

Tony McKibbin

## Cinema Realism

### notes

Realism is one of the great moot points in film analysis. What does it mean for a film to be realistic, and is one man's realism not another man's contrivance? As Christopher Williams says in his intro to *Realism and the Cinema*, "discussion of realism, in film as in other art forms, tends to be tortuous or circular." When we now look at films from the past that were respected masterpieces of realism; do we see heavy plot exposition, suspect sets and theatrical acting? But rather than dismissing such a film as unrealistic, it can be useful to see what would have been perceived as realistic in the film at the time, and where we find its realism implausible or forced today. To discuss realism we are not looking towards a definition of the term; more at aspects in film that pass for the realistic throughout cinema history.

Though the term realism had been used before (many thirties French films were described as works of *poetic realism* for example), realism became a key style in cinema with the *neo-realist* movement that came out of Italy during and after WWII, and with the writings of critics like Andre Bazin - who, in *What is Cinema? Vol 1*, defended one neo-realist work, Vittorio (Bicycle Thieves) de Sica's *Umberto D*, by saying "the narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis." Watching the film today, Bazin's statement won't make a lot of sense: the elaborate camera angles for emphasis, the centrality of the titular character, the crises he undergoes, all indicate strong story and character. Yet Bazin had a point and it lay in the significance of cinema not residing in action but in contemplation, in respecting a life lived rather than a plot mechanized, with characters ciphers to it.

What we need to do is work through a number of elements that generally get passed off as realist. Here are a few: the absence of non-diegetic music, the presence of non-professional actors, the use of off-screen sound, an unobtrusive, under-privileged sense of framing, colloquial dialogue - often only half-heard - against the light camerawork, monochrome or muted colour photography, and the sense that if there is a plot it comes out of the immediacy of a life: that it serves to show up a social problem rather than offer an escape from it. From this pick and mix of elements, how

do the films that we've chosen to focus upon - films like *Germany Year Zero*, *Room at the Top*, and *The Last Detail* - hold up?

In the opening sequence of neo realist director Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero*, the classical music over the credits would seem to lead us into a film indicating tragedy over realist drama, but in fact what we'll realize by the end of the film is it is a combination of the two: that Rossellini wants tragedy to come out of the specifics of realism, the specifics of post-war emotional, economic and social recovery. During this credit sequence Rossellini isn't simply setting the narrative scene, he is also documentary-like illustrating post-war German devastation. As the camera pans across a rubble-strewn city, so Rossellini seems to be saying this is what the story must serve. This isn't setting the scene but demanding a story comes out of the space. As we overhear people talking about starvation and suicide, as we see the young boy helping dig graves, Rossellini seems to want us to believe not in the story (for we don't at this stage know what the story might be), but in the milieu. The panning camerawork which takes in more than simply an establishing shot, the apparently narratively irrelevant but socially very relevant snippets of dialogue, the grainy cinematography, are all indicative of realism, and much the same could be said of *Bicycle Thieves*. Certainly a story quickly develops in each film based on the poverty of the characters, but the space is mapped out first.

*Room at the Top* was one of the first examples of what came to be known as *Kitchen Sink Realism* - *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *The Loneliness of The Long Distance Runner*, *This Sporting Life* and *A Kind of Loving*. These were films closely affiliated with the Angry Young Man movement in theatre and in the novel, and most of the protagonists were men: men determined to move either up and on, or resiliently if absurdly fighting to hold onto their spirit against deadening work and lazy mindsets. The scene in *Room at the Top*, where Joe Lampton goes back to his hometown and visits his aunt and uncle, works with a few key elements - the decent but conventional working class older generation; Joe determined to get something more - but formally this seems on the side of the conservative. Though the scene immediately preceding it captures a town moving from one era to another visually, once Joe goes inside the house the exchanges seem theatrical and stilted. The dialogue is colloquial but crisp and clear, the body language stage bound and the camera privileged. If we insist that realism is about trying to capture the flavour of life, is *Room at the Top* stifled by the narrative element of realism, and has little interest in the visual, formal elements?

*The Last Detail* was one of many seventies American films that sought to put an end to the idea of Hollywood as the glamour industry, and Hal Ashby's muted colour scheme, his against the light cinematography, the actor's looser body language and the use of the demotic all show an interest in the rawness of life - no matter the non-diegetic score that would seem to counter that realism. The story is kept to a minimum as well. It's about a couple of veteran sailors taking a young recruit across the States to prison after the lad steals a money box. (There is also the under-privileging of information that leads to a good gag: watch the moment where Randy Quaid's character steals some candy and then starts eating it on the bus.) If sixties Hollywood filmmakers took the cameras out of the studio and onto the street, the seventies directors traversed the country. *The Last Detail* was but one of many seventies American films that took exploring the nation for granted, and it was the great decade of the road movie. From

*Five Easy Pieces to Badlands*, from *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* to *Two Lane Blacktop*, from *Easy Rider* to *Wanda*, filmmakers searched out the vastness of the USA. In relation to realism it might be interesting to think of which road movies are plot heavy (like *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*) and which ones keep story to the minimum - like the wonderful and underrated *Wanda*. In the seventies, realism offered the filmmakers the opportunity to hit the road and explore the people and landscape.

The Belgian filmmakers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne may not be very geographically exploratory - their films are generally set in and around the industrial Belgian city of Liege - but they hammer away at making their aesthetic more and more realistic while at the same time raising interesting and important questions about narrative tension within realism. One of the points we raised above concerned the plot coming out of the immediacy of life; not out of plot contrivance. In *Rosetta* there is a breath-taking moment that has nothing to do with action but a great deal to do with a young woman in desperate circumstances acting appallingly, and yet when she betrays another character in the scene it is both surprising and wholly, socially, plausible. It has all the impact of a plot twist, but is grounded in the underclass milieu the titular character struggles in. In *The Child*, in the scene where the central character who has sold his baby tries to buy him back, there is a high degree of suspense, but this tension comes out of not the privileged and impressive cross-cutting of a chase sequence, but the absence of cross-cutting. The Dardennes under-privilege the viewer as we stay with the central character while he hands money over through a gap in the wall at adjacent garages, and we, like the character, have to wait a minute or so to find out whether the child has been left in the next door garage, or whether the money has been taken but the child not left. This is suspense equal to Hitchcock's, where he says the audience will work like the devil if you give the audience information that the character is not privy to, but the Dardennes show that by under-privileging the viewer, and emphasising the social elements, we can have tension no less great than in a Hitchcockian thriller.

This hopefully scotches the idea that realism needs to eradicate plot. The question is more how does one generate story out of elements that aren't hyperbolized for the sake of narrative excitement to the detriment of realist presentation. Bazin absolutely has a point when he admires *Umberto D's* attempt to destroy drama through an ontological equality, but filmmakers like the Dardennes want then to build different types of narratives out of the de-hyperbolizing of story. When looking at loosely realist filmmakers - at Maurice (*Loulou, Police*) Pialat in France, Ken Loach in Britain, at the Dogme filmmakers in Denmark, how do they retain realist elements and at the same not completely eschew the demands of narrative? It remains one of the most pressing questions in cinema.

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