

Realism and Formalism

Even before 1900, movies began to develop in two major directions: the **realistic** and the **formalistic**. In the mid-1890s in France, the Lumière brothers delighted audiences with their short movies dealing with everyday occurrences. Such films as *The Arrival of a Train* (4–4a) fascinated viewers precisely because they seemed to capture the flux and spontaneity of events as they were viewed in real life. At about the same time, Georges Méliès (pronounced mel-yez) was creating a number of fantasy films that emphasized purely imagined events. Such movies as *A Trip to the Moon* (4–4b) were typical mixtures of whimsical narrative and trick photography. In many respects, the Lumières can be regarded as the founders of the realist tradition of cinema, and Méliès of the formalist tradition.

Realism and formalism are general rather than absolute terms. When used to suggest a tendency toward either polarity, such labels can be helpful, but in the end they're just labels. Few films are exclusively formalist in style, and fewer yet are completely realist. There is also an important difference between realism and reality, although this distinction is often forgotten. Realism is a particular *style*, whereas physical reality is the source of all the raw materials of film, both realistic and formalistic. Virtually all movie directors go to the photographable world for their subject matter, but what they do with this material—how they shape and manipulate it—is what determines their stylistic emphasis.

Generally speaking, realistic films attempt to reproduce the surface of reality with a minimum of distortion. In photographing objects and events, the filmmaker tries to suggest the richness of life itself. Both realist and formalist film directors must select (and hence, emphasize) certain details from the chaotic sprawl of reality. But the element of selectivity in realistic films is less obvious. Realists, in short, try to preserve the illusion that their film world is unmanipulated, an objective mirror of the actual world. Formalists, on the other hand, make no such pretense. They deliberately stylize and distort their raw materials so that no one would mistake a manipulated image of an object or event for the real thing. The stylization calls attention to itself: It's part of the show.

We rarely notice the style in a realistic movie because the artist tends to be self-effacing, invisible. Such filmmakers are more concerned with *what's* being shown rather than how it's manipulated. The camera is used conservatively. It's essentially a recording mechanism that reproduces the surface of tangible objects with as little commentary as possible. Some realists aim for a rough look in their images, one that doesn't prettify the materials with a self-conscious beauty of form. "If it's too pretty, it's false," is an implicit assumption. A high premium is placed on simplicity, spontaneity, and directness. This is not to suggest that these movies lack artistry, however, for at its best, the realistic cinema specializes in art that conceals its artistry.

Formalist movies are stylistically flamboyant. Their directors are concerned with expressing their subjective experience of reality, not how other people might see it. Formalists are often referred to as **expressionists**, because their self-expression is at least as important as the subject matter itself. Expressionists are often concerned with spiritual and psychological truths, which they feel can be conveyed best by distorting the surface of the material world. The camera is used as a method of commenting on the subject matter, a way of emphasizing its essential rather than its objective nature. Formalist movies have a high degree of manipulation, a stylization of reality.

Most realists would claim that their major concern is with *content* rather than *form* or technique. The subject matter is always supreme, and anything that distracts from the content is viewed with suspicion. In its most extreme form, the realistic cinema tends toward documentary, with its emphasis on photographing actual events and people (1–3). The formalist cinema, on the other hand, tends to emphasize technique and expressiveness. The most extreme example of this style of filmmaking is found in the **avant-garde** cinema (1–7). Some of these movies are totally abstract; pure forms (that is, nonrepresentational colors, lines, and shapes)



1-1a MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD

(U.S.A., 2003) directed by Peter Weir.
(20th Century Fox/Universal)

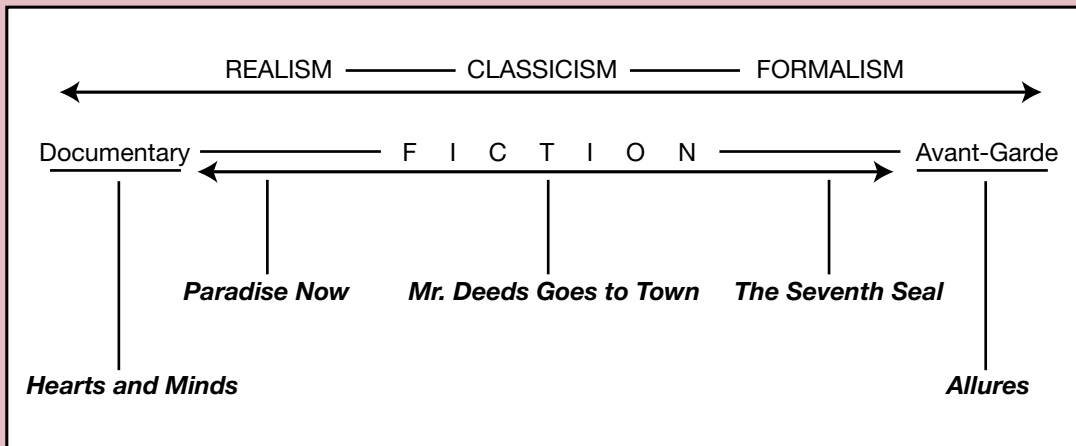
► **Realism and Formalism.** Critics and theorists have championed film as the most realistic of all the arts in capturing how an experience actually looks and sounds, like this thrilling re-creation of a ferocious battle at sea during the Napoleonic Wars. A stage director would have to suggest the battle symbolically, with stylized lighting and off-stage sound effects. A novelist would have to re-create the event with words, a painter with pigments brushstroked onto a flat canvas. But a film director can create the event with much greater credibility by plunging the camera (a proxy for us) in the middle of the most terrifying ordeals without actually putting us in harm's way. In short, film realism is more like “being there” than any other artistic medium or any other style of presentation. Audiences can experience the thrills without facing any of the dangers. As early as 1910, the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy realized that this fledgling new art form would surpass the magnificent achievements of nineteenth-century literary realism: “This little clinking contraption with the revolving handle will make a revolution in our life—in the life of writers. It is a direct attack on the old methods of literary art. This swift change of scene, this blending of emotion and experience—it is much better than the heavy, long-drawn-out kind of writing to which we are accustomed. It is closer to life.”

Gold Diggers of 1933 presents us with another type of experience entirely. The choreographies of Busby Berkeley are triumphs of artifice, far removed from the real world. Depression-weary audiences flocked to movies like this precisely to get away from everyday reality. They wanted magic and enchantment, not reminders of their real-life problems. Berkeley's style was the most formalized of all choreographers. He liberated the camera from the narrow confines of the proscenium arch, soaring overhead, even swirling among the dancers, and juxtaposing shots from a variety of vantage points throughout the musical numbers. He often photographed his dancers from unusual angles, like this *bird's-eye* shot. Sometimes he didn't even bother using dancers at all, preferring a uniform contingent of good-looking young women who are used primarily as semiabstract visual units, like bits of glass in a shifting kaleidoscope of formal patterns. Audiences were enchanted.

1-1b GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933

(U.S.A., 1934) choreographed by Busby Berkeley, directed by Mervyn LeRoy.
(Warner Bros.)





1-2 Classification chart of styles and types of film.

Critics and scholars categorize movies according to a variety of criteria. Two of the most common methods of classification are by style and by type. The three principal styles—realism, classicism, and formalism—might be regarded as a continuous spectrum of possibilities, rather than airtight categories. Similarly, the three types of movies—documentaries, fiction, and **avant-garde** films—are also terms of convenience, for they often overlap. Realistic films like *Paradise Now* (1-4) can shade into the documentary. Formalist movies like *The Seventh Seal* (1-6) have a personal quality suggesting the traditional domain of the avant-garde. Most fiction films, especially those produced in America, tend to conform to the **classical paradigm**. Classical cinema can be viewed as an intermediate style that avoids the extremes of realism and formalism—though most movies in the classical form lean toward one or the other style.

1-3 HEARTS & MINDS

(U.S.A., 1975) directed by Peter Davis.

The emotional impact of a documentary image usually derives from its truth rather than its beauty. Davis's indictment of America's devastation of Vietnam consists primarily of TV newsreel footage. This photo shows some Vietnamese children running from an accidental bombing raid on their community, their clothes literally burned off their bodies by napalm. "First they bomb as much as they please," a Vietnamese observes, "then they film it." It was images such as these that eventually turned the majority of Americans against the war. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, Third Cinema filmmakers, have pointed out, "Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes, or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or purely artistic fact; it becomes something that the System finds indigestible." Paradoxically, in no country except the United States would such self-damning footage be allowed on the public airwaves—which are controlled, or at least regulated, by governments. No other country has a First Amendment, guaranteeing freedom of expression. (BBS Productions/Rainbow Releasing)





1–4 PARADISE NOW (Palestinian Territories, 2005) with Kais Nashif and Ali Suliman, directed by Hany Abu-Assad.

Like most realistic movies, the motto of this film might well be: “This is the way things really are.” There is a close correspondence of the images to everyday reality. This trait necessarily involves a comparison between the internal world of the movie with the external milieu that the filmmaker has chosen to explore. The realistic cinema tends to deal with people from the lower social echelons and often explores moral issues. The artist rarely intrudes on the materials, however, preferring to let them speak for themselves. Realism tends to emphasize the basic experiences of life. It is a style that excels in making us feel the humanity of others. Beauty of form is often sacrificed to capture the texture of reality as it’s ordinarily perceived. Realistic images often seem unmanipulated, haphazard in their design. They frequently convey an intimate snapshot quality—people caught unawares. Generally, the story materials are loosely organized and include many details that don’t necessarily forward the plot but are offered for their own sake, to heighten the sense of authenticity. *Paradise Now* is about the final hours of two Palestinian auto mechanics, friends since childhood, who have volunteered to be suicide bombers, commonly referred to as “martyrs” in the Islamic world. Here they are being wired up with explosives before crossing over to their target in Israel. They have their doubts about their mission, though for the sake of solidarity, they keep their worries mostly to themselves. When they ask what happens after the explosions, their guide says, “You will be met by two angels.” “Are you sure?” asks the anxious bomber. “Absolutely,” the guide replies. (Lumen Films/Lama Prods/Eurimages)

constitute the only content. Most fiction films fall somewhere between these two extremes, in a mode critics refer to as **classical cinema (1–5)**.

Even the terms *form* and *content* aren’t as clear-cut as they may sometimes seem. As the filmmaker and author Vladimir Nilsen pointed out: “A photograph is by no means a complete and whole reflection of reality: the photographic picture represents only one or another selection from the sum of physical attributes of the object photographed.” The form of a shot—the way in which a subject is photographed—is its true content, not necessarily what the subject is perceived to be in reality. The communications theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out that the content of one medium is actually another medium. For example, a photograph (visual image) depicting a man eating an apple (taste) involves two different mediums: Each communicates information—content—in a different way. A verbal description of the photograph of the man eating the apple would involve yet another medium (language), which communicates information in yet another manner. In each case, the precise information is determined by the medium, although superficially all three have the same content.

The great French critic André Bazin noted, “One way of understanding better what a film is trying to say is to know how it is saying it.” The American critic Herman G. Weinberg expressed the matter succinctly: “The way a story is told is part of that story. You can tell the same story badly or well; you can also tell it well enough or magnificently. It depends on who is telling the story.”



1-5 MR. DEEDS GOES TO TOWN

(U.S.A., 1936) with Gary Cooper (with tuba), directed by Frank Capra.

▶ Classical cinema avoids the extremes of realism and formalism in favor of a slightly stylized presentation that has at least a surface plausibility. Movies in this form are often handsomely mounted, but the style rarely calls attention to itself. The images are determined by their relevance to the story and characters, rather than a desire for authenticity or formal beauty alone. The implicit ideal is a functional, invisible style: The pictorial elements are subordinated to the presentation of characters in action. Classical cinema is story oriented. The narrative line is seldom allowed to wander, nor is it broken up by authorial intrusions. A high premium is placed on the entertainment value of the story, which is often shaped to conform to the conventions of a popular genre. Often the characters are played by stars rather than unknown players, and their roles are sometimes tailored to showcase their personal charms. The human materials are paramount in the classical cinema. The characters are generally appealing and slightly romanticized. The audience is encouraged to identify with their values and goals. (Columbia Pictures)

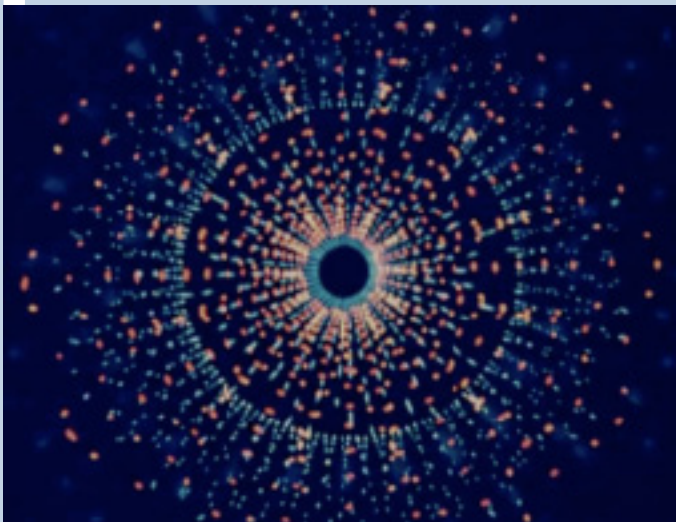
1-6 THE SEVENTH SEAL

(Sweden, 1957) with Bengt Ekerot and Max von Sydow, cinematography by Gunnar Fischer, directed by Ingmar Bergman.

▶ The formalist cinema is largely a director's cinema: We're often aware of the personality of the filmmaker. There is a high degree of manipulation in the narrative materials, and the visual presentation is stylized. The story is exploited as a vehicle for the filmmaker's personal obsessions. Formalists are not much concerned with how realistic their images are, but with their beauty or power. The most artificial genres—musicals, sci-fi, fantasy films—are generally classified as formalist. Most movies of this sort deal with extraordinary characters and events—such as this mortal game of chess between a medieval knight and the figure of Death. This style of cinema excels in dealing with ideas—political, religious, philosophical—and is often the chosen medium of propagandistic artists. Its texture is densely symbolic: Feelings are expressed through forms, like the dramatic high-contrast lighting of this shot. Most of the great stylists of the cinema are formalists. (*Svensk Filmindustri*)



1-7 ALLURES (U.S.A., 1961) directed by Jordan Belson.



▶ In the avant-garde cinema, subject matter is often suppressed in favor of abstraction and an emphasis on formal beauty for its own sake. Like many artists in this idiom, Belson began as a painter and was attracted to film because of its temporal and kinetic dimensions. He was strongly influenced by such European avant-garde artists as Hans Richter, who championed the “absolute film”—a graphic cinema of pure forms divorced from a recognizable subject matter. Belson's works are inspired by philosophical concepts derived primarily from Asian religions. For example, this image could represent a stylized eyeball, or it could be seen as a Mandala design, the Tibetan Buddhist symbol of the universe. But these are essentially private sources and are rarely presented explicitly in films themselves. Form is the true content of Belson's movies. His animated images are mostly geometrical shapes, dissolving and contracting circles of light, and kinetic swirls. His patterns expand, congeal, flicker, and split off into other shapes, only to re-form and explode again, like a spectacular fireworks display. It is a cinema of uncompromising self-expression—personal, often inaccessible, and iconoclastic. (*Jordan Belson*)

1-8a RAGING BULL (U.S.A., 1980)
with Robert De Niro, directed by Martin
Scorsese. (United Artists)



1-8b CONSTANTINE (U.S.A., 2005)
with Keanu Reeves, directed by Francis
Lawrence. (Warner Bros.)



Realism and formalism are best used as *stylistic* terms rather than terms to describe the nature of the subject matter. For example, although the story of *Raging Bull* is based on actual events, the boxing matches in the film are stylized. In this photo, the badly bruised Jake La Motta resembles an agonized warrior, crucified against the ropes of the ring. The camera floats toward him in lyrical slow motion while the soft focus obliterates his consciousness of the arena.

In *Constantine*, on the other hand, the special effects are so realistic they almost convince us that the impossible is possible. Based on the comic book *Hellblazer*, the film contains many scenes of supernatural events. In this scene, for example, the protagonist has traveled to hell, just beneath the landscape of Los Angeles, a place inhabited by demons and angels. In short, it's quite possible to present fantasy materials in a realistic style. It's equally possible to present reality-based materials in an expressionistic style.

Realism and *realistic* are much overtaxed terms, both in life and in movies. We use these terms to express so many different ideas. For example, people often praise the “realism” of the boxing matches in *Raging Bull*. What they really mean is that these scenes are powerful, intense, and vivid. These traits owe very little to realism as a style. In fact, the boxing matches are extremely stylized. The images are often photographed in dreamy slow motion, with lyrical crane shots, weird accompanying sound effects (like hissing sounds and jungle screams), staccato editing in both the images and the sound. True, the subject matter is based on actual life—the brief boxing career of the American middleweight champion of the 1940s, Jake La Motta. But the stylistic treatment of these biographical materials is extravagantly subjective (**1-8a**). At the opposite extreme, the special effects in *Constantine* (**1-8b**) are so uncannily realistic that we would swear they were real if we didn't know better.

Form and content are best used as relative terms. They are useful concepts for temporarily isolating specific aspects of a movie for the purposes of closer examination. Such a separation is artificial, of course, yet this technique can yield more detailed insights into the work of art as a whole.

REALISM: DEFINITION & CHARACTERISTICS

Realism: A style of filmmaking that **emphasizes content** as the main delivery system of narrative.

Characteristics of Realism

- Shots tend to be objective; we view the *mise en scène* without the camera manipulating our perception.
- Editing tends to be seamless with an emphasis on continuity.
- Camera tends to be at eye level.
- Favors a static, non-moving camera.
- Composition feels random or natural, often with an open frame.
- Lighting appears to be natural, neither high contrast or washed out.
- Real locations tend to be used instead of sets.
- Music tends to be diegetic.

When we speak of the two dominant characteristics (Realism & Formalism) it is important to remember the continuum between the two, and that most films are a mixture of BOTH TENDENCIES.

Most of the discussion on formalism and realism tend toward camera movement, position, framing and lighting. But it's important to remember that other things can be formalist or realist as well. So don't forget these as possible places on which to focus your attention:

Mis en scene. The elements within the frame have the ability to convey content through color and design—costumes, set dressing and location and set choices. Look at the German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* for a journey into some a wild formalist diegesis.

Acting. Think of the different styles, from comics such as Jim Carrey to the realism of an Al Pacino in *The Godfather*. Or the stylistic madness of Pacino in *Dick Tracy*.

Script and dialogue. How about the difference between the dialogue in *Casablanca* vs. the dialogue in *Blue Valentine*?

Editing. Eisenstein and his intellectual montage is certainly more obvious in its attempt to deliver meaning through the cut: $a + b = c$, yes? As opposed to a transparent style such as Griffith used.

And finally, there **certain themes or genres** that tend toward Realism or Formalism.

REALISM

Realism has become one of the most contested terms in the history of cinema. Cinematic realism is neither a genre nor a movement, and it has neither rigid formal criteria nor specific subject matter. But does this mean that realism is simply an illusion, and that, as Werner Herzog has declared: "the so called Cinéma Vérité is it?" Probably not, as realism has been an extremely useful concept for asking questions about the nature of cinematographic images, the relation of film to reality, the credibility of images, and the role cinema plays in the organization and understanding of the world. Realism, at the very least, has been a productive illusion.

In film history, realism has designated two distinct modes of filmmaking and two approaches to the cinematographic image. In the first instance, cinematic realism refers to the verisimilitude of a film to the believability of its characters and events. This realism is most evident in the classical Hollywood cinema. The second instance of cinematic realism takes as its starting point the camera's mechanical reproduction of reality, and often ends up challenging the rules of Hollywood movie making.

MAKING MOVIES REAL

In spite of the fact that contemporary film and Greek drama are radically different modes of representation, one model for the rules for realism in movies comes to us from Aristotle's *Poetics*. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle staked the success of dramatic representation on what he called the play's probability (*eikos*). For Aristotle, dramatic action was a form of rhetoric, and the role of the playwright was to persuade the audience of the sense of devoid of reality, or verisimilitude, of the dramatic work. From here flowed rules about characters, the words they speak, and the actions they perform on stage. For characters in a tragedy to be believable, for instance, they must be noble, that is to say slightly more virtuous than the citizens watching the play, and they must act and speak in accordance with their rank in society. If the characters were not more virtuous than the spectators, and if their actions were not consistent with their rank, the audience would feel neither the pity nor the fear, which, for Aristotle, justify the creation of drama. As for events, to be believable they must meet three criteria: 1) they must be logically justified, what today we call this motivation; 2) they must conform to the rules of genre; and 3) they must have, as Aristotle famously said, a beginning, middle, and end.

Aristotle's *Poetics* is a brilliant defense of the art of fiction and at the heart of this defense is a plea for the importance of verisimilitude. Small wonder, then, that Hollywood plots are so closely tied to Aristotelian notions of believability. As David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson have shown, verisimilitude in Hollywood cinema is supported by very specific forms of filmmaking that have remained remarkably consistent over the years. From George Cukor's *Dinner at Eight* (1933) to John Ford's *The Searchers* (1954), the "excessively obvious" style of the classic Hollywood period is bound up with modes of production and with technical or stylistic elements that insure a film's continuity and stylistic transparency. First and foremost, the films that constitute classical Hollywood cinema are driven by narrative causality. More often than not, they center on individual characters, who are often subject to the whims of fate and who undergo dramatic reversals of fortune, even if the films end happily. In Hollywood films, narration is determined by a rigorous chain of cause and effect, with scarcely any room for events that do not, somehow, announce future actions.

Ultimately, for narrative causality to seem real, it must be ushered in by a series of technical elements that maintain the film's continuity. The historical accuracy of wardrobe has long been a key to the realism of Hollywood's period pieces. Extra-diegetic music plays an important role in narrative causality by announcing on-screen action and smoothing over gaps in the narration. Irises, fades, and dissolves serve to mark the passage of time and maintain narrative flow. Match-on-action editing, shot/reverse-shot, the 180 degree rules, and synchronized sound serve to create the illusion of spatial continuity. All these technical elements that dominated classical Hollywood but also regularly

appeared throughout the cinema of the world work to make cinematic fiction more believable. Even the star system served to maintain the verisimilitude of a film—central casting and spectators came to expect stars to play certain roles—hero, villain, *femme fatale*—and attempts to get beyond typecasting were often met with skepticism.

Within the confines of this verisimilitude, Hollywood films have defied the laws of nature, challenged scientific objectivity, and promoted a vision of life as an unending melodrama, but this matters little. Once verisimilitude is established, spectators enter into a rhetorical contract with a work of cinematic fiction wherein, to reprise Samuel Coleridge's formulation, they temporarily suspend their disbelief. Rules of verisimilitude may change over time, but this rhetorical illusion nonetheless helps to explain why spectators in the 1930s felt the frisson of evil when watching *The Invisible Man* (1933), which seems so dated to contemporary audiences. Understanding the rules of verisimilitude is a key to understanding audience reactions to films.

The term "realism" was first applied to painting and literature in the 1830s to describe new forms of art that developed in parallel with the rise of nineteenth-century democracies and claimed a privileged relation to material reality. If Romanticism glorified the imagination, realism, as Peter Brooks has said "makes sight paramount." Thus the novels of Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), George Eliot (1819–1880), Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), and Émile Zola (1840–1902) emphasize description and luxuriate in the details of everyday life. But realism also brought with it new subject matter, in particular the everyday existence of ordinary people, and it closely linked character development to social factors. In painting, Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) first developed this new form of realism, bringing to his canvases a concern for the present, a representation of the working class, a refusal to slavishly reproduce established genres—there are no historical or mythological scenes in Courbet's paintings—a move away from neoclassical idealization of the human body, a representation of bodies at work, and an emphasis on description at the expense of narration.

Nineteenth-century realism was an immensely successful artistic movement. Dominating literature and painting, it spurred scientific positivism and encompassed the invention of photography and film. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that the invention of these forms of mechanical reproduction was less a great technological leap than a symptom of an age when representation of the real became tantamount. Many of the scenes of the early films by Auguste (1862–1954) and Louis Lumière (1864–1948), such as the workers leaving the factory, men playing cards, a middle class family having breakfast, or a barge on a river, could have figured in the pages of a realist novel or the paintings of Edgar Degas, Gustave Caillebotte, or Courbet.

REALISM IN FILM HISTORY

For Kracauer, the realist tendency begins with the very first *cinématographes* of the Lumière brothers. Kracauer opposes the Lumières' realism to the "formative" tendency of their contemporary Georges Méliès (1861–1938), but he also insists that the Lumière films are not just documentaries. Many of these short films, such as *L'Arroseur arrosé*, were staged performances. Still, Kracauer was making a "medium specific argument" in that the Lumières not only invented cinema but exploited its specific attribute: to record and reproduce the world around us.

Bazin traces the origins of the realist tendency in fiction films to the works of Erich von Stroheim (1885–1957) and F. W. Murnau (1888–1931), films that he opposed to the more formalist works of Soviet cinema and to the polished works of 1930s Hollywood. Murnau began his career as one of the leading innovators of German expressionism, directing the classic *Nosferatau, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (*Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*) in 1922. Despite its melodramatic quality, *Tabu* relied on non-professional actors, including Tahitians in important roles, location shooting, and a sparse use of titles. In addition, Murnau weaves into the plot the economic reality and colonialist exploitation of the pearl trade.

While Murnau was filming *Tabu* in the South Pacific, a movement known as "poetic realism" began to take shape in France. Starting in the early 1930s, films such as Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934); Marie Epstein's *La Maternelle* (*Children of Montmartre*, 1934); Jean Renoir's *Toni* (1935), *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (*The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, 1935), and *La Bête humaine* (*The Human Beast*, 1938); Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1937); and Marcel Carnés *Le Jour se lève* (*Daybreak*, 1939) constituted one of the most successful movements in European cinema. Poetic realism may be seen as realist in its refusal of some of the conventions of Hollywood (most notably the happy end), its strong sense of place (which included both location shooting and the sets of designers such as Alexandre Trauner [1906–1993]), its tackling of the social questions of the day (such as unemployment, poverty, and alcoholism), and its depiction of the lives of the working poor. As early as 1930, Jean Vigo (1905–1934), director of *L'Atalante*, had called for a social cinema that would reject both the Hollywood romance and the "pure cinema" of the avant-garde and instead be "continuously replenished by reality" (p. 60). The skipper of a river barge, Italian immigrant workers, laundresses, mechanics, a melancholy sand blaster, were the subjects of poetic realist films. The actor Jean Gabin (1904–1976) was in the paradoxical position of having become the most famous male star of French cinema in large part thanks to roles where he played downtrodden and ill-fated workers. Poetic realism may sound like a contradiction in terms, but for its advocates and practitioners the French movement exemplified realism's basic tenet that creating new, lyrical forms of representation was the best way to create new forms of visibility and new ways of thinking about the world.

Certainly this credo was one of the forces behind Italian neorealist cinema. As different as the Italian neorealist movies were, films such as Roberto Rossellini's (1906–1977) *Rome, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, 1945), *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946), *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1948), and *Europa '51* (*The Greatest Love*, 1952), De Sica's *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Umberto D* (1952), Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1942) and *Terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948), and Alberto Lattuada's *Senza pietà* (*Without Pity*, 1948) all clearly belonged to and helped reignite the realist tendency in post-World War II Europe.

With few exceptions, Italian neorealism set its characters in the historical and economic reality of postwar Europe: *Germany Year Zero* shows us the effects of Hitlerism on a young boy in a rubble-filled Berlin. De Sica's *Sciuscià* (*Shoe-Shine*, 1946) builds its plot around the American occupation of postwar Europe. The very plot of *The Bicycle Thieves* is driven by the poverty of postwar Italy. If Antonio Ricci, the main character of *The Bicycle Thieves*, is so distraught when his bicycle is stolen, it is because this bicycle is the key to his livelihood. In this movie, De Sica and his screenwriter Zavattini (1902–1989) insisted upon giving us the figures we need to understand the poverty affecting Antonio: we hear that a bicycle costs 6,500 lire and that Antonio receives 6,000 lire for the first two weeks of work. Italian neorealism was an intensely materialist mode of filmmaking.

Some scholars have argued against understanding Italian neorealism as a radical break with the past. After all, Cinecittà, the famous studio where some of these films were shot, was inaugurated by Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini in 1937, and the Alfieri Law of 1939, which granted government subsidies to filmmakers, was still in effect after the war. Furthermore, De Sica, Zavattini, and Rossellini all got their start in the film industry under the fascist regime, and some of their films still have recourse to the standard techniques of melodrama that dominated pre-1944 Italian cinema. Still, it is difficult to confuse neorealist films with the high society dramas that preceded them. Neither the so-called *telefoni bianchi* ("white telephone") films nor, for that matter, the Hollywood films that replaced them on Italian screens after the war, had much patience for economic depression and gloomy outsiders. Neorealist films quite consciously set themselves in opposition to more mainstream cinema, a tendency metaphorically expressed in the scene in *The Bicycle Thieves* when Antonio never quite manages to do his job of putting up Rita Hayworth publicity posters.

It is not just the glamour of Hollywood that Italian neorealism defied. This movement also challenged the laws of verisimilitude that dominated commercial cinema. *The Bicycle Thieves* and *Umberto D* both rely upon the thinnest story lines. About *Umberto D*, Zavattini said that he had wanted to make a film about nothing. In *Germany Year Zero* there is no plot to speak of, and viewers can only speculate about the motivation for Edmund's suicide at the end. Plot is not entirely absent from these films, but they all de-emphasize the logical sequence of events in order to develop the characters' discovery of the material reality that surrounds them.

The realist tendency, while international in scope, develops within national cinematic contexts. Certainly this is the case with the British New Wave and social realist cinema. British realism, which harkens back to the documentary movement of the 1930s, has flourished from the 1950s to the present in films as varied as *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1958), *Poor Cow* (Ken Loach, 1967) and *Career Girls* (Mike Leigh, 1997). These films tend to have relatively low budgets and to share such qualities as an emphasis on location, the use of unknown and non-professional actors, an intention to educate, and a focus on marginal characters and social problems. For all their differences, Ken Loach's (b. 1936) made-for-TV film *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and Stephen Frears's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) have in common the desire to show the faces of individuals that had been kept off the screens of Britain up to that point: a woman and her family pushed into poverty and homelessness in *Cathy Come Home*, and the son of South Asian immigrants in love with a British punk in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. These claims to a privileged relation to reality have been contested, however. Scholars have criticized British social realism of the 1960s for its masculine, patriarchal point of view.

The idea that cinematographic realism is tied to political struggle has inspired national cinemas emerging in the wake of European colonialism. The Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene (b. 1923), for instance, perceived his work as a tool for representing the new African reality, seeing film as a mirror for self-understanding and empowerment. In place of the Hollywood and French jungle melodramas through which colonialist ideology imposed itself, Sembene made pared-down films in which characters are set in the economic and social reality of contemporary Africa. Films such as *La Noire de ...* (*Black Girl*, 1966), *Xala* (*Impotence*, 1975), *Guelwaar* (1992), *Faat Kiné* (2000), and *Moolaadé* (2004) are not strict realist works. Sembene often includes elements of melodrama and even musical comedy that might irk purists. But the films' sparse style, their open-ended plots, their refusal of standardized forms of cinematic production, and especially their intense social criticism, situate them within the realist tendency.

The same desire to counter colonialist representations motivated the early realist work of Satyajit Ray (1921–1992) in India. According to what has now become legend, during a trip to London, Ray saw some 90 films in two months. Of all the films he saw, De Sica's *The Bicycle Thieves* left the greatest impression and pushed Ray to start making his own, based on the credo that "the filmmaker must turn to life, to reality. De Sica and not Cecil B. DeMille, should be his ideal." And so, in films such as the "Apu Trilogy"—*Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Road*, 1955), *Aparajito* (*The Unvanquished*, 1956) and *Apur Sansar* (*The World of Apu*, 1959)—Ray's camera reveals the daily life of a family struggling against poverty in post-independence India. His straightforward style shared neorealism's openness to the everyday world.

JEAN RENOIR

French director, screenwriter and actor, Jean Renoir is one of the most original filmmakers in the history of French cinema. A poet of realism and a master of artifice, a revolutionary and a classicist, he is a key figure in the history of European modernism. Renoir has influenced filmmakers as varied as François Truffaut and Robert Altman, Satyajit Ray, and Wes Anderson.

Though he made some ten silent films, Renoir hit his stride with the arrival of sound. The savagely witty *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (*Boudu Saved From Drowning*, 1932) was a biting satire of the duplicitous French bourgeoisie. With the creation of films such as *Toni* (1934), *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (*The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, 1936), and *La Marseillaise* (1938), Renoir participated in the struggle for workers' rights that culminated in the Popular Front in June 1936. But even at their most political, Renoir's films are also meditations on artistic performance. He often preferred actors trained in the music hall tradition and his films often include a theatrical representation of some sort. Even as politically committed a film as *The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, which depicts the creation of a worker's collective, centers around a fantasy cowboy melodrama titled *Arizona Jim*. *La Grande illusion* (*The Grand Illusion*, 1937), starring Jean Gabin and Erich von Stroheim, remains Renoir's most widely seen film. A condemnation of war, this film also reveals Renoir's ideas about the role of performance in the construction of national and social identities.

With *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939) Renoir created one of the great works in the history of cinema. Often cited as a masterpiece of realism for its use of dolly shots, depth of focus, and outdoor photography, Renoir's film is a complex portrait of a society ruled by social masks and illusions. It was an incredibly bold film to make on the eve of World War II.

Exiled from Nazi-occupied France in 1940, Renoir made several films in Hollywood, including *The Southerner* (1945) in collaboration with William Faulkner. In India after World War II, Renoir filmed *The River* (1950), which although it has been criticized for its colonialist point of view, nevertheless, is intent upon showing the complexity of human relations caught in a moment of national upheaval.

RECOMMENDED VIEWING

Nana (1926), *La Chienne* (*The Bitch*, 1931), *Boudu Saved From Drowning* (1932), *Toni* (1934), *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* (1936), *Une Partie de Campagne* (*A Day in the Country*, 1936), *Les Bas-fonds* (*The Lower Depths*, 1936), *La Bête humaine* (*The Human Beast*, 1938), *La Grande illusion* (*The Grand Illusion*, 1937), *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939), *The Southerner* (1945), *The River* (1951), *The Golden Coach* (1953), *French Can Can* (1955), *Elena et les hommes* (*Elena and Her Men*, 1956), *Le Petit Théâtre de Jean Renoir* (*The Little Theatre of Jean Renoir*, 1970)

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THEORIES OF REALISM

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

In 1960, two years after Bazin's death, Kracauer continued and radicalized Bazin's project in his book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Like Bazin, Kracauer argued that of all the arts, film is uniquely qualified to record physical reality. Kracauer conceded that many films combine realist with formalist tendencies, but he concluded the films that make us "experience aspects of physical reality are the most valid aesthetically." Thus for Kracauer, the best moment in Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948) is not Shakespeare's text, or Olivier's acting, or even his direction, but a moment when the camera, almost by inadvertence, frames a window of Elsinore castle and lets us see the "real ocean" in all its force (p. 36). In his previous book, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), Kracauer traced the rise of Nazism through the psychological terror of German expressionist cinema. It is possible his conclusions for the redemption of physical reality through cinema were a reaction against films whose formalism he deemed tainted by its association with totalitarianism and racism. For, in the end, the realist tendency is a form of humanism. In Kracauer's vision, cinema's ontological realism reasserts the fundamental equality of all before the camera.

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

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

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

REALISM'S DISCONTENTS

In the 1850s, the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) condemned realism as a "war on imagination." In the 1960s, cinematic realism came under sustained attack for being an imaginary construct. This attack took several forms, all of which argue against the ontological realism of cinema. Realism, in these views, was nothing more than the product of what Roland Barthes called a "reality effect." The realist tendency may very well have been associated with leftist politics, but for all these

critics and scholars its insistence upon the transparency of the cinematographic image was little more than a pernicious bourgeois illusion.

Perhaps the most systematic questioning of the premises of realism came from Christian Metz, a film scholar who had studied with Barthes. Metz argues that realism and its attendant belief in the transparency of the photographic image is an illusion. Borrowing from semiotics and psychoanalysis, Metz sets out to show that the cinematic image brings together a series of visual, musical, and verbal codes that the spectator then deciphers in an attempt to make meaning. Film and the photographic image do not provide any type of direct access to the real, according to Metz, but are rather one instance of a symbolic system whose model is language. Resemblance, in this view, is based upon codes and conventions; the screen is not a window onto the world, but a mirror, reflecting back to spectators their own ideologies and sense of identity. Metz's radical reformulation of cinema spectatorship coincided with the writings of Marxists, working at *Cahiers du cinéma* and of feminist cinéphiles associated with the British journal *Screen*. For critics such as Jean-Louis Comolli, realism was simply a bourgeois ordering of the world that served to maintain capitalist ideology, while for British feminist scholar Laura Mulvey realism, as all film forms, is structured by the unconscious of patriarchal society. Mulvey insists that film should not be understood as a record of reality, but rather as a reorganization of reality in a way that is fundamentally unjust to certain people, most particularly women and minorities because of its informing patriarchal ideology.

A more formalist questioning of the tenets of the realist tendency has been offered by theories of intertextuality. Basing themselves on the findings of Russian formalists and French theorists, proponents of an intertextual approach see film not as an opening on the world, but as a series of references to other films and other works of art. Michael Iampolski, for instance, describes films as a series of "quotes" that interrupt the narrative and send the spectator back to other texts. Spectators understand what they are watching by patching together all these references, not by referring to a world off-screen. For the analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman, realism is entirely relative to the culture from which it issues. "Realistic representation," writes Goodman, "depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation." Bazin's belief that cinema's ontological realism opened up the world as it is, reveals itself, in Goodman's argument, to be a culturally biased conception.

The most recent questioning of the realist tendency has come from cognitive film theory, in particular its consideration of digital images. A strictly Bazinian approach would view computer-generated imagery (CGI) as a form of animation or painting. But for Stephen Prince, CGI poses new challenges to realism and the theories of resemblance on which it is based. For Prince, it no longer makes sense to think of an image or a sequence in a film as either realist or formalist. Whether they are watching documentaries, epics, or romantic comedies, individuals make meaning out of films in much the same way, basing their evaluations on the same set of assumptions, visual cues, and experiences.

All these critiques of realism have almost put the ideal of film out of reach as a threshold to the world. Still, certain movies have recently renewed with the realist tradition, while at the same time developing reflection on the status of the image. The American director Charles Burnett (b. 1944), whose works include *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) claims that the films of Italian neorealism and the work of Renoir made possible his own filming of the stories of African Americans today. In films such as *Bread and Roses* (2000) and *Sweet Sixteen* (2002), Loach has maintained a fidelity to the political project and the stylistic innovation of British social realism, all the while foregrounding the politics of representation. In Belgium, the Dardenne brothers have made films such as *La Promesse* (*The Promise*, 1997) and *Rosetta*, effectively employing the hand-held camera, minimal makeup, relatively unknown actors, and the natural lighting of *cinéma vérité*. Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) is a series of seemingly random long takes offering both a portrait of Austin, Texas and a subtle reflection on how images organize the world around us. And in films such as *Nema-ye Nazdik* (*Close Up*, 1990) and *Ta'm e guilass* (*Taste of Cherry*, 1997), Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami (b. 1940) has tied realism's revelation of the world to a meditation upon the filmmaking process by which this world is framed, captured, and constructed.

SEE ALSO [Expressionism](#) ; [Ideology](#) ; [Marxism](#) ; [Narrative](#) ; [Neorealism](#)

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ANDRÉ BAZIN

Fifty years after his death, André Bazin remains the world's most important film critic and theorist. Bazin started writing about film in Paris in 1943 and went on to produce an extremely varied and prodigiously enthusiastic body of work. During his short career, he authored nearly 3,000 articles, published in a variety of journals, including, most famously, *Cahiers du cinéma*, which he cofounded in 1952. An indefatigable defender of filmmakers such as F. W. Murnau, Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, Charlie Chaplin, and Roberto Rossellini, Bazin also influenced a generation of French filmmakers who cut their teeth as critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* and went on to become the French New Wave, including François Truffaut to whom he was mentor and adoptive father.

Bazin wrote about such varied topics as Hollywood westerns and musicals, theater, film, and animation, but he is best remembered for his spirited defense of realism. In his famous article, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1945), Bazin presented his core argument for cinematographic realism: photography and cinema allow a mechanical reproduction of reality unseen in any previous art

form. Photography differs from painting in that it produces not a likeness, but the object itself snatched from "the conditions of time and space that govern it."

For Bazin, this realism was enhanced through certain stylistic techniques and choices, including its tendency toward on-location shooting, which helped confirm the existence of a world beyond the screen. Deep focus and minimal editing promoted an ambiguity of vision that more closely resembled the spectator's perception of reality. According to Bazin, films that use depth of focus allow the spectator's eye to wander around the picture and to determine the importance of each object on the screen. Starting in the late 1960s, theorists under the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Louis Althusser's Marxism argued that what Bazin called realism was nothing more than an illusion. More recently, the philosopher Noël Carroll has judged that Bazin's realism is based on logically inconsistent assumptions about resemblance.

Throughout his essays, Bazin tied the films he loved most to a form of asceticism. This austerity was a way of cutting through the rhetorical artifice that had invaded commercial cinema and modern life itself. The cinematic image, for Bazin, allows just enough detachment for us to contemplate the mysteries of the world, whether they take the form of "a reflection on a damp sidewalk," the pockmarks on a character's face, or Ingrid Bergman walking through the ruins of Pompeii.

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WHAT IS REALISTIC CINEMATOGRAPHY

As most people know, the stylistic trend in cinematography over the century has been towards greater realism, which has been easier to achieve in low-light situations thanks to more sensitive film stocks and electronic sensors, plus faster lenses.

There has always been an impulse to make the lighting in a movie logically motivated, even in the heyday of the Hollywood Studio Era – for example, if someone lit a candle on the left side of the frame, the movie lamp simulating that source would not come from the right side of frame. A window on a soundstage set, in a scene set in the daytime, would have bright light shining through it, moonlight would appear darker than sunlight, etc. This natural drive to motivate light logically and dramatically, according to the needs of the story, was tempered by the studio's request that actors look their best at all times.

Trends came and went over time, from the very diffused look of the 1930's to the very crisp look of the 1940's, from shallow-focus to deep-focus cinematography, or from the somewhat Expressionist or Baroque use of shadow patterns to the simpler lighting of the 1950's. The experience of World War II caused a lot of directors and cinematographers to strip away some of the more elaborate visual flourishes of pre-war cinema in search of greater naturalism. However, to modern eyes, some of this simpler lighting strikes us now as looking more "brutal" rather than more natural, as if many scenes were lit by just parking a 10K next to the camera. What seems like realism to one generation often

looks like artifice to the next.

What is called realistic cinematography today is not necessarily an image that replicates the way our own eyes see reality. For one thing, we do not perceive the world as that strobing, staccato motion a movie camera running at 24 fps give us, nor are our eyes closed fifty-percent of the time like most shutters are. Our eyes do not see a two-dimensional image with a surface grain texture. We don't perceive a rectangular black border around reality with objects composed in pleasing patterns within that frame. Our view on the world is not hyper wide-angle nor telephoto in terms of optical compression.

All of this is to say that realism in modern cinematography is sometimes merely the artificial copying of artifacts from documentary work in which there are uncontrollable elements or moments causing certain artifacts (focus problems, lens flares, underexposed and thus, grainy or noisy images). It feels like reality because it looks rough, unplanned, unmanipulated – though the image may be as thoroughly designed and executed as the slickest shot ever made in a classic Hollywood movie. In other words, “realism” becomes just another form of artificial style, only this one conjures up associations with documentaries and thus gives the movie a false sense of honesty in its recreations. Of course, this is part of the pleasure of fictional movies, the willing suspension of disbelief, made possible partly through the believability of the images being presented.

With modern tools, it is more possible than ever to shoot movies in available light. This approach, used appropriately, can enhance the drama of a scene or an entire movie. But it sometimes can be used as a crutch by some filmmakers to avoid actually doing the hard work of making the movie: taking the time to think about the appropriate use of light and shadow to tell this particular story, and then executing that creative idea. This desire by some to avoid thinking about controlling or creating light even extends into other issues like composition; they fall into the trap of seeing the camera merely as a passive recording tool that follows whatever action occurs in front of it. Yet, oddly enough, these filmmakers are more than happy to take these sloppy images with their indifferent use of light and unimaginative use of composition, and then, edit them in a highly stylized and complicated manner, and then compound that giving the final production a strangely unnatural color-correction, maybe hyper-noisy and desaturated, even greenish as well. What results is a movie that is as stylized as *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* in terms of its connections to the real world.

I bring all of this up because I often wonder whether we have hit a certain aesthetic wall in regards to realism because it has become easy to do from a mechanical standpoint... but many filmmakers don't have the artistic maturity to use it as an effective storytelling device, nor are the stories themselves imbued with any real insights into human existence – and thus the hyper-realistic cinematography being used comes off as a shallow stylistic trick. Either we need a healthier respect for what should constitute “realism” in movies, or we need to remind ourselves that realism is just another stylistic device that we can choose to employ when it will be the most effective way of telling the particular story at hand, or choose to discard when there are better approaches.

FORMALISM: DEFINITION & CHARACTERISTICS

Formalism: A style of filmmaking that emphasizes aesthetic elements with a **consciously evident style** in the delivery of narrative.

Characteristics of Formalism

- Camera angles can move toward higher or lower angles.
- A moving camera can be used to emphasize subjective states or create energy and or mood.
- Lighting can move to more extreme use of color, light and shadow in the creation of subjective states and visual metaphors.
- Sets and backgrounds stand out or draw attention to themselves.
- Composition within the mise en scène can more obviously draw on the elements of formality and organization.
- Scoring is more often used and is extra-diegetic, or combines the diegetic with it to create movement between subjective and objective states.
- Shots can tend to be subjective; This can include Point of View (POV) shots where the camera in a sense becomes the character and we see what the character sees, but more often are composed and designed in such a way that we gain access to the character's subjective experience through these means. See image above and below.
- Formalist films. The beauty or power of the image is primary, displacing a sense of reality.
- The visual presentation is stylized.
- The story expresses the director's personal vision or passion, which may even be an obsession.
- The film usually presents extraordinary characters and events.
- Formalism explores ideas, e.g., political, religious, and philosophical ideas. For this reason it is the preferred approach for propaganda.
- Most directors who are great stylists are formalists to some degree.
- The perceptive viewer is aware that the narrative is being manipulated for an effect.
- Formalist narratives may manipulate the time sequence or use an obvious pattern. There may be a disconcerting change of tone, e.g., a lyrical interlude intruding in a grim domestic drama.
- Genres almost always formalist are musicals, science fiction, horror/supernatural, and fantasy.

Roots of Formalism

- Formalist filmmaking tends to have its roots in the world of Art. That frame, which creates the mise en scène, prompts the visual artists desire to use the composition within that frame to create meaning..
- I think that Alfred Hitchcock's statement that "actors are like cattle," comes out of his nature as a Formalist filmmaker. As he was wont to say in his heavy British accent: "I like to think that I make pue-ah cin-eh-MAH (pure cinema). For Hitchcock and many ultra-formalist filmmakers all of the elements that they put on screen are technical elements, parts of a frame in which they actor may have a dominant position in a framing, but not because they are any more important than the other "architectural" elements of the composition. Now this doesn't mean that Hitchcock didn't like actors, but he wanted to work with actors who were going to bring their skills to bear on his framing and for the Realist filmmaker, the actor would be allowed to live within the frame provide to him/her by the director.
- So what types of films are more driven by the formalist director? Perhaps the ones where the director feels the cinematic nature of film story is supported by more obvious technical manipulations. However, the level of formalism in any narrative film is almost always marked by a great respect for the narrative needs. This all changes as you move toward the high

formalism of some experimental filmmakers such as Bruce Baillie and his film Castro Street, which we'll be viewing later this term.

The Two Ideologies of Film Theory

- REALISM: Siegfried Kracauer. Film literally photographs reality. Impossible for film to be a "pure" expression of the artist's intentions.
- FORMALISM- Film is indeed art and not reproduction of reality.
- Unlike realist theorists, "formalist film theorists believe that the art of cinema is possible precisely because a movie is unlike everyday life... The real world is merely a repository of raw material that needs to be shaped and heightened to be effective as art. Film art doesn't consist of a reproduction of reality, but a translation of observed characteristics into the forms of the medium" (Giannetti)
- Formalist film makers shape and mold the images we see on the screen the way a sculptor shapes and molds clay. Their approach to film emphasizes their ability to create story and emotion through manipulation.

THE FORMALIST THEORY

A film theory is a discipline, which encompasses different aspects of cinema in order to explore different concepts regarding this form of expression. The formalist theory is one that is very often used as a topic of study. This modern film theory is used to evoke certain emotions or mental states with the help of technical cinematic facets such as lighting, scoring, sound and set design. Formalism is primarily concerned with the way that it portrays and communicates different styles and emotions, rather than concentrating on the principal themes that it is representing. However, when looking at film theories, we very often tend to compare formalism to realism. The realism theory in cinema is often split into two categories : "In the first instance, cinematic realism refers to the verisimilitude of a film to the believability of its characters and events. This realism is most evident in the classical Hollywood cinema. The second instance of cinematic realism takes as its starting point the camera's mechanical reproduction of reality, and often ends up challenging the rules of Hollywood movie making." (Film Reference) These different aspects will be thoroughly analyzed throughout this essay to demonstrate the importance of formalism and realism in film theory and how they play off of each other. When trying to understand realism, it is important to keep in mind that a film can have an unrealistic subject and theme, yet still show signs of realism in the way that it is shot and edited. We often associate pure films to realist films because of their limited use of sets, the use of natural lighting and the limited editing, among other things. Filmmakers who follow the realism theory try to use the least possible amounts of cuts in their editing. "Their editing is simple and functional—they want you to think more about what you are seeing rather than how you are seeing it." (Media Education Database)

When studying formalism, we can easily compare film this theory to painting. If an artists painting is more concentrated on shapes, colors and lines rather than lines, it can be seen as something more along the lines of formalism, because the artist is not concentrated on rendering as much as he is concentrated on depicting what is in his mind. The theory is the same in film : "films that are Formalist films are more concerned with their artistic style and design and they often come directly out of the artist's imagination". (Media Education Database) Therefore, formalist filmmakers are primarily concerned with the style of the film rather than the rendering and reality of it. The point is not necessarily to try to associate the images and sounds to our lives and what we know, but rather to show these situations through a different lens than our own.

An important component of formalism in films is the use of different types of shots in films, which play on the emotional involvement of the audience in the story that is being told. These shots, which include, wide shots, medium shots and close ups, among others, are used as a device to make the

audience feel more connected to the development of the story. The order in which these shots are used can change the feel and emotion of scenes based on how they are presented.

An example would be from Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1998), when we are first introduced to Laurence Fishburne's character; Morpheus. The scene starts with a wide shot of Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, walking into the room. It is then followed by a medium shot of Morpheus to then bring us to a close up of his face. The addition and synchronization of the soundtrack used captures the viewer; it allows them to feel fear and discomfort. What makes this scene realistic isn't its theme, but rather the emotional connection the arrangement of the shots brings to the viewers.

Another important facet of formalism is sound and how it affects and enhances the visuals found in a film. These sounds not only include music, but they also include the sound effects used throughout the movie, as well as the dialogue tracks. "These three tracks must be mixed and balanced so as to produce the necessary emphases, which in turn create desired effects." (Film Sound) When it comes to the sound effects throughout a film, there is both synchronous and asynchronous sound. Synchronous sound is used to add to the realism of a shot. For example, if a character is starting a car, the sound of the engine starting enhances the realism of the image.

The viewer usually expects synchronous sounds because they are sounds linked to the image. Therefore, the viewer may not necessarily note or notice them. However, asynchronous sounds are sounds that are outside of the image and that aren't linked to what the viewer is experiencing on screen. For example: "A film maker might opt to include the background sound of an ambulance's siren while the foreground sound and image portrays an arguing couple. The asynchronous ambulance siren underscores the psychic injury incurred in the argument; at the same time the noise of the siren adds to the realism of the film by acknowledging the film's (avowed) city setting." (Film Sound) The added sounds involve the viewers' emotions without them necessarily noticing why they are so attentive to a particular moment or scene.

The lighting is also something that can allow the viewers to feel a certain way. For instance, in David Frenkel's *Marley and Me*, the final scene of the movie is when the main character John, played by Owen Wilson, is forced to put down his dog. This scene, which deals with a quite obviously sad and dramatic subject, is set at nighttime. The decision of having this scene during nighttime may seem like a coincidence, but dark environments enhance the dramatic feel of a given situation. Contrastingly, if this scene took place in daytime, the subject would remain the same, but viewers wouldn't necessarily feel as emotional as anticipated.

When looking at both the realist film theory and the formalist film theory, it is obvious that they play off of each other. No film can be completely realistic or formalist. Movies have aspects of both theories, which enhance the themes of the film. The beauty of a film that is based on realism is that the purity of the shots and subjects give you the opportunity to think about what the filmmakers are showing you, not how. In formalism, the filmmaker tries to lure you in using more sophisticated techniques of lighting, editing and the use of different shots. The emotional connection that the viewer feels is quite strong because the use of these techniques grasps the viewer. All in all, these theories could not stand alone, they both need elements from the other in order to create a coherent and presentable film.

FORMALISM AND REALISM

Two perspectives that are closely linked to the topic of film form are formalism and realism. Each has a particular view of what film should be for and how it can achieve its purpose. Formalism began to take on coherence in the 1920s in the Soviet Union, and its two key theorists were [Sergei Eisenstein](#) and Rudolf Arnheim. The theorization behind realism gained strength during the 1930s and its later proponents included André Bazin and Siegfried Kra-cauer. Although the debate between these perspectives may not have really taken off until the 1930s, there has always been a division in the ways in which the medium has been used. Between 1895 and 1901 the films of the Lumière brothers aimed

to record scenes from everyday life, while Méliès used film as an expressive medium that centred on the importance of *mise en scène* in the construction of fantasy.

Formalism emphasizes film's potential as an expressive medium. The available film techniques are of central importance - use of camera, lighting, editing. For the formalists, film should not merely record and imitate what is before the camera, but should produce its own meanings. Primary importance is attached to the filmic process, and it is suggested that film can never fully record reality anyway, if only because it is two-dimensional compared to reality's three dimensions.

We have already looked at examples which can be described as formalist in the work of Eisenstein and Hitchcock. The Odessa Steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* consists of montage editing. Eisenstein was not content to merely show us what happened on the Odessa Steps; instead he expressed the meaning of the events through the choice of shot content and the way he edited the shots together. He produced meaning from a dialectical process between shots, by producing associations from shots, by using symbolic shots, all of which requires the viewer to make sense of what is seen, to think through a sequence. Eisenstein wrote of the editing of shots: '[t]he juxtaposition of these partial details in a given montage construction calls to life and forces into the light that general quality in which each detail has participated and which binds together all the details into a whole' (Eisenstein, 1942, p. 11).

The shower scene from *Psycho* uses a formalist strategy of montage editing. The scene is not shot and edited in a continuous, linear style. The meaning and effect come both from the content of shots, namely a knife flashing across the screen at different angles towards Marion Crane, and from the editing of the shots, which produces a series of short shots that juxtapose the knife and Marion with their different directions of movement. Further examples of formalism are to be found in German Expressionism. Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) are non-realist: the expressive nature and meaning of these films tend to rely upon the *mise en scène*, on the selection and arrangement of elements within shots. It will be noticed that the formalist approach to film-making necessarily emphasizes the importance of the director as someone who intervenes in the film-making process. In other words, a film is a vehicle for personal expression.

Realism, by contrast, emphasizes film as a medium for directly recording what the camera 'sees'. Film techniques are important, but not for producing meaning within the film. The function of the camera is to record what is in front of it and to allow the content to speak for itself for the audience to draw their own conclusions. Bazin believed realist cinema was a more democratic form of film in that it did not manipulate the audience. The use of deep focus allows the audience to clearly perceive a number of elements within a shot instead of being guided towards a particular element. The use of long takes reduces the need for intervention by the director in the construction of the film. Less editing means less fragmentation of time and space. Film is seen as having the potential to reveal the world to audiences. 'For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time, the image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man' (Bazin, 1967, p. 13).

This Bazin quote comes from an essay entitled 'Ontology of the Photographic Image'. Ontology is central to any kind of realism, concerned as it is with the 'reality status' of objects and representations. Is a documentary more 'real' than a Hollywood film? Can any film be 'real'? What does 'real' mean? These are not idle questions: from personal experience we can affirm that many people (in response to a direct question) think of soap operas as 'real'. The ontological question is in turn linked to the matter of epistemology, which is about the meaning of 'knowledge'. How do we know what we know? Again, this question is much deeper and more far-reaching than it may appear: do I 'know' something because I have experienced it (empirically), because I have sensory (phenomenological) information about it, or because I believe what I have read or heard... or seen in a film or on TV?

FORMALIST FILM THEORY

(how we can use this in future filmmaking)

Formalist film first came about in the 1920s, this is when formalist filmmakers were trying to legitimate themselves as artists. Thomson Jones describes formalist film as an appreciation of aesthetic objects and one that needs structural analysis. In the beginning Russian formalist were trying to convert their theories from literary art to film. While they were doing this, they influenced soviet montage filmmakers such as Eisenstein. As formalist theory in film progressed in the 1980s concepts of Russian formalist films were taken to create Neo-formalism.

Key characteristics of formalism is the theoretical and critical emphasis on form. The distinction between form and content is that content is the works subject matter whereas form is what we use and how we present the subject matter. For example, formalists are aware that mise-en-scene, sound, camera, framing, editing and optical effects can be used to create a great work of art. However, these technical features have to be used for a certain purpose. Neo and Russian formalists believed the work of art as a set of devices, they then use these devices to craft a film.

When you look into these theories closely, you can start to understand how and why formalist filmmakers crafted their films, and what theories we can take onto our filmmaking. I really like that these filmmakers really focused on the content of their film and analysed the best ways they could present the story and its background. This is a great way to tell a specific story as you can use certain devices to emphasis important information in the best way possible, instead of going through and using all the technical features you can, but not highlighting anything particular in your film.

Examples of how formalism can be used in my future filmmaking could be to:

- Use the camera to emphasise the subject's mood e.g. moving the camera to create high energy



- Use more POV shots so that the camera becomes the character, we can then focus on the characters subjective experience therefore giving the audience a better understanding of the story and situation



- Make the sets and background stand out, emphasizing the importance of where the character is



- The lighting can be used to create visual metaphors



All these devices are used to emphasize what the character is doing, seeing and feeling and not used just for the sake of doing so. This will then give the viewer a more authentic feel of the character and their story.

FORGET REALISM, EMBRACE FORMALISM

Realism is favored everywhere in today's film world. Even as we march headfirst into an endless parade of comic book movies and sci-fi spinoffs, the popular choice somehow remains to leave the shooting style grounded in reality.

To help us better understand why that is the case, and how it may affect the ambition of filmmakers, [Patrick H. Willems](#) put together a video essay steeped in film theory. And while it may not be the sexiest subject, what he has to say is incredibly important to understand before crafting the world of your film.

The first thing we need to define is what is meant by the term "realism." Andre Bazin, who was a world renowned film theorist, was the first to coin the term. He argued that the goal of cinema is to represent the real world with the greatest commitment to realism. In terms of filmmaking strategies, this meant the use of [objective wide shots](#) and long takes with the camera at eye level, and limited editing.

Essentially, Bazin thought films should be shot in a way that would make audiences feel as if they were actually there observing the events. In this sense, the most extreme example would be essentially static shots of real-life actions.

In contrast, Siegfried Karacauer introduced a new filmmaking tendency to the world which he dubbed "formalism." [Formalist films](#) can be described as highly stylized stories with elaborate sets, costumes and special effects with no interest in imitating reality.

These became the two main tendencies of cinema, and today, play the part of polar opposites of each other on the filmmaking spectrum. Right in the middle of that spectrum is a style of filmmaking that is used by the majority of today's artists: classicism.

Classicism mixes together elements of both realism and formalism. Namely, it takes the production aspects of formalism and puts them in the service of a story with realist values. Even with the technological firepower that VFX artists bring to the table these days, filmmakers tend to shy away from absurd and fantastical worlds. Many of them have an overarching objective of wanting their film to seem real.

As such, classicism has been moving steadily towards the realism end of the spectrum, because, let's face it, movies grounded in reality are easier for audiences, marketers, and studios to understand. Playing around with formalist elements in an uncommitted or unconfident manner could lead to a complete bust.

When formalist elements clash with realist elements instead of working with them, that is when audiences get completely lost. And for good reason. Form should follow function. Which leads us to another key term: verisimilitude.

Willems describes this as a movie's "inner truth." Now, this is key: a movie doesn't have to adhere to actual reality, but it must embrace its *own* concept of reality.

As a director, you're obliged to show your audience how the reality of your film functions and the rules by which it operates. "What matters," Willems points out, "is maintaining verisimilitude and sticking to its own rules." Artificial moments, or moments that seem obviously outside the world of the film you've created, take the audience completely out of the movie.

"What matters is maintaining verisimilitude and sticking to its own rules."

It's a risky play for production companies, but when it works, it works. Some of the most interesting projects to have surfaced in recent years break the mold of realism and stray further towards formalism.

[*La La Land*](#) won major awards this year and [Wes Anderson](#) has actually moved further down the spectrum towards formalism with each movie he's made.

Willems believes that people prefer realism for the same reason they like sequels: "It's familiar, they understand it." In order for filmmaking to evolve, however, Willems argues we need to be "moving in new directions and embrace formalism."

CLASSICISM: DEFINITION & CHARACTERISTICS

Classicism: The classical paradigm is a movie strong in story, star, and production values, with a high level of technical achievement, and edited according to the conventions of classical cutting. The visual style is functional and rarely distracts from the characters in action. Movies in this form are structured narratively, with a clearly-defined conflict, complications that intensify to a rising climax, and a resolution that emphasizes formal closure.

Characteristics of Classicism

- A style determines how the film is organized with the elements of story, sets, scenes, shots, sound.
- A plot is the sequence of actions in chronological order.
- A story is the narrative, or cause-and-effect chain of events, sometimes unseen and able to change time and space.
- A character has certain traits and reacts to certain situations as an agent of action and decision.
- A protagonist is the central character, active, goal-oriented, positive motivations. The antagonist is in conflict with the central character's effort to solve a problem.
- A story must have resolution, an ending, closure for characters and situations.
- Editing is the physical rearrangement of frames of film and the adding of effects such as sound
- Continuity is the arrangement of shots to tell a consistent story.
- Genre is a standard formula for a particular kind of story.
- Auteur is the filmmaker.
- Mis-en-scene is the arrangement of space, to "place on stage" the characters, props, lighting.
- Chiaroscuro is the range of lighting from dark to bright.
- Montage is the arrangement of images for effect.
- Metaphor is a symbolic construction
- Classicism is all about ideal storytelling.
- The goal of a classicist is to tell a story in the best way possible.
- Want you get caught up in the characters and their problems, to feel what they feel, but not be distracted by the filmmaking techniques.
- Classicists will build sets that resemble reality and get them exactly right for the story.
- Make polished pictures with the camera, but nothing that will make you gasp "look at that camerawork!"
- They will use professional actors who can portray the characters emotions, and who will bring in a big audience.
- If there are special effects, they will look as realistic as possible.

Roots of Classicism

- Primitive cinema imitated the novel and theater and vaudeville
- Pre-Hollywood cinema emphasized short playlets based on a single incident
- Feature films of D. W. Griffith integrated multiple incidents, created suspense with editing, added intertitles, used subtle gestures and expressions in closeup shots

CLASSICAL FILM

The classical film is a type of filmic style that is derived from a set period in cinematic history: Hollywood's Golden Age, the 1920s to the 1960s. This era was known as the studio era, with film production being dominated by eight studios (five major and three minor). These studios controlled most of the market – producing, distributing, and exhibiting the films they created (controlling 60% of theatres between each other). Due to this monopoly of the mainstream cinematic landscape, a new style began to emerge from these studios. This new mode of serial production has come to be known as the Producer Unit System, in which the producer oversees the production of the movie from start to finish. The producer and the other parties involved approached creating films during this period as an assembly line to maximise profits a movie can generate. This led to the standardization of film form. Bound by rules and limitations on individual innovation, the classical film mode was born.

As François Truffaut said: “we love the American cinema because the films all resemble each other”. This quote perfectly describes the assembly line resemblance of film in the classical era. A reason as to why there is such resemblance from film to film is due to the norms that are set as “the basic principles of artistic construction that form the work”, during the classical period. These norms create a system that if followed “isolates preferred practices and sets limits upon invention”. Since the studios dictated the majority of films being produced, they were followed by all those involved. These norms had an emphasis on formal unity at a macrocosmic and microcosmic level.

The formal elements of a classic film are rooted in the narrative rather than the stylistic. The narrative itself is the focus of a film created in this era, as “the story must be told by a skillful and systematic arraignment or adaptation of the means at hand subject to the author's use”. These ‘means at hand’ refers to the stylistic system used by the producer and director to better convey the narrative and propel the simple plot forwards. The mise-en-scène, lighting, cinematography, editing, and sound are all used in a way that showcase the narrative above all else. This is achieved through orienting the viewer in the diegetic world both spatially and temporally through costumes, props and lighting. By foregrounding characters and revealing their psychology (in hopes of highlighting the linear causality/motivation) through dialogue, motifs of action and props, clear motives, and music and sound effects. And by ensuring comprehension of the narrative through camera movement, centering characters in the shot, and editing that allows the viewers to follow the action and show them what is significant in the shot. All of this is done to make the narrative comprehensive and unambiguous. Thus, the classical film “rest upon particular assumptions about narrative structure, cinematic style, and spectatorial activity... Narrative form motivates cinematic representation... [and] causal-effect logic and narrative parallelism generate a narrative which projects its actions through psychologically-defined, goal oriented characters”.

CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD NARRATION

The idea of "**classic Hollywood narration**" derives from *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985), by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson.

"Classic Hollywood narration focuses on an individual or small group of individuals who early on encounter discrete and specific goals that are either clearly attained or clearly unattained by the film's end. The goals tend to exist in two spheres, and their pursuit is developed along parallel and often interdependent plot lines. One sphere is private, generally a heterosexual romance; the second is public--a career advance, the obliteration of an enemy, a mission, a discovery, and the like."

(William Luhr, "Tracking *The Maltese Falcon*: Classical Hollywood Narration and Sam Spade," in *Close Viewings: an Anthology of New Film Criticism*, ed. Peter Lehman [1990], 7-8)

Compare Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (2nd. Ed., 1993), pp. 80-81:

Even now, within most mainstream Hollywood productions, audiences expect to encounter a plot centered around a main character played by a star; driven by a consistent set of cause and effect relationships; employing a double plot structure which links a heterosexual romance with another sphere of action (adventure, business, crime, for instance); and which uses the romantic clinch as the sign of narrative closure. Departures from such conventions within contemporary Hollywood cinema are usually seen as especially realistic and 'confronting,' . . . as especially 'arty,' . . . or as fantasy.

Compare Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (2nd ed., 2003), p. 12:

Like most Hollywood movies, *Titanic* contains two distinct plots, a love story and, in this case, an account of the disaster. These two plots are as connected to each other as any individual viewer requires. Chronologically, they are almost completely separate. The love story reaches its climax and resolution 100 minutes into the movie's 194-minute running time, when Rose (Kate Winslet) tells Jack (DiCaprio) that she intends to leave the ship with him. Immediately afterwards, the ship hits the iceberg and the spectacular action movie begins. This coincidence allows viewers to connect the two sequences of events if they choose to do so: Rose, who has described the *Titanic* as "a slave ship, taking me back to America in chains," rejects the luxurious repression the ship represents, and by her act of free will dooms the ship. For those viewers who choose such an interpretation, the story "moves from Rose's sexual objectification and her suicidal frame of mind (in which she turns her anger against herself) to her sexual liberation and the externalization of her aggressive impulses in the spectacle of the ship's destruction."

In his book on *Titanic*, David Lubin suggests that the simultaneity of the kiss and the crash "adhere to the governing rule of historical fiction, which is that public and historically significant events are best understood by taking measure of the private and personal struggles of fictitious characters put forth as ordinary people whose lives happen to be directly affected by those events."¹⁷ We witness the disaster from the perspective of Rose, Jack, and the other characters we have met in following their love story.

CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD NARRATION AND ITS LIMITS

In his essay *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedurals*, Bordwell seeks to highlight how classical Hollywood narration constitutes a specific and normalised way of representing and presenting a particular story, through manipulation of compositional style and techniques. According to Bordwell, there are three components, or purposes of a narrative: representation, structure and act. Bordwell focuses on the former two to show how classical Hollywood narration (prevalent in American films in the 1960s and 1970s) is able to differentiate itself from other narrative modes.

The prerequisite to outlining a narrative in a classical Hollywood film is the existence of a central focal point, or the *protagonist*. This centrality and focus marks the first difference between Hollywood narrative and other narrative modes, such as the absence of a consistent and goal-oriented characters in art-cinema narration. The protagonist is often a psychologically defined individual that struggle to solve a problem or to attain certain goals. This character is often depicted in detail, and becomes the chief object of audience identification. The existence of such a character endows the Hollywood narrative structure with a justified sense of purpose: the narrative naturally follows this individual in his or her attainment of some goal. The narrative therefore begins with the elucidation of the problem, and follows the protagonist in coming into conflict with others, or some external circumstances. The narrative then ends with a clear victory of defeat, or at least a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals. According to Bordwell, even though this narrative arc is a common inheritance from theater and literature, cinema makes it unique by the addition of particular motifs and habits.

Given a permanent central character, the rest of the narration is related and constructed through the principle of causality. This unifying principle is the logic around which temporal and spatial organisation is planned. Spatial composition is organised around causality or a realistic necessity: the placement of a table is for the purpose of writing, and the existence of a phone is for the purpose of calling. The reason for the spatial compositional parts is logical; though metaphors can exist, the objects are utilised to the end of fulfilling a particular practical purpose. Similarly, temporal progression follows the same logic: the most prime example is the deadline, like a ticking bomb that explodes at a particular endpoint in time. The organisation and presentation of time therefore has a sense of purpose, and to lead up to the deadline. The causal logic gives the classical Hollywood narrative a unity in time, space and action: the transition is always logical and expected. The result of the careful planning is a coherent narrative that is linear in nature, motivated to reveal the causal-effect relationship.

A further aspect of classical narration is its invisibility. Classical narration tends to be omniscient, very communicative, and only moderately self-conscious: the narrative structure possesses more knowledge than any character and does not move in a random fashion, it conceals relatively little, but it seldom acknowledges its own existence to the audience. According to Bordwell, this trend is clear when we trace the progression of the narration. In the opening passage, the narration is the most communicative, revealing plenty of information about time, space, and character. However, once the causal relationship has been initiated and an initial problem that the protagonist experiences is delineated, the narration retreats to the background and becomes more covert; the audience is immersed in the *mise en scene*. The story does not seem constructed, and the setting seems to pre-exist the construction of the narrative. There is coherence and permanence in time and space.

Bordwell does a good job in illustrating how classical Hollywood narrative is purposeful. Film techniques are a vehicle for story-telling and for revelation of information; transition is always seamless and cinematic space is calculated. There is a kind of “editorial intelligence”; specific stretches of time are selected for a full-scale treatment, while inconsequential sequences that do not contribute to storytelling is omitted. I feel like Classical Hollywood narration seems pathologically fixated on the coherence of an archetypal story, and even to a certain extent, subordinated by this artificial *purpose*. Shots become exceedingly practical; though metaphoric shots and devices exist, they still serve to elicit particular emotions and interpretations that contribute to the meaningful engagement with the story.