



Realism

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(THEORIES OF REALISM

Film critics and theorists have long given their intellectual support to the practice of realist (/knowledge/Realism.html) filmmaking. For Rudolph Arnheim, writing in the early 1930s, film offered the possibility of "the mechanical imitation (/knowledge/Imitation.html) of nature" in which original and copy become indistinguishable in the eyes of the public. Yet it was Bazin who, a decade later, would transform the mechanical reproduction (/knowledge/Reproduction.html) of the cinematic (/knowledge/Cutscene.html) image into a prophecy. A prolific critic, Bazin is best known for his defense of cinematic (/knowledge/Cutscene.html) realism. For Bazin, what filmmakers (/knowledge/Filmmaking.html) as different as Robert Bresson (/knowledge/Robert_Bresson.html) (1901–1999), De Sica, Renoir, Rossellini, and Orson Welles (1915–1985) had in common was a desire to put cinema at the service of what Bazin called a fundamental faith in reality. The credibility of a film did not come from its verisimilitude (/knowledge/Verisimilitude.html) but from the identity between the photographic image and its object. In "The Ontological Realism of the Photographic Image" (1945), Bazin sketches a brief history of art, in which he identifies cinema as the fulfillment of the human craving for realistic representation. Cinema's mission was thus to fulfill this goal. For Bazin, realism was a style whose chief elements were the long take, deep focus, limited editing and, when possible, the use of non-professional, or at least relatively unknown actors. Realism for Bazin was both the essence of cinema—its ontology—and a rhetoric whose keys were simplicity, purity, and transparency.

In 1960, two years after Bazin's death, Kracauer continued and radicalized Bazin's project in his book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Like Bazin, Kracauer argued that of all the arts, film is uniquely qualified to record physical reality. Kracauer conceded that many films combine realist (/knowledge/Realism.html) with formalist tendencies, but he concluded the films that make us "experience aspects of physical reality are the most valid aesthetically." Thus for Kracauer, the best moment in Laurence (/knowledge/Laurence.html) Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948) is not Shakespeare's text, or Olivier's acting, or even his direction, but a moment when the camera, almost by inadvertence, frames a window of Elsinore castle and lets us see the "real ocean" in all its force (p. 36). In his previous book, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), Kracauer traced the rise of

Nazism ([/knowledge/Nazism.html](#)) through the psychological terror of German expressionist cinema. It is possible his conclusions for the redemption of physical reality through cinema were a reaction against films whose formalism he deemed tainted by its association with totalitarianism ([/knowledge/Totalitarianism.html](#)) and racism. For, in the end, the realist ([/knowledge/Realism.html](#)) tendency is a form of humanism. In Kracauer's vision, cinema's ontological realism reasserts the fundamental equality of all before the camera.

Philosopher ([/knowledge/Philosophy.html](#)) Stanley Cavell ([/knowledge/Stanley_Cavell.html](#)) also has argued for the ontological realism of cinema, even though his main references are the films of classical Hollywood. For Cavell as for Bazin and Kracauer, the basis of the film medium is photographic. A photograph, and by extension film, always implies the presence of the rest of the world. Film "displaces" people and objects from the world onto the screen. This is not only proof, for Cavell, of film's ontological realism, it is also the beginning of our reconciliation with the world. Movies permit us to view the world unseen, at a distance, and this sets in motion the intellectual process that will bring us back to the world and will reaffirm our participation in it. More than any other film critic or theorist, Cavell insists that film's fundamental realism makes it an art of contemplation, an intellectual and spiritual exercise meant to restore our relation to the world.

Also among the proponents of the realist tendency are a number of figures associated with left-wing politics. From Williams to Zavattini, from Walter Benjamin ([/knowledge/Walter_Benjamin.html](#)) to Loach, the realist tendency has often been tied to forms of democratic thought for two reasons. First, realism tends toward a Marxist ([/knowledge/Marxism.html](#)) critique of illusion. The Marxist ([/knowledge/Marxism.html](#)) critique of forms of art that obfuscate economic and social inequalities resonates with filmmakers ([/knowledge/Filmmaking.html](#)), technicians, and writers for whom cinematic ([/knowledge/Cutscene.html](#)) realism is way of cutting through the artifice of standard cinema. This does not mean that Communist filmmakers had a privileged access to truth, but rather that because they put their faith in what Bazin called the "ontological realism" of the image, realist films could perform the type of demystification often associated with leftist intellectual goals. Not coincidentally, two of Bazin's wittiest articles— "Entomology ([/knowledge/Entomology.html](#)) of the Pin-Up Girl" (1946) and "The Myth of Stalin in the Soviet Cinema" (1950)—are clever attacks on the ideological mystifications in films coming from Hollywood and Moscow, respectively.

The second reason to associate the realist continuum with a reflection on democracy is its tendency to give equal time to anonymous voices and unknown faces. Hollywood films may have regularly put ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, but did so through a codified system of well-known actors and stereotypes. Realism's desire to show what had heretofore remained invisible challenges such images and the values that underlie them. To take just one example, Gillo Pontecorvo's *La Battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*, 1965) is considered by many to be one of the last instances of Italian neorealism. But of all the realist techniques that Pontecorvo (b. 1919) uses, the most radical departure of the film, at least for European audiences, was his decision to show the faces and amplify the voices of the Algerian men and women who had led the Algerian revolution. The realist tendency is not sociology ([/knowledge/Sociology.html](#)); rather, it sees itself as a democratic form of art.

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Anish

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This article is really an informative one. it has helped me a lot. i couldnt understand realism. something i want to add here :the people who are silenced or are transgressed are given a voice- a kind of representation, only then it pertains to reality and forms a realist novel or a film or any other of its kind. the issues of today are brought out, so that the people dont find it difficult to connect if those issues would have cropped up before their time.

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