

5-20-2013

Realism, Really?: A Closer Look at Theories of Realism in Cinema

Timothy John Edwards

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Edwards, Timothy John (2013) "Realism, Really?: A Closer Look at Theories of Realism in Cinema," *Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol4/iss1/10>

Realism, Really?: A Closer Look at Theories of Realism in Cinema

Keywords

Realism, Film theory, Siegfried Kracauer, Andre Bazin, Cinematic Approach, Cognitive Approach

Realism, Really?: A Closer Look at Theories of Realism in Cinema

by Timothy John Edwards

'Realism' has been a theory of art since the days of the ancient Greeks when Plato first put stylus to tablet in an attempt to determine what in fact made 'art' art, and furthermore, what made a given work of art a *good* work of art. A theory of realism in art gained new importance during the Renaissance when the innovation of 'perspective painting' was perfected. Then, long after the maturation of Realism as an approach to, and style of, art, came the medium of photography. Influential film theorists like Siegfried Kracauer and Andre Bazin set out to trace this theory to its roots as a human fascination with the artistically mediated reproduction of physical reality. Kracauer and Bazin see the modern medium of cinema as the next step in the evolution of this theory and approach to the creation of art, but, more recently, as the successor to the photographic medium. Kracauer has even gone so far as to posit a prescriptive approach to cinema as an extension of the theory of Realism in the arts, and Bazin also works along similar lines. Kracauer suggests in his writings on Realism in the arts, and Bazin also works along similar lines. Kracauer suggests in his writings on Realism and cinema "that films may claim aesthetic validity if they build from their basis properties; like photographs, that is, they must record and reveal physical reality" (Kracauer 155). While this thesis and Kracauer's approach to cinema realism more generally – is not without its inherent limitations, it is a theory that carries significant weight even to the present day and one that offers significant and analytical utility for the analysis of films.

Siegfried Kracauer purports a theory of cinema in the tradition of artistic Realism. Before delving into his theory, however, it is worth pointing out at the outset that his theory of realism is indeed distinct from the realist tradition in other art forms like painting, and – as will be discussed in the context of Andre Bazin's ontology of cinema – this is the case by virtue of the very nature of cinema and photography as being means for objectively recording and revealing physical reality. Kracauer's account begins by outlining the inherent similarities between photography and cinema, pointing out that cinema can be considered to be simply the next step in the evolution of photography. So, it follows that like a photograph, "a film is realistic because it correctly reproduces that part of the real world to which it refers" (Kracauer 299). Kracauer continues to expound his account of cinematic realism by drawing an important distinction between two main tendencies that existed in cinema at the very outset, these tendencies are the 'realistic' and the 'formative'. Kracauer calls upon two early French filmmakers who will serve to exemplify this distinction, Lumiere and Melies.

Exemplifying the realistic tendency in early cinema are the Lumiere Brothers. There is perhaps no better way in the mind of this author to characterize this tendency other than to do so by calling upon the testimony of a Lumiere cameraman himself, Mesguich, a testimony first introduced in Kracauer: "As I see it, the Lumiere Brothers had established the true domain of cinema in the right manner. The novel, the theater, suffice for the study of the human heart. The cinema is the dynamism of life, of nature and its manifestations, of the crowd and its eddies. All that asserts itself through movement depends on it. Its lens opens on the world" (Kracauer 292). Mesguich's words demonstrate the affinity between photography and the approach of the Lumieres in creating films. Many of these films are in every sense 'moving photographs'. The

point of separation between the mediums becomes apparent when one considers the narrative innovation of Lumieres' films. The Lumiere film *Teasing the Gardener* (Lumiere, 1895) is – in spite of possible controversy herein – *the* first fiction film ever to be produced. While Lumieres' experiments with narrative filmmaking did succeed in providing added entertainment value to members of the paying public, it still left a great deal to be desired. What Lumiere Brothers regarded as merely a “scientific curiosity”, George Melies would come to regard as an unrealized continuum of possibilities. Kracauer claims that if indeed it is the Lumiere Brothers who established the realistic tendency in cinema, it is suiting that Melies be credited as the establisher of the formative tendency in cinema (Kracauer 293).

Again according to Kracauer, Melies' formative aspirations were to become his recipe for success as he went on to pioneer those most essential elements of the modern cinema: masking effects, multiple exposure techniques, as well as superimpositions, the lap-dissolve, and so on (Kracauer 293). It is at this point that Kracauer sets himself up for later contradictions in his theory, because here he acknowledges Melies' formative approach as having pioneered the techniques that have made cinematic realism possible in the context of the more recent narrative cinemas, yet at the same time he claims that these techniques go against the grain of cinematic realism. Consequently, his distinction seems too dogmatic. Thankfully, it seems that these two tendencies are tenuously reconciled in his Cinematic Approach (Kracauer 297). Kracauer in fact fails to see the distinction between Melies' use of cinematic illusion, and of presentational modes much in the tradition of the theatre. This failure – while not insurmountable – forms the centre of Gregory Currie's contemporary debate (Currie). Having now outlined the establishment of these tendencies in early cinema, Kracauer continues to progress and expand his theory by consolidating the parameters of his realistic-formative distinction. What results from this is Kracauer's prescriptive Cinematic Approach.

It is once the camera is used to compose shots via various camera movements that the realistic tendency is realized more fully. This also marks the threshold which photography – with its static images – cannot cross. Kracauer wishes to make a further distinction here, a distinction between the ‘capture of motion’ – as in the use of camera movement – and the staging of shots. It becomes clear here that Kracauer is prepared to elevate the use of camera movement above the use of staging techniques in much the same way that he is prepared to elevate the realistic tendency above the formative. This, again, seems dogmatic and will result in yet another theoretical conflict which he will attempt to reconcile with his more pragmatic Cinematic Approach.

What is expressed by this account of staging practices is essentially the observation that the staging of shots – as in a studio or otherwise – can be aesthetically legitimate so long as the staging contributes to the establishment of camera-reality. This is to say that staged shots should create the visual impression of the real world as seen through the lens of the camera (Kracauer 295). Kracauer's concern with staging is akin to his concern about the formative tendency, which is that when used to fulfill the formative aspirations of the filmmaker, these elements often serve to work *against* the basic properties of the medium. It is at this point – without further qualification – Kracauer may posit his Cinematic Approach.

Kracauer begins, “It follows from what has been said in the preceding chapter that films may

claim aesthetic validity if they build from their basic properties; like photographs, that is, they must record and reveal physical reality” (Kracauer 297). Indeed Kracauer’s Cinematic Approach holds true to his thesis, if only initially. In his attempt to reconcile some of the conflicts resulting from his preceding account of cinematic realism, Kracauer offers two considerations: 1. “Favourable response to a genre need not depend upon its adequacy to the medium from which it issues.” and 2. “...assume that my definition of aesthetic validity is actually one-sided; that it results from a bias for one in particular, if important, type of cinematic activities and hence is unlikely to take into account, say, the possibility of hybrid genres or the influence of the medium’s non-photographic components” Kracauer 297). It is in this form that Kracauer’s theory of cinematic realism becomes amenable, and thus stands to offer a great deal of analytical utility. This is because his theory is only now able to deal with both favourable and unfavourable qualities in any particular film undergoing analysis, and so with any given film it follows that Kracauer (or any other author employing his theory as an analytical tool) – based on his positive account – may justifiably regard it as being either true to the nature of the cinematic medium, or not. The point is that Kracauer’s theory of cinematic realism may now be treated as a self-contained one. Kracauer finishes here with the following prescription: “Everything depends on the “right” balance between the realistic tendency and the formative tendency; and the two tendencies are well balanced if the latter does not overwhelm the former but eventually follows its lead” (Kracauer 298). With Kracauer’s thesis and theoretical framework now in place, it is fitting that his contemporaries may enter into this discussion. If only brief and elliptical, a treatment of Andre Bazin and Gregory Currie is to follow.

Though not technically a ‘contemporary’ in the chronological sense, Andre Bazin’s writings are to be treated here as such for the purposes of identifying certain consistencies between his own ontology and Kracauer’s thesis. In fact, there is – throughout his account – the distinct echo of the ideas presented in Kracauer, if however they are presented in quite a different manner. What is important here is that their theses are in line with one another, that is, Bazin also believes that the basis of the filmic medium is photographic and that films are aesthetically valid if they cultivate cinematic realism. In his own characterization of cinematic realism, Bazin’s distinction lies between true realism and pseudo-realism (Bazin). Indeed, this distinction mirrors Kracauer’s distinction between realist tendencies and formative tendencies. Much of Bazin’s disdain for pseudo-realism is directed at the standardization of techniques pioneered by the Soviet Montagists, but he is also intolerant of the theatrical practices of the German Expressionists (Bazin). Bazin goes a step further than Kracauer in his positive account, however, enthroning the style of Renoir (and also Vittorio de Sica, Robert Bresson, and Orson Welles) as exemplifying the supreme form of cinematic realism (Bazin 315). He bases this assertion on Renoir’s penchant for the “long-take, deep-focus” style (Bazin). Bazin is insistent that this is the most true-to-form style of cinematic realism, and this assertion is entirely coherent with Kracauer’s Cinematic Approach. In fact, the use of ‘long-take, deep focus’ style would constitute the strongest possible application of the Cinematic Approach. There is also contemporary support for this idea in the works of Gregory Currie.

Although Currie’s intention is to deconstruct the ideas of classical film theorists, like Kracauer and Bazin, using the empirically based Cognitivist Approach, Currie finds that – to at

least some extent – their collective theory of cinematic realism is not entirely unfounded, if however somewhat misguided. For example, Currie points out that the ‘long-take, deep-focus’ style is actually no more realistic in a cognitive sense than are other styles – say those employing soft focus or disjunctive editing techniques. And this is because the ‘long-take, deep-focus’ style requires a much smaller aperture size to render images, meaning the human eye would in fact not be able to perceive these images in the same way as the camera does under the same conditions (Currie 55). It is along these lines that Currie is unlike the two aforementioned theorists. So it follows that if applied loosely (and with empirical support), Kracauer and Bazin’s theories of cinema can still be a theoretical framework of great use to contemporary theorists. While Currie’s Cognitive Approach indeed is the most ‘mature’ theoretical framework of the three discussed here, it will not be taken into account in any significant way within the filmic analysis to follow. Rather, in the interest of respecting the canonical stature and historical weight of these authors, their accounts will be applied charitably in the analysis of specific filmic examples. Furthermore, since there is no significant conflict between their two accounts, their respective accounts will take the form of a theoretical monolith under the heading of the the Cinematic Approach. And so without further qualification, filmic analysis is to proceed with and centre around Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion* (1937).

Bazin is not simply giving an offhand example when he mentions Jean Renoir and *La Grande Illusion* in his writings on cinematic realism. Upon reviewing the film – or even just one scene – it becomes clear that the film is a veritable template of the sort of approach to realism that Bazin and Kracauer posit. Based on the prescriptive nature of the Cinematic Approach and its exemplification in *La Grande Illusion* it is conceivable – although never explicitly stated by either – that the style of this film would do well to be adopted by each and every maker of films henceforth. While Renoir was clearly as concerned with the content of the film as with its form (the film is even today considered by many to be an unsurpassed cinematic masterpiece), a study of its content will indeed be more or less excluded from the analysis of the following sequences in the interest of addressing Kracauer’s initial thesis about the nature of the filmic medium. As was just alluded to, just about any scene in *La Grande Illusion* would serve to exemplify the Cinematic Approach, but of course, what better place to begin than with the film’s opening shot.

The opening shot of the film is unconventional in that it begins with a close-up rather than an establishing shot from a distance – this would be the norm in any Hollywood film, for example. A record spins on a gramophone accompanied by music, the camera then pans upward to accommodate Marechal, who is perched over the record, seemingly overcome with nostalgia of his pre-war life. Marechal’s attention is then drawn to his comrade Halphen as he calls out to him, which might otherwise mean an alternating shot would be required to follow the action, but in keeping with the Cinematic Approach the camera instead tracks Marechal as he moves close to Halphen to engage him in conversation. The two are some distance from the camera on the other side of the room, but the deep-focusing of the camera allows the viewer to now see, simultaneously, other men conversing at a table in the foreground, as well as the performance of bar-tending banalities by a barkeep to the rear of Marechal and Halphen. The camera remains fixed on the doorway as the two men part and Marechal moves back toward the gramophone and out of frame as Ringis approaches. The camera then tracks back to the gramophone once more to frame the two

men. As Ringis and Marechal move toward the doorway, the camera again tracks the action as they exit. This shot lasts for approximately one minute. While this is among the longer takes of the film it is by no means an anomaly; Julian Jackson notes in his book on *La Grande Illusion* that Renoir's films have a consistently higher average shot length than other films. Jackson offers the example of another French film, Julian Duvivier's *Pepe le Moko* (1937), which at only one hour and forty minutes has 452 shots while *La Grande Illusion* has only 352 shots at a run time of two hours (Jackson 38). Comparing this opening shot to the entire opening sequence of *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999), for example, there is a stark contrast in terms of approach. And yet, apart from its Science Fiction plot, modern special effects, and computer-generated imagery, the live action shots in the opening sequence are in many ways against the grain of the Cinematic Approach. There are many cuts and little camera movement, and the individual shots utilize a (relatively) soft-focal range. In the example of *The Matrix*- -and there are surely other, possibly better, examples – the formative tendency overpowers the realistic tendency, and so it follows that this film is not 'aesthetically valid' as per Kracauer's initial thesis. But, of course, part of the Cinematic Approach also entails a sparing use of techniques that are associated with the formative tendency. Renoir in fact does so brilliantly with *La Grande Illusion*. Take just one example, his use of shot-reverse-shot cutting as opposed to the more predominant use of long-take, deep-focus within the film.

There are only a few instances in which conventional shot-reverse-shot practices are used in *La Grande Illusion*, and as per the Cinematic Approach, these instances only serve a punctuative purpose in that they stand out starkly from the rest of the film rather than blending in and being otherwise imperceptible. Martin O'Shaughnessy discusses one particular sequence in a chapter of his book on the film that deals with the film's style in the context of its "group dynamics" (O'Shaughnessy 59). During the exchange in which the engineer asks Marechal whether or not de Boeldieu can be trusted, shot-reverse-shot cross-cutting emphasizes their difference. When Marechal finally convinces his comrade of de Boeldieu's trustworthiness, they are then framed together in close-up. The engineer then begins to discuss escape plans, and with their difference resolved the cross-cutting ceases. This pattern recurs in the scene in von Rauffenstein's Wintersborn chamber and again during the successful escape. In the latter example, shot lengths progressively shorten as more cuts are used to capture the action from less ambiguous perspectives than the more common shot lengths and focal-depths used in the rest of the film. Then, when de Boeldieu is shot by von Rauffenstein this more rapid editing quickly grinds to a near halt until de Boeldieu dies in a hospital bed alongside von Rauffenstein in what is one of the more lengthy takes of the film. The usage of techniques belonging to the formative tendency are in full adherence to the Cinematic Approach because they are used so infrequently and with such a great sense of purpose within the scheme of the film. The inverse of this usage of techniques belonging to the formative tendency can be found in *Magnolia* (P.T. Anderson 1999). The majority of this film utilizes standardized Hollywood conventions that are generally contra the Cinematic Approach, however, there are several instances where long-take or deep-focus techniques are used. These techniques belonging to the realistic tendency serve a similar punctuative role to the use of shot-reverse-shot cross-cutting in *La Grande Illusion*. The difference being that in *Magnolia*, the use of techniques belonging to the realistic tendency far outweighs the use of techniques belonging to the formative tendency. So, the film fails to satisfy the requirements of the Cinematic Approach

and thus would not be considered aesthetically valid according to Kracauer.

What should be apparent in the discussion contained with this essay is that with bold theoretical prescriptions comes a greater potential for self-contradiction and dogma. It is for this reason that no grand theory such as 'Cinematic Realism' should ever be considered as purporting to be definitive and all encompassing – even if the author impels this conclusion. Rather, any theory should be used as an analytical tool for a task which it is best suited. If thought of in this way, any self-contained theoretical framework can contribute to significant enlightenment in a given area of study. Thus, Kracauer's initial thesis is not incorrect, but it must be considered in light of its inherent limitations.

Works Cited

- Carroll, Noel. *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2008. Print.
- Corrigan, Timothy, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj. "Andre Bazin From What Is Cinema?" *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. N. pag. Print.
- Corrigan, Timothy, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj. "Siegfried Kracauer From Theory of Film." *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. N. pag. Print.
- Jackson, Julian. "Variations on Realism: 'Interior Truth' and 'Exterior Truth'" *La Grande Illusion*. Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2009. N. pag. Print.
- O' Shaugnessy, Martin. "Film Style and Group Dynamics." *La Grande Illusion (Jean Renoir, 1937)*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009. N. pag. Print.
- Renoir, Jean. *La Grande Illusion*. London: Lorrimer, 1968. Print.
- Currie, Gregory. *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film*. London: Oxford UP, 1974. Print.

Films Cited

- Grande Illusion, La*. Dir. Jean Renoir. Compagnie Jean Renoir, 1937.
- Magnolia*. Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson. Perf. Julianne Moore and Tom Cruise. New Line Cinema, 1999.
- Matrix, The*. Dir. Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves. Warner Bros., 1999.
- Pépé Le Moko*. Dir. Julien Duvivier. DisCina, 1937.