On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema

from Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema

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In the previous piece, Christian Metz explained what separated the semiotician from the film critic. Here, he attempts to understand, using semiotic methods, why the film critic or the average viewer interprets any particular film as “realist.”

In the days when the cinema was a novel and astonishing thing and its very existence seemed problematical, the literature of cinematography tended to be theoretical and fundamental. It was the age of Delluc, Epstein, Balázs, Eisenstein . . . Every film critic was something of a theoretician, a “filmologist.” Today, we tend to smile at this attitude; at any rate we believe, more or less surely, that the criticism of individual films states all there is to be said about film in general. And certainly the criticism of films—or, better yet, their analysis—is an enterprise of utmost importance: it is the film-makers who create the art of the cinema; it is through reflection on those individual films we have liked (or those we have disliked) that we have gained insights into the art of the film in general. Still, there are other approaches. Cinema is a vast subject, and there are more ways than one to enter it. Taken as a whole, it is first of all a fact, and as such it raises problems of aesthetics, of sociology, and of semiotics, as well as of the psychologies of perception and intellection. Whether good or bad, each film is, first of all, a piece of cinema (in the way that one speaks of a piece of music). As an anthropological fact, the cinema has a certain configuration, certain fixed structures and figures, which deserve to be studied.
directly. In its broadest sense, the fact of film is too often taken for
granted—yet there is so much that remains to be said about it. As
Edgar Morin has written, the sense of wonder at the cinema has
given us some of the most meaningful works devoted to the sev-
enth art.

One of the most important of the many problems in film theory
is that of the impression of reality experienced by the spectator.
Films give us the feeling that we are witnessing an almost real spec-
tacle—to a much greater extent, as Albert Laffay has noted, than
does a novel, a play, or a figurative painting. Films release a mech-
anism of affective and perceptual participation in the spectator (one
is almost never totally bored by a movie). They spontaneously
appeal to his sense of belief—never, of course, entirely, but more
intensely than do the other arts, and occasionally films are, even in
the absolute, very convincing. They speak to us with the accents of
true evidence, using the argument that “It is so.” With ease they
make the kind of statements a linguist would call fully assertive and
which, moreover, are usually taken at face value. There is a filmic
mode, which is the mode of presence, and to a great extent it is
believable. More than the latest play or novel, a film, with its
“impression of reality,” its very direct hold on perception, has the
power to draw crowds. We know that André Bazin attached great
importance to this popularity of the art of motion pictures. Although it is by no means rare for an excellent film to be a com-
mmercial failure, by and large the cinema—even in its “advanced” or
experimental forms—commands a large audience. Can as much be
said for the other arts of our time? Can one really speak of an audi-
ence, in the full sense of the word, when referring to the narrow
circles of the initiates of abstract painting, serial music, modern
jazz, or the French nouveau roman—small groups of the enrich-
ened which have little in common with even the cultivated layer of society (not to mention the mass) and which, furthermore, consist mostly of the creative artist’s “accomplices,” whether known or unknown to him, his peers, and his real or potential colleagues? A following does not become an audience until there is at least a minimum numerical and sociocultural difference between the creators and the spectators.

The reason why cinema can bridge the gap between true art and the general public, in large part anyway, and why film-makers are able to speak for others, and not just for their friends (or for those who might be their friends), is that films have the appeal of a presence and of a proximity that strikes the masses and fills the movie theaters. This phenomenon, which is related to the impression of reality, is naturally of great aesthetic significance, but its basis is first of all psychological. The feeling of credibility, which is so direct, operates on us in films of the unusual and of the marvelous, as well as in those that are “realistic.” Fantastic art is fantastic only as it convinces (otherwise it is merely ridiculous), and the power of unreality in film derives from the fact that the unreal seems to have been realized, unfolding before our eyes as if it were the flow of common occurrence—not the plausible illustration of some extraordinary process only conceived in the mind. The subjects of films can be divided into the “realistic” and the “nonrealistic,” if one wishes, but the filmic vehicle’s power to make real, to realize, is common to both genres, imparting to the first an impression of familiarity which flatters the emotions and to the second an ability to uproot, which is so nourishing for the imagination. The fantastic creatures of King Kong were drawn, but the drawings were then filmed, and that is where, for us, the problem begins.
In his article on the rhetoric of the image,\(^3\) Roland Barthes devotes some attention\(^4\) to the question, but only in connection with still photography: What, he asks, is the impression of reality produced by the photography? What, above all, are the limits of photography? These issues, we know, have been raised frequently enough with respect to cinema (indeed, they constitute one of the classic topics of filmology and of the theory of film), but to a much lesser extent with respect to still photography. When we look at a photograph, says Roland Barthes, we do not see a presence “being there”—for this definition is too loose and can be applied to any copy—but a presence that “has been there.” “We therefore have a new category of space–time: place present but time past—so that in still photography there is an illogical conjunction of here and then.” This explains the photograph’s quality of “real unreality.” The portion of reality is to be found in an earlier temporal position, for the image existed at one time in front of the camera lens; photography—a mechanical means of reproduction—had simply to record the image to give us that “rare miracle: a reality from which we are sheltered.” As for the unreality, it is produced by the “deliberation of time” (things have been thus, but no longer are), and also by our awareness of what is “here”—for, “we must insist upon the magical aspect of the photographic image,” which is never experienced as a total illusion. We always know that what the photograph shows us is not really here. For this reason, Barthes continues, photography has little projective power (projective tests are based, preferably, on drawings) and gives rise to a purely spectatorial awareness, an attitude of externalized contemplation, rather than an awareness of magical or fictional possibilities. “This has been” overpowers “Here I am” (Barthes’s italics). There is thus a great difference between photography and the cinema, which is an
art of fiction and narration and has considerable projective power. The movie spectator is absorbed, not by a “has been there,” but by a sense of “There it is.”

Taking this too briefly summarized analysis as a starting point, I would like to extend it with some observations more directly related to the cinema. The impression of reality—varying as it does in intensity, for it has many degrees—yielded by each of the different techniques of representation existing today (still and motion-picture photography, the theater, figurative sculpture and painting, representational drawing, and so on) is always a two-sided phenomenon. One may seek to explain it by examining either the object perceived or the perception of that object. On the one hand, the reproduction resembles the original more or less closely; it contains a number, more or less great, of clues to reality. On the other hand, the vital, organizing faculty of perception is more or less able to realize (to make real) the object it grasps. Between the two factors, there is a constant interaction. A fairly convincing reproduction causes the phenomena of affective and perceptual participation to be awakened in the spectator, which, in turn, give reality to the copy. With this in mind, we may ask ourselves why the impression of reality is so much more vivid in a film than it is in a photograph—as so many writers have observed, and as each of us may verify in his own experience.

An answer immediately suggests itself: it is movement (one of the greatest differences, doubtless the greatest, between still photography and the movies) that produces the strong impression of reality. This, of course, has often been pointed out, but the observation has perhaps never been pushed far enough. “The combination of the reality of motion and the appearance of forms* gives us the feeling of concrete life and the perception of objective reality. Forms
lend their objective structure to movement and movement gives body to the forms,” observes Edgar Morin in Le Cinéma ou L’homme imaginaire.\(^5\) Compared to still photography, motion-picture photography possesses a higher degree of reality (because the spectacles of real life have motion). But, as Edgar Morin further notes,\(^6\) drawing on Albert Michotte van den Berck’s famous analysis,\(^7\) there is more to it than that: Motion imparts corporality to objects and gives them an autonomy their still representations could not have; it draws them from the flat surfaces to which they were confined, allowing them to stand out better as figures against a background. Freed from its setting, the object is “substantiated.” Movement brings us volume,* and volume suggests life.\(^8\)

Two things, then, are entailed by motion: a higher degree of reality, and the corporality of objects. These are not all, however. Indeed, it is reasonable to think that the importance of motion in the cinema depends essentially on a third factor, which has never been sufficiently analyzed as such—although Edgar Morin does mention it is passing (when he contrasts the appearance of forms to the reality of movement in film) and Albert Michotte van den Berck does grant it separate treatment.\(^9\) Here is what the latter says: Motion contributes indirectly to the impression of reality by giving objects dimension, but it also contributes directly to that impression in as much as it appears to be real. It is, in fact, a general law of psychology that movement is always perceived as real—unlike many other visual structures, such as volume, which is often

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*The italics are Morin's.
*I mean, simply, an acceptable equivalent for volume. The problem of volume in the film is vast and complex.
very readily perceived as unreal (for example, in perspective drawings). Albert Michotte van den Berck examined the causal interpretations—the impression that something had been “pushed, pulled, thrown, etc.”—advanced by test subjects to whom movement had been shown by means of a small device constructed in such a way that only movement, and not the mechanisms that produced it, would appear. In Michotte van den Berck’s opinion, those spontaneous causal explanations derive from the fact that the subjects never doubt, even for an instant, that the motions they perceive are real.

Let us go further. Because still photography is in a way the trace of a past spectacle—as André Bazin has said— one would expect animated photography (that is to say, the cinema) to be experienced similarly as the trace of a past motion. This, in fact, is not so; the spectator always sees movement as being present (even if it duplicates a past movement). Thus, Roland Barthes’s “deliberation of time”—the impression of another time that makes the photograph’s presence seem unreal—no longer functions when there is motion. The objects and the characters we see in a film are apparently only effigies, but their motion is not the effigy of motion—it seems real.*

Movement is insubstantial. We see it, but it cannot be touched, which is why it cannot encompass two degrees of phenomenal reality, the “real” and the copy. Very often we experience the representation of objects as reproductions by implicit reference to tactility, the supreme arbiter of “reality”—the “real” being ineluctably con-

*Of course, minus one of the three spatial dimensions in which it usually unfolds. I am talking about its phenomenal character of reality, not its richness or its diversity.
fused with the tangible: There, on the screen, is a large tree, faithfully reproduced on film, but, if we were to reach forward to grasp it, our hands would close on an empty play of light and shadow, not on the rough bark by which we usually recognize a tree. It is often the criterion of touch, that of “materiality,” confusedly present in our mind, that divides the world into objects and copies.* It never allows the division to be seriously transgressed (except in certain cases, which are considered pathological). Roland Barthes is right to remind us that even the most intense photographic “participations” do not involve the illusion of the real. The strict distinction between object and copy, however, dissolves on the threshold of motion. Because movement is never material but is always visual, to reproduce its appearance is to duplicate its reality. In truth, one cannot even “reproduce” a movement: one can only re-produce it in a second production belonging to the same order of reality, for the spectator, as the first. It is not sufficient to say that film is more “living,” more “animated” than still photography, or even that filmed objects are more “materialized.” In the cinema the impression of reality is also the reality of the impression, the real presence of motion.

In his book Le Cinéma et le temps, Jean Leirens develops a theory that, in the cinema, identification—closely linked to the impression of reality—may be in some ways a negative phenomen-

*The case of sculpture, where even the effigy possesses a high degree of materiality, raises different problems. And yet, imagine a statue whose visual resemblance to a human model would be so great as to deceive one’s eyes (think of Mme. Tussaud’s); it would still be the criterion of touch—wax against flesh—that would ultimately allow us to distinguish between the copy and the original model.
non. He supports this with Rosenkrantz’s famous distinction between the character in the theater, who is an object of “dissociation,” and the film character, who is an object of identification.

For his part, the French dramatist Jean Giraudoux writes that in the theater “one presents the spectator with inventions, but each one is disguised by a whole rigorously sexed body.” According to Rosenkrantz, the spectator is summoned to take a position in relation to these very real actors, rather than to identify himself with the character they embody. The actor’s bodily presence contradicts the temptation one always experiences during the show to perceive him as a protagonist in a fictional universe, and the theater can only be a freely accepted game played among accomplices. Because the theater is too real, theatrical fictions yield only a weak impression of reality. Conversely, according to Jean Leirens, the impression of reality we get from a film does not depend at all on the strong presence of an actor but, rather, on the low degree of existence possessed by those ghostly creatures moving on the screen, and they are, therefore, unable to resist our constant impulse to invest them with the “reality” of fiction (the concept of diegesis*), a reality that comes only from within us, from the projections and identifications that are mixed in with our perception of the film. The film spectacle produces a strong impression of reality because it corresponds to a “vacuum, which dreams readily fill.” In his article, “L’Acte perceptif et le cinéma,” Henri Wallon develops an idea that partly confirms Jean Leirens’s theory. The theatrical spectacle, he says, cannot be a convincing duplication of life, because it

*See A Note on Terminology, p. ix.
is itself a part of life, and too visibly so: Consider the intermissions, the social ritual, the real space of the stage, the real presence of the actor— their weight is too great for the fiction the play elaborates to be experienced as real. The stage setting, for example, does not have the effect of creating a diegetic universe; it is only a convention within the real world. (One might add, in the same vein, that what one calls “fiction” in the cinema is, in fact, the diegesis, whereas in the theater the “fiction” exists only in the sense of a “convention,” in the same way that there are fictions in everyday life, for example, the conventions of politeness or of official speeches.)

The cinematographic spectacle, on the other hand, is completely unreal; it takes place in another world— which is what Albert Michotte van den Berck calls the “segregation of spaces”:¹⁷ The space of the diegesis and that of the movie theater (surrounding the spectator) are incommensurable. Neither includes or influences the other, and everything occurs as if an invisible but airtight partition were keeping them totally isolated from each other. Thus, the sum of the spectator’s impressions, during a film’s projection, is divided into two entirely separate “series”: according to Henri Wallon¹⁸— the “visual series” (that is to say, the film, the diegesis) and the “proprioceptive series” (one’s sense of one’s own body) and, therefore, of the real world, which continues to be a factor, though weakened, as when one shifts around in one’s seat for a more comfortable position). It is because the world does not intrude upon the fiction and constantly deny its claim to reality— as happens in the theater— that a film’s diegesis can yield the peculiar and well-known impression of reality that we are trying to understand here....

NOTES

2. A. Bazin. See especially vol. II (Le Cinéma et les autres arts, 1959) of Bazin’s Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1959), on the problem of adaptations, of filmed theater, of films about art, etc. [A condensed English-language version of the four volumes of Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? has been compiled and translated by Hugh Gray in What Is Cinema? (University of California Press, 1967)—Translator.]


4. Ibid., p. 47.


6. Ibid., p. 122.


8. Ibid., pp. 257–58. What Albert Michotte van den Berck has defined is, of course, the “stereocinetic” effect whose importance in the cinema was underscored by Cesare Musatti in his article “Les Phénomènes stéréociné-tiques et les effets stéréoscopiques du cinéma normal” (Revue internationale de filmologie, no. 29, Jan.–March 1957).


14. Leirens, Le Cinéma et le temps, passim, and especially p. 28.

15. Ibid., p. 113, in relation to film stars.


17. Michotte van den Berck, p. 256.