

A woman wearing a vibrant red headscarf and a patterned dress with intricate floral designs in shades of pink, red, and gold. She has traditional face paint on her cheeks and chin. The background is a clear blue sky.

FILM  
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

# Realist Cinema as World Cinema

Non-cinema, Intermedial Passages,  
Total Cinema

LÚCIA NAGIB

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*Non-cinema, Intermedial Passages, Total Cinema*

*Lúcia Nagib*

Amsterdam University Press



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# Introduction

This book is about films and filmmakers committed to reality. For them, the world is not a mere construct or discourse, but made of people, animals, plants and objects that physically exist, thrive, suffer and die. They feel part of, and responsible for, this material world and want to change it for the better. 'Realism', this book argues, is what defines these films' *mode of production* and binds them together across world cinema history and geography.

The idea that 'realism' could serve as the common denominator across the vast range of productions usually labelled as 'world cinema' is widespread and seemingly uncontroversial. Thomas Elsaesser (2009: 3), for example, starts his insightful essay 'World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence' by declaring: 'European art/auteur cinema (and by extension, world cinema) has always defined itself against Hollywood on the basis of its greater realism'. The potted history contained in this formula suggests that world cinema started in Europe, more precisely with Italian neorealism in the 1940s, which, on the basis of a documentary approach to the real, offered fertile ground for the development of art and auteur cinema. Turning its back on the Nazi-fascist propaganda machine as much as on Hollywood fantasy, this new realist strand unveiled on screen the gritty reality of a poverty-stricken, devastated Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. As we know, the raw aesthetics and revelatory power of this foundational movement inspired a flurry of subsequent (social-)realist schools in the world, such as Indian independent cinema in the 1950s, Brazilian Cinema Novo in the 1960s, African post-independence cinemas in the 1970s, the New Iranian Cinema in the 1980s, Danish Dogme 95 in the 1990s and many other new waves and new cinemas, remaining influential up to today. Neorealism was moreover the touchstone of André Bazin's concept of cinematic realism, the world's most foundational and enduring film theory ever written, albeit in the form of short magazine articles – 2,600 of them, in the count of Bazin specialist Dudley Andrew (2010: 13) – left behind after his death at a mere 40 years of age. As is well known, the film medium, for Bazin (1967), is intrinsically realist thanks to the 'ontology of the photographic image', that is, the medium's

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recording property, which establishes a material bond with its referent in the objective world, a process later equated by Peter Wollen (1998: 86) to 'indexicality' as defined by Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. Bazin was moreover, and most importantly to my own approach, the first to locate realism *at the point of production*, by extolling, in neorealism (Rossellini, Visconti, De Sica), the regular use of real locations, non-professional actors (as well as actors stripped of their acting personas) and the combination of long takes and long shots that preserve the space-time integrity of the profilmic event.

But Elsaesser's synthetic formula also contains some incendiary material. Should we take for granted that Europe is the centre of world cinema and that theory about it must consequently be Eurocentric, or at least Europe-centred? Does all world cinema depend on its artistic and auteurist pedigree? And is world cinema forever condemned to be the other of Hollywood – or Bollywood, or Nollywood, or any popular cinema? These questions were at the heart of world cinema theorising at the beginning of the new millennium, as an increasingly globalised world made it imperative to look at different cinemas through their transnational relations. My own contribution to this debate was to attempt to define world cinema positively, as a set of active expressions of local histories and cultures, rather than mere reactions against commercially and/or ideologically hegemonic cinemas (see Nagib 2006; Nagib et al. 2012). In this book, however, I shall propose to leave the Euro- and Hollywood-centric as well as the art/auteur vs commercial dilemma behind and move a step further by favouring the more substantive 'realist cinema' over the catch-all term 'world cinema'. Realism here will be understood as an ethics of the real that has bound world films together at cinema's most creative peaks.

But before moving on to the elaboration of what 'realist cinema' is and its advantages over the somewhat outmoded 'world cinema' appellation, let me first make the case for the latter's continuing relevance as a refuge and safeguard for cinematic diversity and inclusion. The massive exodus of films of all sorts from cinema screens to domestic on-demand streaming services and other digital platforms is today a consummated fact. If this has entailed the easy spread and prevalence of English-language commercial films on offer, it has also provided a home for a huge number of non-commercial independent, experimental and documentary films, which can now bypass the intricate and selective network of distribution and exhibition, and find a direct path to audiences. But it has also caused a major disruption to the way world films would, in the past, naturally filter through international festivals and arrive at arthouse venues (see Iordanova 2012). Granted, Hollywood's

screen dominance worldwide long antedates the on-demand streaming phenomenon, but it has been substantially boosted by it. Arthouse and other 'alternative' cinemas still exist, of course, and they are getting more comfortable, better equipped and sophisticated, but this comes at the price of much-reduced programmes, which are speedily rotated and dictated by a handful of major distributors generally suspicious of non-English languages and subtitles. This means that, for example, in the UK, from the 30+ world films reviewed every month in *Sight & Sound*, a mere half dozen are actually distributed to the cinemas. This scarcity is compounded by the rise of ticket prices in the arthouse circuit, which has become unaffordable to students, the low-waged and the unemployed.

Fortunately, most films excluded from theatrical screenings can now be viewed one way or another on the Internet, in the comfort of one's home. The difficulty, however, lies in one becoming aware of their existence and actively unearthing them from behind the fortified barrier of the VODs' chaotic front-page menus, entirely dominated by American films and series. Those purposely unhelpful menus are the culmination of a process through which consumers have seen their right to window-shop and browse through diversity rapidly corroded, with the increasing demise of physical books, CDs, DVDs and Blurays caused by Amazon's near-monopoly of online sales, which has led to the general collapse of street shopping around the world. World cinema is simply one of the many casualties of this phenomenon. As Stefano Baschiera was quick to observe, Netflix and Amazon, the world's biggest VOD providers,

move away from geographical classification if not for a general, hidden, (and often imprecise) 'foreign films' category. This 'geographical indeterminacy' and the digital possibility to crosscategorise a film, listing it under several categories at the same time (something that the brick and mortar store shelves do not offer), means that several world cinema products 'mingle' in the catalogue, finding places under different classifications and genres.

Baschiera (5) goes on to observe that 'foreign films' end up associated, in a peripheral manner, to mainstream generic products by means of this new categorisation and suggestions for 'further viewing'. There is therefore an active process of decontextualising, neutralising and burying cultural difference behind a uniformising wall of American and English-speaking films to which other world films are attached as a kind of tail-end appendices. To watch world films through these services hence requires the spectator's

previous knowledge and a great dose of patience and determination, as well as the ability to enjoy their viewing in the isolation of one's computer, phone or another private screen, without the endorsement of like-minded crowds a cinema can provide.

That this mode of viewing evolves on a par with world films' ever-greater availability, with the help of smaller, but more diverse, platforms such as MUBI, Curzon and other specialist apps, should, however, be reason to celebrate. These, and the thriving film festivals around the world which showcase a burgeoning production of thousands of films from all over the world every year, are proof that, though exiled and diluted in the VOD market, world cinema continues to be alive and well, as the films studied in this book demonstrate. It is also true that, precisely because of their undifferentiated shelving as 'what to watch next', films in non-English languages can unexpectedly ascend to the limelight, as was the case of *Roma* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2018), a Mexican film spoken in Spanish and Mixtec and distributed by Netflix, which went on to win the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, seven BAFTA awards, including best film, three Academy awards and a host of other prizes worldwide, paving the way for other such films, such as the Korean Oscar-winning *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019), to accede to the mainstream.

In her vigorously argued book *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* (2015), Patricia White defines World Cinema as a privileged realm for women filmmakers and an antidote to their woeful underrepresentation in the mainstream. Along the same lines, Robert Stam, in his newly-launched *World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media* (2019), sees 'a renewed popularity' of the term 'world cinema', which for him combines with what has been alternately called 'Transnational Cinema' and 'Global Cinema' in its drive to 'deprovincialize the film canon by opening it up to minority, women, and Global South directors' (Stam 2019: 104). In fact, our mission as film critics, historians and philosophers has acquired today a true sense of urgency, in terms of uncovering, organising, disseminating and preserving the memory of world cinema's enormous artistic and cultural wealth. Thanks to the advances in digital technology, we are no longer restricted to the written word; on the contrary, filmmaking is today available to scholars like us, as much as to professional filmmakers, allowing us to communicate beyond the academic walls. Videographic criticism is now common currency in academia and dedicated online journals, and an increasing number of academics are venturing into the feature format, a notable example being *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn and anonymous, 2012), a landmark in documentary filmmaking resulting from an AHRC-funded

academic project, studied in Chapter 3. Thomas Elsaesser's widely acclaimed *The Sun Island* (2017) is another example of academic thought translated into the essay-film genre. My own feature-length film-on-films *Passages*, co-directed by Samuel Paiva and showing at film festivals worldwide at the moment of writing, is another such venture that serves as a companion piece to Chapter 7. These are all potential candidates for what Stam (2019: 33ff) calls a 'transartistic commons', a utopian realm without borders, fostering 'transnational, transdisciplinary, transtextual, translinguistic, transartistic, transsectional, transgender/transsexual, trans-mediatic, transregional and transcultural' productions. My own, more modest and hopefully verifiable argument in this book is that thinking along the lines of 'realist cinema' may help us to understand what 'world cinema' actually stands for.

### Realism as Mode of Production

The revival of Bazinian film studies in the 2000s, following the decline of psychoanalytic and semiotic approaches, liberated scholars to talk more freely about 'realism', a term banned from the progressive agenda between the 1960s and 80s as 'politically retrograde' and 'naïve' (Gunning 2011: 119). In 2003, Ivone Margulies edited a collection of essays, entitled *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, which included, among its many excellent essays, Bazin's 'Death Every Afternoon', a key piece on the singularity of the recorded event underpinning his realist thought hitherto unavailable in the English language. Margulies's most important contribution to the realist debate was to shift the focus from narrative verisimilitude to what she calls 'performative' realism, i.e., the enactment or re-enactment of the profilmic event in the phenomenological world that she went on to crystallise in the idea of the embodied self in her latest single-authored *In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema* (2019). Margulies's take on realism, necessarily focused on the point of production, strongly chimes with my own in this book.

The last two decades have also seen a flurry of works by Dudley Andrew resulting from his life-long devotion to Bazin's project and memory. In 2010 he published a single-authored book provocatively titled *What Cinema Is!* in response to Bazin's structuring interrogation *What Is Cinema?* as announced in the title of his most influential collection of articles (1967; 2005). In his book, Andrew boldly reasserts Bazin's realist ethos, by proclaiming: 'in whatever manifestation or period, real cinema has a relation to the real' (xxv), before delving into Bazin's philosophical peers (Sartre, Malraux,



Benjamin) and institutional ties, such as the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. In 2011, together with Hervé Jourbert-Laurencin, Andrew then edited the hitherto most encompassing and in-depth study of Bazin, *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory & its Afterlife*, which was followed in 2014 by *André Bazin's New Media*, a collection of articles by Bazin edited and translated by him. This scholarship, to which my own collection *Realism and the Audiovisual Media* (2009, co-edited by Cecilia Mello) and single-authored book *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (2011) sought to make a contribution, re-instated realism into the film studies agenda, as a result of what Thomas Elsaesser's 2009 essay on realism aptly defined as the 'ontological turn' (5ff). Unlike Bazin's, however, Elsaesser's view of realism concentrates on the spectator's body and senses, as expressed in his book *Film Theory: an introduction through the senses*, co-authored with Malte Hagener (2010: 12), which states:

The cinema seems poised to leave behind its function as 'medium' (for the representation of reality) in order to become a 'life form' (and thus a reality in its own right). Our initial premise of asking film theory to tell us how films and cinema relate to the body and the senses thus may well lead to another question [...] namely whether [...] the cinema is not proposing to us, besides a new way of knowing the world, also a new way of 'being in the world', and thus demanding from film theory, next to a new epistemology, also a new ontology.

Richard Rushton, in his *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality* (2011), strikes a similar chord by defining film (any film) as a real experience for the spectator. Building on Cornelius Castoriadis's notion of reality, he states:

[F]ilms do not re-present anything. Instead, they create things; they create realities, they create possibilities, situations and events that have not had a previous existence; they give rise to objects and subjects whose reality is filmic. (Rushton 2011: 3)

Important though these approaches are in highlighting the spectatorial experience of film, there is very little of that experience that is actually demonstrable. As Tiago de Luca, author of *Realism of the Senses in World Cinema: The Experience of Physical Reality* (2014), aptly states, with regard to recent world cinema's realist vocation: 'this new realist aesthetic is [...] characterized by a *sensory mode of address* based on the protracted inspection of physical reality' (1) (my emphasis). Whether this realist 'mode of

address' can indeed effect a 'realist reception' by any spectator is, however, a major conundrum these studies have not yet resolved.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the growth of the emphasis on a phenomenology centred on the spectator's body and senses has been accompanied by an opposite, non-anthropocentric trend on the philosophical front. The 2000s saw the birth and development of what is variously known as 'speculative realism', 'speculative materialism', 'object-oriented philosophy' and 'object-oriented ontology' (OOO), which has shifted the focus onto things regardless of their correlation with human thought. Involving promoters from Alain Badiou's disciple Quentin Meillassoux to popular scientist Timothy Morton, and corraling heavyweights, such as Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, Slavoj Žižek, Alberto Toscano and François Laruelle, this current is now gaining traction amidst media scholars, starting with Steven Shaviro, who adhered to it from a perspective informed by the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead. Despite the great divergences among them, speculative realists are united, according to Shaviro, 'by a common commitment, shared with Whitehead, to metaphysical speculation and to a robust ontological realism':

[T]hese recent thinkers are all forthright realists – in contrast to the way that so much twentieth-century thought was premised on a fundamental antirealism. [...] [P]henomenology, structuralism, and most subsequent schools of twentieth-century continental philosophy assume one version or another of the antirealist, Kantian claim that 'phenomena depend upon the mind to exist' [...]. It is this assumption, above all, that speculative realism seeks to overturn. (Shaviro 2014: 5)

Speculative realism's non-anthropocentric and environmentally-minded stance resonates in many respects with Bazin's own ontology of the photographic image and his privileging of the objective over the subjective world. So do most of the films and filmmakers in focus in this book, and further attention will be devoted to this line of thought in Chapter 2, focusing on Jafar Panahi's self-defeating attempt at mobilising an 'autonomous' camera whose function it is to capture the world regardless of a filmmaker's will or control.

In order to locate my own approach within the theories outlined above and to make an effective contribution to the debate, I will start by asking: where does realism actually lie? Why did a film such as *Ossessione* (Luchino

1 For further reading on cinematic realism, see: Kappelhoff (2015); Peucker (2007); Foster (1996); Jerslev (2002); Aitken (2006), among others.

Visconti, 1943), studied in Chapter 8, strike everyone who saw it at the time as 'realist' to the point of inaugurating the most influential film movement of all time, Italian neorealism? It was certainly not for its conventional illusionist mode of storytelling, nor its highly melodramatic overtones, and not at all for any overwhelming sensory experience it afforded the spectator, but for its realist *mode of production*, that is, because the film crew went to real locations and inserted its highly trained celebrity actors into a context of poverty provided by the place's real population and habits. These, in turn, were caught on camera through long takes and long shots that preserve space-time continuity, which Bazin famously hailed as the realist procedure par excellence. In other words: because the evidential power of the audiovisual medium (its automatic nature, or ontology, or indexicality) could still be perceived in the final product. As much as the Deleuzian time-image and the sensory-motor relation it establishes with the spectator have become the all-time champions of world-cinema theorising, not least thanks to the rise of what has become known as 'slow cinema', it is now time to turn the gaze to *how* these images and sounds are manufactured and captured, and the tremendous effort a number of film crews and casts from all over the world put into *producing* as well as reproducing reality. Visconti's prowess in 1943, in terms of realism as mode of production, may sound tame, in our day, compared to the daring experiments enabled by light-weight and digital filming equipment, and in Chapter 8 I look into how *Ossessione's* operatic endeavour caters more strongly towards what Visconti calls 'the reality of art' than the highly manipulated real settings and non-professional acting in his film.

Whatever the case, the drive towards realistic modes of production in world cinema has only increased ever since. It was moved by this drive that, for example, filmmakers Joshua Oppenheimer and Christine Cynn remained for eight years in close contact with utterly dangerous and powerful criminals in Indonesia, learning Indonesian in the process, in order to make *The Act of Killing*, analysed in Chapter 3, an instant watershed in documentary making. It was this same urge for evidential realism that motivated the duo Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni, the directors of *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003), discussed in Chapter 10, who faced the hardest conditions in the Gobi Desert, in Mongolia, driving thousands of kilometres amidst sandstorms in order to find the ideal pregnant camel. They then waited for this camel to give birth, in front of the cameras, to an albino calf which, as they could have only hoped for, was rejected by its mother. The fact that this camel was then calmed down, made to weep and accept its forlorn calf under the effect of an indigenous violin provided

the most irrefutable, even miraculous, proof of the reality of the fabled weeping camel.

Other film directors, such as Mizoguchi and Ozu, analysed in Chapter 5; Raul Ruiz, in Chapter 6; and Tata Amaral, Beto Brant, Cláudio Assis and Paulo Caldas, in Chapter 7, have grounded their realist project in the revelation of the multiple artistic and medial forms at the base of the audiovisual medium, which create in their films a passage to material and political reality. This also applies to Edgar Reitz and his crew and cast, whose life-long project *Heimat* became a mode of History-telling as well as of living this history, on the basis of the actors' exercise of their actual musical and other artistic talents in their onscreen performances. Others yet, such as Abderrahmane Sissako, Mikhail Zvyagintsev, Cristina Gallego and Ciro Guerra, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, as much as Davaa and Falorni, have turned their cameras onto threatened landscapes, animals and populations of which their films become witnesses as much as engaged participants. Location is also key to a film such as Wim Wenders's *The State of Things* (1982), looked at in Chapter 1, which sprang from his stumbling on the extraordinary ruin of a half-submerged hotel on the Sintra seaside that materialises the postmodern condition as clearly as any high-level theorising. Jafar Panahi, banned as he is from making films for 20 years, has swapped filmmaking with life itself in what I term his non-cinema tetralogy, in Chapter 2. *Tabu* (Miguel Gomes, 2012) is yet another example of the negative use of cinema, by gravitating around an irresistible, all-consuming black hole, where the sombre legacy of colonialism makes itself felt by resisting representation, both in the African continent and in the former coloniser, Portugal. Realism as mode of production, in these films, means that these crews and casts believe that reality exists and can be inflected and improved through film.

In order to prove this point, this book will veer away from the still prevailing trend of focusing on the materiality of the spectatorial body and the sensuous reception of films, locating cinematic realism, instead, in the way films are made. I will argue that film crews and casts who choose to produce rather than just reproduce reality and to commit themselves to unpredictable events are moved by an ethics that Alain Badiou has defined as 'an active fidelity to the event of truth' (2006: xiii; see also Nagib 2011: 1ff). Three facts speak in favour of this model. First, realism at the point of production is clearly identifiable and measurable, as opposed to the 'reality effect' at the point of reception, which varies widely from one individual to another, remaining inevitably restricted to the speculative realm. Second, realism can be achieved at the point of production regardless



of the technology utilised for the capturing of images and sounds, whether it is the now obsolete celluloid strip or digital equipment. And third, realism is timeless, as the recurrent emergence of realist trends at certain historical junctures demonstrates, and is consequently not the result of the 'evolution of the language of cinema' or tributary to a supposed postwar modernity, as Bazin (1967b) would have had it.

In order to substantiate these contentions, I will start, unavoidably, by revisiting Bazin's realist theory. I will then proceed to laying out a possible taxonomy of cinematic realism according to modes of production, address, exhibition and reception. This will be followed by an explanation of the sub-modalities of the realist mode of production, which provide the structure of this book, from the negation of cinema that changes it into a way of living and interfering politically with world phenomena; to the intermedial procedure that turns other art forms within films into a passage to reality; and finally to the utopian 'myth of total cinema' which Bazin defined as the human desire for 'integral realism.'

## Reality Between Modernity and the Digital Age

Bazin is central to this book because most of what he said about realism in the late 1940s and 1950s would apply to what is understood under 'world cinema' nowadays. This being a term that originated in the Anglophone world, untranslatable in most other film cultures and unavailable in Bazin's time, he chose to give to the new realism of his time the name of 'modern cinema.'

As I have discussed at length elsewhere (Nagib 2016: 25ff), this choice was coherent insofar as it represented the culmination of Bazin's evolutionist approach, according to which the best films ever made could not but be located in his own time. 'Modern cinema' thus starts with Italian neorealism in the late 1940s, excluding from its ranks not only what Bazin (1967b) calls the 'classical' Hollywood cinema, but prewar modernist cinema itself, as represented by Eisenstein and Soviet cinema, German Expressionism and the European avant-gardes in general, due to their allegiance to montage. Though circumstantial and transient at origin, the concept of 'modern cinema' has prevailed in film studies ever since, having been lavishly applied to signify almost any narrative films produced outside the Hollywood system from the Second World War onwards. However, beyond the questionable opposition between modernity and modernism, this model is further flawed by the fact that many realist filmmakers of Bazin's own pantheon, including Renoir, Stroheim, Murnau and Dreyer, were active much before the Second World



War and already resorting to the techniques he deemed both realist and modern. Conversely, neorealist filmmakers were not necessarily averse to montage, if you just think of the quick-fire editing in Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (*Germania anno zero*, 1947), a neorealist milestone which is more akin to the urban velocity featured in a modernist film like *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin: die Symfonie der Grosstadt*, Walter Ruttmann, 1927) than to the contemplative attitude associated with the Bergsonian *durée* at the base of Bazin's definition of modern cinema. These contradictions have not stopped Bazin's evolutionist model from continuing to be widely adopted in film scholarship, not least thanks to the endorsement it received from Deleuze (2013), the most influential film philosopher of all time, who adopted the Second World War as the dividing line between classical and modern cinema, these being respectively characterised by the 'movement-image' and the 'time-image,' which disregard chronology even more frontally than Bazin.

Whilst paying due respect to these seminal theories, my proposal is to think about realism and world cinema away from evolutionist models that fail to cohere even with the schemes in which they originated, and which inevitably place Europe as the gravitational centre of world/modern cinema and in irrevocable opposition to Hollywood and all other so-called classical/commercial cinemas. As David Martin-Jones (2011: 7) rightly suggests, keeping away from Eurocentric and 'othering' mechanisms can reinvigorate these thinkers' ideas and broaden their scope for future usage. Thinking in terms of modes of production can do precisely that without excluding works pre- or post-WWII, along the lines, for example, of Siegfried Kracauer, whose famous book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* describes cinema as dominated from the outset by 'realistic' and 'formative' tendencies, represented respectively by Lumière's documentaries and Méliès' fantasy films (1997: 30ff).

My proposal of a timeless view of realism has nonetheless to overcome the challenge represented by the advent of digital technology. Both Bazin and Kracauer were theorising on the basis of photographic recording, or, in Bazin's terms, the 'ontology of the photographic image', through which the object is directly imprinted on the film emulsion without the mediation of the human being, as in the case of the death mask or the Holy Shroud (Bazin 1967: 14). However, digital technology changed the process of recording in radical ways that disrupted film's fundamental link with the objective real, as Miriam Hansen (1997: viii) was quick to note in her introduction to the new edition of Kracauer's book:

Digital technologies such as computer enhancement, imaging, and editing have shifted the balance increasingly toward the postproduction phase.



Not only can 'mistakes' made during shooting be 'corrected' and recorded effects be maximized, but on the very level of production live-action images and sounds can be generated independently of any referent in the outside world.

This argument was later expanded upon by new-media herald Lev Manovich (2016), who observes:

Cinema traditionally involved arranging physical reality to be filmed through the use of sets, models, art direction, cinematography, etc. Occasional manipulation of recorded film (for instance, through optical printing) was negligible compared to the extensive manipulation of reality in front of a camera. In digital filmmaking, shot footage is no longer the final point but just raw material to be manipulated in a computer where the real construction of a scene will take place. In short, the production becomes just the first stage of post-production. (29)

Perfectly valid in principle, this argument however obscures the fact that many filmmakers continue to valorise production above post-production, even when using digital technology. Indeed, one of the most remarkable consequences of the digital revolution was to enable filmmakers from the most disparate areas of the globe to embark on otherwise unthinkable realist ventures, if you just think of Panahi and his constant use, in the forbidden tetralogy, of small digital cameras and smart phones, without which his whole secret subversive project would have been unfeasible.

Having sparked an avalanche of scholarship and ushered in a 'post-cinematic' era, as announced in the excellent collection *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Film* (2016), the digital revolution is also at the core of Elsaesser's (2009) aforementioned essay, which defines realism in the post-photographic era as an 'ontology mark two'. Unconcerned with the loss of the index and brought about by computer-generated images and sounds, this new ontology, for him, 'breaks with the Cartesian subject-object split, abandoning or redefining notions of subjectivity, consciousness, identity and the way these have hitherto been used and understood' (7). It is however intriguing that Elsaesser should produce evidence for his thesis through the analysis of a film such *Three Iron* (*Bin jip*, Kim Ki-duk, 2004). Granted, in this film, humans share agency with objects and spaces, the animate and inanimate swap roles, and characters become visible and invisible at will. The real and its representation are thus brought into question, but only as

*mode of address*, that is, as fictional subjects in a plot akin to postmodernism and the horror genre. As a result, ‘ontology mark two’ turns out to be, in this case, an exercise in style.

As always, however, Elsaesser has his finger on the pulse, and his film example highlights the blind spot still in need of clarification: the phases and modes in which cinematic realism may (or may not) be produced. In order to clarify this point, I will now proceed to lay out a tentative taxonomy of cinematic realism covering the film process in its various phases, from production to reception.

## Towards a Taxonomy of Cinematic Realism

Bearing in mind the limitations and artificiality of all schemes, and that the modes below never come in isolation, but are entwined and mutually dependent, I will attempt to establish the possible locations of realism in cinema as follows (Table 1):

**Table 1 Taxonomy of Cinematic Realism**

<b>Modes of Production</b>	<b>Modes of Address</b>	<b>Modes of Exhibition</b>	<b>Modes of Reception</b>
Physical engagement on the part of crew and cast with the profilmic event Identity between casts and their roles	Narrative realism as obtained by the ‘cinematographic apparatus’ The production of an ‘impression of reality’	Films that include live performance, such as in expanded cinema experiments Or the opposite, films aiming at extreme illusionism: 3D and Imax environments, and 4D Virtual Reality works	Audiences’ and market behaviour  The way films affect the ‘mind’ or ‘mental structures’
Real location shooting	The ‘reality effect’ derived from graphic or sensational representations		Realism as affect involving the body and the senses
Emphasis on the index			Interactive behaviours as enabled by the Internet, DVDs, games, etc.
The inclusion of artworks in progress within the film			

In recent times, most theories on cinematic realism have been concerned with the last category, that is, with realism as **mode of reception**. This has a history that I have addressed in detail in two books (Nagib 2009; 2011) and will deserve a brief summary here. The emphasis on spectatorial reception emerged as a reaction against Cartesian traditions of body-mind dualism as seen in psychoanalytic approaches to film in the 1970s, in particular in French semiology and the *Screen* criticism, which famously defined the film spectator as a passive subject regressed to the Lacanian mirror-stage infancy. Most contentiously within the *Screen* criticism, but bearing uniquely foundational insights, Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' ([1975] 2009) condemned spectatorial pleasure as elicited by Hollywood cinema as narcissistic, scopophilic and ideologically charged. The reaction to these accusations came in the 1980s, when David Bordwell (1997), drawing on Constructivism, formulated theories around 'mental structures' to explain the universal popularity of American mainstream cinema, while cognitivists such as Noël Carroll (1988) and Murray Smith (1996) rejected the Brecht-inspired opposition between illusionistic absorption and critical spectatorship. In the early 1990s, Deleuze's emphasis on sensory-motor modes of communication motivated critics such as Steven Shaviro (2006) to add the body to this equation, with a view to reinstating pleasure as constitutive of spectatorial experience. This was followed by the celebration of the 'embodied spectator' in the 2000s, as most notably represented by Vivian Sobchack. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Sobchack (2004: 4) proposed 'embodiment' as 'a radically material condition of the human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*'. Along the same lines, Laura Marks (2002: xiii-xv) put forward the concept of 'haptic criticism' as a kind of physical fusion between film and viewer.

As can be seen, the common thread across these views is the focus on realism as a *reality effect* on the human body and senses, hence on realism at the point of reception. It is indeed a fact that, regardless of their recording processes or modes of storytelling, audiovisual media can affect spectators by means of graphic representations able to cause physical and emotional impact even when there is no representational realism at play, for example, when the physical impact on the spectator derives from animation or computer-generated images and sounds (Black 2002). Traditional 2D screenings of action films are perfectly capable of producing reality effects, but particular **modes of exhibition**, such as 3D projections, Imax environments and the more recent 4D Virtual Reality devices, have been specifically designed to enhance them. With all of them, however, reality

effects can only be effects and not actual reality, given the interdiction of spectatorial participation. Even Virtual Reality devices, though allowing the viewer to move their head freely and choose what to look at or listen to within a 360° spectrum, are unable to provide any kind of actual interaction. As Christian Metz (1982: 61-65) was the first to note, there is an unbridgeable fracture between seeing and being seen in audiovisual media due to the temporal gap that separates the moment of shooting from that of viewing, and this is why, for Metz, the spectator's position at any film projection is necessarily scopophilic.

Reality effects are moreover subordinated to varying subjective susceptibilities, hence impossible to measure by universal standards. There is also the fact that, as technology evolves and tricks are cracked, reality effects tend to wane with time and lose the battle against the human brain, which opposes a natural resistance to illusionism. A historical example is that of the audience members who purportedly fainted or ran away when first exposed to Lumière's *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (*L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, 1895), a film which has become perfectly innocuous to current-day spectators. As Oliver Grau (2003: 152) aptly explains:

When a new medium of illusion is introduced, it opens a gap between the power of the image's effect and conscious/reflected distancing in the observer. This gap narrows again with increasing exposure and there is a reversion to conscious appraisal. Habituation chips away at the illusion, and soon it no longer has the power to captivate. It becomes stale, and the audience are hardened to its attempts at illusion. At this stage, the observers are receptive to content and artistic media competence, until finally a new medium with even greater appeal to the senses and greater suggestive power comes along and casts a spell of illusion over the audience again.

There is however one case in which objective realism can be found at the exhibition stage: when the film projection involves live performance. Expanded cinema experiments are the ultimate expression of this category, insofar as they preserve the auratic *Einmaligkeit* (or uniqueness) held by Benjamin as the very definition of an artwork. However, for this same reason, they also have to relent on the recording and replicating properties of the film medium aimed at reaching the masses – the 'public' without which, as Bazin (1967c: 75) claims, there is no cinema – as well as to the possibility of being preserved for posterity. Film studies tools alone are therefore insufficient to address such phenomena.

As for **modes of address**, realism must forcibly be associated with the impression of reality elicited by what Baudry (1986) famously defined as the basic cinematographic apparatus (*l'appareil de base*), including the projector, the flat screen and the dark, collective auditorium. Despite film's vertiginous technological development since its invention and the multiplication of its uses, supports and platforms, the basic cinematographic apparatus as provided by the cinema auditorium has demonstrated extraordinary resilience, remaining for over a century the standard outlet for filmic experience. This endurance, I believe, is due to the comfort zone it affords the spectator between the reality effect and the natural brain resistance to total illusionism. It is moreover a space capable of accommodating a range of cinematic genres and styles, from classical narrative cinema of closure, devoted to eliciting an impression of reality, to mixed-genre productions endowed with disruptive devices that draw attention to the reality of the medium. Moreover, as Arnheim (1957: 3) had already noted, human 3D perception of reality is itself an illusion given that the human retina is as flat as the traditional cinema screen. The three-dimensional impression we have of objective reality is only produced thanks to our stereoscopic vision that promotes the fusion of two slightly different images resulting from the distance between our eyes.

This brings us back to the hypothesis announced earlier in this section that the only clearly identifiable and measurable cinematic realism derives from the first category, that is, from **modes of production**, relying heavily on: the physical engagement on the part of crew and cast with the profilmic event; the near-identity between the cast and their roles; real location shooting; the audiovisual medium's inherent indexical property; and the engagement with works of art in progress within the film. In films resulting from this mode of production, the illusionistic fictional thread (if it exists) interweaves with documentary footage and/or approach, as well as with crew and cast's direct interference with the historical world, aimed not only at highlighting the reality of the medium but also at producing, as well as reproducing, social and historical reality. Needless to say, none of the modes above exist for their own sake, a film relying on physical engagement at production point being only conceived in this way for the specific reality effect it is expected to have on the spectator. Modes of production are however, I wish to argue, the only *objective* way of proofing and proving a film's intention, given the countless variables inflecting the ways in which films are subjectively perceived by each individual.

## Non-cinema, Intermedial Passages and Total Cinema as Modes of Production

To recapitulate, this book proposes to replace the general appellation of ‘world cinema’ with the more substantive concept of ‘realist cinema’, all the while valorising world cinema as an invaluable reservoir of diversity and inclusion. Arguing that an ethics of the real has bound world films together across history and geography at cinema’s most creative peaks, the book veers away from the usual focus on modes of reception and spectatorship, locating instead cinematic realism in the way films are made. The volume is structured across three innovative categories of realist modes of production: ‘non-cinema’, or a cinema that questions the film medium, aspiring to be life itself, in constant, and often self-defeating, competition with the medium’s inevitable manipulation of world phenomena; ‘intermedial passages’, or films that incorporate other artworks in progress as a channel to historical and political reality; and ‘total cinema’, or films moved by a totalising impulse, be it towards the total work of art, total history or all-encompassing landscapes, deployed as the only universe available to humans and other animals inhabiting it. Though mostly devoted to recent productions, each part starts with the analysis of foundational classics, which have paved the way for future realist endeavours, thereby reasserting the point, made earlier in this introduction, that realism is timeless and inherent in cinema from its origin.

Thus Part I, Non-cinema, starts, in Chapter 1, with an analysis of Wim Wenders’s 1982 *The State of Things*, a watershed film that distils, in programmatic fashion, the idea of cinema’s inherent but unachievable mission to become material reality. The film is located at a significant historical juncture, which marks, on the one hand, the end of the European new waves and new cinemas, and, on the other, Hollywood’s move into a self-styled postmodern era, dominated by self-reflexive remakes. More pointedly, it attempts to theorise, in form and content, this cinematic end of history by means of a mise-en-abyme construction evolving across multiple layers of self-referentiality and self-negation, that exposes it to the contingencies of the local environment and improvisations of the characters/actors, rendered idle with the disruption of the film within the film they were working on.

Chapter 2 brings a reflection on Jafar Panahi’s forbidden tetralogy, *This Is Not a Film* (*In film nist*, co-directed by Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, 2011), *Closed Curtain* (*Pardeh*, co-directed by Kambuzia Partovi, 2013), *Taxi Tehran* (*Taxi*, 2015) and *Three Faces* (*Se rokh*, 2018), all of which have come into being despite (or rather as a result of) the 20-year ban from making films imposed on him by the Iranian authorities. Forcibly shot in enclosed spaces – his own apartment in





*This Is Not a Film*, his leisure home at the Caspian Sea in *Closed Curtain*, inside a car in *Taxi Tehran*, and mostly inside a car again in *Three Faces*, as Panahi travels to his remote native village in Iranian Azerbaijan – the forbidden tetralogy is marked by a relentless scrutiny of these restrained locations and of the director himself, turned into reluctant protagonist of his non-films. Incipient plots are commented on, but remain undeveloped amidst the register of the frustrated filmmaker's daily routine and conversations with occasional interlocutors. In such restrictive circumstances, Panahi's irrepressible creative vein is channelled towards bringing to the fore, with radical realism, film's inherent conundrum between its recording and artistic properties.

Chapter 3 focuses on *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn and anonymous), a film that opens up uncharted territory on which to recast the tenets of documentary, world cinema and filmmaking in general. It required the entire crew to put their own lives at risk in the name of a project they hoped would change the way we experience cinema and reality with it. The film's realist commitment emerges from where it is least expected, namely from Hollywood genres, such as the musical, the film noir and the western, which are used *as* documentary, that is to say, as a fantasy realm where perpetrators can confess to their crimes without restraints or fear of punishment, but which nonetheless retains the evidentiary weight of the recording medium. The usual process of illusionistic identification on the part of the spectator is turned on its head by means of disguising these criminals as amateur filmmakers, led to shoot, act within, and then watch their own film within the film so as to force them to experience beyond any illusion the suffering they had caused. Thus, *The Act of Killing* negates cinema in order to usher in the stark reality of death.

Part I closes with a study, in Chapter 4, of Miguel Gomes's *Tabu* (2012), another eloquent example of the negative use of cinema for realist ends. As is the case with the *The Act of Killing*, *Tabu* addresses a nation's tainted historical past by means of a relentless questioning of the film medium and its representational properties. Though similar in their self-reflexive method, the two films differ greatly in their approach. Whereas the former tracks down perpetrators of genocide in Indonesia in order to obtain the evidence of their crimes, in the latter, the horrors of Portuguese colonialism in Africa – the main issue at stake – remain conspicuous by their absence. Both in Mozambique and Lisbon, where the film was shot, the sombre legacy of colonialism makes itself felt by resisting representation.

Part II, *Intermedial Passages*, starts by revisiting, in Chapter 5, the work of two cinematic giants, Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu, and their recourse to theatre in *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums* (*Zangiku monogatari*,

1939) and *Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa*, 1959) respectively. In them, the mediums of theatre and film are scrutinised through the self-reflexive genre of *geidōmono*, encompassing films in which the protagonist is a practitioner of one of the traditional Japanese arts. Here, theatre serves both the Mizoguchi and the Ozu films to break down the system at the base of the mediums of theatre and film into their constitutive parts, provide evidence of their reality, and propose a fairer arrangement of them. As a result, realism becomes closely associated with self-reflexivity as regards the ruthless hierarchy of kabuki and related theatrical forms, which correspond to the film directors' extreme demands on the cast themselves. Thus, the theatre spectacles, on the rare occasions they are presented to the spectator, become infused with the reality of life, not just that of the characters on stage, but also of the actual film actors and their real world.

Chapter 6 is an analysis of Raúl Ruiz's 2011 *Mysteries of Lisbon*, the lengthiest film ever made by the director, consisting of a monumental adaptation (4h26min as a film, 6h as a TV series) of Camilo Castelo Branco's eponymous novel in three volumes, in which interconnected narrative strands multiply wide and deep across generations. Whilst questioning the medium and its hierarchical position among other media, the film also brings storytelling close to reality and history-telling by creating holes in the narrative mesh through which the spectator can catch a glimpse of the incompleteness and incoherence of real life. In this context, the film's constant intermedial morphings become 'passages' to the real, through which drawings, paintings, sculptures and murals change into live action and vice versa, silently subverting the idea that the story could have one single end, or an end at all.

A companion piece to the feature-length documentary *Passages: Traveling in and out of film through Brazilian geography* (directed by me and Samuel Paiva), Chapter 7 crystallises the main issue at stake in Part II, that is, the utilisation within film of artforms such as painting, theatre, poetry and music as a bridge or a 'passage' to political and social reality. Rather than focusing on individual artists and films, the chapter addresses a national phenomenon, more specifically, selected works by filmmakers from the states of São Paulo (Beto Brant and Tata Amaral) and Pernambuco (Cláudio Assis/Hilton Lacerda, Paulo Caldas/Marcelo Luna), in Brazil, who over the years have bridged across their regions' very different social history and geographic situation by means of a shared artistic and political platform. Their films commingle in the desire to reassess questions of national identity and social inequality, once at the heart of the Cinema Novo movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which they revisit through a less ideological lens, but an enhanced commitment to realism at the point of production. At the

same time, the films' independent character favours an emboldened use of the film medium that recognises no borders and exposes its inextricable connections with other art and medial forms. The intermedial method is thus strategically poised to shed a new light on the ways in which these films not only represent but interfere with and transform the world around them.

Part III focuses on films bearing an irrepressible desire for totality, be it the total work of art, the complete history of a country or the entire world as represented by monumental landscapes. It starts, in Chapter 8, with a study of *Ossessione* (Luchino Visconti, 1943), a film universally recognised as a masterpiece and foundational work of Italian neorealism, the most influential film movement of all time, which has inspired new realist film currents and independent productions around the globe. Accordingly, it has been scrutinised from a variety of angles by successive generations of scholars. Yet, as is the case with any masterpiece of this magnitude, the possibilities of novel approaches to it are inexhaustible. In this chapter, I revisit the crucial topic of realism in *Ossessione* through a perspective hitherto underexplored in scholarship on the film, namely the contribution of opera and music to its realist endeavour. Under this light, *Ossessione* changes into an accomplished example of the aspiration to total cinema or even total artwork, not at reception point as Bazin (1967d) would have had it, but at the point of production.

Chapter 9 focuses on *Heimat 2: Chronicle of a Generation* (*Die zweite Heimat: Chronik einer Jugend*, 1992), the second part of the monumental *Heimat* TV and cinema series, scripted and directed by German filmmaker Edgar Reitz. The project, spanning over 60 hours so far, has in *Heimat 2* its longest instalment, with 13 episodes totalling more than 25 hours of film. My objective here is to evaluate the ways in which the *Heimat 2* series, as part of a 'total-history' project, i.e. the retelling of the history of Germany from the nineteenth century to today, presents history in the making by means of intermediality, that is, through the use of music as theme, diegetic performance and organisational principle of all episodes. Set in the clearly demarcated decade of the 1960s, *Heimat 2* is devoted to chronicling the development of the Neue Musik (New Music) movement amidst the artistic effervescence in Germany at the time, including the beginnings of what was initially known as Junger deutscher Film (Young German Cinema) and later Neuer deutscher Film (New German Cinema). Beyond its many allusions to real facts and personalities in film and music, all the musical roles in the series feature real instrumentalists, singers, conductors and composers, who were all, almost miraculously, also brilliant actors, able to enact on-camera as fiction their actual musical talents. It is in the reality of this musicianship, and the way it inflects the series' form and content, that

lies, I wish to claim, an element of incontestable truth, beyond the inevitable, even necessary, betrayals of history taking place on the level of the fable.

Part III, and the book itself, closes with Chapter 10, which examines Bazin's 'myth of total cinema' in light of a major trend in recent world cinema to focus on monumental landscapes, in films by Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni (*The Story of the Weeping Camel/Ingen nulims*, 2003), Abderrahmane Sissako (*Timbuktu*, 2014), Mikhail Zvyagintsev (*Leviathan/Leviafan*, 2014), Nuri Bilge Ceylan (*Winter Sleep/Kış uykusu*, 2014), Cristina Gallego and Ciro Guerra (*Birds of Passage/Pájaros de verano*, 2018), and Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles (*Bacurau*, 2019). Taken together, these films testify to the remarkable convergence among filmmakers from the most disparate corners of the globe in resorting to expansive landscapes as a totalising cosmos and a sealed-off stage for the drama of existence. In all these films, the totalising impetus, expressed through the monumental scale of the landscape, combines with a desire for realism by means of real locations endowed with unique geological formations, vegetation, populations and fauna. In all cases, however, the isolated, remote and self-contained settings remain vulnerable to alien invaders whose presence produces a tear in their integrity allowing for issues of our time – political corruption, drug trafficking, destructive tourism, gun culture – to seep in and ultimately restore their indexical link with the real world. This is also, and most importantly, the process through which landscape reveals itself as a repository of history. The chapter goes on to define the drive towards total cinema, in the films in focus, as realist, but of a realism at the opposite end of Bazin's famous 'myth of total cinema', which he describes as the human desire for the 'reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world' (1967d: 20). It argues, instead, that realism in these films takes place at the point of production, by focusing on real landscapes that change fiction into fact. The chapter ends up, nonetheless, meeting Bazin's total illusionism through the back door, which he left conveniently open for cinema's return to the moment when it 'had not yet been invented' (Bazin 1967d: 21).

Committed to a realist mode of production, all films in this book are political, transformative and promising of a new, hopefully better, world.

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