

# ON REALISM IN CINEMA

Eduard VLASOV

Jun'ichi SUZUKI

One can hardly compare the application of the term realism in cinema with the usage of the same term in literature. In literature realism is usually associated either with the purely technical way of representation, or with the designation a specific literary trend in the 19th century. Concerning the trends and movements in cinema realism functions only as a partial constituent in the definition of one of the most prominent European schools, namely Italian Neorealism. The purpose of this work is to discuss the problem of the original nature of cinema, reveal the purely cinematic features of film as an art in its own right and their connection with the notion of realism.

## 1. The Syntactic Model

One of the most controversial debates which has not so far been solved in narratological theory is the problem of determining the narratological status of film. Since for the representation of the film content there is a tangible medium, i.e., the flat screen with its inherent deforming nature (which is absent for instance in drama), I consider the immediate result of the projection of the celluloid reel onto the screen as a process of narration, where the camera plays the role of a global narrator.

Discussing the difference between a photograph and a film, Metz (1971) raises the question "why the impression of reality is so much more vivid in a film than it is in a photograph." He then continues, "An answer

immediately suggests itself: It is *movement* (one of the greatest differences, doubtless the greatest, between still photography and the movies) that produces the strong impression of reality" (7; Metz's italics).

Movement essentially displays a two-fold nature with regard to film. On the one hand, it is a fundamental characteristic of the representation, the one which determines the uniquely original nature of cinema as a visual art in contrast to painting and photography. On the other hand, this movement is the crucial structuring component of any narrative, since any narrative consists basically in the presentation of a sequence of events. In general, the essence of narrativity may be represented by the following syntactic model:

(VERB + NOUN)<sup>n</sup>

Here, the verb is the only constituent which provides real movement, i.e., the progress in the actions and events, as in these examples (taken from Bob Dylan):

The joker *was speaking* to the thief

Two riders *were approaching*

Princes *kept* the view

Thus any narrative, including film, is the embodiment of a *predicate* model of representation. The movement in the broadest sense (actions, happenings, conditions) of any sort is of primary importance for the narrative.

The most obvious juxtaposition between narrative and non-narrative is usually found in the contrast between prose and poetry. Due to its principally metaphorical nature, the model of representation in poetry can be defined as an *attribute* model. Its essence can be expressed by the following relationship:

ATTRIBUTE + NOUN

Examples of this link may be the following:

the Yellow Brick Road

the river as a snake

the heart of darkness

While the predicate model generates direct representation based on the literal interpretation of the action, i.e., its primary dictionary meaning, in non-narrative, the attribute model shifts the focus of attention to the domain of simile and metaphorical interpretation. Thus, applying the two models to one and the same sentence, gives us two different scopes of interpretation, each emphasizing a particular constitutive unit in this sentence. For example, if we treat the following textual message of The Beatles:

It's been a hard day's night  
 And I was working like a dog;  
 It's been a hard day's night  
 And I've been sleeping like a log.

in this dichotomic counterposition, we come up with two diverging results:

*PREDICATE MODEL*

*ATTRIBUTE MODEL*

It's *been* a hard day's night

And I *was working* like a dog;

It's *been* a hard day's night

And I've *been sleeping* like a log.

It's been a *hard day's* night

And I've been working *like a dog*;

It's been a *hard day's* night

And I've been sleeping *like a log*.

We may conclude that the predicativity inherent in the sentence structures is more basic, and hence primary with respect to the attributivity

in them. This claim is justified by the fact that in general, based on the “action indicators” present in the text any poem can be seen as some kind of a sequence of events, i.e., as a narrative on a primitive level. It is only after the literal meaning has been grasped that an attributive-metaphoric evaluative reinterpretation may occur.

## 2. The Problem of Verisimilitude and the Syntactic Model

The problem of realism in the artistic representation is always connected with the notion of verisimilitude. Even in such a multilevel system of approaches to realism as the one introduced by R. Jakobson (1921), there is always a predictable convergence into the conceptual core of *vraisemblance*. Jakobson’s classification is by far one of the most “democratic” ones allowing for a variety of interpretations. He designates by the term *realistic* those works of art which can be described as following one of these five basic criteria:

- A. Realism as the aspiration and intent of the sender/author, i.e., a message/a work is understood to be realistic if it is conceived by its creator as a display of verisimilitude;
- B. Realism as the subjective perception of the individual apprehending the work of art, i.e., a message/a work may be called realistic if the receiver/the person judging it perceives it as true to life;
- C. Realism as context/a historical artistic movement, i.e., comprehending the sum total of the features characteristic of the specific artistic trend of the XIXth century;
- D. Realism as a code/a poetic technique for the condensation of the narrative by means of images based on contiguity, i.e., the transformation of the proper term into a metonymy or a synecdoche;
- E. Realism as content requiring of true-to-life, logical, consistent moti-

vation of the actions, events, and characters.

Clearly the unifying parameter of all these statements of realism is the concept of verisimilitude, whose two constituent parts (*veri* + *similitude*) acquire particular emphasis in these different definitions. Thus, the prevalence of *veri*, i.e., of belief, dominates criteria A (the sender believes in the verisimilar nature of the message he sends), B (the receiver believes in the verisimilar message he receives), and E (the sender supplies the activity contained in the message with verisimilar motivation/the receiver believes in the verisimilar motivation of the activity contained in the message), while the notion of *similitude* prevails in criteria C (the particular group of senders orient their technical devices in the depiction of reality towards the establishment of a transparent, i.e., adequate, relationship between the message and the actual world; in Barthes' [1966] semiotic model, the elimination of the signified) and D (the particular poetical technique based on the principle of similarity between the image presented in the message and its referent in reality).

The principle of verisimilitude allows the receiver to assume (a) the real existence of the imaged object in the actual world, or (b) merely the possibility/potentiality of such an existence. This assumption of reality or potentiality is established in principle by the process of narration stimulated by the predicate model, introduced in §1. Generally speaking, movement is the basis for existence on all levels, starting from the elementary physical processes (e.g., Newton's law of gravity) and ending with complex ideological matters (e.g., Bakhtin's global dialogism in the manifestation of human nature).

The attribute model is not basic and consequently it is not a necessary constituent of the narration, because of the absence of movement or progress in it. Attributivity is thus an additional, extra-narrative compo-

ment in the structure of the message. It may be defined as that particular element which makes poetry poetic. In this sense it forms a higher, aesthetic level in the system of art. In actual reality poetry is in the domain of art exclusively, while prose covers both art and the everyday-life human communication; ordinary everyday-communication by means of poetry is not considered to be normal, i.e., realistic.

In defining the peculiarities of the two models a prominent feature emerges with respect to each of them. The predicate model is *ascertaining* in character while the attributive model is *evaluative* in character. This establishes the hierarchical primacy of the predicate model, as well as its ascertaining fundamentalism: the object can exist in a pre-evaluative state, i.e., without the need to be evaluated. At the same time the existence of an evaluative state presupposes the prior existence of an object which undergoes the process of judging. In the excerpt from the Beatles' song cited above the primary constituent, giving its narrative characteristic is the ascertaining of the facts that the lyrical hero, who also provides the narration, has spent a day (the past tense of the verbs), has worked and has gone to sleep:

It's *been* a hard day's night  
 And I've *been working* like a dog;  
 It's *been* a hard day's night  
 And I've *been sleeping* like a log.

The predicates then create the ascertaining framework of the narration, namely they transpose the concrete actions into the artistic domain. The attributive, evaluative part can be activated only after this domain has been established.

### 3. Film and Reality

There is little doubt that cinema is a complex synthetic type of art. In its eclectic nature cinema permits the establishment of a more justified link between film and reality than a similar relationship between the actual world and other arts. It is exactly this eclecticism in film that can be considered as most strongly corresponding to the complex eclectic perception and interpretation of reality by humans.

As early as the 1930's, just after the introduction of sound, but before the use of colour, S. Eisenstein discusses the specificity of film: "Without going too far into the theoretical debris of the specifics of cinema, I want here to discuss two of its features. These are features of other arts as well, but the film is particularly accountable to them. *Primo*: photo-fragments of nature are recorded; *secundo*: these fragments are combined in various ways. Thus, the shot (or frame), and thus, montage. <...> We should like to find in this two-fold process (the fragment and its relationships) a hint as to the specifics of cinema <...> film-specifics lie not in the process itself but in the degree to which these features are intensified" (Williams, 1980, 18). As far as the second constituent, i.e., montage is concerned, nothing essentially has changed in the 60 years which followed after Eisenstein wrote it.

The nature of the shot, however, has undergone a double shift with the technical innovations of the sound systems and the establishing priority of shooting/screening in colour over the black-and-white one. On the level of sound the most fundamental achievement has been the introduction of the stereo recording/reproduction of the soundtrack. With regard to colour, there has been a remarkable evolution in chemistry and photographic developers, which has permitted the possibility of accomplishing practically a one-to-one correspondence between the colours of the same object in actual reality and on the screen. One can also add the obvious technical

progress in optics and mechanics. On the level of optics, it allows for a wide range of angles and focuses which create verisimilar, i.e., corresponding to the view of the eye apparatus, perspectives. In mechanics there was the break-through discovery about the speed of shooting and projection: the original speed used by the founders of cinema — 16 frames per second — was proven to be artificial with respect to the perceptive abilities of the human eye. Another speed — 24 frames per second — was found to be absolutely equal to the speed of reception of actual reality by the human eye. This is the only shooting/projection speed for the natural transmission of visual information.

The evolution of the cinema is evidently represented in the progress of the creative activity of Eisenstein himself. He starts with the black-and-white, mute, and technically deficient, 16-frame per second shots in *Strike* and ends with the second part of *Ivan the Terrible* in colour, sound and 24 frames per second.

All these technical innovations, introduced on the level of the shot, allow for its modification in a very obvious irreversible direction: they bring it closer to actual reality, creating the illusion that there is no borderline between the two. The last step in this progress was taken with the attempts to introduce stereo-cinema. Thus, the current development of the technical construction of the shot in modern cinema allows the utilization of the same kinds of perceptual operations as employed by humans in actual reality:

REALITY

CINEMA

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(1) the framing nature of the human eye;

(1) the framing principle of the camera's functioning;

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|---|--|
| (2) the ability/necessity to focus the gaze on a particular object/s at different eye distances;            | (2) the wide range of technical possibilities to change/fix the focus through the camera's optics;   |
| (3) the ability/necessity of simultaneous perception of visual and sound data in its stereo manifestations; | (3) the principal technical possibility of sound recording parallelly with the shooting, including stereo effects;                         |
| (4) the natural ability of the eye apparatus to distinguish among colours;                                  | (4) the chemical means and devices ensuring the sensitivity/processing of the celluloid to fix/reproduce the actual colours;               |
| (5) the three-dimensional nature of perception;   | (5) the possibilities to create the visual effect of depth perspective by the simultaneous projection with two projectors in stereocinema. |

On the one hand, then, there is an almost complete overlapping between the human's perceptual faculties and the cinematic machinery. On the other hand, cinema absorbs the methods of other types of arts which are defined by Williams (1980) in the following manner: "The method of sculpture — patterned on the human's body structure. The method of painting — patterned on the positions of bodies and their relation with nature. The method of literature — patterned on the interrelations of reality and man. The method of theater — patterned on the behavior and the activity of people roused by outer and inner motives. The method of music — patterned on the law of the inner harmonies of emotionally apprehended phenomena" (19). All these methods of perception/representation of reality have

found their realization in the cinema. And after Williams, we can describe the method of film as modelled on (1) the behaviour and the activity of people, (2) represented in their outer appearance, (3) in their interrelations with reality and other people, (4) in their emotional states and drives. We can conclude that the method of cinema synthesizes and incorporates in itself the methods of all other previously existing arts.

#### **4. Visual and Verbal**

From the point of view of human physiology and psychology, the sense of sight dominates over the other perceptive faculties of man. Consequently, visual representation/perception prevails over verbal. At the current stage of overall human development, i.e., after the firm establishment of film as a kind of art and television as the most important representative of the media, the process of returning to the natural original kind of representation/perception has been completed. Verbal representation as it is fixed in literature originated from pictorial representation (pictures created letters but not vice-versa).

During the thousand years of human civilization, the most widely-spread method of fixation and dispersing of messages of any kind has been accomplished by means of written texts. Regardless of the fact that in parallel with the literary texts, there existed other visual and sound arts, such as painting, theatre, architecture, dancing, music, etc., literary texts dominated due to the fact that unlike the other artistic forms, with the establishment of writing it was technically possible to fix the text, preserve it, and transmit it over time and space. The very popular arts, such as painting, architecture, theatre, etc., were restricted to specific locations (e.g., the placing of a picture in a particular museum with its restrictive consequences with regard to its accessibility) and periods (e.g., the im-

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mediacy and simultaneous transitoriness of the theatrical performance), until it became technically possible to fix them permanently on a celluloid reel or magnetic tape and hence make them available regardless of their spatio-temporal coordinates. As a result of technical progress nowadays, we have equal possibilities of fixation, preservation, duplication, and distribution of either verbal or visual messages.

From the point of view of narration both verbal and visual representation allow the receiver to extract ascertaining information from the message, i.e., the information provided by the predicate model. The main reason which justifies the dominance of visual over verbal representation is the speed and volume of narrative information transmitted by the message. Due to merely physiological reasons visual representation gives the receiver a greater amount of information per unit of time than verbal representation does.

The volume of information and the speed of its acquisition in visual representation is of a principally different nature and cannot be even compared to the same parameters in verbal representation. A 10 seconds' sight at a Rembrandt painting or at a shot of an Antonioni film provides the receiver with sense data about objects and their positioning, perspectives, colours, setting, etc., which are several times more numerous than the information received when reading an extract from *War and Peace* within the same time interval.

If we disregard the technical aspect for the emergence of film, and concentrate on a more anthropological approach incorporating the overall development of the descriptive/perceptive characteristics of human mentality, we may claim that its emergence is the natural justified result of the basic epistemological direction *to visualize the verbal*, and not merely describe the visual. On the level of the interrelationship between literature

and reality, an obvious example illustrating this claim is the erection of monuments to literary characters (e.g., the monument of Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn in the USA, and Andersen's Little Mermaid in Denmark) and the opening of museums dedicated to literary personages in the same poetics as the opening of such museums dedicated to actually existing people (e.g., the Sherlock Holmes museum in England and the museum of the Buddenbrooks in Germany).

In principle the tendency to visualize the verbal may be seen as a manifestation of man's natural will to integrate the artistic object into actual life, in other words, to externalize and hence objectify an already internally formulated belief. This is a result of the strife to eliminate the ephemeral, intangible nature of the belief by endowing it with a material essence and transforming it into an empirically verifiable object of reality. In this process the belief in the real turns into real proper.

## 5. The Realistic Nature of Cinema

Film scholars in describing cinema from the point of view of realism prefer to employ such labels as "partial reality" (Arnheim, 1933), the "impression of reality" (Metz, 1971), the "illusion of reality" (Lotman, 1973), etc. Such labels inevitably distinguish between actual reality and cinematic representation, just like the distinction between *real* and the *belief in real*. They are based on the transformation of the actual reality in the process of shooting and projection on the flat two-dimensional surface of the screen (Arnheim, 8-34).

It is our opinion, however, that in all these treatments there is an absolutization of the theoretical concepts underlying the process of cinematic representation/perception. These critics deliberately ignore the obvious physiological faculties of the very sophisticated human visual-

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mental apparatus which is capable of the transference and retrieval of the original three-dimensional space from its flat representation. This mechanism works automatically irrespective of any intellectual capacities which may or may not be possessed by the receiver. Thus, the average spectator perceives the "reality" shown on the screen in exactly the same way a highly intellectual one would, no matter the degree of theoretical cinematic knowledge of the latter. Furthermore, both spectators would perceive the product of representation on the flat screen in the same way they perceive the external reality in the actual world. From this perspective, the notions of "partial reality," "the impression of reality," and "the illusion of reality" are valid on a meta-cinematic level but not on a purely cinematic level.

If we compare visual and verbal representations the most radical difference between the two is the absolute/relative completeness of the description in visual representation and the fragmentary, gapped nature of the verbal one. In other words, verbal representation introduces many possibilities for ambiguities, unequivocalness, unexhaustiveness as well as interpretations, meditations, and fantasies. At the same time because of its absolute/partial completeness and exhaustiveness visual representation achieves the highest degree of objectivity.

In this context the reality presented on celluloid/video tape takes precedence in terms of its objectivity over the realities presented by the remaining visual arts. As already mentioned above it supersedes painting and photography because of the element of movement present in it. Furthermore, because of its immutable fixedness it has a superior position over drama as well. In drama the action presented to the spectator is unmediated, spontaneous, and therefore unstable. Even one and the same performance can never be repeated in exactly the same manner twice; in this sense, the performance of drama is not a representation but a presenta-

tion since changes, however minute, occur every time the play is enacted.

Thus, in terms of temporal progression and degree of fixedness, film can be compared with a product of literature. Both cinematic and literary narratives present us with a sequence of events. However, in the literary text the progress in movement, i.e., actions, conditions, is interruptable with interior monologues, authorial commentary, philosophical generalizations, etc. Film I would like to define as a total uninterrupted flux of narrative. Generally speaking, the global essence of cinema is a representation of any sort of objects in their uninterrupted movement/existence in time and space.

The specificity of cinema as a particular type of art requires the creation of the objects to be fixed in the film before their shooting. The objects which the director intends to integrate in his film must exist in actual reality already in the pre-filmic stage. This concerns all the constituents of the film production: the actors as bearers of the characters' physical and mental attributes, the props, the décor, etc. In other words, in the process of film projection the spectator sees objects which really *do* exist in non-filmic, i.e., actual, reality. Even in science-fiction movies the non-real characters (e.g., Spielberg's *E.T.* or Verhoeven's *Robocop*), the products of the imagination and futuristic technology (e.g., the spaceships in Lucas' *Star Wars*) must exist in pre-filmic reality. Because of the wide accessibility to knowledge about the process of film shooting, which is widely presented in television reportages, or is even a subject of interpretation in feature films (e.g., Fellini's *8½*) the spectator perceives the reality presented on screen as a part of his actual reality. This way of perception is justified by the extra-filmic existence of film objects in actual reality (e.g., the most unbelievable objects are exhibited for public observation in the Universal Studios Park or in Disneyland). The absolute coincidence

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between film and actual world is even more obvious when we are shown outdoor sequences depicting geographically/topographically concrete locations (e.g., Woody Allen's New York settings, Fassbinder's Germany).

Following the discussion above we would like to make the claim that film as a type of art is more realistic in its basic nature than any other kind of representational art. Moreover, realism is the only epistemological constituent which features the specificity of film because the predicate model finds its most thorough manifestation in it. This model provides the permanent perpetual global movement in time (first of all — existence). Before any film starts exploiting the meta-visual, i.e., evaluative, components it must ascertain the fact of the existence of the object. None of the other kinds of art can ensure such an immediately visible justification of existence before the receiver. Even in pure narrative such as in skaz because of its verbal nature, where the possibility of evaluation and interpretation is much more restricted than in poetry, the verification of existence is incomparable to that in film.

We would like to claim that *realism is the exclusive filmic method of depiction/representation of reality*. All applications of the terminology of literary history (Romanticism, Surrealism, Postmodernism) or theory (irony, grotesque, parody, pastiche) are of purely literary, non-cinematic nature. All of them have an evaluative status — they serve to describe the intentions and ideas of the film director which he implements in his film. Because of the non-material nature of these intentions and ideas, they cannot belong literally to the visual domain; they belong to the verbal domain. They are formulated in words, consequently they are described in words. It is not accidental that the main trends and movements in cinema are defined by scholars with terms borrowed from the criticism of other arts (compare for example, German Expressionism as defined after its emer-

gence in painting and literature, or French New Wave after the nouveau roman, etc.).

Any type of art is defined by the dichotomic relationship between reality and imagination. At one extreme of this dichotomy, in the domain of pure imagination, we can place music, since the images in music can hardly find their referents in actual reality. At the opposite extreme is situated cinema. Its position is determined by its highly restrictive with regard to the free imagination character.

In this context none of the five definitions of realism suggested by Jakobson are applicable to cinema. In terms of criterion A the director not only intends to make his film verisimilar, but he is obliged to do it, i.e., the intention becomes a necessity. In terms of criterion B the receiver cannot disbelieve the "actual" existence of the world in the film, because he is confronted with the representation of really existing objects (which he can visit, see and touch while on vacation in Hollywood). Criterion C is completely irrelevant, because as already discussed all the introductions of the terms for every trend and movement in the history of cinema concern the non-filmic, i.e., ideological, philosophical, literary, musical, etc., layers incorporated in the film. In terms of criterion D the director has no choice in his technical devices of presentation, but to present real physical objects in the film. The question of realistic motivation found in E does not even arise. If we return to Jakobson's riddle of the "green herring hanging in the drawing-room" which in verbal representation is discussed and described but still allows us the possibility of doubt about its colour and location, this ambiguity will be lost with the introduction of a single shot of a truly green herring hanging on the wall in the setting of a real drawing-room.

If in literature in all these criteria there was a predominance of a particular aspect of verisimilitude, i.e., the belief or the similarity, in cinema

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this evaluative distribution undergoes a radical shift. The domain of belief is transformed into a domain of necessity and obligation. The domain of similarity becomes one of complete overlapping and identicalness.

On the purely cinematic level the problem of verisimilitude in film does not exist. The term in its literal dictionary meaning implies the notion of two different kinds of reality, actual and fictional, and simultaneously the possibility and potentiality of the existence of different inter-relationships between them. Cinematic technique does not give a choice, it does not allow for the existence of two separate realities, since the camera fixes on the celluloid the same objects which exist in the actual world and will be represented on the screen during the film "narration." From this point of view film is the most restricted and unfree product of art and this fact determines its specific nature.

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