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Through a Shifting Lens: Realist Film Aesthetics

(II:1)

Thomas Allen Nelson

In recent years film criticism has had a great deal to say about the dramatic shifts of style found in examples of contemporary film realism. In an attempt to struggle with such factors as the innovations of the *nouvelle vague* in the late 1950s and 1960s, the movement toward more expressive representational styles by second generation Italian neo-realists like Antonioni and Fellini, the progress of Ingmar Bergman from a maker of naturalistic dramas like *Port of Call* in 1948 to what Roy Armes sees as the “modernist” complexity of *Persona* (1966),¹ and the precocious technical maturity of young directors like Bernardo Bertolucci in Italy and Francis Ford Coppola in America, film critics have experienced great difficulty in redefining the nature of realist film practice and realist film language. Alan Casty articulates what many of us employ as descriptive shorthand for today’s realist style: a blending of “open” structures and an expressive imagery contained within the boundaries of narrative plausibility. He attributes these “new directions out of the old” to changing attitudes toward the nature of reality itself:

The techniques that go against or beyond traditional Realism are attempts to give shape to, find a form for a sense of reality that is elusive, ambiguous, even contradictory and finally, ungraspable.²

Roy Armes, in two recent studies, provides an even more precise historical and philosophical definition of this new realism.³ He argues that since 1959 and the release of such landmark films as Resnais’ *Hiroshima*

Mon Amour and Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) the "time of the image" has returned to the realist fiction film, but, unlike silent predecessors, complicated by an appreciation for a modernist ambiguity. Consider, as illustration, the following passages drawn from Arnes' conclusion to *The Ambiguous Image*:

Over the same period the cinema was concerning itself primarily with a very different task, namely that of developing narrative film styles which would allow reality to be rendered satisfactorily either by direct transcription (Flaherty or the Stroheim of *Greed*) or by the creation of facsimile worlds (the Hollywood studios). In the 1950s and 1960s, however, both the cinema and the arts share a common focus, with the imagination taking over as a pivotal point of modernism. That is to say, a modernist work in any medium is now likely to deal in some way with the interaction of real and imaginary, fact and fiction, or with the contradictions of art and life (p. 231).

It is clear that modern film-makers, perhaps because of the medium's uniquely close connection with reality, have confronted directly many of the problems that face us in our personal, social and political relationships. Nevertheless their work is based on a recognition that the truths of the twentieth century cannot be fully expressed in forms obeying the rules of nineteenth-century narrative. Modern cinema has that positive, creative aspect so important to Camus, because it acknowledges that new styles are needed to embody new perceptions (p. 239).

Arnes employs the umbrella term "modernist" to connect and distinguish those films and filmmakers in the past two decades who have manipulated for expressive and imaginative purposes the realistic face of the film image and the rationalist assumptions of traditional film narrative. Several significant issues, however, remain either unaddressed or unresolved: what new definitions and categories of understanding in film theory and practical criticism are required in order to account for the open-ended eclecticism of the new realist film? Can we, as Bazin did almost thirty years ago, trace the effect of a new film technology -- the materials of the medium -- on these altered and varied perceptions of reality outlined by such recent film historians as Casty and Arnes? And finally, while it may be possible to equate selected European filmmakers with a post-existentialist/absurdist sensibility -- "modernist" if you like -- what assumptions about film and reality account for the film style and content of as disparate a group of contemporary American "realists" as Stanley Kubrick, Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese? Although the commentary that follows does not pretend to offer either a systematic response or a final

answer to these questions, it does aim to outline a framework for future examination and discussion.

The Philosophy of Realist Film Theory

While 1959 may be a watershed year for European film, 1960 could very well be considered as culminative in the evolution of realist theory and realist film language. In that year, with the publication of Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, the Lumière-Flaherty-Bazin tradition seemingly had consolidated and validated its opposition to expressionist heresies common to the Méliès-Eisenstein-Arnheim axis. A belief in the integrity and complexity of filmed reality had successfully devalued formalist manipulations and intrusions: principles of continuity -- invisible and classical editing, the sequence shot, depth of field -- proved more buoyant than the residuum of psychic dislocation and philosophical pretension associated with German expressionist *mise-en-scène*, collision montage, and *film noir* lighting. The filmmaker as "revealer" of the real was canonized as more "cinematic" and true to the properties of his medium than the expressive filmmaker's oblique and imaginary articulations of the real. By the 1950s a centrist humanism and its realist film definitions had prevailed over both the ideological formalism of the Left and the Teutonic stylizations of the Right.

Despite their considerable differences, expressed more in degrees of sophistication than in kind, Bazin and Kracauer shared a belief in an autonomic reality which could best be "revealed" or "redeemed" in film through minimal human (formalist) interference. While Kracauer's notions of the real border on the mundanely literal and Bazin's reflect an intellectualized Catholic Personalism, each considered the filmmaker's role as that of a Moses mediating between medium and subject. Since the time of Muybridge's multiple camera experiments with animal locomotion, a basic realist axiom has held that the materials of film art (camera, lighting, sound, film stock, script, etc.) should serve a supportive and revelatory function to the materials being photographed. For Bazin especially, those filmmakers interested in "reality" rather than "image" were assisted in this realist manifest destiny by four significant technological advances during the three decades after 1930: namely, the development of light sensitive panchromatic film stocks, the increased sophistication of studio microphones, improved camera mobility with the use of cranes, and the introduction of various wide-screen/anamorphic lens systems. At last, the art of the cinema was prepared to explore the "depth" of reality through deep focus and through a marriage of the long camera take and short-lens compositions to preserve its ambiguity and spatial/temporal continuity.

Bazin, we know, felt that in five or six American film genres of the 1930s and French poetic realism (Feyder, Renoir, Carnè, Duvivier) the art of the realist film reached maturity. He saw in these films and directors a clear and coherent reconciliation of photographic and narrative styles, "an art that has attained a perfect balance, an ideal form of expression."⁴ Implied in almost all of Bazin's writings is a substructure of humanist assumptions

about both reality and film and, as outlined below, what amounts to an informal manifesto of guiding principles for the evaluation of realist films.

1. *The Principle of Perceptual Correspondence*: That the relationship between private worlds and the outer world is stable and continuous; that, in effect, individuals are equipped to balance and reconcile the contrary demands of the personal and the public, the subjective and the objective.

2. *The Principle of Narrative Continuity*: That realist narrative film provides a facsimile for our sense of continuity and order in the real world. It achieves this through a blending of narratives governed by laws of plausibility and the filmmaker's unobtrusive handling of the materials of his medium in order to preserve the intrinsic unity and complexity of reality.

3. *The Principle of Human Centrality*: That the significance of this film art depends on the extent to which it reveals and redeems in a context of complexity and ambiguity the central human dilemmas. Bazin, typical of many of today's film humanists, defines this centrality through reference to realist literary models: "The filmmaker is no longer the competitor of the painter or the playwright; he is at last the equal of the novelist."⁵ Once again in the history of the cinema, the art of the film is defined and legitimized through comparisons with models of fictional realism.

4. *The Principle of Moral/Aesthetic Balance*: And finally, that the realist filmmaker's art is as much moral as aesthetic, which is to say that he should not compromise his creativity by giving shape to a world of either unbridled fantasy in which his perceptions despotically hold sway or one of impersonal and mechanistic naturalism where human beings become no more than biological automata. To do so, in Bazin's words, would be a violation of the "temporal truth of things" and of both reality's physical unity and its complexity.

Even though Bazin, in his apparent faith in reality's multiplicity and ultimate reality, appears to be heading for the "modernist" future discussed by Arnes, he always remains true to the tenets of traditional humanism. Out of the original *Cahiers* group, in fact, only the work of his protege Francois Truffaut could be construed as reflective of the spirit, if not the letter, of a Bazinian aesthetic. The careers of as diverse a group as Antonioni and Fellini, Godard and Resnais, Bergman and Bresson, Kubrick and Altman, move in stylistic and thematic directions for which Bazin's critical structure at best provides only sporadic application. Arnes, conversely, primarily links the modernist film to developments in the arts, not the novel, and finds its assumptive structure in the merger of a surrealist aesthetic and Camusian epistemology. Logically his argument implies that modernist attitudes toward the relationship between film and reality stand in an adversary position to Bazinian humanism. It may be instructive, if only as a taxonomic exercise, to see what shape such an opposition takes.

1. *The Principle of Perceptual Discontinuity*: That an unstable and discontinuous relationship exists between perception and outer reality; that, in fact, individuals are not equipped to correctly perceive the nature of the objective world, due in large measure to the unavoidable intrusions and distortions of the subjective. Arnes, for instance, discusses films which

restore to primacy the image and therefore the creation of mental/imaginative landscapes, while Bazin prefers films in which the structure of the image reflects the spectator's relationship with a unified and "deep" reality.

2. *The Principle of Narrative Devaluation*: That the concept of narrative or story is merely an artifice, not an objective correlative, which gives form to reality but does not define it. Traditionally associated with the rational and linear assumptions of realist literature and film, the mechanics of plot structure in the hands of modernist filmmakers lose a mimetic authority and instead become another manipulative source for excursions into imaginary/personal realms. Armes discusses films with loose, so-called "anti-narrative" structures in which issues and conflicts remain "open" and unresolved (*L'Avventura* and *La Chinoise*, for instance) while Bazin favors films demonstrating coherent rhetorical principles (genre films and the works of Renoir, for instance).

3. *The Principle of Perceptual Centrality*: That, moreover, the significance of this film art depends on the extent to which the filmmaker embodies an interpretation of a reality whose ultimate shape remains not only unknowable, but irrelevant. While Bazin and Armes in their respective theories traffic heavily in such terms as "complexity" and "ambiguity," and therefore suggests philosophic affinities, they do so in differing ways and contexts. For Bazin, ambiguity remains a value connected to the traditional notion that the artist should stand in awe and wonder before the mysteries of an anthropomorphic world; such an artist, by following the Ariadne thread into reality's depths, discovers and then shapes in his art the larger truths of mankind and nature. Armes' modernism, on the other hand, argues for the artist's perception as an autonomous and selective entity confronting and giving order to the contradictions inherent in the exchange between inner and outer; art, this view implies, becomes an addition to outward reality, not a reflection of it.

4. *The Principle of Aesthetic Exchange*: And lastly, that as the modernist filmmaker articulates his personal vision of reality through appropriate stylistic manipulations he likewise fulfills an obligation to both his art and his audience. At this point, according to Armes, the filmmaker becomes the auteur who embodies through cinematic *exempla* the larger human struggle for coherent, albeit complex, expression of the necessary ambiguities which exist not in reality itself but in the complex interaction of imagination and life. In such a way are humanist values recovered in the formalism of modernist films.

The Aesthetics of Realist Film Technology

If, however, an understanding of this shift from a humanist to modernist realism is to advance the state of critical discourse, it must not only provide narrative and philosophic definitions for these new perceptions of the real, but technical ones as well. What new technology has emerged in the past twenty years? What new look or texture, if any, now competes with

the short-lens style so prominent in European and American films of the Bazinian era? Can film modernism be reconciled to the accelerated movement over the past fifteen years from light sensitive black and white panchrome to experiments with color? The co-optation by the fiction film of such *verite* staples as the zoon, the use of available light, and the incorporation of wild sound techniques with complex sound mixes? While Bazin and Kracauer linked their theories to developments in film technology, Armes, and a host of auteurists and eclecticists (Robin Wood and Peter Wollen, to name two) make only passing reference to issues of film technology. Auteurist critics talk in some detail and with insight about images and structures, ambiguities and motifs, dislocations caused by jump cuts and elliptical story-telling, what Alan Casty has generalized as the "eclectic openness of contemporary styles";⁶ few, however, cast more than a cursory glance at the phenomenon of an Antonioni shifting since 1964 from black and white to color, from short- to long-lens compositions, and in *The Passenger* (1975) back again to a re-exploration of the aesthetics of the short-lens, wide-angle look, and the authorial camera. Mostly, the modernist critic remains committed to discussions of stylistic and thematic recurrence, touching base with the implications of a given film's technology only when clear auteurist conclusions can be drawn. While Christian Metz may be correct in saying that the criticism of individual films states all there is to say about a film in general,⁷ in the area of film aesthetics a persistent inadequacy remains: namely, how are we to account for the range of meanings and applications both demonstrated and implied by recent technical innovations in the realist fiction film? Only after that is accomplished can the achievements of individual films and directors be placed in a truly appreciative context.

If the use of technology were the sole criterion for distinguishing today's realism from that of earlier faith in *inclusive* forms of realism had been replaced by a *selective* realism. Rather than pretending to an unobtrusive use of the materials of the medium so that a convincing and representative illusion of life might emerge, today's realist fiction film tends to "focus" audience attention and reaction through a dynamic and often intrusive manipulation of camera and lens, color and composition, audiovisual counterpoint and sound distortion. Leo Braudy, as do many, links this technological situation to a new synthesis of closed and open film styles:

The distinction between their methods and visions of the world were breaking down as directors, writers, and cameramen struggled to find a new synthesis, a new way of telling stories, that could eclectically mingle the best of the open and closed styles in light of technical and cultural change. The 1950s ushered in an era of flux in film style, an era that I think we still inhabit, which all the old canons are being re-evaluated.⁸

The "normal" experience of film viewing enjoyed today may be one where mixtures of visual style and texture--short- and long-lens perspectives, deep

and shallow compositions, naturalist and impressionist colors -- have become through usage aesthetically acceptable and reflective of a new grammar in realist filmmaking.

Perhaps no other practice in recent years has drawn more attention and criticism than the so-called "telephoto syndrome."⁹ Paul Joannides and Stuart Kaminsky in separate essays have speculated about the potential implications of zoom/telephoto aesthetics.¹⁰ To Joannides, because the telephoto composition is planar rather than recessional, the screen becomes "a flat surface with flat patterns projected on to it, not a window through which we see the world."¹¹ Whereas the Bazinian director thought of the sequence shot -- and the screen -- as a cinematic stage composed of "democratic" deep images and perspectives, filmmakers now treat the screen as a canvas on which to cast both realist and impressionist images of various shapes and colors. Kaminsky, significantly, argues for an expanded function of the zoom in fiction films, and isolates eight in particular.¹² Because cinematic techniques carry, in Kaminsky's words, "a particular meaning or meanings in shifting contexts," the time seems right for yet another appraisal of how both the face and substance of the realist fiction film continues to be altered by zoom-telephoto aesthetics.

Besides the important uses outlined by Kaminsky, the zoom offers the realist filmmaker an important resource for developing levels of understanding separate from those rendered within conventional narrative. The zoom's movement toward and away from a telephoto setting has a way of noticeably transforming the camera from an impartial recorder/revealer into a selective and interpretative instrument. Zooms can destroy the illusion that the frame is a window on the world and that what it records represents in microcosm the fuller context of life itself. Instead, they draw attention to a camera/lens function and the operator's selection and manipulation of context. What we see in the frame is not necessarily determined by a commitment to *a priori* definitions of reality's depth and unity, but to whatever interests the person running or directing the camera. In the fiction film the zoom-in may bring the audience into the context of what appears to be an on-going and disconnected human process. The opening shot of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), for instance, depicts an artist-audience surveillance of a selected subject: we don't know why Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is picked out, or a couple, and unconsciously we realize that any number of people in the shot might serve just as well as a focus for our interest. Such a *verite* technique, as it voyeuristically scans the surfaces of a given situation, encourages us to interpret -- and misinterpret -- the intentions of both our interest and that of the artist directing the camera. Or, a zoom-in might isolate some microscopic object or actions independent of a given film's developing story and character interests. It forces us to see, to consider factors other than those consistent with the demands of narrative content, while complicating, as in two such disparate films as Antonioni's *Zabriski Point* (1969) and Altman's *Nashville* (1975), our response to setting or landscape. Are such

revelations part of narrative or an additional source of perception and meaning provided us by the omniscient filmmaker?

The reverse zoom can define a selected context as well, as in the case when it suddenly moves from a severe close-up of something we cannot identify or locate within spatial or temporal continuities. In *Walkabout* (1969), Nicolas Roeg cuts to a startling close-up of an unidentifiable red mass, and only after the camera zooms back do we realize that we have been looking at ground meat in a butcher shop. Distinct from the zoom-in, the reverse zoom does not give the audience that sense of participating in the selection process; depending on the speed, it can jolt us into a consideration of the filmmaker's line of inquiry as either separate from or an addition to the issues directly related to the immediate interests of film content. More importantly, such a method can embody juxtapositions common to Eisensteinian montage within a single shot, thereby suggesting the presence of the strange in the familiar, the idea in the corporeal, without a resultant fragmentation of time or space. It is not certain, however, if such techniques add "depth" to reality so much as they suggest perceptual choices and perceptual manipulations.

Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975) comes to mind as a recent film which combines reverse zooms and an interest in developing disparities between realist narrative content and artist/audience communication. In Part I, as the love tryst involving Barry, Nora and Quin develops, Kubrick zooms back from the particulars of film content (Barry chopping wood, Nora and Quin's hands, a pistol being prepared for a duel) to assert arabesque landscape compositions similar to those found in Gainsborough, at once a lyrical ordering of Barry's rural world and the audience's release from the mechanics of his fate. This could be an example of what Joannides has described as the "abstracting, formal rather than realistic, bias of zoom and telephoto shooting,"¹³ although Kubrick carries out such formal experiments with the image without a loss of narrative integrity. Because the character of Redmond Barry fails to perceive such basic disparities as those between the tragic pettiness of his ambitions (captured for us without zoom interference) and the expressive possibilities of his natural world (captured from a reverse zoom distance), he lacks the necessary imagination to transcend his own fate. Stanley Kubrick may qualify in more ways than one as a candidate for that "poet of the zoom lens" called for by Stuart Kaminsky: "but when he arrives, he will almost certainly be damned for his impertinence."¹⁴

In its more conventional uses the zoom allows added flexibility to the handling of the sequence shot. Actors can move around in their naturalistic milieu with visible freedom and fluidity, employ improvisational styles and dialogue, and develop nuances of emotional and psychological mood. In *Rocky* (1976), John Avildsen has the zoom camera follow from a distance -- moving in, moving back -- and establishes not so much a realism of setting (normal setups and lenses accomplish that just as well), but a single character's gestural and emotional *mise-en-scène*. Such a technique works well with the styles of post-New York Actors Studio performers like Dustin

Hoffman and Sylvester Stallone, while the Bazinian sequence shot demands that the actor gauge his movements (whether "natural" or theatrical) to the more formal stagings required by deep focus. For an understanding of this difference all one has to do is distinguish between Jack Nicholson's total body language within a long-lens film like *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and the less expressive performance demanded of him by the architectonics of Antonioni's short-lens film, *The Passenger*.

The improvised, open quality of the zoom sequence shot does contain important deterministic features. In several films -- *Rocky* and Altman's *Nashville* (1975), for instance -- the sequence shot ends when the narrative action being photographed arrives at a point coincidental with the camera's location. Only at the end of the shot, however, does the audience recognize that the movement within the shot has been determined by the location of a stationary camera. In some instances, we discover that we have been viewing an "outside" action from an "inside" position: In *Rocky*, we watch as the central character interacts with the street members of his ghetto environment and only as he opens the door to a pet store do we realize that the camera's location and Rocky's destination coincide. What this does is juxtapose the ease with which Rocky defines and communicates his street persona with his as yet unarticulated private self. The camera's position not only documents this conflict within a single shot, but indicates that Rocky will eventually move toward a more complete expression of both his personal feelings for Adrienne (Talia Shire) and his private moral battle with an American media-hype. In this case, the zoom camera tells us where a character or action is heading prior to its official articulation within the film's sequential logic. Rather than suggesting the ironies of a national fate, as in *Nashville*, a private communication between artist and audience, as in *Barry Lyndon*, or the musings of a detached social satirist, as in Lina Wertmüller's recent films, Avildsen's use of the zoom sequence shot stays on a level consistent with his audience's identification with story and character.

In an age growing more interested in personal articulations than social determinisms, in the dynamics of self-discovery over the mechanics of behavioral systems, environment functions less as a message and more as a medium. In film such a preoccupation has redefined the conception of setting and *mise-en-scène* from a role of metaphorical conspirator (whether dressed in Caligarian expressionism or Wellesian deep focus) or sociological presence (as in neo-realism) to one of perceptual collaborator. Telephoto compositions coupled with zone focusing present a world of shifting perceptions, complex but shallow space, ever-changing colors and shades, where the performer's autonomy depends on his embodying eccentric or otherwise distinct forms of self-definition amidst an engulfing blur of space. The telephoto lens can transform normal perspectives into two-dimensional mind trips and demonstrate how perception constantly alters concepts of the real by working directly upon a sensate world. *Combinations within reality* -- of sight and focus, of color and shape, of feeling and mood -- have replaced an older faith in rational *connections within reality*. It may be no accident that many of today's popular film stars

(mostly male) first achieved their present archetypal stature amid telephoto imagery: Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* (1967), Jack Nicholson in *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Five Easy Pieces*, Robert Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, and Robert DeNiro in the "past" sequences of *Godfather II* (1974). Coppola's film, in fact, provides an instructive contrast between long- and short-lens aesthetics. The Vito Corleone sequences, blending sepia-tinted colors with telephoto soft focus, show DeNiro, through gesture and facial expression, communicating the nuances of his character without a subsequent separation from the canvas of a visually integrated and nostalgic *mise-en-scène*; the "present" sequences, in contrast, create a world of isolating shadows and short-lens compositions which appropriately render Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) as a force of stasis and death. Not surprisingly (and deservedly), DeNiro's performance was accorded the greater recognition of the two, although by the standards of the Bazinian era Pacino's, molded to a style and content reminiscent of Wellesian moral ambiguity, might have been considered the more memorable. If nothing else, film history teaches us that each age posits distinct values onto prevailing realist styles.

In Bazinian terms, directors as distinct from one another as Antonioni, Kubrick, and Coppola in their highly selective use of the zoom and telephoto shot (not to mention manipulations of color and sound) demonstrate an interest in *both* reality and the image. According to prior definitions, directors interested in "reality" relied upon the sequence shot, deep focus compositions, and a realist *mise-en-scène*, while those fascinated with the plastics of the image turned to either an expressionist manipulation of what was photographed (decor, lighting, etc.) or montage. Significantly, both preoccupations can now be indulged within the structure of a single shot, without resorting to extensive prestylizations or contrapuntal editing. If definitions of film reality are in a state of flux, characterized by an interest in the multiple functions of perception rather than just the substance of experience, zoom/telephoto aesthetics would seem to hold out to the realist filmmaker opportunities for both an expansion of personal expression and levels of artist/audience communication.

Notes

¹*The Ambiguous Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 97.

²*Development of Film: An Interpretive History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1973), p. 269.

³In addition to *The Ambiguous Image*, see his earlier *Film and Reality: An Historical Survey* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974).

⁴"The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," *What Is Cinema?* I, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 29.

⁵*Ibid*, p. 40.

⁶Casty, p. 271.

⁷*Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, translated by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 3.

⁸*The World in a Frame* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1976), p. 95.

⁹See especially the discussion of "Composing with Lenses" in James F. Scott, *Film: The Medium and the Maker* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), pp. 37-60.

¹⁰Paul Joannides, "The Aesthetics of the Zoom Lens," *Sight and Sound* (Winter 1970/71), pp. 40-42; and Stuart M. Kaminsky, "The Use and Abuse of the Zoom Lens," *Filmmakers Newsletter* (October, 1972), pp. 20-23.

¹¹Joannides, p. 42.

Tracking, emphasizing distance, searching out figures in a broad space, sudden dramatic emphasis, subjective psychological reactions, moving into freeze frames, special effects, and as a replacement for other lenses.

¹³Joannides, p. 42.

¹⁴Kaminsky, p. 21.