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Ivone Margulies: Reenactment and A-filiation
Richard Rushton: Post-Classical Hollywood Realism
Contemporary Realism

Realism is a contentious term. Championed in the ‘40s by theorist André Bazin as the asymptotic tele of the filmic medium, and adopted epistemically by the Italian neorealists to denote the testimonial candor of their post-war cinema, its usage and subsequent connotations came under fire in the ’50s and ’70s, charged with empirical dogmatism and ideological complicity in the wake of Grand Theory’s intellectual vogue. Since then, the term has been held at a cautious remove in film studies, paired often with historicizing prefixes to mark the contours of movements past (poetic realism, neorealism, kitchen sink realism, etc.) but uttered always in retrospective turns, pointing to the finitude of its mimetic prowess—what Christian Metz labelled its “realism of the senses”—to an oneiric and/or intersubjective realm. Each era looks for its own. And finally, Tiago de Luca engages in a phenomenological reading of Gus Van Sant’s Gerry, proposing a more embodied version of realism—“realism of the senses”—to understand the text’s visionary images. While not exhaustive of the surrounding strands of realism being considered in film scholarship, this issue of Cinephile acts as an insightful survey of at least the most absorbing areas dedicated to this reinvigorated field. My deepest gratitude to the authors for the caliber of their contributions. I must also extend thanks to my advisor Lisa Coulthard and my advisor Lisa Coulthard and her work as a photographer, she is also a partner in the design studio Caste Projects.

Contributors

Hannahlie Beise received her B.F.A. from Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2007. In 2008, she worked with The Sartorialist in New York and was commissioned by the Frank Gehry IAC building in Manhattan to produce a series of panoramas for permanent installation. In 2009, she was an Artist in Residence at the Banff Centre. In addition to her work as a photographer, she is also a partner in the design studio Caste Projects.

Tiago de Luca was recently awarded his Ph.D. in World Cinema at the University of Leeds, UK. He has published articles in academic journals such as Senses of Cinema, New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film, and Journal of Chinese Cinema. He has a forthcoming chapter on realism and world cinema in the anthology Theorizing World Cinema (2012).

Marc Di Sotto is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Edinburgh, working on the relationship between memory and authenticity, and how these are reflected in the representations of history in literature and film. This work builds on his M.Sc. thesis, “Speaking in the Voice of Witness: A Study of Trauma and Authenticity in Fictional Representations of the Holocaust” (2008). He is a peer reviewer for the postgraduate journal Forum.

Justin Horton is a Ph.D. candidate in Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University in Atlanta. His area of research includes classical film theory, cinematic realism, and sound studies. His M.A. thesis, “The Flow of Water: Contemporary American Realisms” (2011), explores how free indirect discourse and the disjunction of sound and image open realism to an oniric and/or intersubjective realm. Current projects include an investigation of voice-over in animated television, and the convergence of cinema and the “out-of-body” experience.

James Lattimer is an M.A. candidate in Film Studies at the Free University of Berlin. He has worked for the Forum section of the Berlin International Film Festival since 2008 and has been appointed to its selection committee for the upcoming 2012 edition. He is currently writing his M.A. thesis on how neorealist theory can be applied to the oeuvre of Kelly Reichardt.

Ivone Margulies is an Associate Professor in the Film and Media Studies Department at Hunter College (CUNY). She is the author of Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday (1996) and the editor of BBoy Real- ism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema (2003). She has published articles in Screen, French Studies, Critique, and others, and contributed the essay “A Matter of Time” to the Criterion release of Jeannette Diezmann, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (2009). Her recent essay, "Bazin’s Exquisite Corpse," can be found in Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and its Afterlives (2011). She is currently completing a manuscript on post-war reenactment cinema.

Richard Rushdon is a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Lancaster University, UK. He is the author of The Reality of Film (2011), Cinema After Deleuze (2012) and co-author of What is Film Theory? (2010). He has published articles in Screen, Journal of Visual Culture, CineAction, Deleuze Studies, Senses of Cinema, among others. He is currently working on a book tentatively titled A New Politics of Cinema.
Reenactment and A-filiation in Andrea Tonacci’s Serras da Desordem

This essay considers the dystopic dimension of post-Shoah (Lanzmann, 1984) reenactment cinema, closely reading the figuration of return, dislocation, and a-filiation in Andrea Tonacci’s Serras da Desordem (2006). An allegorical meditation on the audiovisual erasures and rewritings of National History, Serras tells the story of Carapiru, an isolated Indian from the Awá-Guajá tribe who reenacts events that took place twenty to thirty years earlier, mainly his first contact with non-indigenous Brazilians after an attack ordered by landowners disperses and kills members of his family group.

Carapiru wanders for eleven years and 600 km from the northeast of Maranhão to Bahia, and in 1988 he makes contact with some ranchers and stays with the Aires family until FUNAI, the Indian Services, bring him to Brasilia and then back to Maranhão to join remnants of his community at the Caru reservation. When Sydney Possuelo, the person in charge of isolated groups, calls a translator for Carapiru, the young man who comes recognizes Carapiru as being his long lost father. The eventful discovery of a not-yet contacted Indian and the unexpected re-encounter of father and son after eleven years of separation lead to Carapiru’s momentary celebrity status.

Serras da Desordem freely cuts news and television reportage of Carapiru’s first encounter with non-Indian Brazilians into reconstructed and documentary scenes from 1988 and 2006; expeditionary films from the teens and twenties flit by interrupting Carapiru’s reenacted present, and an extended montage of institutional newsreels and films reference the period of Carapiru’s wanderings (the “Brazilian miracle” period), turning the film momentarily into an ironic dictatorship-era synopsis. The film advance a radical de-originating agenda, from its inter-textual saturation to the classical self-reflexive staging of the filmmaker meeting Carapiru at the end of the film to “start” it. Serras’s hybrid texture, its unexpected temporal shifts, black and white to colour transitions, and various image grains, keep Carapiru constantly unanchored, lost in a forest of images.

This unmooring—real, enacted, and textually multiplied—is my object here. Carapiru’s disengaged, incongruous presence among non-Indian Brazilians, his residual group, and the film’s surface, is a result both of a violent history of eradication and the effect of a fracturing aesthetic involving recursive repetition and literal reenactment.

Carapiru agrees to replay his story on the condition that the director will bring him back to his reservation. While this anecdote pinpoints charged questions of Indian displacement, the film steadily engages the contradictions involved in mimetically reproducing a going-back in time and place. Deeply entangled with his personal and ethnic history as a survivor of one of the last not-fully contacted Tupi-Guarani tribes, the paradoxes of retracing Carapiru’s history of dislocation are many: what does it mean to represent first encounters, to re-construct dispossession? How does one maintain the multiple registers of separation and encounter as we see Carapiru revisit the sites and people he met twenty years earlier?

The inherent belatedness of reenactment has been instrumental in the renewed engagement with the real appar-

1. Tonacci is part of the Brazilian Cinema Marginal movement. His first feature, Bang Bang (1970), is a spare, self-reflexive road movie. After that, he spent the late 1970s and 1980s working with indigenous tribes experimenting with testimonial and self-ethnographic forms (among many others, Conversas no Maranhão, 1978; The Araras, 1980-81). He had no illusions about indigenous groups living a pastoral reality.

2. The Guajá had to become nomadic foragers since the 1800s to escape decimation and are at present reduced to around three hundred and sixty members, sixty of whom live in a dwindling forest pressed by multiple corporate interests, in particular the mining company Vale do Rio Doce.
In contemporary tactical art and parafictional forms, critically stretching the reach of testimonial, revising history and registers of authenticity, many of these meta-fictional practices embed a redemptive promise into their re-creations, opening a biography to alternate possibilities (as in Shuler, Elizabeth Shuler’s 1997 “remake” of Shulamith Firestone’s life prior to her radical politics), or testing the activist reach of a political speech into different presents (as in Mark Tribe’s The Port Huron Project, 2006-2009).

Dealing with Carapiru, an isolated Indian and the prime object of ethnography’s salvage paradigm, Tonacci’s take on the retroactive potential of reconstruction is necessarily questionable. Used to catch up with a missed event or gesture, reenactment is closely aligned with cinema’s fictional machinery, with its desire to shape and tame contingency. When deployed to represent the Indian, an entity subjected to constant patrol and territorializing pressure (when not downright extinction), reenactment becomes all-too-easily complicit with the ethnographic tendency to fixate an existing reality anchored in the past: to have the Indian become a piece of folklore relegated to the Nation’s past, to try to represent the Indian, thus trying to close its case.

Provocatively stating that “In Brazil everyone is Indian or black, thus trying to close its case. The Indian, thus, is no longer an Indian—which has nothing to do with representativeness or identity, but with singularity (150-153).”

To what degree does the protagonist’s consciousness count in a filmed theatre, and what is transmitted once Carapiru’s self-expression is occluded, blocked event? What is the agency of the returning figure, of a figuration of return?

Literal reenactment films raise, above all, the question of agency. The casting simplicity of in-person reenactment—for what could be more obvious than playing one’s own story—is tempting for activist filmmakers. Presented in terms of its protagonist’s affect and subjective memory, self-performance is easily confused with a public reclamation of one’s self and voice, occluding the film’s voice and agenda.

Carapiru remains un-translated. The film dissociates in-person reenactment from authentic relay, suspending its protagonist in multiple—temporal, categorical, and expressive—fronts. Invalidating the consciousness-raising mission of classical neorealist reenactment and documentary films, Carapiru is not introduced as a self-driven agent of his own history; and neither is cinema a transparent conduit to animate any prospect of continuity with the past, or should it be seen instead as a mere prop lit up just for the film? The film oscillates between these options, insisting on a tableau for his voice nor for eventual onscreen self-awareness. Like other contemporary reenactment films discussed here, Seru stages a problematic agency: that Carapiru is there but strangely absent, that his presence is at odds with the present it refers to, is both a result of Tonacci’s targeted mobili-zation of reenactment’s hesitant temporality and an allegory for an intractable aléity.

Disrupted Transmission

Carapiru’s relay value is linked to recurring images of a fire-brand. The film starts, in the manner of process-oriented ethnographies, with an Indian making a fire. We do not yet know that this is Carapiru. A dreamlike sequence prefiguring the attack dissolves into images of Indians choosing a place to set up camp, showing their convivial relationship with their kin and animals. An older native woman hands the firebrand to a child, a detail that gains significance when, later in the film, one of the men in charge of the Indians’ protection tells a parable for the film. He mentions an occasion when, concerned with their escape, he asked one of the Indians to put out his firebrand. When it was extinguished, he felt the Indian’s pride in carrying it was instantly deflated. The firebrand, a simple tool when compared to a lighter or match, becomes, in this anecdote, a figure for multiple losses and ruptures.

In “The Artifices of Fire” (2008), Ismail Xavier takes stock of this metaphor, pointing to Tonacci’s articulation of cinema’s role in this break with tradition: “At the end of the film we return to its initial scene, the image of an Indian making fire. Only we now know this is Carapiru and he comes to the woods to meet Tonacci and the camera” (23). In the last shot, Carapiru addresses the camera while a digitally inserted jet plane passes above him, “an even more inaccessible image of technology” (23).

Carapiru’s incomprehensible camera-address persists as the node of obstructed communication and ostensive reflexivity that guides the question of testimonial agency in literal reenactment: can reenactment, like the firebrand, animate any prospect of continuity with the past, or should it be seen instead as a mere prop lit up just for the film? The film oscillates between these options, insisting on a tableau for his voice nor for eventual onscreen self-awareness. Like other contemporary reenactment films discussed here, Seru stages a problematic agency: that Carapiru is there but strangely absent, that his presence is at odds with the present it refers to, is both a result of Tonacci’s targeted mobili-
We are left to ponder what distinguishes original happenings from replay, routine from event, event from film take.

of a National history of violence and spoliad—equate incommensurate images of Brazil. More than a synthesis of an era, this juxtaposition creates an imbalance between a single body and its testimonial burden, these constellations of meaning too dense to filter through an individual story. Such allegorical pressure is constant in incommensurate images of Brazil. More than a synthesis of an inaccessible self is instantly denaturalized, echoed by the prosthetic memory of the military era, ending on a de-structured event from replay, routine from event, event from film take.

Carapiru is not the sole revenant in the film. With remarkable economy, Tonacci replicates reenactment’s strategy to have a single person (or scene) reappear in a new context, eliciting a retroactive foreshadowing, a set of correspondences across time.

The uncanny kinship between past and present is especially highlighted when it targets the circumscribed autonomy of indigenous populations. The second time the Indian community idly bathes by the river, it is shadowed by the threat of massacre that follows an Edenic second view, a shadow a second scene where, in the present-tense of history, children run after another pigeons. These short bursts of footage corrupt the film’s neutral base—backyards, classrooms, and the kitchen are visited by someone else’s vision. In many cases, this vision corresponds to Major Luiz Thomas Reis’ ‘Asphalt Brazil’ (Asfalto Brasil, 1933), a compilation of films by the cinematographer who accompanied Marshall Rondon’s Commission in his scientific explorations of the Brazilian interior.

Complicating the fidelity of the savage paradigm in fully determining the contours of ethnographic documenta-9
tory, Catherine Russell has called for an experimental ethnography that ‘foreground[s] the “time machine” of anthropological representation’ (6), pointing to Walter Benjamin’s vision of allegory as an alternate historiographical model, one in which fragments of other histories bring into play a deep temporal crisis, are intercepted by a similarly framed 1920s kitchen and meal scene, featuring another family at the table. Edited in perfect match-on-action continuity, these inserts institute momentary but deep rifts in historical consciousness: “What connects the dish served here and the raised spoon there,” affirms Rodrigo de Oliveira, “is nothing less than the perception of a whole, the consciousness that National history is construed by having the image as an involuntary support of memory” (75).

Luis da Rocha Melo remarks that the film’s excerpts, derived mostly from exploration and travel documentaries, intertwine and comment on Tonacci’s own gaze (34–42). A flickering archival image of native, uniformed children in a classroom surrounded by white-smocked class for kids. An archival shot of a pig flitting by in a backyard crosses a furtive shadow a second scene where, in the present-tense of history, children run after another pigeons. These short bursts of footage corrupt the film’s neutral base—backyards, classrooms, and the kitchen are visited by someone else’s vision. In many cases, this vision corresponds to Major Luiz Thomas Reis’ ‘Asphalt Brazil’ (Asfalto Brasil, 1933), a compilation of films by the cinematographer who accompanied Marshall Rondon’s Commission in his scientific explorations of the Brazilian interior.

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non-linear temporality. It is precisely this allegorical model that is embraced in Tonacci’s jarring re-appropriation of other visual histories. Inserted with rhyme but with no apparent motive, these naturalized scenes of anachronistic zeal are snippets of gelled historicity. They reveal a visual pattern implicating cinema’s complicity in a patronizing gaze that objectifies natives, children, wild landscapes, and animals. Complicating one series of images to be read through the other, they create a noise in Tonacci’s “rescue” of Carapiru’s story. Erupting as if from a historical unconscious, this interstitial commentary haunts the film’s well-intentioned present.

Many of the criteria that grant coherence to a realist discourse—the flashback, memory, reference to a cycle, inherited family traits—all the staples of a shared diegetic world or a coherent psychology—are submitted to significant torques, filtered by Carapiru’s opaque subjectivity as well as by the film’s relentless fragmentation. Two sequences rehearse the protagonist’s affiliation while showing its shift contours and ruined history: Carapiru’s encounter with his son and his dispersal amid other Indians at the reservation.

A-filiation

It is especially regarding the question of kinship—which lineages are Carapiru’s claim? Where does he fit and what is the status of an isolated Indian in Brazil today?—that the film most clearly activates reenactment’s “anachronic” quality, creating a speculative space to frame and keep Carapiru’s apartness alive as a question.10

The retreating of Carapiru’s loss and return to his group sets into play a continually deferred scenario of integration. The finding of Carapiru’s lost son strikes us as momentous: “The ultimate proof, a bullet wound the son knew his father to bear on his back, is shown through a replay of a television reenactment of the encounter in 1988. Carapiru’s body is the screen for recurrent mediations and mis/recognitions. We see television images of American linguists unsuccessfully trying to map Carapiru’s language onto a Tupi Guarani grid. We also register our own fantasies of adoption (Carapiru child-like passivity helps) sparked by the reconstituted encounters with benevolent families—the Aires who take Carapiru in and Sidney Possuelo’s family with whom he stays in Brasilia. Navigating a field of assumed genetic relatedness, the various encounters with normative orders set in relief his position as outsider, relegating Carapiru to a second exile, to an a-filiation.

Possuelo reveals, for instance, that he at first thought Benvindo recognized Carapiru, not because he is his father, but because they are from the same ethnicity. Threading a risky line—whether an emphasis on ethnic origin and culture would betray or reinforce Carapiru’s singularity—Tonacci steers clear of ethnographic explanations. Loretta Cormier, a Guajá scholar, notes that “genealogies are neither meaningful nor appropriate for understanding the way the Guajás perceive kinship relations” (75). Their belief that they have more than one “biological family” explains what happened. Benvindo hears Carapiru’s name and says in broken Portuguese, “This is my father’s name… I recognize his face… He is my father.” The ultimate proof, an old bullet wound the son knew his father to bear on his back.

...these films make clear that there are no natural causes, no genetic or social predispositions; there is only theatre, a claim enacted in and through repetition.

10. I borrow Christopher Wood and Alexander Nagel’s notion of the “anachronic,” introduced as an alternative to the historian’s description of a work of art as anachronistic. By contrast, to describe a work of art as “anachronic” is to say what the artwork does “qua art”: “when it is late, when it repeats, when it becomes, when it returns, also when it projects a future or an ideal” (14).

11. They could not reenact the encounter because Carapiru had an accidental collision in Brasilia and they had to interrupt the filming for six months.

See Tonacci, “Conversas na Dessert” 248.

12. See Cormier chaps. 6-7.
Contemporary Realism has noted apropos of Werner Herzog’s This de-realizing aesthetic recommended by Lan-... its atmospheric effects, it is brought about through an intensified affective dimension. The juridical claim enacted in and through repetition. A cluster of scenes of daily life at the Guajá res-

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Works Cited


5. “The Indian is another humanity,” is repeated twice in Serras: la machine de mort khmère rouge de Ruby Pardo. Eds. Lynn Higgins, Seven Ugaron and Dalton Kraus. L’Erreur Créateur 53.3 (Win-

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The critique of realism as it was practiced by film critics and scholars in the late 1960s and 1970s has fallen rather dramatically off the film studies map. There are some reasons for this disappearance. For example, the emphasis on perceptual and cognitive frames of realism explored by cognitive film theorists has greatly refined film studies’ approaches to realism. As well, rather than critiques of realism, defenses of realism have risen to the fore, especially in terms of a reassessment of Bazin’s theories. Alongside this renewed advocacy of realism, however, for large parts of the film studies community questions of realism seem more irrelevant than ever, especially insofar as special effects and CGI animation have tended to take centre stage in Hollywood blockbusters over the last fifteen to twenty years. For those who have celebrated the triumph of digital special effects over analogue indexicality, realism has well and truly been put to rest. The celebration of the digital has thus been one way of doing away with the critique of realism, for if there is no longer any realism, there is no need to critique it.

With these positions in mind, I want to revisit the critique of realism here with a few particular points in view. First, I want to claim that many contemporary special effects films and CGI animated features can be called realist in ways that are related, albeit in modified ways, to the realism associated with classical Hollywood. My intention in doing so is to claim that these films cannot be dismissed as either fantasies or escapes—a typical advocate of realism, for example, might dismiss special effects films as irrelevant departures from reality. In other words, a major reason for revisiting the critique of realism is because contemporary Hollywood films cannot be easily celebrated for their anti-realism or their digital surpassing of analogue realism. My aim instead is to argue that these films can give valuable insights into the kinds of realities we currently inhabit. And while it is true that I am going to be somewhat negative about, and critical of, that reality—I am revisiting the critique of realism, after all—I do not wish to be critical of the films themselves. Rather, the films I discuss here—and I rely on some approaches made by other scholars—shed valuable light on the kinds of realities we have begun to take for granted.

Some sense of what I am aiming for here is provided in my book The Reality of Film (2011). There, while discussing a range of film-related scholars, I argue that rather than providing departures from reality, films can be said to provide us with ways of understanding, conceiving, navigating, and imagining reality. In other words, instead of trying to claim that some types of films express reality well—call these "realist" films—while others fail to do so, I make the claim that all films present us with realities of one sort or another. What is at stake in such an approach is an attempt to discern what kinds of realities are made available by a particular film or films. From such a perspective, reality is not just what we see or perceive, nor is it merely what a camera might record or capture. Rather, reality is about imagining, dreaming, fantasizing, and conceiving what kinds of realities might be possible, though seeing and perceiving understandably fall within such frameworks as well. My question might therefore be: what kinds of realities are made available in contemporary Hollywood cinema?

Conceptions of classical Hollywood realism still seemed appropriate up until approximately ten years ago. Warren Buckland, for example, in a contentious piece on Jurassic Park (Spielberg, 1993), defined what he called a “new aesthetic realism” that had been made available through digital imaging. Buckland argued that a range of realist conceptions, many of which were indebted to André Bazin and other Cahiers du Cinéma writers of the 1950s and 1960s, were applicable to contemporary special effects films, even more so with the added realism that could be obtained by way of CGI effects, such as the realism of Spielberg’s digital dinosaurs. Even more to the point, Lev Manovich’s Language of New Media (2001) posited a his-

1. See Anderson, Currie, and Grodal.
2. See Anderson, Crowe, and Morgan.
There are some key moments. Kristen Daly, for example, describes the complexities that have emerged with cinema’s digitization. She argues that contemporary Hollywood cinema, there has also been an embracing of new forms of narrative, forms that differ substantially from their classical counterparts with other modes of filmic organization. Manovich, for example, refers to the interfaces or information spaces of digital media (326), while David Bordwell theorizes what he calls “network narratives.” Suffice it to say that, along with the mechanization of everyday life, then in the digital era, “the cognition of the audience must be synchronized with digital logics” (Daly 86). The digital age usherers in new senses of the world so that the old mechanical and industrial categories no longer apply. From such a perspective, realism belongs to the debates of a bygone era. Nevertheless, here one might begin to sense that the question of reality becomes a pressing one: what kinds of reality can be conceived by way of digital cinema and “digital logics”?

Along with the quest to discover what kinds of reality are at stake for digital cinema—and Daly posits various modes of “play,” “navigating,” “searching,” and “figuring out the rules of the game” as essential to the digital’s “database” logic—there is a sense that narratives are not what they used to be. Daly contends that “the dominance of narrative…is waning” in favour of a range of other modes of audience interaction with the digital text (83). Like Daly, other scholars have noted the replacement of classical narratives with other modes of filmic organization. Manovich, for instance, is interested in the space of information spaces of digital media (326), while David Bordwell theorizes what he calls “network narratives.” Sufficient it to say that, along with a turning away from questions of realism in digital cinema, there has also been an embracing of new forms of narrative, forms that differ substantially from their classical Hollywood predecessors.

Alongside such interventions, Kristen Whisell has published two key articles investigating the relation between digital cinema’s aesthetic strategies and the potential socio-cultural significance of those strategies. One angle she pursues when discussing what she calls the “digital multitude”—the many films that feature digitally produced crowds of people (or aliens, or robots, and so on)—is that “more often than not, the multitude’s appearance heralds ‘The End’—the end of freedom, the end of a civilization, the end of an era, or even the end of human time altogether” (“Digital Multitude” 91). Whisell thus pinpoints one of the key narrative tropes of digital cinema: that a great many films seem to point “the end of the world” as an organizing frame. What this necessitates in the films she discusses is a bonding together of humans in the face of extinction: “To become the agents of a new history,” Whisell contends, “the protagonists must temporarily prioritize the collective over the individual and trade self-interest for united, self-sacrificing, bloody engagement with an enemy” (108). In these films, the strategies of discovering a new collective spirit in order to prevent the end of the world offer a response to the threat of the digital multitude and its aims for human destruction. Additionally, for audiences, those strategies also suggest ways of coping with the anxieties involved in the expansion of the digital world over the last twenty years or more. Whisell points to a key narrative strategy that has emerged in the digital era that defines a reality of the present for its audience: that we need to band together to defeat our enemies, enemies that seem to have emerged only in the digital era—whether these are suicide bombers, “evil” regimes, or computer systems themselves.

Thomas Elsaesser offers yet another perspective. In terms of narrative, he claims that contemporary Hollywood films increasingly seem to favour puzzle narratives—dense, multi-layer narratives that scramble in myriad simultaneous directions and often feature sudden reversals of assumption (“Mindgame”). One of Elsaesser’s examples of this kind of puzzle narrative is Avatar (Cameron, 2009). In discussing the film, he makes some startling claims about the ways in which contemporary audiences approach narrative meaningfulness. He claims, for example, that there are a range of ways into and out of the narrative, so that one almost reaches a point at which one can make whatever one wants of it; in a film, he argues, that offers “access for all.” The proliferating layers of antithetical or even contradictory storylines—which Elsaesser calls “cognitive dissonances”—ends up delivering to the spectator a sense of satisfaction at merely having managed to decode something from the film. In fact, “the cumulative effect of these cognitive dissonances,” writes Elsaesser, “is to provoke the spectator into actively producing his or her own reading” (“Access for All” 260).

In other words, one can be for or against the film, one can see it as a narrative of noble savagery, of corporate control, or any range of other options. The film encourages such “freedom of interpretation” and actively courts opposed or contradictory stances on the film’s meaning or message.

With a film such as Avatar, then, there have emerged variable forms of free-floating and free-choosing subjectivities. Elsaesser claims that it is the spectator’s “management of contradictions” (256) that is key to Avatar’s success with audiences: it makes it seem as though spectators are choosing their own perspectives on the film, but all while the film is carefully managing those perspectives. Such a perspective is only “the illusion of ‘empowering’ the spectator” (260), and ultimately its narrative, its contradictory story lines, are all so many “images [that] are instructions for actions” (261); the film is controlling us, even as it appears to be offering us choices.

Elsaesser points out a complex one. He argues that trying to identify the ways in which a film like Avatar is defining the kinds of realities we have come to inhabit over the last twenty years or more, realities defined more and more, it seems, by digital technology and its logics. One way of defining that reality is that we take Elsaesser’s point a step further: “the cumulative effect of these cognitive dissonances,” writes Elsaesser, “is to provoke the spectator into actively producing his or her own reading” (“Access for All” 260). In other words, one can be for or against the film, one can see it as a narrative of noble savagery, of corporate control, or any range of other options. The film encourages such “freedom of interpretation” and actively courts opposed or contradictory stances on the film’s meaning or message.

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For Elsaesser, as with the other authors I have discussed, realism is not a central issue. And yet, Elsaesser’s argument begins to move very close to the kinds of arguments that were once made apropos of a “critique of realism.” If we accept Elsaesser’s conclusion, then Avatar is doing nothing less than expressing what was once called the “dominant ideology”—in fact, Elsaesser claims as much (261). Such a stance was one of the key tenets of the critique of realism: that “cinema reproduces reality,” but in so far as it does so, all its can do is reproduce the prevailing ideology. Jean Narboni and Jean-Louis Comelli made such a point in their 1969 editorial for Cahiers du Cinéma, “Cinema / Ideology / Criticism.” In that editorial, the authors set in place the criteria for a critique of realism that were to become extremely influential well into the 1980s (and, indeed, their influence can still be felt in some circles today).

### Classical Hollywood Realism

Classical Hollywood realism has three main characteristics: it privileges aesthetic strategies of transparency; it produces a fixed spectator-subject; and it is unable to adequately portray the contradictions of society. For critics of realism, these features are all geared towards reproducing reality, but by extension, they thereby reproduce the prevailing ideology as well. Films that do this—the bulk of which can be considered classical Hollywood realist films—produce “bourgeois realism” and the whole conservative box of tricks,” as Comelli and Narboni rather bluntly put it (20). If we look closely at the three key terms above—transparency, fixed spectator-subject and contradictions—then it will at first glance appear that for contemporary scholars such terms are no longer useful ones. First, the foregrounding of aesthetic techniques in the digital age has made simple distinctions between transparency and aestheticism much more difficult, especially insofar as rapid editing, mobile phones, and special effects render the notion of a “transparent window on the world”—central to Renais-

sance perspective no less than classical Hollywood realism— and less and relevant for contemporary Hollywood films. Second, the fixed spectator-subjects of classical Hollywood spectatorship also appear to have been superseded by mobile, freely-choosing spectators who are no longer passive consumers, but who actively work to figure out and make the meanings in the film, read it in the light of other contexts (Whisell and Daly have argued).

From Whisell’s perspective, the fixed Subjects (with a capital “S”) of classical Hollywood (and, needless to say, of Aristotle’s analyses) have been replaced by a new sense of collectivity that eschews “too much individualization and self-interest” (“Digital Multitude” 108). Finally, the rise of puzzle narratives has enabled Hollywood films to portray contradictions, even if this contradic-

*tion is tempered by what Elsaesser notes is an ongoing


5. See Althusser; cf. Baudry.
mode of control exercised by films like *Avatar*. For Daly, Whissel, and Elsaesser, these complexities definitively separate the films of contemporary Hollywood from those of the classical age.

These are strong claims: that the terms posed by classical Hollywood realism no longer apply to contemporary Hollywood films. At the same time, however, there is no sense that ideology has been done away with. Neither Daly, Elsaesser, nor Whissel mention ideology as a term of detailed analysis, but all offer ideological perspectives: Elsaesser’s critique of *Avatar* is decidedly negative on ideologically-grounded; Daly’s defence of “Cinema 3.0” (Verbinski, 2007) who had to confess the first Hollywood film to feature complicated plotting. (shows something approaching contradiction—as Roger And how might it be related to realism? is the ideology of these contemporary Hollywood films? take up issues of ideological significance. So where or what modification” (98); and Whissel sits on the fence somewhat, though her invocations of “multitudes” and “collectivities” positive—the films she discusses act as “a counter of com-

Daly, Elsaesser, nor Whissel mention ideology as a term of reality for Whissel, and Elsaesser, these complexities definitively separate the films of contemporary Hollywood from those of the classical age. Daly eventually defends such a perspective as being one that contemporary audiences have become comfortably acquainted with: “Digital consumers are accustomed to not quite grasping the links, to knowing that only a computer could make such a link…This vagueness is commonplace and accepted by the digital user” (96). This might be a first step towards defining a contemporary ideological reality: that films, no less than the digitized world itself, have become incomprehensible in ways that we have begun both to acknowledge and accept. And this might certainly be one way of conceiving of contradiction: that there is no longer a smooth, easy, or linear reality mapped out by films in terms of a beginning, middle, and end, and equally, that there is no ideology “out there” that can be so easily shaped into a various competing ideologies define the kinds of realities we inhabit, and there is no way to break through to a domain that might be ideologically exempt...

past, present, and future. Perhaps this is a first step towards defining a contemporary ideological reality. Such a perspective leads to interesting conceptions of subjectivity. For Elsaesser, a film like *Avatar* only appears to offer a spectator myriad choices. In a similar way, Daly’s “Cinema 3.0” does away with “following a linear narrative” and instead offers the spectator a range of games and puzzles that “put the viewer to work” (86). Here we have an active —instead, an interactive—viewer rather than the passive or “fixed” spectator associated with classical Hollywood. And for Whissel, as we have seen, examples from contemporary films demand that conceptions of the individual subject be put aside in favour of collective action.

Transformers: Revenge presents difficulties for any straightforward conception of subjectivity. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to give this film the detail on this point, except to declare that what seems like a mode of interactivity for Daly, might turn out to be a more insidious form of passivity than even classical Hollywood cinema. Daly states that contemporary consumers are accustomed to having machines make their decisions for them. Transformers: Revenge makes a similar point: its hero, Sam Witwicky (Shia LeBeouf), has visions of “cyber

8. Towards the end of the film, for example, Galloway is unreasonably ejected from an airplane while one of the military jocks calls him a "dumb ass."
With such issues in mind, Transformers: Revenge might be considered a very ‘realist’ film. It is not avoiding reality; rather, it is presenting reality to us in a straightforward way. The reality it presents is certainly ideological, but that in no way makes it false. To call such an ideological reality false would be to turn one’s back on the reality we inhabit, especially insofar as reality will always already be ideological. The authors I have briefly discussed here indicate a number of ways that some contemporary ideological realities might be comprehended. Elsewhere demonstrates, for example, that the complexities of contemporary puzzle films offer the kinds of contradictions that classical Hollywood realism could not. So the foregrounding of contradictions might be one way of accounting for today’s ideological realities. And yet, whereas the critics of classical realism thought the exposure of contradictions would open up the possibility for human emancipation, Elsewhere contends that, in the context of contemporary cinema, no such thing has happened. Instead, the contradictions of contemporary narratives—Avatar being exemplary for Elsewhere—merely deliver the appearance of freedom. The exacerbation of complexity or contradiction in contemporary Hollywood narratives is merely another way that Hollywood keeps us captive.

In contrast, Daly argues that contemporary forms of cinema do offer modes of empowerment to viewers (98). Many of the conclusions she makes, however, are problematic to say the least. Near the end of her article, she invokes Gilles Deleuze, stating that he envisioned a future of cinema that would no longer be predicated on “looking through a window on the world,” but that would offer instead a “table of information” (qtd. in Daly 97). Thus, Deleuze presents one way in which a realist perspective can be replaced by an “informational” one. But whereas Daly takes this to be a positive prediction, Deleuze, in fact, saw no such thing; indeed, he could hardly have been more critical of what he called “information,” declaring at one point that “When you are informed you are told what you are supposed to believe” (“The Creative Act” 320). The information world is one in which we can no longer believe; we must simply accept what we are told to believe. Deleuze would eventually call such a state of existence a “control society,” and Daly’s article, no less than Transformers: Revenge, very accurately charts the contours of such a society.

Whissel offers a more nuanced approach to contemporary cinema, especially if we conceive of such films in terms of their ideological realities. Yet, in defining contemporary forms of reality, she remains from making any judgments about the possibilities entailed by such collectives. The next step is to ask why so many of the films she discusses—and Transformers: Revenge is pertinent here—all posit “the end of the world” as a framing device. Classical Hollywood films, by contrast, typically posit the beginning of a new world, the founding of a new civilization or the birth of a nation, rather than “The End.” The implication is quite possible that the hope of founding or re-founding a civilization of the “good”—a civilization founded on the ideals espoused in A Few Good Men—is very much a thing of the past. Such insight is definitive for the ideology of contemporary Hollywood cinema as much as it is for the reality of the contemporary world: that the possibility of imagining a better kind of world is gone; all that remains is the hope that “our” enemies will be defeated and that “our” military will keep us alive.

Post-Classical Hollywood Realism

his way, the world and the human race would have been destroyed.

Things turn out very differently for the Galloway of A Few Good Men. Here, the film ends with truth and justice victorious over the might and convenience of military deception. This means that for the ideological reality of the film—and A Few Good Men is unexceptional in its acception of the codes and conventions of classical Hollywood realism—one could have characters like Galloway able to reprimand characters like Jessep for their misappropriations of power. In other words, trying to convince others of the difference between right and wrong, or justice and injustice, was still an option for classical Hollywood films, as much as it might have been for reality itself. The Galloway in Transformers: Revenge, on the other hand, suffers entirely different consequences. It is as though the film is declaring that anyone who searches for truth, especially when we are dealing with classified intelligence in the realms of national government and the film makes it clear that Gallo- way is supposed to be a representative of Barack Obama’s government).

A number of distinctions come to the fore here: the clarity or ‘transparency’ of narrative storytelling in a class-

7. See Deleuze, “Postscript on Control Societies.”

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For André Bazin, realism exists in the plural: “There is not one realism,” he writes, “but several…Each period looks for its own” (“William Wyler” 6). In what follows, I look to a recent example that reflects this ongoing search. Joe Swanberg’s debut feature Kissing on the Mouth (2005), a founding film of the polarizing “mumblecore” movement, proves an illuminating case, for it confronts the “problem” of realism on a number of fronts, among them the technonto-logical, the inheritance of antecedent realist styles, and the question of taboo and taste as it pertains to that which mainstream realisms so often elide: sex. Moreover, I submit that the film’s most intriguing undertaking lies in its curious interplay between sound and image. Specifically, the sounds, or more aptly, the sound-image relations, found in Kissing on the Mouth deviate considerably from a “realist” soundscape and stage a manifold interrogation of the possibilities of realism in a poststructural, postmodern, post-filmic age.

In order to proceed, we must first situate Kissing on the Mouth within the context of mumblecore, the now waning microbudget movement that tends to focus on the ennui of inarticulate, post-collegiate American hipsters. 1 In addition to sharing a common social milieu, these films are united by a similar aesthetic. Frequently improvised, cast with nonprofessional actors, and characterized by narrative looseness, mumblecore films attempt to make a virtue of their roughhewn visual style. Though Swanberg’s films fit this general mould, they stand out against the others for their graphic inclusion of what appears to be non-simulated sex. The director contends that this is not the gratuitous deployment of skin for shock value; rather, Swanberg claims that Kissing was conceived as a rejoinder to the mumblecore progenitor, Andrew Bujalski’s Funny Ha Ha (2002), a film in which its young protagonist’s awkward flirtations result most often in stolen, awkward, or misaligned kisses (Lim 11). Though both films are concerned with the listless longings of middle-class Caucasians, Swanberg explicitly depicts that which is omitted in Bujalski’s film. In Funny Ha Ha, sex is a subject that both the director and his characters seem to hesitantly dance around; in Kissing, sex seems more “natural” than conversation, which is often uncomfortable, clipped, evasive. Whereas the verbal exchange is fraught with peril, sex is at least a fleeting moment of shared interest or intersecting intention—intercourse as discourse. The film’s opening scene immediately cues the viewer that sex is on the agenda, for it depicts the flip side of Bujalski’s chaste coin. Before any dialogue is exchanged, we are presented first with a man and a woman kissing, then a close-up of a condom being unrolled onto an erect penis. The title card of the film then appears over the characters engaging in apparently non-simulated lovemaking. So often associated with callow hierarchies of intimacy (as in the cliché baseball analogy—first base, second base, and so on), the title registers ironically when placed atop the image of graphic sex. Clearly, the film is dealing with something other than the sexless sweetness of Bujalski.

It would be easy to write off Swanberg if his adoption of a realist aesthetic were merely an attempt to elevate the pornographic to the art house, and, indeed, many have made such a case.2 Sex is, after all, one of the more “artifi-

1. A sampling of films that fall under the mumblecore heading include Four Eyed Monsters (Buice & Crumley, 2005), The Puffy Chair (Duplass, 2005), Quiet City (Katz, 2007), Team Picture (Audley, 2007), among others.

2. Amy Taubin, emblematic of the critical backlash against mumblecore, is one of the most outspoken detractors of Swanberg, whom she describes as a “clueless [narcissist]” whose “greatest talent is for getting attractive, seemingly intelligent women to drop their clothes and evince sexual interest in an array of slobby guys who suffer from severely arrested emotional development” (“Mumblecore: All Talk?”).
This tempering of the more explicit elements of Kiss-ing with the quotidian is not without antecedents. The focus on the banal can be found throughout a number of realist cinemas, for it subverts the cause-effect chain of classical narratives by leaving in that which is commonly excised in the Hollywood film. We find its origin in the Italian neorealist period—the famous scene of the maid going about her chores in Umberto D. (De Sica, 1952) comes immediately to mind—and it has endured as a common aesthetic (and political) strategy in art cinema. Writs Bazin of the De Sica film: "The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of

cial of events in the cinema, calculated and choreographed to show some actions while choking (the lack of) others. Throughout much of his work, Swanberg counters this tendency with the graphic depiction of various sex acts, most notably in this case, the autoerotic. In one scene, we see Patrick (Swanberg) unobscured and masturbating in the shower, culminating with a close-up of him ejaculating. Instead of the sex acts that are merely suggested in mainstream fare, the depiction of the male climax in Kiss-ing serves to "verify" the film’s sexual encounters. As Linda Williams in her path-breaking study on pornography posits, the visualization of the film’s sexual encounters. As Linda Williams in her path-breaking study on pornography posits, the visualization of

critical components of the movement’s interrogative or deconstructive project.

which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis" (’Umberto D’ 81). The deployment of temps mort forced with neorealism can be seen in perhaps its most overtly political articulation in feminist cinema of the 1970s, with Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975) being the exemplar. Irene Margules echoes Bazin in her monograph on Akerman: “Along with extended duration,” she argues, “the quotidian is undoubtedly the signifier of excellence of the realistic impulse” (23). In this regard, the “money shot” in Kiss-ing is hardly scandalous, for the surrounding banality wrests any eroticism or narrative drive from it; within the logic of Swanberg’s film, Patrick’s climax is no more bracketed off than any of the other mundane “instants of life.”

Indeed, throughout Kiss-ing on the Mouth, Swanberg seems to be channelling Akerman. The scene in which Patrick and Laura (Kris Williams) paint the walls of a bedroom recalls a similar scene in Je tu il elle (1976). Furthermore, Swanberg’s comment about filming the body in the same “way [he] filmed a computer or a table” reflects an approach that Akerman utilizes in her short La chambre (1972), wherein the camerain’s 360-degree pans pay no more mind to the lone human figure (Akerman), who sleeps, eats, and masturbates, than the tea kettle or chest of drawers.

In addition to this loosened approach to narrative events, Kiss-ing utilizes another realist hallmark: the use of nonprofessional actors, a strategy that also came to prominence with Italian neorealism. Swanberg, like most of his fellow mumblecore directors, employs amateurs in his films in an effort to tamp down the artificiality of trained performance. Moreover, Swanberg relies heavily on improvisation, another common realist approach. Taubin writes: "these non-actors are perfect choices for these films because their insecurity and embarrassment about voicing their characters’ ideas, desires, and feelings is not merely symptomatic of their lack of technique, it dovetails with a defining characteristic of the particular cohort (white, middle-class, twenty-something) to which the filmmakers and their quasi-fictional characters belong" (’Mumblecore: All Talk?’). Taubin allights upon both the effectiveness and stiffness of this approach: in that the characters are only "quasi-fictional,” the performer never “disappears” fully into his character. Instead, a friction emerges between the “real” of the actor and the construct of the performance and/or the very performativity of “real” self. In some instances, the scene comes off as “natural” in that it lacks the polished style of traditional acting. However, in others, the result is ungainly, pointing to the artificiality inherent in the cinematic endeavour. Hence, the stutters and swallowed lines from which the moniker “mumblecore” is derived are crucial components of the movement’s interrogative or deconstructive project.

As these examples indicate, tactics utilized in Kiss-ing on the Mouth are by no means unique, but rather, are inheritances from a number of prior realisms. The nonprofessionals who act in the film hearken back to neorealism and numerous new wave movements throughout the world. Similarly, non-simulated sex can be seen in the works of a number of art house directors including Catherine Breillat, John Cameron Mitchell, and Michael Winterbottom. Where the film stands out, though, is that it is engaged with the problem of realism not only at a stylistic level, but also in terms of the narrative. The relationship between sound and image and how they interact with questions of representation and ontology become central concerns by film’s end.
about love, relationships, life goals, and so forth. Unlike Chris, who is associated with an analogue technology, Patrick records and edits his interviews digitally.4 Furthermore, nothing in the text suggests that his project is designed to be anything other than an aural one, for he is never seen capturing or editing images to accompany his collection of spoken interviews. That Kevin is a visual approach and Patrick’s an aural one is of especial importance.

One can see, therefore, that the film organizes the two men vying for Ellen’s affection into three binary oppositions (see Table 1).

Though it is tempting to disregard the creative occupations of Chris and Patrick as tropes of the mumblecore genre, I contend it is more productive to think of them instead in terms of the contrasting ontological natures of their respective artistic media and their differing methods of “capture.” This dichotomy reflects back upon the very anxiety over the fate of photographic and cinematographic realism, now that the image no longer (necessarily) carries an indexical link between the material object and its representation. After all, Bazin’s conception of cinematic realism is tied in part to its photographic derivation—its register of a trace of an object within the world onto the filmstrip. The ontological difference between the technologies employed by Patrick and Chris serve to acknowledge the disquietude the digital turn has wrought to the notions of representational realism. In other words, the “great spiritual and technical crisis that overtook painting” (Bazin, “Ontology” 10) with the advent of photography is visited upon us again, ushered anew by the digital.

Table 1: Kissing on the Mouth’s Male Binaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship to Ellen</th>
<th>Sexual</th>
<th>Platonic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain of Representation</th>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of Capture</th>
<th>Analogue</th>
<th>Digital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
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</table>

So how, then, does Kissing attempt to resolve or intervene in this crisis? The answer lies in a second binary: the audio/visual. Just as Swanberg announces his intentions to redress the staid lustfulness in Bujalski’s film in the opening scene, he follows it in the subsequent scene with the introduction of a formal device that marks the film’s most striking deviation from our prototypical realist text. In it, Patrick is seen preparing a microphone for an interview with an off-screen subject. As we cut away (visually) from the interview scene, the voice of the subject carries over into the next. The identities of Patrick’s interlocutors (a total of four by film’s end) are never revealed. Interestingly, Swanberg deploys a seen/unseen dynamic by showing only Patrick, the interviewer, and keeping the interviewee invisible. These lengthy responses are heard exclusively in the form of voice-over narration, and reemerge throughout the film with little to no narrative justification. These voices rarely seem to “link up” to the film’s visual content, but yet form a running soundtrack that seems to be related only tangentially and in a thematic way to the visuals or the story.

This audio is curious, for unlike most traditional films, it seems to bear no relationship to what is visualized onscreen. The spectator attempts to unify and to reconcile what she hears and sees, which is why the voice that is heard but is not seen has garnered considerable attention from scholars of sound cinema. For instance, Pascal Bonitzer, speaking of documentary film, argues that the unseen narrator exercises a god-like (and thus, ideologically suspect) authority over the spectator. Along the same lines, Michel Chion has labeled the unseen voice the “acoustmère,” a spectral figure to whom he attributes a number of powers—ubiquity, omniscience, panopticism, and omnipotence (18-25). The acoustmère attains these powers by being “present” despite being “not-yet-seen” (21); yet, in Kissing on the Mouth, these voices trouble Chion’s theory because, despite functioning acoustically, they never reveal themselves, and thus, cannot be linked with their physical sources. In this regard, these voices “issue from a space other than that on the screen, an unrepresented, undetermined space” (Copjec 184). Hence, by disallowing the voices in Kissing the status of third-person, omniscient narration, and also by withholding their “de-acoustimization,” Swanberg denies them any of the powers associated with the acoustmère or the authority ceded to the documentary narrator. These are then “intemporal voices: they cannot be situated in—nor submitted to the ravages of—time or place” (185). In short, these voices hang in limbo.

Therefore, unlike conventional voice-overs, the audio and the visual elements of the film achieve a certain level of independence from one another; the voices that float over the images are not there to serve as interior monologue or commentary, nor do they align necessarily with the text’s dramatic situations, and when they do, it seems more serendipitous than by design. Instead, sound and image operate as equals, neither subservient to the other.

Gilles Deleuze theorized such a relationship between the aural and the visual in his two volumes on the cinema. According to the philosopher, the de-linking of sound from image is a crucial characteristic of the “pure optical and sound situations” of the modern time-image. The rupture initiated by World War II, according to Deleuze, inaugurated the shift from the classical movement-image to the modern time-image, following which, sound “began to ‘turn in on itself’ for ‘it [was] no longer dependent on something which is part of the visual image; it becomes a completely separate sound image; it takes on a cinematographic autonomy and cinema becomes truly audio-visual” (243). By being discrete and autonomous elements, the aural and the visual attain the possibility of entering into a free indirect relationship with one another.

Kissing...self-consciously withholds the voices’ identities, and in so doing, subverts the customary authority of the acoustmère’s disembodied voice...

from silent to sound cinema allowed for the presentation of “direct” character speech (i.e., speech that is heard and synchronized with the moving lips of an actor, not speech conveyed via title card, which is an indirect method). The sound film, once it had overcome the initially awkward period of transition, developed into its classical form. The rupture initiated by World War II, according to Deleuze, inaugurated the shift from the classical movement-image to the modern time-image, following which, sound “began to ‘turn in on itself’ for ‘it [was] no longer dependent on something which is part of the visual image; it becomes a completely separate sound image; it takes on a cinematographic autonomy and cinema becomes truly audio-visual” (243). By being discrete and autonomous elements, the aural and the visual attain the possibility of entering into a free indirect relationship with one another.

3. Like the character he plays, Swanberg relies upon digital technology. Kissing on the Mouth foregrounds the limitations of this technology by maintaining the camera’s native 1.33:1 aspect ratio and featuring “blown-out” overexposed cinematography. (Bazin, “Ontology” 10).

4. In a recent essay, Aymar Jean Christian argues that digitality is a somewhat of a thematic and aesthetic trope within Swanberg’s body of work, most explicitly in LOL (2006), the follow-up to Kissing on the Mouth.

5. According to the philosopher, the de-linking of sound from image is a crucial characteristic of the “pure optical and sound situations” of the modern time-image. The shift initiated by World War II, according to Deleuze, inaugurated the shift from the classical movement-image to the modern time-image, following which, sound “began to ‘turn in on itself’ for ‘it [was] no longer dependent on something which is part of the visual image; it becomes a completely separate sound image; it takes on a cinematographic autonomy and cinema becomes truly audio-visual” (243). By being discrete and autonomous elements, the aural and the visual attain the possibility of entering into a free indirect relationship with one another.

6. Deleuze borrows the notion of free indirect discourse from Pier Paolo Pasolini, though as is his custom, he modifies it significantly. For Deleuze’s elaboration of cinematic free indirect discourse, see the DVD commentary, the voices heard throughout Kissing on the Mouth were not scripted; rather, Swanberg and fellow filmmaker and co-star Kris Williams interviewed several of their peers and transferred this audio into the film. Thus, the interview audio is indeed a documentary, but the film leads one to believe that the people speaking exist within the diegesis. The appropriated voices, then, add yet another layer to the film’s already complex interaction between fiction and reality, sound and image.

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Deleuze remarks that within the pure optical and sound situation, “talking and the visual [are] no longer held together, no longer corresponded, but [become] and [contradict] themselves, without it being possible to say that one rather than the other is ‘right’” (250). This passage is key for two reasons: first, it assigns neither the visual nor the aural a place of supremacy; second, the two components come to contradict or falsify one another. Thus is born the “sound image” or “sonis,” which exists on either side of “a fault, an intestine, an irrational cut between” sound and image (251). This interval is, for Deleuze, home to the true power of the cinema, for this space between is a locus of possibility, the site of viable becoming. He associates the emergence of the sonis with a diverse array of filmmakers, from Eric Rohmer to Robert Breton to Alain Robbe-Grillet. Most surprisingly, he cites ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch as an exemplar. In Rouch’s work, the documentary—the privileged site of the “real”—becomes home to audio-visual contradiction, which for Deleuze, marks the cinema’s greatest possible potential. Instead of filling in or providing the aural complement to the image, sound enters into an irrational relationship with it, and out of this reciprocal interplay is born film’s ability to transform or destabilize “reality.” Only when the elements of cinema—the raw materials of image and sound—are divided from one another, may new potentialities be actualized. This irrationality is crucial to our understanding of the interview audio in Swampner’s film.

We have grown accustomed to the voice-over in fiction film providing information or otherwise framing that which is seen; the voice is in most cases an identified character within the diegesis. Kissing, therefore, self-consciously withholds the voices’ identities, and in so doing, subverts the customary authority of the auteur’s disembodied voice—a tension is set up between what we hear and what we see. What I call subversion, however, Deleuze describes as a necessary trade-off, by “entering into rivalry or heterogeneity with the visual images… [breaks] free from its moorings” and “loses its omnipotence but by gaining autonomy” (250). Deleuze’s notion of audio-visual “rivalry” illuminates the tension between sound and image, and the visible and the invisible, upon which the clasis of Kissing on the Mouth hinges. Late in the film, Ellen tacitly agrees to pose nude for a photo shoot with Chris after he begins to cajole her with a photo session that will make Ellen a model in their initial, more traditional courtship. Thus, Ellen begins to tell the story of her affair with Chris. In so doing, she also submits to the second of her suitors, this time in voice but not in image or body.

Recall for a moment the earlier breakup scene, which suggests that what Chris had been seeking from Ellen was an intimacy of a different sort, one of emotional content. Chris sits on Ellen’s bed looking over the negatives from their shoot, noting the way the light plays off her body. All the while, Ellen kisses and pets him in an attempt at arousal. “Can we talk?” he asks. “Can we do something other than sex?” Her refusal to provide access to her interiority is precisely the act that ultimately dissolved their relationship. And it is exactly this emotional transparency that gives to the film its conclusion. In response to Patrick—who now “possesses” Ellen’s voice, her thoughts, in a recording that is permeated with the type of intimacy that Chris sought and that Ellen was unwilling to give him. Thus, over the course of the film, Ellen moves from the realm of binaries associated with Chris (sexual/platonic) to those aligned with Patrick (platonic/sound), and in so doing, she shifts from carnal, corporeal body to invisible, disembodied voice. Crucially, Ellen’s transformation is not of the physical sort, but rather, a shift in the form of her mediation. For both Patrick and Chris, he believes these images signal a corresponding romantic attachment, one that Ellen staunchly refuses. Nevertheless, her participation in the photo session enacts an unwitting concession on her part.

In submitting to Chris’s lens, she is “pinned down” via her collaboration and becomes, in a sense, a possession, locked into an ideal pose according to his preferences. Indeed, despite Ellen’s repeated denial of an emotional attachment, she finds herself unexpectedly hurt by Chris’s later rejection of her in favor of one of his other “models.” These photographs become for Ellen a two-fold predicament: primarily, they incorrectly signal to Chris her desire to engage in a bona fide, romantic relationship; consequently, through Patrick’s exhumation of them, she is exposed to his prying gaze and demands to defend her actions. Moreover, because Ellen has no interest in a sexual relationship with Patrick, the pictures become for him a particularly stinging reminder of the unattainability of the object of his desire.

Deleuze observes that “when the pure optical and sound situation, “talking and the visual [are] no longer held together, no longer corresponded, but [become] and [contradict] themselves, without it being possible to say that one rather than the other is ‘right’” (250). This passage is key for two reasons: first, it assigns neither the visual nor the aural a place of supremacy; second, the two components come to contradict or falsify one another. Thus is born the “sound image” or “sonis,” which exists on either side of “a fault, an intestine, an irrational cut between” sound and image (251). Thus, Deleuze’s notion of audio-visual “rivalry” illuminates the tension between sound and image, and the visible and the invisible, upon which the clasis of Kissing on the Mouth hinges. Late in the film, Ellen tacitly agrees to pose nude for a photo shoot with Chris after he begins to cajole her with the pictures become for him a particularly stinging reminder of the unattainability of the object of his desire.

Sex and speech: both fleeting forms of intimacy, of mutual exchange between people, the recording of which serves the desire to fend off their ephemeralities.
Part of cinema’s appeal, Robert A. Rosenstone has argued, is that it is able to satisfy an innate desire to see “history unfold before our eyes” (11). In *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), Siegfried Kracauer is skeptical about the potential of historical film. For Kracauer, historical film depends on a claustrophobic alignment of the spectator’s “potential field of vision” with the actual images that appear on the screen. In a film depicting contemporary reality, he argues, the audience is “free to imagine that the camera roams reality itself” because even where the staging of the film might be artificial, it is made to duplicate “real-life surroundings” (78). Kracauer illustrates this phenomenon with the example of Elie Faure’s dream of an impossible documentary about the Passion of Christ. Apart from turning its spectators into “eye-witnesses to the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Agony in Gethsemane,” this documentary would show what a historical film could not: the “seemingly insignificant happenings incidental to those momentous events—the soldiers shuffling cards, the clouds of dust whirled up by the horses, the moving crowds, the lights and shadows in an abandoned street” (78). Kracauer describes this effect created by the attention to arbitrary detail as the illusion of “endlessness”—a notion dialectical by nature as it depends on the capturing of finite fragments that signify a depth to the reality of the scene that the camera is unable to capture. Paul Greengrass’s *Bloody Sunday* (2002) seems to approach this ideal film; through large-scale reenactment and attention to the arbitrary, it convincingly masks the seams of its artificiality as it recreates the events of the Bloody Sunday massacre. This article will focus on the relationship between the aesthetics of authenticity and its critical readings in terms of trauma, as well as explore the limitations of such an approach. There is no question that a community experiencing an event on the scale of Bloody Sunday will be faced with potentially long-term, traumatic responses, yet when dealing with its representation, the impulse to read the film’s aesthetic construction in this way obscures a deeper ambiguity about its politics of history. *Bloody Sunday* was first broadcast on January 20, 2002 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre. On January 30, 1972, soldiers of the British Parachute Regiment opened fire on an anti-internment march organized by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in Derry. Twenty-seven civilians were murdered or injured. This injustice was a glaring demonstration of the military establishment’s failure to those it was supposed to protect; and more than this, when a tribunal headed by Lord Chief Justice Widgery (ordered by the Prime Minister Edward Heath) exonerated the soldiers’ abuse of power, a chasm was effectively created between the official historical records and popular memory. Widgery’s report (1972) concluded that the British soldiers had come under fire before shooting and that, although none of the victims were handling a bomb or firearm when hit, it was suspected that some had been in possession of such weapons during the course of the afternoon. Both claims were strongly contested by NICRA and the families of the victims—indeed, the aftermath of the massacre and its official whitewashing saw an increase in the recruitment of young men into the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In 2010, the Saville Inquiry overturned most of the conclusions of the report. In this way, *Bloody Sunday* is situated within a complex relationship between notions of realism and historical

1. See Hayes & Campbell for a salient study of the traumatic effects of the event on the Derry community.
2. In 1998, in the context of the Peace Process and against the background of the 1993 Downing Street Declaration’s commitment to overcoming “the legacy of history,” the Blair administration’s ordering of a new inquiry was an important symbolic gesture. Lord Saville’s report, published on June 15, 2010, found that paratroopers fired the first shot, and had fired on unarmed civilians.
The emphasis on witnessing relies on the same disavowal of the interpretative procedures inherent in the reconstruction of the world through which the camera moves.4

of historical reality, considering that what constituted this reality was, or was believed to be, contested. Bloody Sunday’s authenticity was important to early reviewers, who praised the way it captured the “look and feel of the real thing” and applauded its effort to grant audiences access to “the power and pain of history as it is happening” (Melarkey 24; Dashiell). Lance Petit describes the film as having “raw footage” texture in the way it foregrounds missed action and obscured, “interrupted” dialogue, like when the camera wanders through crowds over the shoulder of Northern Ireland MP Ivan Cooper, weaving in and out of the frame as he jests with locals (55-56). This rawness is reflected in the editing too, with scenes cut in mid-dialogue or mid-action, often figured in the form of fade-outs to a black screen. The overall effect is one of disorientation and confusion as the viewer tries to piece together fragments of conversations and quick-cut images. Tony Kelly argues that this strategy is part of an interpretation of conflict that shakes out frames of fractured bodies and disorienting movement provides the most jarring emotional response in the film. (“Bloody Sunday”)

It is curious to note that the two key elements that Kracauer focuses on to describe the sense of endlessness in his ideal film—the emphasis on disorientation and the incidental, and the impression of the camera freely moving through space—are central to this traumatic reading of Bloody Sunday. In this way, we can note how Penney’s and Kelly’s reading implicitly align on a number of levels: the way in which the camera is a free-floating traumatized subjectivity, yet this illusion of witness is dependent on the notion that the world witnessed is somehow objective. In other words, the temptation to speak of the film in traumatic terms is founded on the film’s effectiveness in creating the illusion of the past’s endlessness—to use Kracauer’s term. The emphasis on witnessing relies on the same disavowal of the interpretative procedures inherent in the reconstruction of the world through which the camera moves.5

Penney develops the camera as witness to implicate the viewer who is “asked to bear witness to the trauma to become a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event” (“Bloody Sunday”): “This language of ‘bearing witness to’ and ‘co-owning’ the trauma is directly informed by Shooshana Felman and Dori Laub’s theory of traumatic transferral, and Cathy Caruth’s conception of trauma as a structural response mechanism associated with the experience of survival. For Felman and Laub, during the experience of trauma, “the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction” (57). The survivor becomes stranded in a paradox where s/he is possessed by an experience that has not been ‘experienced in time’, and is, therefore, not fully known (Caruth 62). As the survivor does not possess the capacity to attribute psychic meaning to the event as it was experienced, the event becomes internalized “without mediation” and resistant to linguistic expression, resurfacing only in the form of flashbacks, which for Caruth, can be understood as a “literal return of the past” (59). Trauma becomes “a literal, nonsymbolic and nonrepresentational memory of the traumatic event,” a memory that is outside of memory, in the sense that it is not individual memory but something approaching the real inscribed in the mind (Ley’s 71). For Felman and Laub, it is only through the act of testimony, which involves a transferral of the trauma between the survivor and the listener, that the knowledge of the event finally comes into being; through the act of listening, the hearer becomes a “co-owner” of the trauma, coming to feel “the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels” (57). From this perspective, a curious overlapping becomes visible between trauma theory’s emphasis on the immediate representation of the event in the witness’ mind and its expression through symptom, and Bloody Sunday’s reconstruction of the witness position through an appropriation of the documentary aesthetic.

Derek Paget’s discussion of dramadox/docudrama is revealing here. Paget highlights a crucial dialectic between the “intertextual” and the “indexical” at the heart of the dramadox/docudrama. He argues that such productions appropriate their authenticity effect by referencing the movements and textures of documentary, which simultaneously point to their origin in the real event (136). Reading Paget alongside Bill Nichols, we can refine our understanding of how this appropriation might work. Nichols argues that one of the central differences between fiction and documentary rests on an inherent disagreement in their relationship to realism: “In fiction, realism serves to make a plausible world seem real; in documentary, realism serves to make an argument about the historical world persuasive” (165). Indeed, for Nichols, this polemical aspect of documentary is essential. Documentary realism, he states, “is not only a style but also a professional code, an ethic, and a ritual” (167). The difference lies not in the misapprehensions that documentaires presents an unmediated recording of the world, but in the way that, through the editing process, an argument about the world is constructed through the juxtaposing of

3. Bloody Sunday was broadcast on ITV, while Jimmy McGovern’s Sunday (2002) was broadcast the following week on Channel 4.

4. Aliens Blaney, for example, writes that the film “work[s] through the persistence of historical trauma in contemporary Northern Ireland” by providing the opportunity for “informal viewers to revisit, and uninformal viewers to witness, scenes from the past” (134; 118).

5. See also Blaney, Hinton & Lynch.
The blank spaces, shaky cameras, and inaudible conversations are not symptoms of what cannot be phrased, but choices not to phrase at all.
Since the widely reported critical wrangling between A. O. Scott and Richard Brody on the merits of using the term “Neo-Neo Realism” to describe a batch of American independent productions released in 2008 and 2009,1 the term has been largely conspicuous by its absence. Of the various directors deemed by Scott to be bringing American cinema its “neorealist moment,” three have yet to re-emerge (So Yong Kim, Ramin Bahrani, Lance Hammer), two have moved toward the mainstream (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck), and only one, namely Kelly Reichardt, has continued to receive significant attention. Tellingly, however, the considerable quantity of critical discussion on Reichardt’s 2011 film, Meek’s Cutoff, has failed to invoke this contentious term, giving credence to the idea that Scott’s “neorealist moment” was of a fleeting nature. Yet, while the intrinsic value of categorizing films based on a movement famed for its own lack of a clear definition is debatable at best,2 neorealist theory can still be utilized as a means of exploring the recent trend of American realism touched on by Scott. If anything, the sheer wealth of academic writing on neorealism comprises a rich seam of theoretical approaches that can easily be applied to contemporary contexts.

Unlike Wendy and Lucy (2008)—which has been brought into connection with De Sicca’s Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette, 1948) and Umberto D. (1952) regarding the structuring principle of a search, and the solace offered by a canine companion, respectively3—Meek’s Cutoff does not, at least at first glance, invite such obvious neorealist comparisons. Although this can perhaps be put down to the nineteenth-century setting and the more immediate foregrounding of the Western genre, a more detailed analysis reveals a range of neorealist underpinnings. The subtle reconfigurations Reichardt performs on these neorealist elements lead to a shift in their ultimate effect and help to illustrate that the relationship between contemporary realist stirrings and neorealism is more complex than a direct revival.

The following discussion of Meek’s Cutoff focuses on the narrative techniques employed by the film and how these relate to various neorealist narrative forms. Rather than get embroiled in the variety of theories pertaining to neorealist narration,4 I will draw primarily from André Bazin’s conception of neorealist narrative structure in order to analyze Reichardt’s film. Due to Bazin’s frequent referencing to Cesare Zavattini’s own thoughts on neorealism, I supplement Bazin’s comments with those of Zavattini where appropriate. While some of Bazin’s more utopian statements on neorealism are to be treated with caution, his lyrical yet precise approach continues to pay dividends, as the recent surge of renewed interest in his work seems to indicate.5

Rather than appearing as a single coherent theory, the two main components of Bazin’s neorealist narrative I am interested in are referred to across a range of texts spanning a five-year period, serving to refine the same ideas in each iteration. The first of these is introduced as a lyrical-natural

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1. See Scott and Brody for details on the original critical spat; for its subsequent discussion, see Kregel and Birdwell.
2. See Roberto & Wilson for a succinct account of the problems in defining neorealism.
3. See Groulx, Hoberman, and Jones.
4. See, for example, Deleuze, Cinema 1 201-220 and Cinema 2 1-23, Thompson 197-217, and Wagstaff.
5. For recent examples of this tendency, see Andrew and Cardullo.
...seemingly innocuous details end up receiving subsequent significance...and episodes that appear to convey significant narrative information end up leading nowhere...

metrical, describing the episodic narrative structure employed by Roberto Rossellini in Paisan (Rizzi, 1946), as a series of events between which “the mind has to leap from one event to the other as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river” (Bazin 35). In more concrete terms, this stepping-stone metaphor can best be understood as referring to a narrative structure consisting of individual events whose exact relationship to one another is not always apparent during the narrative itself (as it only becomes clear in retrospect which particular stones proved decisive in allowing the river to be crossed), and whose overarching construction avoids any overtly contrived quality (as the stones were not placed in the river for that exact purpose).

Bazin later returns to the same idea in more explicit terms to describe the narrative strategy employed in Visconti’s The Earth Trembles (La Terra Tremata, 1948) and Genini’s Heaven Over the Marshes (Cielo sulla Palude, 1949), remarking approvingly that “things happen in them each at its appointed hour, one after the other, but each carries an equal weight. If some are fuller of meaning than others, it is only in retrospect; we are free to use either ‘therefore’ or ‘then’” (59). The various occurrences that comprise the plot, thus, each have different levels of significance for the narrative as a whole, with some merely following one another chronologically, while others build on one another to form a narrative progression. Moreover, the respective significance of each occurrence actually emerges only once the whole narrative has played out, as no one occurrence is emphasized more than any other.

It is with regards to this basic episodic structure that Meek’s Cutoff devises closest to Bazin’s narrative model. The narrative is structured as a series of episodes whose relation-
...Meek's Cutoff can be seen to expand Zavattini's identification model to include genre... while still retaining a link to a specific social reality via the body...

moments of grace in the repairing of a wagon axle, the collecting of firewood, or the grinding of wheat, the second explanation given by Zavattini as to the effect achieved by portraying these activities proves surprisingly apt for explanation given by Zavattini as to the effect achieved by collecting of firewood, or the grinding of wheat, the second specific social reality via the body...

while still retaining a link to a specific social reality via the body, on the one hand, while still retaining a link to a specific social reality via the body, on the other.

A similarly subtle reconfiguration is also undertaken regarding duration. While the film does, indeed, show certain episodes with the sort of respect for real-time duration advocated by Bazin, for others of episodes presented in this way actually end up undermining his theory rather than adhering to it. Instead of showing the characters carrying out their tasks in real time, the film insists on presenting central dramatic episodes in real time. Perhaps the clearest example of this tendency is the scene in which Emily first encounters the Indian. Having run from the sight of each other, Emily enters a wagon and emerges with a rifle. Over the next minute, she methodically loads the gun, fires a shot, cleans the gun's two barrels, reloads, and finally fires for a second time, a car coinciding with the second shot. While this scene provides the most overt example of this durational approach to presenting dramatic episodes, the film contains various narrative episodes in which a similarly pronounced sense of duration is created, such as when Stephen Meek and Solomon Tetherow return to camp with the Indian tied between them, or when Emily cautiously repairs the Indian's shoe. Although this sort of durational presentation is not the only strategy used to portray dramatic episodes—the elipses in the wagon-lowering scene, for instance, provide an alternative—its very use in this context brings about a complete reversal of Bazin's theory. The two necessary conditions that led Bazin to consider Umberto D. an undervalued presentation of real life are decoupled here: certain dramatic episodes are presented in real time while daily activities are portrayed so as to exemplify their generality, circumventing a fidelity to duration. This decoupling ends up running counter to the aims of Bazin's original model, as the decision to present selective narrative episodes in real time serves, if anything, to undermine their significance for the narrative as a whole, giving them precisely the kind of additional weight that Bazin's episodic model is concerned with avoiding. Thus, by pulling apart and applying separately the two components of a narrative strategy whose goal it is to represent reality by converging on reality itself, a new strategy is created that aims to accentuate the narrative's dramatic construction rather than allowing it to disappear into realist transparency.

Combining the respective theoretical approaches of Bazin and Zavattini produces a set of narrative principles and justifications whose application in contemporary cinema by no means needs to be limited to Meek's Cutoff. The narrative analysis of the film also serves to illustrate that transferring past realist strategies into such settings is unlikely to leave their functions unchanged, with comparatively little reconfiguration needed in order to create very different, even contradictory, effects. As such, it is important for any exploration of neorealist elements in contemporary cinema to avoid the temptation to merely reduce their use counter to the aims of Bazin's original model, as the...
In this article, I will look at Gus Van Sant’s *Gerry* (2002) as a privileged example of a realist trend in contemporary world cinema defined by excessive adherence to spatiotemporal integrity through allegiance to the long take, eliciting, as a result, sensory-contemplative cinematic experiences embedded in physical presence and duration. In so doing, I hope to shed some light on the main aesthetic principles governing this tendency, including its distinctive reconfiguration of cinematic realism as exemplified by *Gerry*. I will start by contextualizing *Gerry* within Van Sant’s career, move on to investigate the ways in which the film adheres to, and departs from, traditional notions of realism, and finally analyze its contemplative long takes in light of a landscape painting tradition and American avant-garde, “visionary” cinema. As I will argue, *Gerry’s* hyperbolic focus on the natural world is designed to enhance the phenomenology of the viewing experience, testifying to cinema’s ability to revitalize perception in its full sensory dimension.

**“A New Cinema”**

*Gerry* is emblematic of a cross-cultural cinematic tendency across the globe, which I have elsewhere theorized as “realism of the senses” (de Luca), whose representatives include renowned filmmakers such as Carlos Reygadas (Mexico), Tsai Ming-liang (Taiwan), Béla Tarr (Hungary), Lisandro Alonso (Argentina), Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand), Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey), and others. These are cinemas, I argue, fascinated by the physicality of animate and inanimate matter, bodies and landscapes, all enhanced by slow and/or static long takes that deflate narrative progression, and through which the perceptual and material qualities of the image are enhanced. As exemplified by films as otherwise distinct as Reygadas’s *Japón* (2002), Alonso’s *Liverpool* (2008), Albert Serra’s *Birdsong* (*El cant dels ocells*, 2008), among others, a common trope animating this tendency is the presence of solitary characters wandering through deserted landscapes. Devoid of psychological nuances, they interminably walk, stroll, and loiter, often aimlessly, precluding narrative interaction in favour of phenomenological and sensory experience. These aimless perambulations invite the viewer to protractedly study, in silent long takes, the sheer presence and literalness of the empty landscapes they traverse, a contemplative verve which, I will argue, is carried to its ultimate consequences in *Gerry*.

Before I start with my analysis of the film, however, some remarks on its context are useful. In Van Sant’s case, the adoption of this cinematic style was the direct result of his encounter with the work of Hungarian filmmaker Béla Tarr. After his famous shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho* (1998), sandwiched between two similar and conventional films (*Good Will Hunting*, 1997; *Finding Forrester*, 2000), Van Sant’s career seemed to have reached its saturation point, exposing a director faced with typical postmodern conundrums such as the impossibility of aesthetic originality. This was, indeed, what Van Sant himself expressed in an essay on Tarr. Entitled “The Camera is a Machine,” this was included in the catalogue of a 2001 Tarr retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. In it, Van Sant highlights the inertia of what he calls the “Industrial Vocabulary”—“The cinematic vocabulary of a 2001 television show like *Ally McBeal* is virtually the same as *Birth of Nation’s*”—and describes his encounter with Tarr’s work as marking a watershed in his career, as he found himself “attempting to rethink film grammar” (Van Sant).

And so it is that in 2003, the director released *Gerry*, a film that partly stemmed from a quest to break with conventional narrative cinema.1 This rupture, in Van Sant’s view, is materialized in Tarr’s “endless” tracking shots,

1. This formal direction was later cemented with *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005), films which, together with *Gerry*, comprised what the press nicknamed as the “trilogy of death,” alluding to their reenactment of real life stories involving young demises: the little known story of a desert murder (*Gerry*), the Columbine massacre (*Elephant*), and the death of rock star Kurt Cobain (*Last Days*).
whose protracted focus on inconsequential details and actions disregarded story progression and exhaust narrative motivation, foreclosing, as a result, the sheer materiality of the image’s audiovisual components. Rather than placing “separate fragments…together to form meaning,” Van Sant declares, Tarr’s meditative long takes result in films “organic and contemplative in their intentions,” so much so that “it is like seeing the birth of a new cinema” (Van Sant).

That Tarr was inspired by Tarkovsky is further evident in its reproduction of emblematic scenes of Tarr’s oeuvre, which, incidentally, reiterate the citational impetus of Van Sant’s cinema as epistemized by Psycho. A sustained take of the bobbing heads of Mart Damon and Casey Affleck (Gerry’s protagonists) evokes, for instance, an identical visual composition in a shot in which both characters, followed from behind, are, in actual fact, subjected. Shot entirely on location, mostly in Death Valley and the Utah salt flats (as well as in the Andes, Argentina), the harsh conditions and scorching weather of these locations resulted in a few casualties and unfortunate filming by car at a desert, both of whom inexplicably refer to the same crowd of contemporaries and communal mode of production based on improvisation, physicality, and chance, aspects that—at least in principle—connect the film to a cinematic realist tradition.

Improvisation, Physicality, Absurdism

Gerry employs devices traditionally hailed as the quintessence of cinematic realism, as theorized, not the least, by foundational realist advocate André Bazin. Not only does the film respect the spatiotemporal integrity of reality through a hyperbolic use of the long take, it also testifies to a production process conceived on the premise of location shooting, characterized by improvisation and attention to contingent phenomena which foregrounds the physicality of actors and the materiality of profilmic events. However, as I will analyze in this section, this does not translate into a cinematic realist tradition.

Aiming at a more informal and spontaneous project, Van Sant teamed up with Mart Damon and Casey Affleck, personal friends with whom he had first worked on Good Will Hunting, and the trio started sketching the script for Gerry based on the news of a boy who murdered his friend and bickering. At the film’s end, Damon-Gerry inexplicably chokes Affleck-Gerry to death, and manages to find his way out of the desert and be rescued by a car.

For most of Gerry, the viewer is confronted with these characters, weak and hopeless, dragging their way across harsh landscapes and struggling to find water under a blistering sun. In this respect, the film displays a documentary quality springing from the extreme temperatures and ruthless environmental conditions to which the cast and crew were, in actual fact, subjected. Shet entirely on location, mostly in Death Valley and the Utah salt flats (as well as in the Andes, Argentina), the harsh conditions and scorching weather of these locations resulted in a few casualties and an open-ended structure thus reveals the organic nature of this project, as well as the importance of Damon and Affleck in the film’s creative process. Close friends in real life, they deliver an improvisational acting style grounded in absurdist dialogue.

Gerry is...the fruit of an organic and communal mode of production based on improvisation, physicality, and chance, aspects that—at least in principle—connect the film to a cinematic realist tradition.

Even prompted some crew members to abandon the shoot.

Granted, onscreen physical exertion is conveyed through arthouse, as indicated by the large make-up crew credited at the end of the film, which no doubt contributed to the dissipating, sunburnt look of both actors. Still, Gerry attests to what Lúcia Nagib has recently theorized as “physical realism,” which she defines as recording processes that “give evidence of an actor’s physical engagement with the profilmic event” (19). This is what happens, for example, in the scene in which Affleck, stranded atop a rock, jumps off after hesitating for nearly eight minutes. Avoiding the use of montage trickery, this scene is presented in a long shot that foregrounds the physical reality of Affleck’s jump, even though a jump cushion had been set up on the ground so as to prevent major injuries. This allegiance to the reality of the profilmic event, with the ensuing incorporation of chance elements during the shoot, was the premise upon which Gerry was originally conceived. Shot in chronological order, Van Sant had no idea as to how or when the film would actually end. With a view to endorsing the film with a spontaneous quality, its script, jointly sketched by director and actors, was composed of two pages containing around sixty lines and one-word descriptions, to be improvised on the spot by Damon and Affleck. Examples include “taking a break,” “getting bored,” “panicking,” “looking for trail,” “returning the way they came,” “writing,” etc. (Ballinger 174). This skeletal, open-ended structure thus reveals the organic nature of this project, as well as the importance of Damon and Affleck in the film’s creative process. Close friends in real life, they deliver an improvisational acting style grounded in absurdist dialogue.

Gerry is, indeed, a whimsical, obscure language full of made-up jargon such as “dirt-mattress,” “rock-maronned,” and “mountain scout-about.” Their conversations often come across as inconsequential and nonsensical, occasionally lending the film a humorous quality. At the film’s beginning, for example, the Gertys engage in a three-minute conversation about the television program “Wheel of Fortune,” recalling with amusement a contestant who “had every letter except for ‘L’ in the word ‘barrel”rbing,” but who thought it was a Y. Later on, Affleck-Gerry claims that he “conquered Theres…two weeks ago,” going on to give the details of the ancient Greek city’s conquest to an attentive Damon, a buffling monologue that, the viewer concludes, can only refer to a video game.

Gerry’s mode of production, in major respects attuned to the tenets of realist cinema, is thus translated into a fundamentally anti-realist narrative concerned with causal- ity or logic. Indeed, the film’s absurdist dialogue, delivered by two solitary characters in the midst of nowhere, is in many ways reminiscent of Samuel Beckett’s famous existen- tialist play Waiting for Godot, an aspect largely picked up by the press upon Gerry’s release. Originally written in French as En attendant Godot, and representative of the “Theatre of the Absurd,” the play presents two characters engaged in obscure conversations while they wait for the eponymous Godot, which in Gerry finds its cryptic equivalent in “the thing.” The word “Godot,” as noted by Lawrence Graver, encompasses a multitude of meanings and puns, both in English and French, among them the obvious “God,” but also “godillo” and “godasse,” French words for “shapeless old shoes” and “military boots”—both recurrent visual motifs in the play (41). Interestingly, in Gerry it is the word “Gerry” that is endowed with a puzzling interchangeability, a usage supposedly incorporated from the way the actors speak between themselves in real life. Not only do they refer to each other as Gerry, but this word, the spectator learns as the film unfolds, has a semantic and semiotic versatility in their vocabulary: it is used as a verb, an adjective, and a noun, with varying meanings. Hence, in order to express his luck when “conquering Theres,” Affleck-Gerry exclaims that that was “such a gerry.” In another scene, Damon-Gerry explains that they “gerrited off to the animal tracks,” using the word as a substitute for the verbs “wander” or “walk.”

2. See Stanger 11-14.
Most notably, Gerry stands for the word “fuck” or “screw,” as illustrated in the scene in which Damon-Gerry concludes that they “totally gerried the mountain scout-about.” Thus, Gerry’s thin, cryptic plot seems to be encapsulated in the slippery word “Gerry,” whose definite meaning, like the film’s narrative, is impossible to pinpoint. In this respect, Gerry resonates with a landscape painting tradition.

In his study of spatial representation in cinema, Martin Lefebvre asks whether there is such a thing as “landscape” in film—in the contemplative sense that this term has acquired apropos of a Western painting tradition. Distinguishing between “settings” and “autonomous landscapes,” Lefebvre argues that the spectator may adopt an “autonomising gaze,” taking in, for example, a western setting “in its own right” and transforming it into a “landscape” (29). On the other hand, one may find “landscapes” momentarily, as in the temps morts of Michelangelo Antonioni’s films, famous for their long takes of characters aimlessly traversing desolate locations. Implicit in Lefebvre’s discussion is the de-dramatizing function that the distant and silent long take can perform. Of course, the sequence shot can be appropriated for dramatic ends, and this was what Bazin himself praised when expounding on the long takes of Welles, Renoir, and Wyler, which, in the critic’s view, displayed a meticulously orchestrated mise-en-scène in strict accordance with dramaturgic logic.3 However, with Antonioni—and to an even greater extent Gerry—we have a different scenario. Here, long takes coupled with distant framings are often utilized so as to produce images evacuated of narrative information and meaning, which enhance, in return, the purely material presence of landscapes.

If, as Malcolm Andrews contends, a landscape painting tradition emerges as a quest “to celebrate the awesome beauty of the natural world” (48), Gerry is similarly a film that seems fascinated by the film medium’s ability to capture phenomenological reality as materialized in stunning landscapes. Lefebvre charts the birth of a landscape tradition “in the progress from the moment when large loca- tions ceased to be an appendix ‘to a painted scene’ and became ‘the primary and independent subject matter of a work’” (23)—meaning the literal spatial increase of landscapes in the surface of a painting and the inversely proportionate decrease in the size of human landscapes. In particular, this dwarfing of the human figure culminated in the Sublime painting tradition, a tendency with which Gerry specifically resonates.

The defining characteristics of the Sublime were famously proposed by the English philosopher Edmund Burke in *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1827), in which he defines it as divesting the human being of control and reasoning, the experience of which, usually found in nature, is inexpressible and unrepresentable. To encounter the Sublime is thus to confront superlative concepts such as “Vastness,” “Infinity,” “Lighet,” and “Magnificence,” as found in material form in the natural world (Burke). This notion was pictorially trans- lated into landscapes whose monumentality loomed over powerless and minuscule human figures. In Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Monk by the Sea* (Der Mönch am Meer, 1809), we encounter more than two thirds of its surface occupied by an immense and formless white sky, which weighs down

...if these grandiose images lend themselves to metaphysical readings, then they convey...emptiness, nothingness, and meaninglessness, testifying not to God but to the sheer mystery of existence and the physical world...
Contemporary Realism

has become the director’s hallmark, found in most of his films. Either slowed down or sped up, break the narrative flow, notably, they appear in the form of passing clouds, which pervasive, if in subdued form, in many of his films. Most he later veered into narrative cinema, “visionary” images are

Design in the 1970s, where he studied experimental cinema Van Sant’s rapport with the American avant-garde to be the case in

an attempt to reproduce dream states and (altered) mental processes of perception and cognition. We see, in lengthy takes, immense skies, rising suns, sped up clouds and shadows, sand dunes and monumental rocks—autonomous images that arbitrarily halt Gerry’s already rarified narrative and whose extended duration lend the film a hypnagogic quality (Figure 9). As viewers, we are unable to locate the place of these images within the diegetic universe: are they purely objective images conveying the passing of time? Are they being “seen” through the eyes of these characters? Or are they “mirages” in their own right—that is to say, au-

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is regularly punctuated by images of landscapes entirely devoid of human presence. In this respect, the film’s protracted focus on the objective real serves to evoke mental processes of perception and cognition. We see, in lengthy takes, immense skies, rising suns, sped up clouds and shadows, sand dunes and monumental rocks—autonomous images that arbitrarily halt Gerry’s already rarified narrative and whose extended duration lend the film a hypnagogic quality (Figure 9). As viewers, we are unable to locate the place of these images within the diegetic universe: are they purely objective images conveying the passing of time? Are they being “seen” through the eyes of these characters? Or are they “mirages” in their own right—that is to say, au-

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Figure 9-10: Visionary Images in Gerry and My Own Private Idaho

found in Gerry, in which the real and the imaginary seem to indistinctly coalesce, as illustrated by a scene that conveys a mirage—the archetypal desert trope. We initially see both Gerys from behind, talking to each other as they sit on the ground, while a person, entirely out of focus and in the distance, walks towards the camera. As the scene cuts to a frontal shot of both characters and then back to a shot from behind, the camera starts closing in on Affleck’s back and we realize that the person coming in his direction is actually Damon, and that the film operates at the intersection of subjective and objective perspectives. More remarkably, this intersection is expressed through the film’s form, which thanks to a discontinuous montage of mirage-like images, evokes “more directly states of consciousness and reflexes of the imagination in the viewer” (Sitney 306). Onscreen for minutes in overstretched shots, these images resist any coherent meaning, being conveyed as heightened sensual presences. Here, the long take provides the viewer with plenty of time to study the phenomenal, textual, tactile—in short, the sensual, material qualities these landscapes radiate: the solidity of rocks, the gaseousness of passing clouds, the whiteness of salted grounds, the blueness of skies. As such, these images resonate with Gilles Deleuze’s definition of cinematic affect. Drawing on

Realism here does not emerge as a mimetic exercise, but rather, as an aesthetic endeavour concerned with reclaiming the phenomenology of the viewing experience. Peirce’s concept of “Firstness”—a mode of being in which qualities have not been actualized in a state of things and thus emerge “in their own suchness” (Peirce 86)—Deleuze defines affect as the pure expression of a pure quality and power: “It is that which is as it is for itself and in itself” (Deleuze 100). In film, affect is expressed when the image loses its spatiotemporal coordinates, enabling qualities to appear for themselves. This, he contends, is mostly accomplished through the facial close-up and spatial fragmentation (as in Bresson’s films), and emptiness, what he calls the any-space-whatever (espace quelconque) or qualisigns:

There are…two states of any-space-whatever, or two kinds of “qualisigns,” qualisigns of deconnection and others of emptiness…The any-space-whatever retains one and the same nature: it no longer has co-ordinates, it is a pure potential, it shows only pure Powers and Qualities, independently of the state of things or milieu which actualise them. (125)

True, Deleuze does not mention the long take in his discussion of the “affect-image.” Yet as Gerry illustrates, it seems obvious that duration, when combined with particular framing strategies, can only enhance the affective qualities of images as described by the philosopher. Not only does the film foreground the emptiness of landscapes through sustained long takes, it occasionally adheres to framing devices whose resulting images threaten to overflow the borders of the figurative, thereby attaining the sensuous quality of abstract paintings in motion. This is what happens, for example, in the shot showing an immense blue sky un-

Conclusion

As hopefully illustrated, Gerry cannot be so easily accommodated under the rubric of cinematic realism. On the one hand, the film accords to precepts traditionally associated with realist cinema such as location shooting, improvisational modes of production, and, in particular, the use of the long take. Superimposing these elements, however, are anti-realist narrative devices and experimental strategies that complicate Gerry’s categorization as a realistic film in accordance with representational canons. Its hyperbolic asser-

Figure 11-12: Affective landscapes

der which we see triangular summits, and forestless white clouds whose changing shape is rendered visible through time-lapse procedures; or when we see the surface of rocks above which grey, heavy storm clouds swiftly pass through the screen, also the effect of time-lapse procedures (Figures 11-12). Though one obviously perceives these things for what they are, these images fluctuate between their real, individuated state and their sensorial plasticity: their movement, forms, texture, and colours are liberated from that which actualizes them. As such, the film seems to answer Stan Brakhage’s famous call for a pure perception, freed from language and automaticism: “Imagine an eye unraveled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprjudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception” (Brakhage 46). By foregrounding reality primarily as a perceptual, sensual, and experiential phenomenon, Gerry is such an adventure of perception.
tion of the film medium’s recording ability, crystallized in its “visionary” long takes, serves to yield a cinematic sensory experience rather than attending to the demands of narrative economy. Realism here does not emerge as a mimetic exercise, but rather, as an aesthetic endeavour concerned with reclaiming the phenomenology of the viewing experience.

In 1969, Susan Sontag, in her famous essay “The Aesthetics of Silence,” remarked on the representational saturation that would come to be viewed as typical of post-modernism. In it, she draws attention to a then emerging art which, rather than fostering meaning, turns to “opaque-ness,” “blunderness,” and “alogicality,” citing, among others, Beckett and minimalist art. This silent turn she attributes to a general scepticism of language and the concomitant appeal of a cultural and perceptual cleansing process in the context of a world overfilled with readily available representations and “furnished with second-hand perceptions” (5). As the artist is faced with the daunting prospect that whatever he or she creates “will remind...of something already achieved,” silence promises a more immediate and “unalienated art” (14-5). Van Sant was certainly after this renewal when making Gerry, adopting an experimental realist approach that attests to cinema’s ability to enhance experience rather than attending to the demands of narrative economy. Realism here does not emerge as a mimetic representation and “furnished with second-hand perceptions” (5).

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The spectator would approach art as he does a landscape; a landscape doesn’t demand from the spectator his “understanding,” his imputations of significance, his anxieties and sympathies; it demands, rather, his “vision” (17). In its advocacy for perceptual literalness and sensory experience, Gerry strives to be this contemplative kind of art. As such, the aesthetic sensations it conjures are not disconnected from thinking but are the very vehicles through which a new thinking—that which is yet to be thought—comes into being.

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