CAN FILM BE THE MOST REALISTIC ART?

CHRIS BELCHER

United States philosophers who have been writing about film recently—Haig Katchadourian, Alexander Sesonske, and Paul Weiss come to mind—seem to be largely interested in laying a foundation for film aesthetics by defining 'film' and delineating the types of films.[1] In France and Italy, where critical reflection on the cinema has been academically respectable for much longer than here, semiologists such as Christian Metz and Gianfranco Bettetini are attempting to investigate the language of film.[2] Both of these aims are certainly worthwhile. But what has become of the issue that served for so long as the point of departure for most theories of film, opening the door not only to aesthetics but to ethics and even metaphysics as well? I am speaking of that complex of questions dealing with the relationship between film and the world, either as we happen to perceive it or as it really is. Are movies more like dreams or reality? Are the best ones necessarily realistic? Non-realistic? Or does realism have nothing to do with aesthetic value? If films are highly realistic, what ethical value might they have? One could go on listing the many questions involved in the basic dispute concerning how film and reality are related to each other. But I prefer to move directly to the query, arguably the most central of the lot, with which I am concerned at present: Can film be the most realistic art?

I would like to begin by briefly reviewing what two groups of classical film theorists have had to say about the relationship between film and reality before moving to this more specific problem. The first group includes Hugo Munsterberg, the philosopher-psychologist whom James imported to chair the Harvard department which also boasted Santayana and Rudolf Arnheim, who felt confident enough of his 1933 position in *Film* to reprint most of the book unchanged a quarter of a century later in *Film as Art*.[3] Munsterberg and Arnheim stress the differences between the film experience and our non-film experience. Munsterberg, whose *The Film: A Psychological Study* was the first theoretical work of any consequence on cinema, maintains that the Kantian conditioning for our experience of the world must be met in a new way when the curtain goes up for films, which allows the fundamental condition of art to be met: "we shall be directly conscious of the unreality of the artistic production."[4] Film makes us perceive depth where there is flatness, movement where there is a rapid succession of still photographs, and the past and future where there is only the present; yet never do we forget that we are being "tricked," and this makes film art. In a similar fashion, Arnheim emphasizes camera selectivity, directional editing, and "the nature of the medium"—soundlessness, colorlessness, and screen narrowness—as guarantors of film's distance from reality.[5]

Andre Bazin, the father of French film criticism and theory, and Siegfried Kracauer are the most influential members of the second school of opinion concerning the basic film and reality issue. Bazin, in "The Myth of Total Cinema," describes the final cause of the evolution of film as follows: "The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of the mechanical reproduction of reality in the twentieth century . . . namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image . . . "[6] Writing a few years later, in his monolithic *Theory of Film*, Kracauer expresses roughly the same opinion concerning the purpose of film: "Film, in other words, is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates toward it."[7]

I have not introduced Munsterberg, Arnheim, Bazin, and Kracauer as an empty historical exercise; rather it seems to me that each of them has insights which must be incorporated into any theory of film and claims which must be responsibly countered. The first school, the "Formalists," developed at a time when what had begun as pure amusement—like the Ferris wheel or the pin-ball machine—was close to reaching the status of the first art to be invented rather than discovered. Arnheim and Munsterberg, wherefore, desired to answer the question, "How is film as art possible?" Fearful of what could happen if film could develop technologically enough to copy nature extremely accurately, they dwelled upon the features which, they felt, kept it from doing so. Herein lies both the genius and the fatal flaw of the Formalists. Their genius is in recognizing that complete replication of nature is not art—just more nature. If *mimesis* were a sufficient condition for art, then assembly line workers would be the greatest artists, with bird call imitators not far behind. Yet, being children of their times, the early Formalists were unable to see that film could safely add color, high fidelity recording of dialogue, wider screens, and deep-focus photography without coming so close to reality as to lose its capacity to function as art. This is their flaw.

Bazin and Kracauer, on the other hand, felt no need to prove that film can be an art, this battle having been won by the time they began writing. Instead they asked, "How is film most successful as art?" They seem to be disagreeing with the Formalists so completely only because, assuming with Lessing that an art's excellence lies in what is unique to it, they focus on film's ability to mirror the world in motion. Although at times they confuse the "ought" with the "must" of films, and at other times speak as if there is absolutely no difference between that film pictures and what

reality is, the so-called "Realists" are not as much at loggerheads with the Formalists as is commonly supposed. After all, it is not Kracauer or Bazin but Arnheim who says, "Film is the art that approaches most nearly to reality—if by reality we understand the sum total of what our eyes and ears tell us."[8]

This brings me back to the question posed at the beginning of the paper: Can film be the most realistic art? Keeping in mind both the mistakes and the positive contributions of the four theorists discussed above, I want to consider the various ways that this question might be answered. I shall not offer a final solution, first, because I do not have one, and, second, because it must await a final clarification of the concepts of 'film,' 'art,' and 'reality.' To choose one of the dozens of precise technical definitions of 'film' and to defend the favored one would be to set aside whether or not film can be the most realistic art as merely a subsidiary point, which I do not believe it is. (In any event, we would not be able to wait for the perfect definitions of 'art' and 'reality.') So my comments are intended to satisfy only the widely accepted parameters of the concepts of film, art, and reality which I believe we set for ourselves; hopefully, their tentativeness does not entirely empty them of value.

To begin with, I think it should be obvious that some things which Kracauer, Bazin, and everyone else would acknowledge as films—although perhaps aesthetically uninterested ones—are mere splotches of color, moving paintings, and others are designed to sell products or give news reports. In the first case, film may be artlike but it need not be representational; in the second case, film may be representational but it need not be artlike. But that such types of film exist does not influence the investigation of the *potential* which film might have to be more realistic than other arts. The question is not whether all films are both art and more realistic than other instances of art, but whether some films which are art achieve a superior realism.

I shall discuss three ways in which one form of art might be more realistic than other forms of art. The first standard judges an art's realism in terms of the response it evokes in the perceiver. The second standard honors the art that copies the material world in greatest detail. The last standard looks with favor toward the art that can explicate the structure of the world, that can show us the face of ultimate reality. These standards may be labelled the 'behavioral,' the 'mirror,' and the 'underlying structure.' Of course I do not claim novelty for any of them. Nor do I claim, to repeat myself, that one of them independently or all of them together clearly proves that film is in fact the most realistic art, or that it can be. But I do submit that if this issue is to be settled, the settlement must take each of these criteria into account in some way.

By the behavioral criterion, a representational art is judged realistic to the extent that people react to it in the same fashion as they would react to being confronted with the circumstances in reality it represents. In a sense, the behavioral standard tests realism in terms of illusion, since it demands an art to make the perceiver think he is perceiving something that he is not. It would seem to be a fairly easy matter to devise experiments in which arts could be conclusively tested by this standard. The subject could be wrapped up in such a way as to have all his senses, as we might say, "cut off." Then he could be removed to the spot where a particular work of art was displayed, unwrapped, and his response catalogued and compared with that of other subjects for both the same and other works of art. The problem with this experiment, I feel, is that it ignores the normal social and psychological conditions under which we normally experience art, which therefore are a part of our experience of a given form of art: such experiments must be ruled out. This leaves us with the history of people's reactions to types of art as they have experienced art under normal conditions. Mere film seems to do quite well. Anecdotes about audience reaction in the early days of movies suggest that it was extremely common for large numbers of viewers to scream and flee the theater when a train roared toward the camera. Somewhat later, with the first close-ups of faces, viewers would cry, mystified, "Where are their legs?" The fact that they considered a bodiless head worthy of wonder suggests that they believed the figure on the screen to be real in some way. Yet, the obvious challenge would be, we no longer are confused by such things. Does this mean that film once was highly realistic but no longer is? My answer is that, yes, we have become much more sophisticated, but we can still be "fooled." In fact the most popular films in the United States in the last few years—*Jaws, Earthquake, The Towering Inferno*, and other "natural disaster" movies—have been distinguished by their adeptness at doing just this. The behavioral criterion, I submit, must not be discarded without careful consideration.

The mirror standard, which Kracauer, Bazin, and Arnheim accept in some form, contends that: (1) Reality consists of the material entities in the world, especially as perceived by our audio-visual senses, and (2) a realistic work of art copies these material entities "as they really are." The problem with (1) is that, if true, blind and deaf persons would be largely separated from reality, which doesn't seem to be the case. However, (1) can easily be refined to avoid this difficulty, while the difficulty with (2) may be more serious, if Nelson Goodman is correct that everything has so many aspects one cannot isolate one of them as how a thing "really is."[9] There are also practical problems with the mirror criterion. The prospect of comparing net resemblances between works of art and reality for all the

different arts makes Hercules' Augean stables and Bentham's hedenistic calculus seem relatively manageable. Yet, for all its drawbacks, the mirror criterion, perhaps in conjunction with some other standard of realism, might serve to cut important distinctions.

The third way in which film, or any art, might be judged to be the most realistic art is the underlying structure standard. When Bergson uses the term 'cinematographic' to describe the metaphysical underpinning of the world, he might well go on to say, "And it follows that film is the most realistic of the arts, since the way it can place shots together to form a story or an episode makes explicit this underpinning." Sergei Eisenstein actually takes this step of stating that the basic principle of film art—which for him is the formation of a new entity out of the montage of two conflicting shots—is also the basic principle of the world as we know it: "these visions have a positively film-like order—with camera-angles, set-ups at various distances, and rich montage material."[10] ('Vision' for Eisenstein is the basic particle of our perception of the world.)

If philosophers ever conclusively establish that reality is made up either of Bergsonian *durées* or Eisensteinian dialectical processes, they may simultaneously prove that film is the most realistic art. Until then, there are at least two criteria of reality, one based on behavioral response and the other on mirroring, which may be systematically employed to examine this doctrine.

NOTES

[1] Haig Khatchadourian, "Film as Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3 (Spring, 1975), pp. 271-84. Alexander Sesonske, "Aesthetics of Film," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1 (Fall, 1974), pp. 51-57. G. F. Riley, Review of Paul Weiss' *Cinematics, Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1 (September, 1975), pp. 155-56.

[2] Alexander Sesonske, Review of Gianfranco Bettetini's *The Language and Technique of the Film*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2 (Winter, 1974), pp. 240-41.

[3] *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

[4] (New York: Dover, 1970), p. 69.

[5] *Film as Art.*

[6] *What Is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), Vol. I, p. 21.

[7] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 28.

[8] Ibid., p. 160.

[9] *Languages of Art* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1968), pp. 6-7.

[10] *The Film Sense* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1942), p. 44.

University of New Mexico