

Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology

A Film Theory Reader

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**Theory and Film:
Principles of Realism and Pleasure**

Film theory has undergone an extraordinary expansion and mutation in the last few years. Without wishing to specify either their relative importance or their interdependence, one could indicate three factors which have contributed to this growth: increasingly heterogeneous developments within filmic practice: an enlarged educational investment; and a growing concern with the general theoretical problems of signification. The result of these complex determinants is that, while developing its own specific area of analysis, film theory has come in recent years to have more and more to contribute to many of the most important and central cultural debates. *Screen* has participated actively in this process and it is through a consideration of one crucial area of discussion, namely realism, that we can attempt to understand the impetus and direction of *Screen's* work in the recent past. Brecht remarked that realism was not simply a matter for aesthetic debate but was one of the crucial questions of our age.¹ The problems of realism occur in an acute and critical form in the cinema, and perhaps no single topic concentrates so many of the developments that have taken place in film theory.

If we say that realism is, and has been, the dominant aesthetic in film, it is important to realize that this dominance does not date from film's inception. At the moment of its invention, various possibilities remained upon to film: possibilities which were closed down by a set of ideological choices, and the manner of this closure is of great interest to the study of ideology.² But if we recognize the extent to which realism became dominant in film only after the development

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of sound, and after film production throughout the world had been hegemonized in Hollywood, it is still the case that realism has been the dominant aesthetic since the Second World War. Whether we look to Hollywood, where realism is purchased at almost any price, or to the Italian neorealist cinema, we find that the struggle is to represent reality as effectively as possible; in both cinemas the possibility as such of the representational relation is taken for granted. If *cinéma-vérité* opposed Hollywood, this opposition was in terms of the effacement of style, where a pristine representation, an authentic relation between film and fact, was contaminated by arrangement and conscious intervention. Only in the early 1960s do we begin to find filmic practices which question the very validity of the representational relation. Within the Continental tradition, and owing an explicit debt to neorealism and particularly to Rossellini, the films of Godard began an investigation of film which took as its object the very processes of representation as well as the problem of what was represented. At the same time, in America, the development of cheaper filmmaking technology allowed many of the theoretical concerns of modern American painting to find a practical application in film. The name of Warhol can serve as an index of this development. But if these practices can best be articulated outside any representational problematic, the theoretical debates around them have constantly lagged behind those practices, and very often, the most important factor contributing to this backwardness has been difficulties with the problem of realism. At the same time a traditional realism remains the dominant force within the commercial cinema, where, if many of the tricks and effects of other cinemas are constantly borrowed, films like *Nashville* or *American Graffiti* reproduce the major strategies and procedures of films like *Giant* or *The Chase*. Finally, realism poses a constant problem within the Marxist theoretical and political tradition as a legacy of the primacy attached to it in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. It is thus difficult in any field of cinema to avoid the term, and indeed it is vitally necessary to examine it and its consequences in some detail.

Realism and Empiricism

As a starting point one could take the objection that realism cannot be dominant in the cinema because Hollywood cinema is not realistic. By the criteria of one of the great realist critics, André Bazin, for a film to be realistic, it must locate its characters and action in a determinate social and historical setting. Most Hollywood films, it could be argued, fail to do this and are, therefore, unrealistic. But Bazin's characterization of realism is much more centrally concerned with a transparency of form which is reduplicated within Hollywood filmic practice. Bazin's criteria for distinguishing between films can only be based on nonfilmic concerns. (It should be said in advance that although these considerations will tend to collapse Hollywood and neorealist cinema together, there is a different

reading of Bazin which could disengage from his text a set of incoherences which can be articulated so as to produce distinctions between neorealism and much Hollywood cinema such that the value judgments Bazin wished to confer on the postwar Italian cinema could be retained without a commitment to Bazin's theory of representation.)³

For Bazin, as for almost all realist theorists, what is in question is not just a rendering of reality but the rendering of a reality made more real by the use of aesthetic device. Talking of the use of convention within the cinema, Bazin writes that such a use may be made "at the service or at the disservice of realism, it may increase or neutralize the efficacy of the elements of reality captured by the camera. . . . One can class, if not hierarchize, the cinematographic styles as a function of the gain of reality that they represent. We shall thus call *realist* any system of expression, any narrative procedure which tends to make more reality appear on the screen." This "more" is not quantitative but qualitative: it measures the extent to which the essence of the object represented is grasped. For Bazin the essence is attained through globality and totality; it is understood as coherence. Rossellini's vision is assessed in terms of the globality of the real that it represents: this globality

does not signify, completely the contrary, that neorealism can be reduced to same objective documentaryism. Rossellini likes to say that the basis of his conception of *mise-en-scène* lies in a love not only of his characters but also of reality just as it is, and it is exactly this love which forbids him to dissociate that which reality has united; the character and the decor. Neorealism is defined neither by a refusal to take up a position with regard to the world nor by a refusal to judge it but it supposes in fact a mental attitude; it is always reality seen through an artist, refracted by his consciousness, but by all his consciousness, and not by his reason or his belief and reconstituted from dissociated elements.⁴

The central nature of the artistic activity becomes the presentation of a reality more real than that which could be achieved by a simple recording. The play on the notions of "real" and "reality" which is involved in Bazin's conception (the artist produces a reality more real than reality) is also the central feature of empiricism. In *Reading Capital*, Louis Althusser locates the specific feature of empiricism not in the confrontation between subject and object which is, postulated as anterior to any knowledge (though to be sure empiricism relies on this), but rather in its characterization of the knowledge to be obtained as defined by the object of which it is knowledge. Althusser writes: "The whole empiricist process of knowledge lies in that operation of the subject named abstraction. To know is to abstract from the real object its essence, the possession of which by the subject is then called knowledge."⁵ The whole empiricist conception thus depends on two notions of real and ultimately two notions of object, and this play suppresses the process at work in the production of knowledge. Bazin too starts out with the reality of everyday life and ends up with the greater reality of the filmmaker's representation of it. What must be hidden by the "author" is

the process by which this "greater reality" is arrived at, for, of course, on this account the "greater reality" is there all along just waiting to be seen. Thus, for Bazin, any concept of process which would call both subject and object into play instead of positing them as constitutive moments is eliminated. This finds clear expression in his discussion of de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*:

As the disappearance of the actor is the result of an overcoming of the style of acting, the disappearance of the *mise-en-scène* is equally the fruit of a dialectical process of the style of narration. If the event is sufficient unto itself without the director having need to illuminate it by angles or the special position of the camera, it is true that it has come to that perfect luminosity which permits art to unmask a nature which finally resembles it.⁷

All interference by the subject must be reduced to a minimum because such interference involves subject and object in a process which destroys their full and punctual autonomy. The triumph of *Bicycle Thieves* is that it completely does away with the cinematic process. Bazin writes: "*Bicycle Thieves* is one of the first examples of pure cinema. There are no more actors, no more story, no more *mise-en-scène*, that is to say finally in the aesthetic illusion of reality—no more cinema."⁸ The revelation of reality is the prime task of the cinema, and all aesthetic devices are simply there to unmake themselves so that we too can experience, as the artist experienced before us, that moment at which reality presents itself as whole.

Contradiction and the Real

Against this traditional analysis, I argue that film does not reveal the real in a moment of transparency, but rather that film is constituted by a set of discourses which (in the positions allowed to subject and object) produce a certain reality. The emphasis on production must be accompanied by one on another crucial Marxist term, that of contradiction. There is no one discourse that produces a certain reality—to believe so is to fall into the idealism complementary to the empiricism already discussed. A film analysis is dealing with a set of contradictory discourses transformed by specific practices. Within a film text these may be different "views" of reality which are articulated together in different ways. Most documentaries (including the anthropological films Mick Eaton and Ivan Ward discuss in their article "Anthropology and Film" in this number of *Screen*) bind the images together by the verbal interpretation of the voiceover commentary. Classical fictional cinema, on the other hand, has the crucial opposition between spoken discourses which may be mistaken and a visual discourse which guarantees truth—which reveals all. For this opposition to be set up, the spectator must be placed in a position from which the image is regarded as primary. The movement of this placing can be grasped by considering a third group of

films which find their constitutive principle in the refusal so to place the spectator. In a film such as the Dziga-Verov Groups' *Wind from the East* a set of political discourses and images are juxtaposed so that, although what the Second Female Voice says is what the filmmakers regard as politically correct, it neither subdues the images, as in the documentary, nor is judged by them. None of the discourses can be read off one against the other. There is no possibility of verification, no correspondence between sound and image enabling the spectator to enter the realm of truth. This dislocation between sound and image focuses attention on the position of the spectator—both in the cinema and politically. These juxtapositions make the spectator constantly aware of the discourses that confront him as discourses—as, that is, the production of sets of positions—rather than allowing him to ignore the process of articulation by entering a world of correspondence in which the only activity required is to match one discourse against the realm of truth.

It might here be objected that "filmic discourse" has not been defined with sufficient precision. Rather than giving an exact definition, one must indicate the range of application of the term. Within language studies, from at least the Renaissance onward, "discourse" is the term used to indicate a shifting of attention from the formal oppositions which the linguist attempts to define and articulate to the way in which these formal oppositions relate to the speaking subject. When we talk of "discourse" we move away from a conception of language as a set of significant oppositions independent of the speaking subject (Saussure's *langue*) to focus on the position of the speaking subject within the utterance. With discourse we become interested in the dialectical relation between speaker and language in which language always already offers a position to the speaker, and yet, at the same time, the act of speaking may itself displace that position. In filmic terms this means the kinds of combinations of words and images which can be differentiated in terms of different positions allocated to the viewer. I hope to make clear the kinds of elements involved in this combination later in my examination of *American Graffiti*. For the moment it can be stated that it is neither a question of the filmmaker using a transparent discourse to render the real nor of her or him inventing a discourse which produces a real. Instead the production of a film must be understood as involving a work, a practice, a transformation on and of the discourses available. One such practice, which I have called classical realism,⁹ and shall analyze in *American Graffiti*, involves the homogenization of different discourses by their relation to one dominant discourse—assured of its domination by the security and transparency of the image. The fact that one such practice involves this homogenization is a matter of ideological and political but not normative interest. My aim in this article is to demonstrate how the practices which articulate the different elements in the discourses which constitute a filmic text have certain political effects. For the moment, and against a traditional realist emphasis, one could say that, at any given time, it is the contradictory positions available

discursively to the subject, together with the positions made available by non-linguistic practices, that constitute the reality of the social situation.

It is contradiction that Bazin wishes at all costs to conceal and coherence that furnishes him with his crucial emphasis. The coherence and the totality of the artist's vision provide the final criterion of reality—subject and object confront one another in full luminosity. This luminosity draws attention to the fact that the relation is visual—that all we have to do in the cinema is look. It is here that we begin to analyze the practices of classical realist cinema, for the distinguishing feature of these practices is the production of a perfect point of view for the audience—a point of vision.

The Point of View and the Look

Jacques Lacan has offered an analysis of vision which is of great relevance to any attempt to understand the reality of film. For Lacan, vision offers a peculiarly privileged basis to an *imaginary* relation of the individual to the world.¹⁰ This imaginary relationship is characterized by the plenitude it confers on both subject and object, caught as they are outside any definition in terms of difference—given in a full substantial unity. The imaginary is central to the operations of the human psyche and is constituted as such in early infancy. Somewhere between the sixth and eighteenth month, the small human infant discovers its reflection in the mirror; an apprehension of unity all the more surprising in that it normally occurs before motor control has ensured that unity in practice. The specular relation thus established in this, the mirror phase, provides the basis for primary narcissism, and is then transferred onto the rest of the human world where the other is simply seen as another version of the same—of the “I” which is the center of the world. It is only with the apprehension of genital difference that the child leaves the comfortable world of the imaginary to enter into the world of the symbolic. The symbolic is understood by Lacan (after Lévi-Strauss) not as a set of one-to-one relationships but as a tissue of differences which articulate the crucial elements within the child's world. It is the acceptance of a potential lack (castration) which marks the child's access to the symbolic and to language. Language in the realm of the imaginary is understood in terms of some full relation between word and thing: a mysterious unity of sign and referent. In the symbolic, language is understood in terms of lack and absence—the sign finds its definition diacritically through the absent syntagmatic and paradigmatic chains it enters into. As speaking subjects we constantly oscillate between the symbolic and the imaginary—constantly imagining ourselves granting some full meaning to the words we speak, and constantly being surprised to find them determined by relations outside our control. But if it is the phallus which is the determining factor for the entry into difference, differ-

ence has already troubled the full world of the infant. The imaginary unity has already been disrupted by the cruel separation from those objects originally understood as part of the subject—the breast and the feces. The phallus becomes the dominating metaphor for all these previous lacks. Lacan defines the centrality of the phallus for the entry into the symbolic and language when he describes the phallus as “the signifier destined to designate the effects, taken as a set, of signified, insofar as the signifier conditions these effects by its presence as signifier.”¹¹ The signified here is exactly the imaginary full meaning constantly contaminated by the signifier's organization along constitutive and absent chains.

In *Le Séminaire XI*, Lacan attempts to demonstrate the relation between the symbolic and the imaginary at the level of vision and to demonstrate the existence of lack within the scopic field (this lack being the condition of the existence of desire within the visual field—a desire which can find satisfaction in a variety of forms). Taking the Holbein picture *The Ambassadors* (the National Gallery, London), Lacan comments on the death's-head hidden in the picture by a trick of perspective and only visible from one particular angle. The rest of the picture is caught in the world of the imaginary—the spectator is the all-seeing subject and, as if to emphasize the narcissistic nature of the relation, Holbein fills the picture with Renaissance emblems of vanity. However, the death's-head, perceived when we leave the field of the picture, reintroduces the symbolic. For the death's-head draws attention to the fact that we see the picture at a distance and from a particular angle (if we think back to Bazin's quotation about *Bicycle Thieves*, it is clear that for him cinema must obliterate distance and angles). With the introduction of the spectator's position the objects simply and substantially there are transformed into a set of differential relationships; a set of traces left by a paint brush; an organized area of space which, from one particular point, can be read as an object. That the object thus seen is a skull is in no way surprising when we consider that the entry into the symbolic can be most simply described as the recognition of the world independently of my consciousness—as the recognition, that is, of the possibility of my own death. Holbein's picture demonstrates a congruence between the organization of language and the organization of the visual field. Just as the constitutive elements of language must be absent in the moment of speaking, so the constitutive nature of the distance and position of the viewing subject must be absent from the all-embracing world of vision. *The Ambassadors* reintroduces the look into vision. As such it bears witness to the separation (castration) on which vision is based, but which it endlessly attempts to ignore.

The intervention of the symbolic in the imaginary is already in evidence at the very opening of the mirror phase. For the infant verifies its reflection by looking to the mother who holds it in front of the mirror. It is the mother's look that confirms the validity of the infant's image, and with this look we find that at the very foundation of the dual imaginary relationship there is a third term already unsettling it. The mother verifies the relationship for the child, but at

the cost of introducing a look, a difference where there should be only similitude. The fact that this look which both sets up and potentially destroys the full visual field is felt as castration explains why, traditionally, the eye is always evil. We are now in a position to grasp Lacan's claim that the visual is organized in terms of the look (*le regard*)—defined by the others' look that it is not—and of the blot (*la tache*), the fact that any visual field is already structured so that certain effects will be seen, Lacan writes:

The function of the blot and the look is, at one and the same time, that which commands the most secretly, and that which always escapes the grip of, that form of vision which finds its contentment in imagining itself as consciousness.¹²

Bazin wishes to do away with the camera because it constantly threatens the world of imaginary plenitude and must therefore be repressed at all costs. In its place a visual world is instituted from which the look, any trace of castration, has been expelled. The distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary can be understood in cinematic terms by contrasting the look and the point of view. The point of view is always related to an object.¹³ But insofar as the object is a given unity there is always the possibility of seeing it together with all the possible points of view—there is always the possibility of a point of overview. The point of view preserves the primacy of vision, for what is left out of one point-of-view shot can always be supplied by another. The look, however, is radically defective. Where the point of view is related to an object, the look is related to other looks. The look's field is not defined by a science of optics in which the eye features as a geometrical point but by the fact that the object we are looking at offers a position from which we can be looked at—and this look is not punctual but shifts over the surface. It is important that it is a head that looks back at us from Holbein's painting.

From this account of the pleasure involved in vision it might seem that the ideal film would show us a static perspective. But this is to ignore the dialectic of pleasure and desire revealed to us by Freud.¹⁴ If, on the one hand, there is a tendency toward stasis, toward a normalization of excitation within the psyche, there is also a compulsion to repeat those moments at which the stasis is set in motion, at which the level of excitation rises to unbearable heights. The small boy in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in his endless game of *fort-da* ceaselessly throws away the object at the end of the string only to draw it back and start again. This action, which Freud tells us reproduces the experience of separation from the mother, shows that it is exactly the moment of anxiety, of heightened tension, the moment of coming which is relived in a constant cycle, which threatens itself. What lies beyond the pleasure principle is not a threatening and exterior reality but a reality whose virulence knows no cessation, the reality of those constitutive moments at which we experience ourselves in the very movement of separation, which moments we are compelled to repeat in that endless movement which can find satisfaction only in death. Desire is set up only by

absence, by the possibility of return to a former state—the field of vision becomes invested libidinally only after it has been robbed of its unity by the gaze of the other. The charm of classical realism is that it introduces the gaze of the other but this introduction is always accompanied by the guarantee of the supremacy of the point of view; the threat appears so that it can be smoothed over, and it is in that smoothing that we can locate pleasure—in a plenitude which is fractured but only on condition that it will be reset. Here the stock terms demonstrate what is at stake: the motion pictures, the movies, the flicks; it is the threat of motion, of displacement that is in question, but this threat is overcome from the start.

The logic of this contradictory movement can be understood on the basis of the set of interchanges that take place between screen and viewer—that complicated circulation which ensures that I am not only a spectator in the cinema but also, by a process of identification, a character on the screen. The cinema constantly poses me as the constant point of a fixed triangle and it constantly obscures and effaces the complicated progress of the shots, the impossible movements of that point by the logic of events on the screen. To analyze this process we need the concepts elaborated by Benveniste to distinguish between the *sujet de l'énonciation* and the *sujet de l'énoncé*.¹⁵ Benveniste suggests that to arrive at a logical understanding of tenses and to understand fully the importance of language for subjectivity, the speaker as the producer of the discursive chain, *le sujet de l'énonciation*, must be distinguished from the speaker as the grammatical subject, *le sujet de l'énoncé*. The distance between these two subjects gives us a formal linguistic account of the distance between the philosophical subject, *le sujet de l'énoncé*, the "I," judge of the correspondence between world and language, and the psychoanalytic subject, the *sujet de l'énonciation*, the "it," unable to distinguish between word and world and constantly threatening and unmasking the stability of the "I." Applied to film this is the distinction between the spectator as viewer, the comforting "I," the fixed point, and the spectator as he or she is caught up in the play of events on the screen, as he or she "utters," "enounces" the film. Hollywood cinema is largely concerned to make these two coincide so that we can ignore what is at risk. But this coincidence can never be perfect because it is exactly in the divorce between the two that the film's existence is possible. This bringing into play of the process of the text's production takes us out of the classical field of semiotics, the field of the *énoncé* in which the text is treated as the assertion of a set of disjunctions permuted to produce actions, and into the question of the production of these very disjunctions. The subject is neither the full presence of traditional "auteur" criticism nor the effect of the structure of traditional structuralism; it is divided in the movement between the two. The contradiction between *énonciation* and *énoncé* is also the contradiction between narrative and discourse. Narrative is always propelled by both a heterogeneity and a surplus—a heterogeneity which must be both overcome and prolonged. The narrative begins with an incoherence but already promises the

resolution of that incoherence. The story is the passage from ignorance to knowledge, but this passage is denied as process—the knowledge is always already there as the comforting resolution of the broken coherence (every narration is always a suspense story). Narrative must deny the time of its own telling—it must refuse its status as discourse (as articulation), in favor of its self-presentation as simple identity, complete knowledge.

American Graffiti: An Example

To understand a film like *American Graffiti*, its reality and its pleasure—the reality of its pleasure—it is necessary to consider the logic of that contradiction which produces a position for the viewer but denies that production. To admit that production would be to admit of position, and the position that has been produced is the position of the point of view, promising, as Bazin wished, that the event is sufficient to itself and needs no illumination from angles or the special position of the camera—promising, in short, a suprapositional omniscience, the full imaginary relation. In *American Graffiti* this contradiction of a process of production and the denial of that process take form around the fact that we know, from the beginning of the narrative, that Curt Henderson will leave the town and yet that we hover, in suspense, over a decision which, once resolved, is obvious. The question, as always in classical realism, is one of identity. This identity may be questioned and suspended, but it is, in a deferred moment, asserted and read back over the text. Nor is this reading back an optional extra. Without it the very concept of identity and truth, the very concept of character, on which classical realism rests would disintegrate. If the hero were not really good (or bad or whatever) all along then there would be no point to the story—the narrative would become merely the retelling of successive states of affairs. The resolution of the identity of Curt Henderson is also the production for the viewer of that point of view from which he can watch the film, but the pleasure of this production is provided by two looks which threaten to disturb that point of view, to displace an identity. These looks are each of a different order and I want to consider them separately, for one remains within the order of pleasure guaranteed by the point of view while the other threatens a disruption of a very different order.

The first look that introduces the moment of heterogeneity and surplus which is the impetus of the narrative comes from the girl in the white T-bird.¹⁶ Securely placed within a point-of-view shot (Curt Henderson's) it nevertheless troubles a full imaginary identity—throwing open an uncertainty about Curt and his future on the night he has to decide whether to leave town. It is explicitly a gaze of sexuality and introduces the unsettling evidence of woman's desire as the girl mouths "I love you." *American Graffiti* thus traverses the classical path of narrative in that it is a desperate attempt to deny sexuality, the knowledge of which

provides its first impetus. The girl's glance introduces a look into our point of view and calls attention to our position as we become separated from our full being in the world (as Curt becomes an other for someone he does not know, so he becomes aware of his position, loses the full security of the imaginary). In order to replace ourselves fully in the world it is necessary to refine an origin which can function as a guarantee of identity. In order to overcome the unsettling gaze of the mother we must find a father, someone who will figure as that moment of originating identity and power which will deny the possibility of the interplay of looks. It is this search that Curt Henderson undertakes. His progress from the schoolteacher to the Pharaohs to Wolfman Jack is the search for a father who will confirm him in his identity and expunge the possibility of difference: who will reassert the point of view over the look. In the scene in the radio studio we have another very heavily marked point-of-view sequence (three shots of Curt watching, two of Wolfman Jack performing, in exactly the same sequence as we had earlier seen the blonde at the traffic lights) which provides the knowledge to overcome the earlier threat.

It might be objected that this approach ignores the complicated intercrossing of the stories of the four boys. But not only can one find the same logic at play in two of the other three (Milner constitutes a special case), it would also be a mistake to think they are on the same level. *Nashville* and *American Graffiti* are two of a set of films which, although they have borrowed tricks and devices from other cinemas, remain within a traditional Hollywood practice. The two most obvious tricks are the refusal to weight the sound track in the traditional manner, a development drawing on such different sources as Welles, Godard, and *cinéma-vérité*, and, on the other hand, a proliferation of characters such that the dominance of narrative has been replaced by the freedom of the "slice of life". Both these novelties function as noise rather than structure. A close analysis of the sound shows that a traditional weighting is given to those elements necessary for the development of the narrative. Equally, the proliferation of characters does not affect the traditional movement of narrative. Rivette's *Out One: Spectre* is an example of a film which does break down narrative by proliferation of character, but at the cost of an enormous extension of the duration of the film and a genuine inability to find it an *end*.

It is Curt Henderson's point of view which offers within the narrative that knowledge and security we enjoy as we sit in the cinema, and it is this visual primacy which indicates his traditional centrality to the narrative. For Curt accomplishes the final imaginary task—he discovers the father. For everyone else Wolfman Jack is a name which finds its reality only in the differential world of sound, but Curt is able to reunite name and bearer so that a full presence can provide the certainty of what he is and what he must do—he is a *set* and must leave town in order to see the world. The girl's gaze troubled this identity, but in the final shots of the film Curt is in a position where that gaze cannot trouble him. Before she knew who and where he was—now the positions are reversed.

And it is from the point of view of the plane that the film accomplishes the progress toward the knowledge implicit in it from the beginning. The primacy of Curt's progress for an understanding of the film is underlined when the final titles tell us that he is now a writer living in Canada. The implication is that it is he who has written the story, he has conferred on us his point of view.

The other look within the film is of a different order and radically displaces the point of view, introducing a far more threatening moment of separation for the spectator. This look does not occur within the diegetic space between characters but in the space between screen and audience. John Milner and Carol attack a car whose occupants have been so foolish as to throw something at them, racing around it letting out its tires and covering it in foam. As this happens, changes of camera position are no longer motivated either by point-of-view shots or by diegetic considerations—for a moment we have lost our position and point of view as the camera breaks the 180-degree rule, though this losing of position has a certain diegetic motivation in the actions of John and Carol. Most significantly, we see the film lights appear beside the car. The diegetic space is broken up as the film looks back at us. This encounter with the real, this movement into the symbolic is the moment of ecstasy in which Carol squirts foam all over the car and Milner lets out all the tires (a sexual symbolism obvious enough), showing us that the pleasure involved here is of a more radical nature—a pleasure of tension and its release. If Curt provides the pleasure of security and position, John Milner functions as that threatening repetition which can only end in death and which offers no position but rather ceaseless motion. This is not to suggest that Milner offers any real alternative in the film; if he did it would contaminate the pleasure provided by Curt more significantly. But as the representative of an element which finds its definition outside the synchronic space of the other characters, he introduces time in a potentially threatening way. The political nature of the film, as will be argued later, depends on a repression of time outside a process of natural growth. Milner introduces, admittedly in a minimal way, a time which is not reducible to this natural cycle—his attitude to the culture is different from that of the other boys, because he is older than they.

The Question of the Audience

What has been said so far may seem to have removed all questions of realism and film from any consideration of their social conditions of production and reception. Concentration on the organization of the text has proposed a viewer caught only within an atemporal movement between the symbolic and the imaginary and confronted only by the reality of difference. It might seem from this that film and, by implication, art in general are caught in an eternal battle

between the imaginary fullness of ideology and the real emptiness of the symbolic. Nothing could be further from my intentions in this article. My aim is to introduce certain general concepts which can be used to analyze film in a determinate social moment. That the breaking of the imaginary relation between text and viewer is that first prerequisite of political questions in art has, I would hold, been evident since Brecht. That the breaking of the imaginary relationship can constitute a political goal in itself is the ultraleftist fantasy of the surrealists and of much of the avant-garde work now being undertaken in the cinema. In certain of their formulations this position is given a theoretical backing by the writers of the *Tel Quel* group.

I hope that my analysis of *American Graffiti* has sketched in outline how the process of the production of a point of view for the spectator is effaced by mechanisms of identification. What is politically important about this textual organization is that it removes the spectator from the realm of contradiction. But it is not just contradiction in general that is avoided but a specific set of contradictions—those raised by the impact of the Vietnam War on American society. Portrait of a pre-Vietnam America, the film presents to us the children of the Kennedy Generation in the age of innocence—an innocence that we can regard from our position of knowledge. But this knowledge presupposes us outside politics now, outside contradiction. Indeed, Curt Henderson is a writer living in Canada, reflecting on an earlier reality of America that could not be sustained. (The fact that the writer is living in Canada is a further index of the repression of Vietnam—he has presumably dodged the draft, but this remains unspoken: to interrogate that decision would introduce contradiction.) The passing of innocence is reduced in the film to the process of growing up—there is no way in which external forces could be introduced into the homogeneous society of small-town California. Toad grows up and goes off to die at An Loc, but this is simply part of a human cycle. The position of the viewer after the Vietnam War is simply held to be the same but different—the position of the imaginary. The Vietnam War is repressed and smoothed over.

However, if this is our criticism of the film it is clear that what we object to is not the fact that bits of reality have somehow got left out, but rather the whole relation of the film to its audience. The audience and their representations are the terms of the "realism" of any film or work of art—not some preexistent reality which it merely conveys. Nor should this be thought novel within the socialist tradition, for I would argue that Engels' and Lenin's comments on realism are prompted by these considerations, and if they used what tools they had to hand and are thus given to talking in representational terms, then we, seventy years later, should not be worried about discarding these terms.

In his letter to Minna Kautsky of November 26, 1885 on her novel *The Old and the New*, Engels wrote that he had nothing against politically didactic writing, but then went on to say:

But I believe the tendency must spring forth from the situation and the action itself, without explicit attention called to it; the writer is not obliged to offer to the readers the future historical solution of the social conflicts he depicts. Especially in our conditions, the novel primarily finds its readers in bourgeois circles, circles not directly related to our own, and there the socialist tendencies novel can fully achieve its purpose, in my view, if, by conscientiously describing the real mutual relations, it breaks down the conventional illusions dominating them, shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, causes doubts about the validity of the existing order, and this without directly offering a solution or even, under some circumstances, taking an ostensibly partisan stand."⁷

Within this passage Engels is using more than one criterion of realism. He calls not simply for a description of the real mutual relations but for one such that they will be directly related to their audience. The text is determined not only by the situation to be represented but by its audience as well. These considerations also dominate Lenin's writing on literature. In the articles on Tolstoy which contain his most lengthy consideration of literary matters, the present political conjuncture is always dominant. Before all else it is essential to grasp the political situation to which they are addressed. They are written to combat two prevailing views of Tolstoy—opposed but complementary. On the one hand, Lenin wishes to wrest Tolstoy from those reactionary critics who want to clasp the religious Tolstoy to their bosom and thus present him as fundamentally in favor of the status quo. On the other hand, Lenin is concerned to correct those on the left like Plekhanov who see no more in Tolstoy than a religious mystic and thus reject his work as of no value. Left and right within this circle can agree on the identity of Tolstoy. Lenin, however, protests that there is no such identity, but rather a set of contradictions which must be grasped and understood as an urgent political task. Lenin never ceases to emphasize that the reality of Tolstoy is contradictory—that it is composed both of a bitter and undying enmity for the social system which has brought about the social conditions in Russia but that this enmity goes together with the most reactionary mystical and religious ideology with the result that Tolstoyism is a profound obstacle to revolutionary change in Russia. In addition to this emphasis on change and contradiction Lenin is emphatic that Tolstoy is typical, that he "represents" the period 1861–1905, the period, that is, between the freeing of the serfs and the unsuccessful revolution of 1905. Understanding the contradiction that is Tolstoy is important because it "represents" on the literary level the political problem of the peasantry in Russia—the peasantry is a force of great revolutionary potential and yet it is held back by a very reactionary ideology. Only by understanding these two contradictory facets can one correctly analyze the situation in Russia.

It is important to have these facts clear before considering the problem of the vocabulary Lenin uses in these articles, a vocabulary of expression and representation which finds its most characteristic form in the metaphor of the mirror.

Indeed the first article on Tolstoy is entitled "Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution" and it begins with the following paragraph:

To identify the great artist with the revolution (of 1905) which he has obviously failed to understand, and from which he obviously stands aloof, may at first sight seem strange and artificial. A mirror which does not reflect things correctly could hardly be called a mirror. Our revolution, however, is an extremely complicated thing. Among the mass of those who are directly making and participating in it there are many social elements which have obviously not understood what is taking place and which also stand aloof from the real historical tasks with which the course of events has confronted them. And if we have before us a really great artist, he must have reflected in his work at least some of the aspects of the revolution.¹⁸

Thus this mirror that is Tolstoy and his work are so described that the metaphor cannot function coherently. Not only is it a mirror that does not reflect, it is also a mirror that participates in a process without understanding it and, as a participant, must presumably be affected by and affect that process. It is a mirror that acts. A mirror that alters the very scene it is reflecting. To complete the paragraph Lenin adds an assertion which has nothing to do with what has gone before. In any case, he argues, Tolstoy is a great artist, and if this is so then his work *must* reflect his time. Thus within Lenin's text we can discern two claims. First that to understand Tolstoy is to understand the period 1861–1905 (here Tolstoy is a mirror but a mirror which acts) and second that the relation between Tolstoy and his time is the necessary relation that holds between a great artist and the society in which he lives and works.

These opening remarks provide Lenin with the space to go on to say that Tolstoy is of such supreme importance not because he represents a reactionary peasant ideology which already exists, but rather because he produces an ideology which the peasant is likely to espouse. And this production of ideology is not a separate activity from Tolstoy's writing. Ideology is produced within the work of literature; insofar as the artist is able to grasp and articulate the social changes taking place within the world of individuals and feelings, within the world of identification, he will offer an explanation of them: he will proffer an ideology. Insofar as the reader is offered both a description and an explanation of his or her own life (and the description and explanation are one and the same process), he or she may adopt the ideological viewpoint of the text. It is here that ideology accomplishes its real effects, as the representation of the real conditions of existence affects those conditions themselves. Tolstoy's skill as a writer is part and contradictory parcel of his importance as a reactionary ideologue, and both must be understood to understand the peasantry. For Lenin, as for Engels,¹⁹ what is at issue is not simply the reality external to the text but the reality of the text itself. We must understand the text's effectivity within the social process, which is to say we have to consider the relation between reader and text in its historical specificity.

Conclusions and Consequences

In an earlier article,²⁰ I argued for a typology of texts classified according to the organization of discourses within them. What was crucial was not the content of the text but the relations inscribed for the reader. The real was not an external object represented in the text but the relation between text and reader which reduplicated or cut across the subject's relation to his or her experience. Classically, realism depended on obscuring the relation between text and reader in favor of a dominance accorded to a supposedly given reality; but this dominance, far from sustaining a "natural" relation, was the product of a definite organization which, of necessity, effaced its own workings. In so far as the "reality" thus granted dominance was in contradiction with the ideologically dominant determinations of reality, then a text could be deemed progressive, but nevertheless such an organization was fundamentally reactionary; for it posed a reality which existed independently of both the text's and the reader's activity, a reality which was essentially noncontradictory and unchangeable. Alternatively, one could have an organization of discourses which broke with any dominance and which, as such, remained essentially subversive of any ideological order. At the end of the article I raised the question as to whether there could be a revolutionary film which would subvert the traditional position of the spectator in a more positive fashion than the simple deconstruction of the subversive film or whether any such positivity inevitably replaced one in a position of imaginary dominance.

Although I think that the earlier article can be read in a more favorable light, there is no doubt that it is contaminated by formalism; by a structuralism that it claimed to have left behind. Traditional criticism holds text and author/reader separate, with the author able to inject meaning which is then passed on to the reader. The position outlined in my article made the subject the effect of the structure (the subject is simply the sum of positions allocated to it) but it preserved the inviolability and separateness of the text—no longer given as an immutable content fixed in its determinations by reality through the author, but rather as immutable structure determining reality and author/reader in their positions. But the text has no such separate existence. If we dissolve the reader into the text in the system of identification which I have outlined in this article, it is impossible to hold text and reader (or author as first reader) separate. Rather it is a question of analyzing a film within a determinate social moment so that it is possible to determine what identifications will be made and by whom, the way Lenin analyses Tolstoy.²¹ The text has no separate existence, and for this reason it is impossible to demand a typology of texts such as I proposed in my earlier article. Rather each reading must be a specific analysis which may use certain general concepts but these concepts will find their articulation within the specific analyses and not within an already defined combinatory.

Realism is no longer a question of an exterior reality nor of the relation of reader to text, but one of the ways in which these two interact. The filmmaker

must draw the viewer's attention to his or her relation to the screen in order to make him or her "realize" the social relations that are being portrayed. Inversely one could say that it is the "strangeness" of the social relations displayed which draws the viewer's attention to the fact of watching a film. It is at the moment that an identification is broken, becomes difficult to hold, that we grasp in one and the same moment both the relations that determine that identity and our relation to its representation.²² Oshima's *Death by Hanging* offers an excellent example of a film in which the indissociability of "the real" from reality is demonstrated, in which the learning of our position in the cinema is also the learning of the social reality of Japan. (It would be in terms of the way that the artist analyzes our moments of constitutive separation in terms of social reality that one might formulate a justification for Lenin's unsubstantiated claim that any great artist must "reflect" the great social changes of his time.) In *Death by Hanging*, R, having failed to die, must learn who he is so that he can be hanged again fully conscious of his crime. As he learns to take up his position sexually and socially so that he can understand why he, a Korean subproletarian, raped and murdered a Japanese girl, so we too are learning what it is to sit in the cinema. The documentary style of the opening of the film merges into fiction and then fantasy without any of the conventional markers. We have constantly to refind our place, both in the execution hut and in the story. Subjective shots are eschewed, as are the normal rules for the organization of cinematic space. One of the results of the lack of subjective shots is that they can be used to great effect at certain moments, as when R confronts the girl he will attack. At the narrative level we are constantly unsure both of the status of events (fact, fiction, or fantasy within fiction) but also of how to understand the "ridiculous" prison officers. As we watch the Education Officer there is a kind of irony at work which completely undercuts any position of knowledge. In a film like *American Graffiti* we can find a very classical irony whereby we are constantly aware that everything is too perfect to be true, but this irony simply confirms us in our dominance, for the perfection guarantees the imaginary truth of the story. In *Death by Hanging*, the comic antics of the Education Officer deprive us of any fixed position from which we could gather his activities into a coherent "character." Unable to "place" him, we are forced to pay attention to him, to listen to his ridiculous logic, outside any certain realm of truth. The irony of *Death by Hanging* dissolves any area of truth which could be established by judging its correspondence to reality. Story of an identity (R must learn who he is), *Death by Hanging* dissolves the identity into a set of relationships which once grasped can be transformed. It is because he has understood them as a set of relationships that R can transform them at the end of the film. The introduction of his sister introduces a reality into his fantasies which means that he can no longer act them out in the real world. As this introduction of a radical otherness destroys R's fantasies, so the film destroys our fantasies by the introduction of its own reality. At the end of the film we no longer have our fantasies of Koreans, of

executions, but only on the condition that we no longer have our fantasy of the cinema.

The cost of ignoring these considerations can be seen in the TV play *The Lump*, produced by Tony Garnett, written by Jim Allen, and directed by Jack Gold in 1969. Posed once again as a problem of identity—will the young student who has taken part in the strike on the building site be won to the truth of the revolutionary cause, or will he prefer to opt out and reveal his weakness?—*The Lump* contains all its material within the most conventional diegetic and cinematic space. As a result of this imprisonment it is impossible for the filmmakers to introduce any historical component—the relations of the present struggle to the Russian Revolution or to the experience of Thomas Hardy—without such forced diegetic motivation—a poster of Lenin, the example of the slogan "Peace, Land, Bread," a bedside copy of *Jude the Obscure*—that the purpose of the reference is lost except on those who know it already. At the same time it is impossible to introduce any element of criticism or information which would not fracture the transparent space and make us aware that we are watching a "political" film. Thus there can be no criticism of the attitude to women within the text (women are expunged completely from this world of identity except for Yorky's comment that he wants "to get a leg over"), nor can there be any real information about the conditions of the Irish workers that cannot be "realistically" conveyed in a short speech by a character. The introduction of any of these elements might be held to destroy the popular appeal of the film and deprive the makers of the possibility of arousing the support of a mass audience for the scandals of the building industry, and more generally for the support of left-wing views. But the content of the left-wing commitment is so vague, as a necessary consequence of the refusal to introduce the spectator to his or her own constitutive contradictions, that it is doubtful whether anybody is won by the film to anything. The mechanisms at work in *The Lump* are the same as those used in *The Sweeney* to elicit sympathy for a copper who bends the rules. One can lend this sympathy for an hour without having to change one's attitudes or beliefs because of the occultation of the relation between viewer and text which allows the spectator to remain both on and off screen in that interchange I have already sketched. It is by the interruption of that channel that one begins engagement with the real—until then there is simply the endless repetition of the imaginary.

Notes

This article originated in a paper written for a SEFT Weekend on Realism and the Cinema. The films planned for screening at that school were *American Graffiti*, as an example of a Hollywood-made film in the modern, more "realistic" style, *The Lump*, as an example of the use of fictionalized documentary for political ends within the mass media, and *Death by Hanging*, as an example of a film which while superficially "nonrealist" can lay claim to inclusion within

Brecht's definitions of realism. These three films accordingly constitute the main sources of examples in this article.

1. "Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such." Bertolt Brecht, "Against George Lukacs," *New Left Review* (March–April 1974), no. 84, p. 45.
2. This should not be taken to imply that the cinematic apparatus is ideologically neutral, but that its ideological effects. Stephen Heath has begun the investigation of this inscription in "On Screen, in France," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Autumn 1976), vol. 1, no. 3.
3. A good survey of Bazin's comments on realism can be found in Christopher Williams, "Bazin on Neo-Realism," *Screen* (Winter 1973–74), 14(4):61–68.
4. André Bazin, *Qui est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1962), 4.22.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
6. Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970), pp. 35–36.
7. Bazin, *Qui est-ce que le cinéma?* p. 57.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
9. In Colin MacCabe, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses," *Screen* (Summer 1974), 15(2):7–27. For a criticism of the positions put forward in that article, see below.
10. The analysis of a Holbein painting which is discussed in this section can be found in "Du regard comme objet petit a" in Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XI* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1973), pp. 65–109. My understanding of the issues has benefited from Christian Metz's "The Imaginary Signifier," *Screen* (Summer 1973), pp. 16(2):14–76 [excerpts from that article are included in the present anthology—ED], and Jacqueline Rose's British Film Institute Educational Advisory Service seminar paper "The Imaginary, the Insufficient Signifier," mimeographed.
11. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1966), p. 690.
12. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XI*, p. 71.
13. See Edward Branigan, "Formal Permutations of the Point-of-View Shot," *Screen* (Autumn 1975), 16(3):54–64.
14. For a summary of Freud's argument in its Lacanian reformulation, see Colin MacCabe, "Presentation of 'The Imaginary Signifier,'" *Screen* (Summer 1975), 16(2):7–13.
15. See Emile Benveniste, *Problems of General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), part 5.
16. The analysis of the interplay of identification and vision leans heavily on two earlier articles in *Screen*—Stephen Heath's "Film and System, Terms of Analysis" (Spring 1975), 16(1):7–77 and (Summer 1975), 16(2):91–113; and Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," (Autumn 1975), 16(3):6–18 [included in this anthology—ED].
17. *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings*, ed. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973), pp. 112–13.
18. In V.I. Lenin, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967). For a detailed consideration of Lenin's use of the metaphor of the mirror, see Pierre Macherey, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (Paris: Librairie Francis Maspero, 1967), pp. 125–58. The translation of Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge, 1978) includes also an appendix of Lenin's articles on Tolstoy, including that quoted here.
19. And also, I would argue, for Marx—see his letter to Ferdinand Lassalle of April 19, 1859. See *Marx and Engels on Literature Art*, pp. 103–8.
20. MacCabe, "Realism and the Cinema."
21. Such an analysis, it must be emphasized, has nothing to do with a counting of heads but is a class analysis. Its validity will be determined in its relations to practice, both political and cinematic.
22. This is the burden of the argument in Colin MacCabe, "The Politics of Separation," *Screen* (Winter 1975–76), 16(4):46–61.