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## THE REAL THING? - The Hauntings of Realism in Contemporary Media Theory

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### **“The poor have monopolized reality.”<sup>1</sup>**

In the early days of photography and cinema these two media were considered too realistic to be able to meet the criteria of serious art. Both reproduced, the conservative defenders of art claimed, reality in a far too mechanistic manner and without the inscription of human touch. They were, to employ C.S. Peirce's semiotic terminology, too indexical, bearing a point-for-point correspondence to their source.<sup>2</sup> Thus, two vital properties of art were arguably missing in these cultural forms: a human interpretation of reality and a personal message for the audience.<sup>3</sup> One may recall that just a few decades later, in the heyday of what is termed realist film theory, André Bazin considered this mechanical reproduction of nature the greatest virtue of photography - and, consequently, of the technology of cinema. Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer, the other well-known realist, defiantly claimed in 1960 that “photography proper” and “truly cinematic films” go beyond the conventional limitations of traditional arts in their potential to reveal reality.<sup>4</sup>

While many versions of realism have admittedly emerged in the course of the critical scholarship that deals with various forms of representations,<sup>5</sup> in cinema studies one can make a rough distinction between two large categories which I choose to call technical (or pictorial) and ethical realism. The first category refers to questions already discussed above about the film image's capability to reproduce reality. That is, the image on the screen is regarded as being a more or less an exact copy of the world, or, more accurately still, a copy of the human subject's visual perception of reality. Evidently, this branch of realism has never

concerned, say, literary criticism: no one has, to my knowledge, ever ventured to claim that words on paper reproduce the world in this sense.

Ethical realism, in turn, refers to the ruminations of the significance and usefulness of various art forms in society. Although the history of this notion originates in ancient Greece and Rome, it acquired new importance in the 19th century western world, where it was inspired by the fast developing natural and social sciences. Hence the purpose of the arts became equally “scientific”. They were supposed to reveal the evils of human relations and society, and, simultaneously imply possible reforms. Western (also Russia before and after the Communist Revolution) literature and theatre, in particular, accepted the challenge, and since then two rival tendencies have steered their development. The first is the modernist inclination to abstraction and the second is social(ist) realism. One might argue that in the 19th century the motto of the present paper came true as people without wealth or power, together with other marginalized and/or oppressed groups, “monopolized” reality. This is because from that time on the fictional works deemed the most realistic by critics, tended to deal with the problems of the marginalized.

In the field of film these two versions of realism, technical and ethical, overlap to some extent and this has caused confusion. For instance, Sergei Eisenstein's theories and films do not meet the criteria of technical realism in the strict sense (this eventually resulted in his persecution during Stalin's regime) while they certainly represent the ethical variant. In contrast, André Bazin's and Siegfried Kracauer's views were basically endorsed of technical realism, although their ideas also included the ethical side, especially the former's admiration of Italian neorealism.

However, in poststructuralist and postmodern criticism both variants of realism, along with the notion of representability, have been strongly challenged. Even before that, 1960s semiotics quite emphatically questioned the whole issue of realism in film, as well as in other forms of representation. Eventually, it was Jean Baudrillard who seemingly concluded the discussion of pictorial realism with his influential thesis of postmodern culture as simulation, or “hyperreality”. In his theory the postmodern image is simulacrum (a concept adopted from Plato), “an image without a referent”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, according to Baudrillard there is no access to any reality beyond representation; in other words, representations are the only reality.

Similarly, ethical realism has gone through a series of theoretical drawbacks. The concept was seriously damaged, first, by Jacques Derrida’s philosophy with its much-quoted basic premise: “There is nothing outside the text”.<sup>7</sup> It was further challenged by the ideology theories of the 1970s (influenced by Althusserian Marxism) as well as Michel Foucault’s “archeology of knowledge” and Jean-François Lyotard’s thesis of the death of grand narratives. Each of these, with the added impact of feminism, new theories of historiography, ethnicity, “race” and nation, contributed to a loss of faith among post-structuralists in any shared empirical reality, and in any true representation of it.

In the light of this critical turn, all claims of and aspirations to truth came to be regarded as merely new evidence of the universalist tendencies of the post-Enlightenment culture, itself white, Eurocentric and patriarchal. Consequently, realism in various systems of communication is defined either as an ideological construct or, simply, a mode of representation (or both, as in Colin MacCabe’s theory of classic realist text on literature and cinema). In postmodern culture there is no universal notion of truth, on the contrary, all truths are seen as context-bound, local and/or subjective. Therefore, the dilemma that ethical realism faces is this: how to change reality when; a) one can never know what reality is and, b) with ideologies and other grand narratives being dead and all truths context-bound, no one can ever claim that her or his version of reality is better than the one he or she wishes to “improve”.

Media theories responded to this new epistemological and ontological challenge by turning to the audience. Accordingly the lived experience of the social, gendered, ethnic etc. subject became all-powerful. Since the 1980s we

have witnessed a rather desperate effort by media scholars both in the field of humanities and the social sciences to grasp the “reality” of the spectator. However, these efforts seem rather to have given new insights into people’s behaviour in the interview situation, and their manner of speech when reporting their experience of media products than evidence of the “authenticity” of the experience itself.<sup>8</sup> In addition, these studies often tend to have a homogenizing bias: researchers try to discover the all-male, all-female, all-gay, all-lesbian, all-Finnish or simply all-active (as in John Fiske’s case) experience.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it is interesting that the realist project still seems to prevail in a new disguise, because as the textual realism has lost its credibility, the theorists have found a new one, the realism of the spectator and the truth of her or his experience. Clearly this is the reality these efforts aspire to.

## The crisis of documentary

Traditionally it was believed that the documentary - and realist - tradition of filmmaking was established by the very first films of the Lumière brothers (the view questioned by recent studies in early cinema). The ideology behind them was apparently the well-known maxim of realist film theory: the camera can both record and reveal reality, and thus render visible the truth of the world. The early films displayed this “frenzy of the visible” - in Linda Williams’ terms<sup>10</sup> - first, by presenting familiar everyday events, a train arriving at a station, a baby eating soup, and soon after by starting to explore the wonders of the world also in far-away places. The hunger of the audience for visual pleasure seemed insatiable: filmmakers had constantly to find new attractions - in the sense suggested by Tom Gunning<sup>11</sup> - to meet this demand. The fantasy of the vicarious experience of reality was an attraction itself, i.e. reality was turned into attraction in these early documentaries.

The lure of this newly found visual pleasure may lie in the new model of looking, theorized by Jonathan Crary.<sup>12</sup> Crary argues that a modernization of vision took place in the early 19th century which turned the earlier “decorporealized” spectator-subject of the camera obscura mode of Renaissance art into a “newly corporealized” observer. While the earlier model presupposed the separatedness of the subject and the object, the new culture of images - represented by various toys and “watching-machines” like the

stereoscope, kaleidoscope, thaumatrope etc. - implied a new relationship where the bodily sensations of the spectator replaced the former "objective" gaze, causing the observer and image to merge. This new sense of "being there" can be seen as a partial explanation of the documentary craze of the early cinema. Seeing and experiencing equalled truth: the spectator learned the truth of the world by letting the camera take her or him there, see with her or his own eyes.

The whole documentary film tradition of the modern era has relied heavily on this principle: the world can - and should - be known, reality can be controlled by knowledge, the truth can be learnt. In short, "the modern project" has perceived the world, to a certain extent as safe and predictable. No wonder, then, that the postmodern philosophy of the uncertainty and relativity of all truths has most severely shattered both documentary filmmakers and theories of documentary. What is the use of making documentaries if all interpretations of the world seem to be equally fictional or relativist? Does the death of metanarratives imply the death of reality? Bill Nichols aptly describes this angst when speaking of historical documentaries:

How do we tell what happened in the past if we do not have the familiar framework of the logic of problem solving, the theology of damnation and redemption, the economics of progress, or the politics of revolution to guide us? [—] And [—] how do we represent individuals who may not represent the truth as much as subjective experience and different interpretations of it?<sup>13</sup>

This crisis of documentary has specifically touched the makers of anthropological and ethnographic films and their respective theories. This is because with sight being considered the primary sense, film has traditionally enjoyed a special status in these sciences during the present century for carrying the burden of testimony and verification. The questioning of both technical and ethical realism - the former cornerstones of ethnographic film-making - has resulted in serious troubles. No more should the anthropologist rely on the film image as an objective representation of otherness, no more should she or he trust the background information of the film - however accurate it may seem - as an adequate scientific contextualization. Rather, the anthropologist ought always to suspect the filmmaker's (if not a member of the object-group's) discourse for possible Eurocentrism or some other hegemonic

discourse. Similarly, he or she should also question his or her own hegemonic scientific interpretations. This schizoid - almost paranoid - situation has resulted in a counter-reaction within anthropological and ethnographic filmmaking which has surprising similarities with audience research in other media studies: the cult of experience. David MacDougall writes:

There is an irony in the disjunction that has grown up steadily between anthropologists and filmmakers, in that anthropologists, by and large, have wished film to make increasingly accurate, complete, and verifiable descriptions of what can be seen - that is, of behaviour, ritual, and technology - whereas filmmakers have shown a growing interest in precisely those things that cannot be seen. It was never the physical body that was felt to be missing in ethnographic films. The body was constantly and often extravagantly before us in its diversity of faces, statures, costumes, and body decorations. [—] What was missing was not the body but the experience of existing in it.<sup>14</sup>

## The return of realism - with a vengeance

It seems to me that as much as postmodern philosophy and film theory have questioned the empirical notion of truth and any access to reality, realistic aspirations in filmmaking - and media theories - have not vanished at all. Realism always raises its ugly head and returns with a vengeance. Just as media theorists have "discovered" the reality of the spectator's experience, anthropological filmmakers and theorists yearn for the subjective experience of their object. Consequently, the basic philosophy of traditional realism has not changed much: just like in Lumière's or Bazin's days, the camera is still capable of revealing the truth of the world, only this time the truth is supposedly the experience of the other facing the camera. Of course, the truth we get is actually a talking head or body, a person's tortuous effort to reduce her or his multifarious subjective reality into a series of linguistic signs.

Even the ideology of spontaneous speech - as if anybody could speak "spontaneously" to an interviewer or a camera - is astonishingly similar in both ethnographic filmmaking and audience ethnography within media studies - probably because the latter has appropriated its methods from anthropology and ethnography. In the ethnographic film interview the present ideal is, according to Leslie Devereaux; "a quiet, unhurried, ruminative

conversation in which the subject is fully free to speak or not to speak". The target is to give "the subjects moral space in which to say what is on their minds".<sup>15</sup> Presumably this friendly stream-of-consciousness chatter is the anthropological truth of the other, even if the interviewer - and the spectator - did not understand a word.

However, Devereaux also emphasizes the visual context of the ethnographic interview, and again one cannot but wonder how close she eventually comes to the central tenets of André Bazin's ideals of technical realism of the film image. We recall that Bazin strongly opposed all kinds of montage tricks and the manipulation of the spectator even in fictional filmmaking; instead, his realism endorsed sequence shots and deep-focus photography which, according to him, gave the spectator the freedom to choose their points of attention at will. Now compare these ideals to those suggested by Devereaux (with no reference to Bazin):

Film can also allow the viewer a degree of autonomy different from that of the reader's. When documentary film refrains from forcing the viewer's gaze, and attention, to follow it through fast cutting and short takes, the viewer can look at leisure at the image and through looking this way perhaps see something. At the moment of filming, the decision to place the camera at a distance, showing subjects in their contexts within the image the viewer sees, and to hold the camera still for long takes, long takes that remain in the film, allows the viewer to trust in the camera's stillness enough to look for herself, to move her eyes around the image, and to move her thoughts without fear that she will miss something, a fear which is the hallmark of the viewer's experience of mainstream cinematography.<sup>16</sup>

And when Devereaux adds a little later that "[t]his is what, if anything, I would prescribe for film in the ethnographic project: a cinematography that allows the viewer agency and self-knowledge in the act of spectatorship", we can only congratulate. Realism abandoned in film theory? No way: at least one anthropologist and theorist of ethnographic film has finally discovered Bazinian realism and the concept of spectatorship. In my view, she far too simplistically uses the filmic medium as a remedy when trying to solve the ethical problems of qualitative methods, in this case the hierarchy between the researcher (the bearer of the look) and the researched (the object of the look). In addition, she displays surprising faith in her newly-found Bazinian variant of technical realism (labelled idealistic by many poststructuralist

theorists) considering that she otherwise seems to be well acquainted with recent developments in media studies.

In a way, Devereaux is a "latecomer" also in another respect. She calls for a new form of vision; the transformation of "looking" into "seeing". According to her, "looking" refers to the "separation of beings into viewer and viewed", whereas "seeing" implies traversing that gap.<sup>17</sup> While this view is somewhat contradictory to her above-mentioned doctrine of "the viewer agency" in the first place, we recall that, according to Jonathan Crary, this traversing had already taken place in the 19th century visual culture even before the invention of cinema. Anyway, Devereaux' view again testifies to the temptations of early cinematic realism.

Realist nostalgia also remains in "mainstream" film theory. In his discussion of reality TV Bill Nichols laments the "death of documentary" and the appearance of this lousy substitute which has none of the characteristics of "real" documentary. In his opinion "[d]ocumentary might treat reality creatively [—], but the intent was to mobilize viewers to act in the world, with a greater sense of knowledge or even a more fully elaborated conception of social structure and historical process".<sup>18</sup> Although Nichols avoids using the terms 'reality' and 'realism' and prefers such concepts - here euphemisms in my reading - as 'history', 'historical or natural [sic!] world' and 'the representation and its historical referent', the traditional ideology of ethical realism is self-evident. "Real" documentary aims at revealing the evils and injustices in society and prompts people into corrective action. Networknews (in the US), in turn, merely presents news as attractions, encouraging viewers to vicarious participation without action, while "reality TV raises vicarious participation to an art".<sup>19</sup> Thus, much as he problematizes the truthfulness of the image in documentaries - and is forced reluctantly to give in to the differing interpretations of the famous "Rodney King video"<sup>20</sup> - there still seems to be for Nichols historical reality beyond representation or, at least, some versions and representations of reality are, for him, better and more truthful than others. And what is more, his rhetorics of the "real" documentary strongly echo the rhetorics of the 1960s and early 1970s as if he, after all, had never doubted the capability of film image to reveal the truth.

Actually it seems that the whole issue of realism has turned full circle since the times of early cinema, both in a practical and a theoretical

sense. I agree with Nichols that tv news and reality tv present a “historical world” in the form of attractions but I argue that it is actually nothing new. As already indicated in the beginning of the present paper, in cinema “reality” has always been an attraction, a fantasy, since the days of the Lumières. This way cinematic realism has only returned to its roots, with a postmodern flavour. While early film documentaries brought the spectator the wonders of the world, reality tv and news have rehabilitated this as the aesthetics of everyday wonder. Both programme types rely on the spectator’s sensibility of “being there” and turn many everyday routines into worthwhile spectacles. In tv news we watch with awe and admiration politicians walking and talking, ordinary people at their work, or describing their experience of major or minor incidents. In reality tv we may witness with amazement an American Highway Patrol officer reproaching a citizen for careless driving, chatting with ordinary people on the sidewalk or tailing a suspect car.

Above I quoted David MacDougall who deplored that what was missing in earlier ethnographic films “was not the body but the experience of existing in it”. If we accept Jonathan Crary’s thesis, this may not be case. For the bodily experience was always there, but not in the sense that MacDougall has in mind. While I do not believe that cinema can tell the truth of an other’s bodily experience any more than everyday communication can, I may feel some certainty of my own bodily sensations when watching a film, maybe even that often felt eerie emotion of really “being there”. Thus, in the final analysis it seems that the only cinematic realism is, after all, the reality of the spectator’s body.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This excellent crystallization of ethical realism was suggested to me by Anne Veijola from the University of Oulu.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994, 18.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1983, for a discussion of these problems.

<sup>4</sup> André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* Vol. I. Ed. and trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press 1967, 12 - 13. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*. New York: Oxford University Press 1979, 23, 40.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Robert Stam - Robert Burgoyne - Sandy Flitterman. *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*. London: Routledge 1992, 184 ff. for a useful discussion of the origins and

variants of realism in film studies.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Cambridge: Polity Press 1988, 170 et passim.

<sup>7</sup> This translation quoted by Christopher Norris in his *Deconstruction. Theory and Practice*. London: Methuen 1982, 41. For the elaboration of this idea see e.g. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1982, 18 ff.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*. London: Routledge 1993, 53 ff. for a thorough survey of the problems of empirical audience studies. Cf. also Veijo Hietala, *Situating the Subject in Film Theory*. Annales Universitatis Turkuensis. Ser. B: 194. University of Turku 1990, esp. 273 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1992, 13.

<sup>10</sup> See Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and “the Frenzy of the Visible”*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1989, for more on this philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Cinema, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde”. In Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*. London: BFI 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*. Cambridge: MIT Press 1990. Cf. also Linda Williams’ discussion of Crary in her essay “Corporealized Observers” in Patrice Petro (ed.), *Fugitive Images*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Nichols, “‘Getting to Know You...’: Knowledge, Power, and the Body”. In Michael Renov (ed.), *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge 1993, 176.

<sup>14</sup> David MacDougall, “The Subjective Voice in Ethnographic Film”. In Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman (eds.), *Fields of Vision*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1995, 249.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie Devereaux, “Experience, Re-presentation, and Film”. In Devereaux and Hillman 1995, 71.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 70 - 71.

<sup>18</sup> Nichols 1994, 46 - 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Nichols 1993, 190. Cf. Michael Renov’s much more cautious view on the same video: “No longer ought we as a culture to assume that the preservation and subsequent re-presentation of historical events on film or tape can serve to stabilize or ensure meaning. One could imagine that the attorneys who defended the four Los Angeles police officers had perfected their tactics through a careful reading of contemporary film theory, so well did they manage to place the 12 jurors (none of them African American) ‘in the shoes’ of the four defendants.” Michael Renov, “Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction” in Renov 1993, 8 - 9.