Damon and Affleck at the bottom of the frame (Figures 7-8).

But here we are also compelled to examine this visual resemblance more closely. For a Romantic painter like Friedrich, the contemplation of nature—mirrored in his paintings by subjects seen from behind and contemplating views themselves—was the means by which to enter into communion with a spiritual dimension. His paintings, as *The Monk by the Sea* illustrates, are freighted with religious allusions. In *Gerry*, this metaphysical dimension is not so clear-cut. More than communing with Nature, these characters are estranged by it, suffering from its sheer physicality

and indifference, as illustrated by the splendid yet merciless salt flats. This is to say that if these grandiose images lend themselves to metaphysical readings, then they convey, perhaps more pointedly, emptiness, nothingness, and meaninglessness, testifying not to God but to the sheer mystery of existence and the physical world, as well as to the sensory power of the film medium in its ability to enhance perception.

## Visionary Images

In addition to employing distant long takes that literally minimize the importance of characters before the grandiosity of the natural world—which invites a contemplative (as opposed to an interpretative and alert) spectatorial attitude—*Gerry* is regularly punctuated by images of landscapes entirely devoid of human presence. In this respect, the film's protracted focus on the objective real serves to evoke mental processes of perception and cognition. We see, in lengthy takes, immense skies, rising suns, sped up clouds and shadows, sand dunes and monumental rocks—autonomous images that arbitrarily halt *Gerry's* already rarefied narrative and whose extended duration lend the film a hypnotic quality (Figure 9). As viewers, we are unable to locate the place of these images within the diegetic universe: are they purely objective images conveying the passing of time? Are they being “seen” through the eyes of these characters? Or are they “mirages” in their own right—that is to say, audiovisual expressions of a pure consciousness? While these questions remain unanswered, the fact remains that these oneiric images resonate with the American avant-garde tradition and its “visionary” quest as famously theorized by P. Adams Sitney. Elaborating on experimental filmmakers such as Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, among others, Sitney describes the visionary tradition in film as an attempt to reproduce dream states and (altered) mental processes through the juxtaposition of non-correlated, literal images, its greatest aspiration being “the mimesis of the human mind in a cinematic structure” (305), which seems to be the case in *Gerry*.

Van Sant's rapport with the American avant-garde goes back to his student days at the Rhode Island School of Design in the 1970s, where he studied experimental cinema and became engaged with this filmmaking strand. Though he later veered into narrative cinema, “visionary” images are pervasive, if in subdued form, in many of his films. Most notably, they appear in the form of passing clouds, which either slowed down or sped up, break the narrative flow, offering instead moments of contemplation. This visual motif has become the director's hallmark, found in most of his

work to date. In films such as *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*, moreover, sped up clouds convey the characters' altered perception of reality. In the former, they appear, together with surreal objects floating in the air, as a means to express the characters' drug-induced state of mind (Figure 10). In the latter, its narcoleptic protagonist, played by River Phoenix, provides the cue for dreamlike images of empty roads and passing clouds whenever he falls into deep sleep.

However, visionary images are onscreen in these films for a few seconds only. Further, the altered states of mind they convey are acknowledged as such within the narrative, which clearly demarcates the reality of its intradiegetic universe and the distorted cognition of this same reality as experienced by characters. This demarcation is nowhere to be



**Figure 9-10: Visionary Images in *Gerry* and *My Own Private Idaho***

found in *Gerry*, in which the real and the imaginary seem to indistinctly conflate, as illustrated by a scene that conveys a mirage—the archetypal desert trope. We initially see both Gerrys from behind, talking to each other as they sit on the ground, while a person, entirely out of focus and in the distance, walks towards the camera. As the scene cuts to a frontal shot of both characters and then back to a shot from behind, the camera starts closing in on Affleck's back and we realize that the person coming in his direction is actually Damon, and that the film operates at the intersection of subjective and objective perspectives.

More remarkably, this intersection is expressed through the film's form, which thanks to a discontinuous montage of mirage-like images, evokes “more directly states of consciousness and reflexes of the imagination in the viewer” (Sitney 306). Onscreen for minutes in overstretched shots, these images resist signification, being conveyed as heightened sensible presences. Here, the long take provides the viewer with plenty of time to study the phenomenal, textural, tactile—in short, the sensorial, material qualities these landscapes radiate: the solidity of rocks, the gaseousness of passing clouds, the whiteness of salted grounds, the blueness of skies. As such, these images resonate with Gilles Deleuze's definition of cinematic affect. Drawing on

*Realism here does not emerge as a mimetic exercise, but rather, as an aesthetic endeavour concerned with reclaiming the phenomenology of the viewing experience.*

Peirce's concept of “Firstness”—a mode of being in which qualities have not been actualized in a state of things and thus emerge “in their own suchness” (Peirce 86)—Deleuze defines affect as the pure expression of a pure quality or power: “It is that which is as it is for itself and in itself” (Deleuze 100). In film, affect is expressed when the image loses its spatiotemporal coordinates, enabling qualities to appear for themselves. This, he contends, is mostly accomplished through the facial close-up and spatial fragmentation (as in Bresson's films), and emptiness, what he calls the any-space-whatever (*espace quelconque*) or qualisigns:

There are...two states of any-space-whatever, or two kinds of “qualisigns,” qualisigns of disconnection and of emptiness...The any-space-whatever retains one and the same nature: it no longer has co-ordinates, it is a pure potential, it shows only pure Powers and Qualities, independently of the state of things or milieux which actualise them. (123)

True, Deleuze does not mention the long take in his discussion of the “affection-image.” Yet as *Gerry* illustrates, it seems obvious that duration, when combined with particular framing strategies, can only enhance the affective qualities of images as described by the philosopher. Not only does the film foreground the emptiness of landscapes through sustained long takes, it occasionally adheres to framing devices whose resulting images threaten to overflow the borders of the figurative, thereby attaining the sensuous quality of abstract paintings in motion. This is what happens, for example, in the shot showing an immense blue sky un-



**Figure 11-12: Affective landscapes**

der which we see triangular summits, and formless white clouds whose changing shape is rendered visible through time-lapse procedures; or when we see the surface of rocks above which grey, heavy storm clouds swiftly pass through the screen, also the effect of time-lapse procedures (Figures 11-12). Though one obviously perceives these things for what they are, these images fluctuate between their real, individuated state and their sensorial plasticity: their movement, forms, texture, and colours are liberated from that which actualizes them. As such, the film seems to answer Stan Brakhage's famous call for a pure perception, freed from language and automatism: “Imagine an eye unrulled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception” (Brakhage 46). By foregrounding reality primarily as a perceptual, sensible, and experiential phenomenon, *Gerry* is such an adventure of perception.

## Concluding Remarks

As hopefully illustrated, *Gerry* cannot be so easily accommodated under the rubric of cinematic realism. On the one hand, the film accords to precepts traditionally associated with realist cinema such as location shooting, improvisational modes of production, and, in particular, the use of the long take. Superimposing these elements, however, are anti-realist narrative devices and experimental strategies that complicate *Gerry's* categorization as a realist film in accordance with representational canons. Its hyperbolic asser-



tion of the film medium's recording ability, crystallized in its "visionary" long takes, serves to yield a cinematic sensory experience rather than attending to the demands of narrative economy. Realism here does not emerge as a mimetic exercise, but rather, as an aesthetic endeavour concerned with reclaiming the phenomenology of the viewing experience.

In 1969, Susan Sontag, in her famous essay "The Aesthetics of Silence," remarked on the representational saturation that would come to be viewed as typical of post-modernism. In it, she draws attention to a then emerging art which, rather than fostering meaning, turns to "opaqueness," "blandness," and "alogicality," citing, among others, Beckett and minimalist art. This silent turn she attributes to a general scepticism of language and the concomitant appeal of a cultural and perceptual cleansing process in the context of a world overfilled with readily available representations and "furnished with second-hand perceptions" (5). As the artist is faced with the daunting prospect that whatever he or she creates "will remind...of something already achieved," silence promises a more immediate and "unalienated art" (14-5). Van Sant was certainly after this renewal when making *Gerry*, adopting an experimental-realist approach that attests to cinema's ability to enhance perception and, in so doing, evacuate consciousness of what we traditionally call "thinking." Sontag compares silent art with the perceptual appeal of landscapes, an operation that is, therefore, literally conflated in *Gerry*:

The spectator would approach art as he does a landscape. A landscape doesn't demand from the spectator his "understanding," his imputations of significance, his anxieties and sympathies; it demands, rather, his absence, it asks that he not add anything to it. Contemplation, strictly speaking, entails self-forgetfulness on the part of the spectator: an object worthy of contemplation is one which, in effect, annihilates the perceiving subject. (Sontag 16)

An annihilated perceiving subject, however, is denied thinking only in the traditional, Cartesian sense of this term. For as Sontag herself observes, in contemplation, "the silence of eternity prepares for a thought beyond thought, which must appear from the...familiar uses of the mind as no thought at all—though it may rather be the emblem of new, 'difficult' thinking" (17). In its advocacy for perceptual literalness and sensory experience, *Gerry* strives to be this contemplative kind of art. As such, the aesthetic sensations it conjures are not disconnected from thinking but are the very vehicles through which a new thinking—that which is yet to be thought—comes into being.

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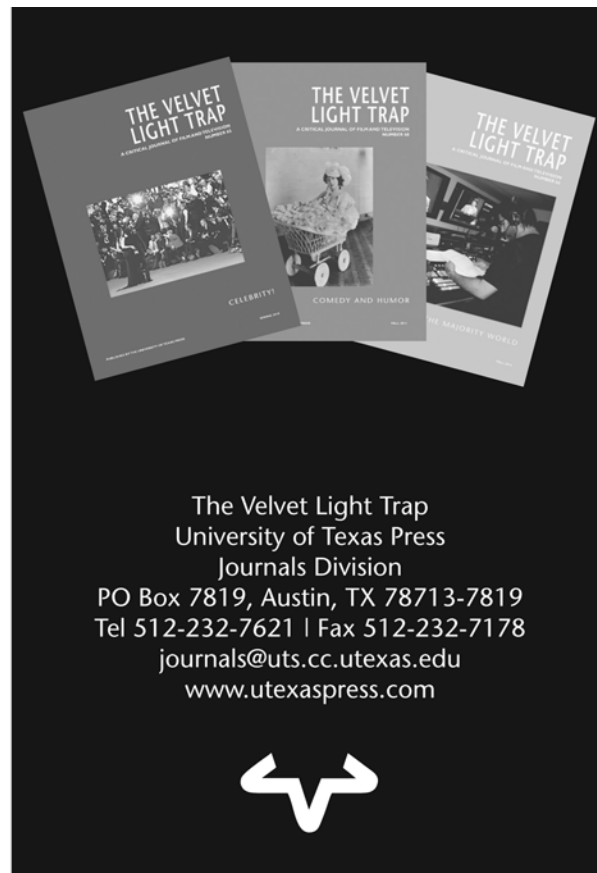
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