

REALISM AND THE CINEMA

Edited by Christopher Williams
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Reviewed by Keyan G Tomaselli

As with most books on the cinema published by the British Film Institute, Realism and the Cinema is basically a reference work. A welcome addition, not usually found in BFI publications, are detailed notes, bibliography and an index. Like a number of other offerings from the BFI, it crusades rather than explains, juxtaposing long extracts (both early and recent) of various writers in a (successful) attempt to highlight similarities and contradictions, but its weakness is that it does little to tie up the relationships or develop a coherent argument. The author excuses this approach in his statement:

The commentary is meant to help in this process, but the reader should be warned that its approach is primarily conceptual rather than contextual. It is concerned with juxtaposing ideas rather than giving thorough accounts of the specific historical context in which the ideas were produced. (p.3)

Perhaps though, this orientation is the book's strength. The author argues that many important writings are not readily accessible to Anglo-Saxon readers for they exist in the pages of small circulation journals, often in languages other than English, or in books that are out of print. The writings of over twenty-six prominent film makers and theorists are grouped under four main chapter headings: "Realist positions", "Descriptions of the work of a realist film-maker, Robert Flaherty", "Forms and Ideologies" and "Aesthetics and Technology".

The problem and consideration of realism, according to the author, is incapable, for it inevitably

arises once we have accepted, even as a hypothesis, that the world exists, either as an objective fact for people to look at, or as a set of possibilities which they construct through their intelligence and their labour, or as the product of their imagination, or, most plausibly, as a combination of all three. (p.1)

Film, then, is one form of expression which exists alongside this world.

The first half of the book is an anthology of principal realist positions, while the latter section offers arguments against realism. Despite this apparent opposition, the editor successfully shows that the two approaches are mutually interdependent: both are committed to the idea of 'Truth' - a notion circumscribed by ideology.

In the introduction Williams deals briefly with the constraints of film technology and film language in documenting "real truth" rather than "mere appea-

rances" (p.6). (This is developed in more detail in Part IV.) He is highly critical of the lack of theoretical concern between realism and narrative claiming that little is known of how films cast in narrative form work (p.7). Dismissing semiotic activity in this area as "narrow" and "pre-judged", Williams argues against a comparison with the nineteenth century realist or naturalist novel. More useful would be a comparison with the flexibility of the narrative tradition as a whole (p.8). Surprisingly, George Bluestone's book, The Novel into Film, is not on Williams' list for further reading.

Following this fascinating but all too brief discussion, Williams launches into a detailed examination of "realist positions" juxtaposing the writings of John Grierson and Sergei Eisenstein. Whereas Grierson argues that "Documentary would photograph the living scene and the living story" (p.17), Eisenstein is more sophisticated: "Photography is a system of reproduction to fix real events and elements of actuality", but "The final order (through editing) ... is determined by the social processes ... and class-determined tendency" of the director. This displacement of reality, determined by ideology, is, observes Williams, "itself carried out in the name of realism" (p.21). Realism, according to Eisenstein is "the function of a certain form of social structure". Where Grierson wants to see 'real man' on the screen, Eisenstein is more interested in 'real man' as spectator (p.22). Dziga Vertov, described as a formalist documentarist, argues that the cinema as fiction is a narcotic which has dissipated the revolutionary fervour of the hungry workers. Script and acting, he avers, "falls outside the real purpose of the cinecamera, which is to explore living phenomena" (p.24). Vertov's Kino-Eye, although underwritten by an emotive revolutionary fervour, approximates to some aspects of current descriptions of ethnographic film making. Observation of everyday activities was the keynote for Vertov.

Representing the Italian neorealists, Cesare Zavattini is quoted: "(Cinema) must tell reality as if it were a story; there must be no gap between life and what is on the screen." (p.29). For Rossellini neorealism is "the artistic form of truth" (p.32). This definition naturally moves Williams onto a consideration of the theories of Andre Bazin where the aesthetic of the film maker is one which integrates reality into the film and where realistic material (provided by reality) permits the artist to discover realistic "means of expression" (p.36). Williams comments that Bazin's further theoretical development is limited by his argument that meaning is always "there, waiting to be revealed; it cannot be constructed" (p.53). Bazin, unlike Vertov or Grierson, does tolerate, and in some cases welcomes actors, though limiting their function to the enhancing of narrative-dramatic structures (p.53). Rohmer, partially reconceptualising Bazin's theories, refers to "great universal laws" where realism aims to be a system. Both he and Bazin "attempt to construct a visual, representational culture within the wider culture they inherit" (Williams, p.69). Eisenstein is more complex, seeking a system which constructs itself out of the search mediated through montage. V F Perkins, on the other hand, developing Rohmer's notion of formal constraints argues that film is a truthful illusion which involves spectators in the process: "Realism is defined as coherence; the internal truth of varying sets of conventions", comments Williams (p.79).

Having outlined these differing approaches to "Truth", Williams identifies the contradiction. On the one hand are the 'pure', more naive versions of realism represented by Grierson, Zavattini, Rossellini, etc who deny conventions or pretend that they do not exist. On the other are Eisenstein, Vertov, Bazin, Rohmer and Perkins who are aware of questions of style. Williams then goes on to explore the conventional constraints which define realism(s) and its/their operation(s). The ideas hinted at by the above writers are developed more explicitly in subsequent chapters.

In Part II on Flaherty, Williams states that his style implies a kind of mysticism, a non-signified "purely visual" perception of things. Yet as Williams points out, Flaherty's editor, Von Dongen, takes many of her cues from the work of Eisenstein. Flaherty's films follow distinct story patterns: Grierson says with too much of a "tendency towards narration"; Kracauer complaining with only a "slight narrative".

In Part III, "Forms and Ideologies", Williams looks at anti-realist positions which emphasize "the nature of the artistic material itself" over imitations of life (p.115). Assessing the contributions of Lef and Novy Lef by the Russian Left Front of the Arts between 1923 and 1928, Williams quotes articles by S M Tretyakov, Victor Shklovsky, Ossip Brik, Yuri Tynyanov and a number of others whose new artistic forms paralleled the construction of new forms of life under socialism. Sometimes the debate was confused, both the notion of realism and art as an instrument of cognition being rejected. Common to all positions, however, was the acknowledgement that cinema could be socially and politically useful.

Moving onto Berthold Brecht's contribution to film discussion, Williams points out that he took the traditional marxist view that cinema "is a drug, a permanent seduction of the working class away from their own true interests" (p.163).

Despite Brecht's view, the May 1968 disturbances in France stimulated an upsurge of neo-Marxist accounts of film. This trend was further nourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the ideas of Louis Althusser. Williams cites Jean-Paul Fargier as an example of this new direction. The relationship between film and politics, argues Fargier, is mediated by ideology:

"When bourgeois idealists baldly assert that the cinema has 'nothing to do with' politics, we immediately feel tempted to assert the exact opposite: that the cinema is always political, because in the class struggle nothing is irrelevant, nothing can be put in PARENTHESES" (p.171).

Fargier offers a paradigm for a film "useful to the proletariat": all films are ideological, but some can also be theoretical. Grounded in Althusser's definition of theory, a theoretical film constructs its own object and transmits a consciousness of this process of construction to the audience (p.186). This kind of film criticizes or even attempts to destroy the impression of reality.

Part IV deals with the relationship between aesthetics and technology. Williams traces this discussion from the ideas of Jean Epstein expressed in the 1930s, Patrick Ogle's correlation of information about lenses, lighting and film stocks, supplemented by those of Renoir and Rossellini through to documentarist Allan King's "structured fiction" (p.218). Joining the discussion is Gianfranco Bettetini's semiotic analysis of "the sequence shot" and the abandonment of cutting.

A discussion of cinema verite by Jean-Louis Comolli shows how fiction and documentary interpenetrate each other where, instead of film trying to copy life by reproducing it, film and life produce each other, 'reciprocally'.

The book ends with a conversation published in Cahiers du Cinema between Rohmer, Comolli, Bonitzer, Daney and Narboni. Many of the issues and problems raised in the text are dealt with and as Williams concludes: "What is remarkable about the discussion is that the interlocuters agree about nothing at all" (p.244).

If nothing else, Williams' book highlights the confusion of stances, gaps in

the history of cinema theory and points to the debate which continues to revolve around the concept of realism. This concern is of relevance to the South African filmic experience. First, it offers local theorists a rich background with which to launch into the study of South African documentary and ethnographic film, two styles only recently subjected to serious academic criticism. Second, Williams' book places more emphasis on the study of contradictions within film theory than is usually the case with text books which offer yet another conventional look at the major theorists. This has implications for the study of South African film where the ideas of Althusser and other neo-Marxist theorists are only now beginning to permeate film analyses. Third, this in turn must move such considerations into the film making fraternity itself as more and more film makers (and particularly university graduates) begin to question their role and function in apartheid society.

It is fortunate for South African readers responsive to radical approaches to film theory that Realism and the Cinema is co-published by MacMillan, for otherwise it would not be available in South African bookstores.

OTHER BOOKS RECEIVED

THE CINEMATIC APPARATUS

Edited by Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath
Published by MacMillan
Price: Approx. R40.75

The essays assembled here offer a series of approaches towards an understanding of the relation of the technical and the social which constitutes cinema. It is the recognition of that relation that is at stake in the notion of the Cinematic Apparatus, including as it does both an attention to the actual machinery of cinema and, following developments in recent, psycho-analytically-based film theory, a stress on the need to examine the meta-psychology of cinema, and constructions and positions and effects of meaning and subjectively involved in the various aspects of the technical mechanism.

The essays come together as a unity in the book which clearly reflects in its organization the notion of the cinematic apparatus in these terms: from initial questions concerning the technology of cinema, the book moves into consideration of cinema as a particular institution of relations and meanings, redefining it as it goes the ways in which those initial questions - the question - of technology might be understood.

Specific topics treated within this overall movement include: technology and ideology in cinema (Peter Wollen, Stephen Heath, Peter Gidal); sound (Mary Doane (Douglas Gomery); colour (Dudley Andrew); animation and the perception of motion as aspects of the apparatus (Joseph and Barbara Anderson, Bill Nichols and Susan Lederman, Kristin Thompson, Jean-Louis Comolli, Maureen Turim); the cinematic apparatus from the perspective of the radical questions posed by feminist critiques (Teresa de Lauretis, Jacqueline Rose).
