EMBRACING EXISTENCE: TERRITORIES OF "REALITY" AND TERRITORIES OF "FICTION" IN CINEMATIC CREATION

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SUMMARY

The "fiction *vs.* reality" dichotomy takes on great emphasis in cinematic practice due to the reproductive nature of the cinema. This article proposes a historical itinerary through territories of reality and territories of fiction in cinematic creation. The desire for reality emerges throughout the history of the cinema in concrete social situations, not only in order to break with the compositional laws of "Hollywood-style" narrative but because it becomes necessary at a particular moment of uncertainty to maintain a more direct relationship with reality.

KEY WORDS

Process of generation of "realities", Cinematic practice, Need for reality, "Fiction *vs.* Reality" dichotomy, Theories of the cinema, Cinematic language, Modes of representation, Fiction, Documentary, Creation documentary.

ARTICLE

Discussion of whether or not art is an imitation of nature, and whether the artist should involve his or her own vision, has been a repeated one throughout history, as Gombrich (1998: 80) underlines when he states: "From the time when Greek philosophers called art an 'imitation of nature', their successors have never ceased to busy themselves in affirming, denying or qualifying this definition". The fundamental axis of the philosophy of representation has been the relationship between art and reality. The "reproductive" nature of photography and the cinema consequently pointed to the dialectic between photography and

reality, or between the cinema and reality. The formal and conceptual dichotomy of "fiction *versus* reality" in cinematic practice that we consider today to be something recent is, on the contrary, a reflection that has come down from classical Greek times (1) to the present and it originates in something that appears to be an innate characteristic of the individual: responsibility (guilt) when facing representation and the commitment not to betray "reality". In the cinema, the dichotomy becomes something akin to ideologies that contrast the reality that is mediated and elaborated through fiction and the reality proper to the documentary form which is there and only needs to be recorded by the camera, although in fact it also has its own conventions. Both "stances" give rise to endless debate and reflection among *cinéastes* and theoreticians. The existence of these two characters – documentary and fiction – underlines the opposing nature of concepts such as real-imaginary, objective-subjective and true-false.

The dichotomy referred to appears in the origin of the cinema and already expresses itself in various aspects: a) the films of Lumière and those practices that emerge from them that lie at the root of what can be distinguished as the documentary ideology that is still alive in our day; b) that aspect that does not focus its interest on narration but on images, on the medium and its expressive resources and c) that aspect that emerges from the need to tell stories, to build a narration that is comprehensible. Yet the fact is that the need to tell stories and the use of the cinema as an eminently narrative medium remains the form that prevails above other alternative forms of cinematic expression. Méliès identified fiction and Griffith identified argumentative models that had their roots in a literary taste that was grounded especially in the nineteenth-century novel (Bou, 2002: 33). In this way, a language that has come to be called natural was constituted (2).

Classical cinema conventions

The search for reality in classical cinema with classical narration is replaced by an illusion of reality, an imagined reality whose abstraction emphasises a series of conventions and rests on the laws of editing. Classical cinema invents stories that are as close as possible to reality, trying to make imagined things "reality" in order to make them appear to be true. Documentary realism is not the realism of fiction, as Nichols (1997: 217) states: "In fiction, realism makes an implausible world seem real; in the documentary, realism makes a line of argument about the historical world appear to be persuasive". Classical cinema is one that captures the spectator with a narrative of fast action. Reality is achieved by means of split editing, an extreme splitting of the composition, since fragmentation has been one of the devices used to guide the spectator or to give the film a unity that makes it real; cause-effect narration makes this cinema plausible because it points up the kinds of questions that spectators must ask themselves, and measures out the answers sparingly. Similarly, it provides narrative form for each and every one of the elements that take part in it and organises the data present in all the events so that it is at the service of a storyline. "The

function of the classical storyline is, in this sense, that of cancelling out what by its chance and random nature resists being named; a working of the form that aims at eliminating the contingency element that survives in the image" (Marzabal, 1998: 17).

What underlies fiction films is the creation of a new world in which the random element is banished; however, the absence of the hand of the director, in other words, the absence of the enunciator, effaces any trace of the fact that this is a structured discourse and favours the impression that it is pure storyline, pure narration charged with plausibility.

Fiction films feed and satisfy the spectator's motivation with regard to the exploration of the individual human being, but it is true that they can also obey the spectator's desire to be told the same story over and over again.

What is termed reality in the cinema

The photographic basis of the cinema establishes a direct link with reality. However, as Nichols (1997: 119) states: "Photography's susceptibility to being manipulated does not only imply later manipulation, but the glance of the camera evidently establishes one reality that is opposed to the rest of reality". This author defends the idea that discussing the glance of the camera means fusing two different operations: the literal, mechanical operation of a device to reproduce images, and the human, metaphorical process of looking at the world.

Consideration of the cinema as a recorder of reality has been a constant throughout its history, but it was in the post-war period that this approach was consolidated, through Italian neo-Realism. Two reasons brought about this need to reflect reality: one, because the idea prevailed that the cinema is photography and therefore has the faculty of recording what happens, and the other, because there existed the need to describe the surrounding world, the social reality of the post-war period (the desolation after the cruelty). By introducing the time factor, cinema becomes the ideal medium for the new cultural identity that demands to be recorded. There exists a desire for reality, a need to address the world, a social conscience and the obligation of commitment. An ethical attitude of commitment on the part of the cinema in the face of historical reality establishes itself. As Deleuze states, we pass from action cinema to the cinema of seeing.

Italian neo-Realism seems to be *reportage* because its naturalness is closer to oral than written narration; it seems to be more akin to a sketch than a painting. The films of Rossellini point to an awareness of their creative process, which fundamentally involves a process of searching. "Rossellini made a start with his

camera, a large amount of blank film and the outlines of scripts that he modified in line with his inspiration, the human or material means at his disposal, nature, landscapes." (Bazin, 1990: 310).

The theory of the relationship between cinema and reality, in general terms, considers the debate between the reality that appears before the camera and the reality that is shaped by the image that represents it. In other words, for some theoreticians reality in the cinema is shaped by an eminently documentary expression, whereas for others there exists the possibility that this reality is interpreted in some way. Casetti (1994: 31) makes an analysis of the different stages of research into this theme and establishes a difference between "immediate realism" and "critical realism" or, which amounts to the same thing, between "great realism" and "empirical realism". We may speak of theoretical models which maintain that reality can only be represented by means of direct access, and those models that accept mediations. One exponent of the former stance is Zavattini (1979: 103), who defends the idea that "It is necessary for the space between life and spectacle to be cancelled out". In opposition to the tradition of classic Hollywood cinema, which is a cinema that introduces "authentic" elements into the fiction by inventing stories as close as possible to reality, Zavattini (1979: 97) proposes "the recovering of events and the making of reality a story"; expressed in his own words: "it is not a matter of turning imagined things into 'reality' (by making them appear true or real) but of making things significant to the highest degree just as they are, almost as if they narrated themselves". For this author, the films *Paisà*, *Roma città aperta*, *Sciu cià*, *Ladri di Biciclette* and *La terra trema* "contain certain things of an absolute significance, which reproduce the idea in completely narrative elements; always on a somewhat metaphorical plane, for they are still an invented story and not the incarnation of the documentary spirit". For his part Aristarco (1968), who would stand at the opposite end of the spectrum to Zavattini, defends empirical realism or critical realism. For this author, the cinema should not content itself with describing, but with the fact that the narration can show what underlies the events. Aristarco establishes different degrees of reality, understanding this reality as what is perceived and discovered by directors in accordance with their own leanings and capacity for analysis in depth. Chiarini proposes two conceptions of the cinema: cinematic spectacle and film. Whereas in cinematic entertainment the desire to tell a story, the winning over of the audience and the play of the fiction are key elements, in film fiction, the narration and the *mise-en-scène* are renounced in order to enter into contact with reality. "With the documentary, pure cinema is born, the cinema as anti-spectacle, considering that the basis for spectacle is 'fiction', not the transfiguration that is also proper to the cinema, whereas the foundation of pure cinema is authentic reality" (Aristarco; 1968: 78). This direct contact with reality of which Chiarini speaks does not rule out mediation on the part of the director, who in fact re-elaborates the initial data. Thus, the balance between creative re-elaboration and the photographic foundation of film is what identifies the cinema. The camera sets itself up as the witness to reality and efforts must be made to distort this reality as little as possible, both in the form and in the substance. According to this vision, *montage* loses its key role and manipulating character and must contribute to maintaining this fidelity to reality.

Chiarini stands between Zavattini, who demands immediacy, and Aristarco, who accepts mediation, as he establishes a compromise between photographic fidelity and poetic re-creation.

The theories expounded that are intimately related with cinematic practice in Italian neo-Realism, even with the shades of emphasis that differentiate between them, find an analysis in Casetti that sustains the belief that Italian neo-Realism, in spite of making an appeal to reality, is not a simple reproduction of the world that surrounds us, but submits itself to a series of "textual strategies" and signs proper to culture that "allow the introduction of an effect of reality". This leads again to the consideration that reality reproduced as such might end up as something that proves unintelligible. The same faculty that sets up the cinema as the figurative art *par excellence*, which is its representation of time, is what impedes its reliable expression, as the fact that situations pass in real time makes their visualisation untenable. (3) Another formula that will enable us to maintain a film's expression of reality is to employ a hidden camera, or the technique of filming from a distance and of course the absence of *montage*. The fact is that any documentary is an interpreted film; however random it may appear, it has something of *mise-en-scène*. "Thus, the most realist of the arts shares, however, a common fate; it cannot embrace all of reality: reality always slips away somewhere or other" (Bazin, 1990: 301).

Therefore, when approaching this relationship between cinema and reality, reference is made to types of reality, but never to their complete attainment. Realist cinema also has its strategies; for the new perspective of Italian realism the important thing may be a lengthy take that serves no purpose according to traditional script criteria, lacking any dramatic link-up and basing itself exclusively on the phenomenological description of the characters. The defence of realism therefore also imposes one particular type of shot and the prohibition of others. Whereas classical cinema imposes situations and emotions that we might term pre-fabricated (according to the realists), realism prohibits what is termed the falsification of reality, which comes from splitting what occurs in the same scene into two shots. As Casetti (1994:44) states: "this is the famous prohibited *montage*: separating the threatening wild animal from the threatened man with a cut would be to renounce the intimate credibility of the situation". In this way, fragmentation is abandoned and use is made of the sequence shot, in which the spectator has to decipher the truth. (4)

One example that illustrates what the deepest reality in creative cinematic practice amounts to is when Flaherty, in his desire to be true to the reality of how Nanook's family lived inside the igloo, and not having sufficient focal distance to frame them all, was obliged to build a giant-sized igloo in order to reconstruct reality; splitting up the different members of the family into close-up shots would not have reflected the unity of the family and would consequently have meant a falsifying of reality to Flaherty. For its part, Lumière's scene of workers leaving the factory was shot several times so that it coincided with the factory's actual closure and the characters were arranged in accordance with aesthetic criteria, which implies a *mise-en-scène*.

The cinema of the modern era

The cinema of the modern era, among other things, provides films in which the documentary and fiction, the visible and the narrative, cohabit. These are films in which co-existence is considered between images that speak for themselves and abandon themselves to their own meaning, and images that are elaborated with the aim of giving them a narrative value.

To return to the evolution of the new cinema, neo-Realism reflects a historical moment and locates the individual on the sidelines of the social situation. The *Nouvelle Vague* that then emerges lets us see inner reality and presents us individuals on the margins of themselves, who are displaced for good from their surroundings. An early view of the transition from neo-Realism to *Nouvelle Vague* seems to point to the idea that between both movements there is a short, sharp cut; Deleuze (1984), however, refers to neo-Realism as a movement that intuitively tackles questions to which the *Nouvelle Vague* will give shape through the intelligentsia and reflection. Emptiness, mystery, the enigma of destiny, chance in film form and substance, the individual's internal process that leads to a path that is clearly going nowhere, are the signs of modernity that Rossellini puts forward, ridding himself of the shadows of the war to which the *cinéastes* of the modern era lay claim.

Nouvelle Vague cinema reveals the prevalence of the author who is determined to show his own anxieties. It is a cinema that breaks with traditional forms, reflects on the medium itself and seeks new narrative solutions. For Casetti (1994: 93) there are three features that characterise the new movements: "the need to maintain a deeper and more direct relationship with reality; the requirement not to reduce the discourse of reality to a mere reflection of its empirical data; and the special attention paid to the language through which it is expressed". Unlike what it may seem, *auteur* cinema does not invalidate the objectivity of the images, but rather seeks for realism and not mere credibility. The new cinema tries to fashion reality from the perspective of the author who seeks for what is concealed behind appearances. The contribution made by Astruc (1948) that considers the camera a fountain pen enabled *cinéastes* to express themselves through sound and images with great autonomy and therefore set up the prevalence of the shooting over the other stages of the cinematic process. (5)

Godard, held to be the most innovative of the *Nouvelle Vague* directors, approaches the cinema as a test, (6) deconstructs film continuity and the narrative flow; breaks with the rules of acting, makes use of improvisation (although it is simulated) and also breaks with some of the rules of classical *montage* like the search for *raccord* and moving invisibly from one shot to another. He, on the contrary, uncovers the medium with which he works and employs cinematic resources by making them form part of the story he is telling. His cinema, like thought, installs itself between representation and abstraction and, like life, as Pla (7) states, does not have a closed argument, but rather a complete and abrupt one. He also approaches

men's desires to escape from themselves. Godard's characters invoke Baudelaire when he refers to the "Urge to escape from oneself", because they rest from their own burden by breaking the stereotype. The perceptual, cognitive overload in Godard's films corresponds to how a man feels in the face of the world surrounding him, he hears many conversations and can only understand one, perhaps none. His cinema is not real, but it lets us feel reality and it also explicates the issues of the moment, one particular Paris, one particular culture. On a first reading it may appear that his experimentation is built on breaking with what has gone before, but it may well be that his main aim in his creative process was not to impose limits on himself and to work without norms (without the norms of classical cinema, and without the norms that neo-Realism and the *avant gardes* dictated to break the norms of classical cinema).

We now know that the cinematic movements of the modern era arose because it was fun to shatter narrative conventions, but not for the mere pleasure of going against them; rather, in order to take certain liberties. Godard talks of style in his process of distortion, in the search for a moral alternative in inevitable film rhetoric, an alternative so as not to destroy truth (Quintana, 2000: 48). As for themes and characters, Godard applies the mechanism opposite to the documentary, giving it an approach that proves to be a variant of fiction because, unlike Flaherty, who makes fiction by basing himself on real fact, Godard takes characters from fiction and gives them a documentary air (Godard, 1996: 180-181). In short, Godard's cinema crosses the boundaries of the cinema, traces a path between image and reflection and creates visual metaphors of facts by presenting objects that are more alive than people.

It might be said that his movements are like those of a painter in front of a canvas, like impulses that form part of a global process, but that are built on unique gestures; a technique that emerges from itself and projects itself from the *cinéaste*'s soul; a composition that creates itself based on inspirations that know no rules; nor, however, do they ignore them.

In the systematic examination that he makes of cinema praxis, Burch refers to the new language that the cinema of the modern era gives birth to: "...the birth of this language has also brought with it a kind of completely new argument that we shall call 'non-fiction' so that it is not mistaken for the old 'documentary' and whose operations are very different from the argument that we call 'fictional'" (Burch, 1985: 161). The maximum exponent of the so-called "form-meditation" is Godard, for he has always wanted to break away from the traditional storyline, by making recourse to "non-fiction", that is, to meditation on reality. *Vivre sa vie* is the most representative illustration of this type of experience. (8)

In many of its films, modern Italian cinema (Antonioni / Fellini) displays narrative that lacks intrigue, that states and then abandons it, to talk in terms of classic Hollywood narrative. Sequences in many cases do not state the cause-effect relationship proper to this narrative and, in addition, they do not succeed one another in order to drive the action forward to a resolution. Once again, the approach to reality is stated by the rhythm that events generally adopt in life, that shapeless segregation to which Pla refers, those events

that do not fit one into another but which, in spite of this, retain a certain intelligibility, that intrinsic value that real-world data possess and which cannot be marked by the logic of discourse. Enigmas are not resolved, "suspense" is denied, and the suspension of the storyline is reinforced. Empty shots, indeterminate motives, a staging of the incidents that responds to their own logic and not that of the plot of the film, which lead to no conclusion. "Many self-conscious narratives of the modern era are to be found in this exercise of the *jeu* as narrative construction-deconstruction" (Font, 2002: 272).

Some *cinéastes* of the modern era such as Antonioni, Resnais, Wenders and Agnès Varda are to be found in this unstable, metaphorical narrative landscape that moves between photographic reproduction and linguistic elaboration. (It should be emphasised that Resnais asks for the cinema to be a testimony to the breakdown that characterises modern society and for this reason he must distance himself from the canons of traditional cinema).

Not only Wenders, in some of his films, but also Agnès Varda, Johan van der Keuken, Chris Marker and Chantal Akerman make documentary films, in other words they do not create an imaginary world, but clearly present a style that imposes itself on reality, and their films end up by taking shape as a fictionalised universe.

To give an example of products that cross boundaries, we find documentaries that approach such a personal vision as Fellini's *Roma*, which is an absolutely subjective documentary "inhabited" by Fellini's ghosts, and films like *Roma città aperta* by Rossellini, which is a fiction film as it has a dramatic structure yet, nonetheless, is much more documentary in that sense of truthfulness than Fellini's *Roma*. Guerín's opinion (2000: 23) is that this has more to do with an attitude of formulation than with the pact with reality.

Co-existence, connection and the tension between documentary modes and fiction modes are also put into practice in modern cinema by Kiarostami and Marc Recha, as well as the (more clearly documentary) proposals by José Luis Guerín (*Innisfree*, *Tren de sombras*, *En construccion* 1990-2001), Joaquín Jordá and Isaki Lacuesta, and with films that, at some distance from the documentary, draw nearer to a real world and enter into a commitment with that world, like *Los lunes al sol* by Fernando León.

André Bazin's affirmation (1990: 299) that a classification – if not a hierarchy – of cinematic styles is possible, depending on the level of reality that they represent, appears today more than ever to be the parameter used to categorise the products that result from cinematic practice. Italian neo-Realism satisfied the appetite for giving expression to post-war reality and the need to face up to one's own brutally devastated world. At present the "fiction *versus* reality" dichotomy is visibly disintegrating and is the object of multiple debates and reflections because there remains a need to believe that some reality exists, particularly as a result of the enormous impact of September 11th, 2001, an event that awoke us from a deep sleep, making us ask where *is* reality and leading us imperiously to look for it and record it, thus

creating that marked tendency to associate fiction with the entertainment world and the documentary and its other forms with the world of science.

The problem lies not in deciphering which is better, fiction or documentary, but rather which type of fiction and which type of documentary, and with what aim and with what purpose. Fiction is an imagined reality in which the spectator can find the principles of life that he or she does not find in everyday reality. Fiction films that deal with some real world do so in order to commit themselves to reality. The documentary seeks for reality in the most direct way possible. Products on their borders take advantage of the essay-like power of film language with the purpose of recovering the concepts that we need to understand the world.

NOTES

(1) Pictorial representation developed in tune with norms imposed by nature, where perfection and the ideal are present. Thus, a canon of beauty is established by which the artist must be governed when imitating reality. The Greek theory of imitation starts out from the assumptions that 1) the human mind is passive, therefore it can only perceive what exists and 2) it is based on the perfection of nature, understanding by this affirmation that, although man might invent something, this would be a mistake due to the fact that perfection already exists in nature. Art is imitation and it is unimaginable that the artist should interpret or contribute his vision; perfection is built up from the repetition of this imitation, without admitting even minor variations

(2) Burch, an author who studies the genealogy of cinematic language, criticises the theoretical discourses that term "Hollywood" language (which he prefers to term mode of representation) as natural, revealing that behind the first narratives lay an intention to make themselves understood that developed representational strategies that cannot be considered a natural system. Likewise, Burch displays his disagreement both with those who see the "original sin" of the cinema in the camera and the blind glance, and with those who see the "original sin" of the cinema in the theatricality of its beginnings; and even with those who see the primitive cinema as a Paradise Lost as a result of the narration that Porter and Griffith included. But above all, Burch refuses to see a "bad object" in the films that, far from deconstructing the codes of institutional narration and much less the foundations of the Movement for institutional representation, raise meanings different from those that this movement repeats eternally (Burch 1991: 18).

(3) Experiments of this type have been carried out, Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963), which reproduces six hours of a man sleeping.

(4) The importance of Orson Welles, for instance, lies precisely in his rejecting of fragmentation, by opening the field and showing all the action. Bazin suggests that Welles has restored the quality of what is "real" to the cinema; in other words, continuity itself and not some planning that, as the same author states: "...introduces an evident abstraction into reality but to which we have come to habituate ourselves completely and no longer realise it as such". Welles's scenes do not choose for us. "Whereas the lens of the classical camera successively focuses on different places in the scene, that of Orson Welles takes in the whole visual field with equal sharpness, converting it immediately into a dramatic field [...] *Citizen Kane* therefore owes its realism to the intelligent use of a concrete technical advance: thanks to the depth of field, Orson Welles has restored to reality its sensitive continuity". Moreover, Bazin adds, Welles renounces the qualities of the authentic document because he does not use either natural settings, sunlight, or professional actors (Bazin, 1990: 300).

(5) Astruc's "realist" approach is based on the relationship between respect for the photographic record and the "author's" declarative liberty, which in a certain way obviates the spectator. This conception, like all the empirical conceptions put forward by "New Cinemas", has no theory regarding montage as a significant process. In this respect, Kracauer (1996: 100) states that what is recorded is relatively de-structured and presents different degrees of indecisiveness, proposing as a consequence that montage as a specific characteristic of the cinema is a significant device. This invites consideration of what role the spectator plays and if reality exists depending on the receiver's acceptance.

(6) His cinema has been termed *essai*, although Bordwell (1996: 312) explains that the reflections presented "are organised around narrative causes and effects". Nor does Bordwell agree with the view that considers Godard's cinema scientific because it appears to analyse the conventions of Hollywood cinema, contemporary life, the system of signs, whereas in fact it does not do so; Bordwell states: "Godard's films suggest a great deal but prove nothing [...] there is no statement of intentions, no chains of deductions, no conclusion". Likewise, Bordwell (1996: 312) accuses Godard of acting in a capricious and arbitrary manner: "The most annoying thing of all, perhaps, is the problem of function. What purpose is served by eliminating the sound in the penultimate scene of *Vivre sa vie*? What justification is there for the changes to negative in *Lemmy against Alphaville* (*Alphaville*, 1965) or the repetition of the scene of the car wash in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*? This kind of problem reappears in A *bout de souffle*, in which the rhythm and context of the cuts in the montage are inexplicable from any coherent principle of narrative relevance. Godard, in other words, raises the possibility, as no other director has done, of a purely capricious or arbitrary use of technique.

(7) "The fact that the public believes that novels must have a plot does not mean that there is one in life. This need on the public's part is what demonstrates that life, transported onto the literary plane, is a formless, chaotic segregation of images. The fatigue caused by this endless, incomprehensible chaos is

what makes us long for an arranging, a coherence, even if artificial, arbitrary and totally implausible" Josep Pla (1981: 12).

(8) It is worth citing other manifestations like Free Cinema, which seeks for realism without commentary or explanation, Cinema Novo, which defends the avoidance of manipulation, the Latin American cinema of denunciation and the *New American Cinema Group*, so-called *underground* cinema, whose aim is to distance itself from traditional cinema.

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