

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

**Make-believe: claiming the real in contemporary  
fiction cinema**

Emma van der Vliet

Thesis Presented for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Centre for Film and Media Studies

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

May 2009

## Table of Contents

Make-believe: claiming the real in contemporary fiction cinema .....	1
Table of Contents .....	2
Clip compilation on DVD .....	3
List of figures.....	4
Acknowledgements .....	5
Abstract.....	7
Introduction .....	8
Realism in film: the first century .....	9
A brief historical overview of realist film “movements” .....	16
Realism in film: the second century. ....	21
Realist form, techniques and aesthetics .....	29
Realism and the aesthetics of presence.....	32
Text selection .....	48
Chapter outlines.....	51
The Naked Stare: stripping with The Idiots.....	53
“That white-hot moment”: improvisation, authenticity and the work of Mike Leigh .....	78
Space, place and the everyday in La Haine.....	121
“This Little Space In Between...”: Romance Gets Real.....	155
Shooting Bokkie and the ethics of faking it. ....	187
Realism today: “a nostalgia for presence” .....	203
List of works cited .....	212
Filmography .....	223

## Clip compilation on DVD

1. The opening sequence of *The Idiots* (1998)
2. Karen "spasses" at the end of *The Idiots*
3. The tearoom scene in *Secrets and Lies* (1996)
4. The barbecue scene in *Secrets and Lies*
5. The burnt-out gym scene in *La Haine* (1995)
6. Vinz's avenging angel fantasy sequence in *La Haine*
7. The lone breakdancer in *La Haine*
8. The aerial shot in *La Haine*
9. Confrontation with the TV journalists in *La Haine*
10. The Steadicam follow-shot in *La Haine*
11. The listening booth sequence in *Before Sunrise* (1995)
12. The ending of *Before Sunrise*
13. Peripatetic conversations in *Before Sunset* (2004)
14. The first kill in *Shooting Bokkie* (2003)
15. Extract from the briefing session in *Shooting Bokkie*

The DVD clip compilation is intended to provide the examiner with easy access to some of the material under discussion. It is not intended for any other purposes, and will not be included in the library copies for copyright reasons.

## List of figures

- Figure 1: Karen and Susanne in the hard-won alcove scene.
- Figure 2: Karen looks on appalled as Stoffer laughs and stops “spassing”.
- Figure 3: Karen goes into “spass” in the final scene.
- Figure 4: A camera in shot in the house-buying scene.
- Figure 5: Cynthia's traumatic realisation in the tearoom scene.
- Figure 6: Our introduction to Roxanne, who blends into her workaday background
- Figure 7: Vinz's nightmare outside the club.
- Figure 8: Hubert smokes a joint and watches the breakdancing.
- Figure 9: The lone breakdancer continues to spin.
- Figure 10: Vinz's “avenging angel” fantasy, complete with halo.
- Figure 11: Imaginary phone-calls in *Before Sunrise*.
- Figure 12: Linklater keeps the focus on Jesse and Céline
- Figure 13: Awkward smiles in the listening booth.
- Figure 14: Céline (or is it Julie?) loses at pinball.
- Figure 15: Jesse's look of disappointment when Céline lets her hair down.
- Figure 16: Linklater keeps the focus on the conversation in *Before Sunset*.
- Figure 17: Looking on death in *Shooting Bokkie*.
- Figure 18: Josi Minty looks sceptical in the briefing session.
- Figure 19: The camera distracts the barber as Christo goes in for the kill.
- Figure 20: Aftermath of the shoot-out in Papa Joe's café.

The relevant figures can be found at the end of each chapter. These figures are intended to provide the examiner with easily accessible visual references and not for any other purposes.

## Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks...

to Lesley Marx, a most wonderful supervisor, teacher, colleague and friend. I can't imagine having taken on a project like this without her dedicated, meticulous and above all warmly encouraging support. To work with Lesley has been a joy and an immense privilege, for which I am enormously grateful.

to Will, for whom realism is "like a heavy venison stew on a bright summer's day," for his loving perseverance, and for making me more (non-venison) meals than I could possibly count.

to Oscar and Leo, who've far too often had to make do with the "left-overs" of their mother at the end of a working day: I eagerly anticipate making reparations!

to my mother, Virginia, and to Welshie, who let me get on with it in my garret, boldly participated in discussions about "real sex" over lunch, commiserated with me during my apparently endless lucubrations, and frequently looked after my children...

to Mary, Meg and Karina who showed me the way, and who generously shared their survival secrets.

to Jane Stadler, my highly over-qualified "Beautiful Assistant" for advice and encouragement and for keeping me posted.

to Jeremy Stigter and Geneviève Anhoury, Josee van Reijn and Helle Thorsen Wegerberg, who found me unfindable documents and films across the seas.

to Jane and Lauren, for much-appreciated TLC on the home-front.

to Ian Glenn for fiercely supporting my application for teaching relief, to the UCT humanities faculty for granting it, and to my wonderful colleagues who no doubt had to catch some flak in my absence.

to Lyn Holness and everybody at UCT's emerging researcher fund, for financial assistance and for their friendly and very helpful advice.

to Ingrid Thompson and Amina Adams, who have led me on many fruitful searches and brought me the spoils from their own solo searching missions.

to the staff at interlibrary loans, who have pulled numerous rabbits out of the hat for me.

to Max Milne for teaching me to make DVDs and for putting my clip compilation together so expertly.

to Cath, for the extra information on Le Corbusier and his dreaded curtains.

to all my family and friends, for their tolerance, support and offers of help.

...and to Maya, for keeping me company on the home stretch.

## Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which certain contemporary fiction cinema posits its narratives as real. Looking at a broad overview of realist movements through the history of cinema, it draws out the codes and conventions which filmmakers have employed and suggests that realist cinema is typically characterised by its focus on creating a sense of presence and immediacy. It describes how a strand of self-reflexivity can be traced throughout the history of realist cinema and asserts that this tendency has become increasingly predominant in a more sceptical postmodern climate. The study focuses on the interplay between the cinematography and the setting (to create a sense of locatedness and contextual specificity) in Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995), on Lars Von Trier's quest for a "naked" film stripped of its cosmetic trappings, and his pursuit of the "genuine" moment within that (in *The Idiots*, 1998), on Mike Leigh's use of improvisation and byplay to encourage a sense of authenticity in performance in *Secrets and Lies* (1996), and on Richard Linklater's reworking of the romance genre for a postmodern audience in *Before Sunrise* (1995) and *Before Sunset* (2004). Further, it investigates how Rob De Mezieres uses typical realist codes and conventions from the realist repertoire in *Shooting Bokkie* (2003) to convince his audience that the fiction they are watching is factual, and discusses the ethics of making that claim fraudulently. Finally, the study concludes that realism continues to endure and even to flourish in the current disbelieving era because of its ability to adapt and mutate, and because it satisfies a fundamental human need for a sense of presence.

## Introduction

The word realism must surely be one of the most complex, ambiguous and generally slippery terms in critical currency. This becomes even more the case when one tries to apply it to the task of film analysis, where the concept of realism is not only varied but in some cases contradictory. One could praise the latest Hollywood blockbuster, with its computer-generated special effects, for its impressive realism, just as one could describe the most ascetic and austere independent film without a special effect in sight as realist. Essentially the difficulty lies in the fact that, as Richard Armstrong says, echoing André Bazin, “there is no such thing as realism. There are only realisms” (2005: xi). Clearly, multiple realisms are apprehended by viewers who bring their distinctive subject positions to bear in the viewing process. This has been the subject of important developments in film theory, perhaps most notably with the feminist intervention of Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay originally published in *Screen* in 1975, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” My own interest, however, is not with theories of spectatorship or reception theory, but with the ways in which realism has been conceptualised and realised in a range of filmic texts.

To start, first, with a broad general definition: The Oxford English Dictionary defines realism as “[c]lose resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing or scene.” That is, realist representations are perceptually very similar to the objects they represent. Further, however, realism is defined by the “[b]elief in the real existence of matter as the object of perception... also, the view that the physical world has independent reality, and is not ultimately reducible to universal mind or spirit.” For realism in art to have any validity, there must supposedly be an attempt to capture and communicate something about an independently existing real world.

In her analysis of literary realism in *Realism*, Pam Morris raises the two closely associated terms mentioned in the OED, mimesis (the “close artistic imitation of social reality,” and verisimilitude (“the appearance of being true or real; likeness or resemblance to truth, reality or fact”). As a “starting point” in her analysis of the term, she defines literary realism as “any writing that is based upon an implicit or explicit

assumption that it is possible to communicate about a reality beyond the writing” (Morris, 2003: 6). This could apply equally well to a starting point for a discussion of film realism, though this has been strongly contested by recent theorists in particular, as a broad overview of the history of cinematic realism will reveal. A discussion of the common formal characteristics discernible across the realist movements outlined in the overview will follow.

### **Realism in film: the first century**

The notion of film realism has been hotly debated since the very inception of cinema. Cinema-goers experiencing the first films ever made were greatly affected by the impression of realism they imparted. Paris journalist Henri de Parville spoke enthusiastically about the “the ripple of the leaves stirred by the wind” in Lumière’s work, which he also praised for its tendency to show “nature caught in the act” (Kracauer 1960: 31). The invention of photography had already taken artistic realism to new levels, but cinema, which introduced editing, camera mobility, duration in time, and most importantly the illusion of movement, took photography’s putative ability to capture reality a great deal further. Siegfried Kracauer noted that film was “uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality” and thus gravitated towards it (1960: 28), going so far as to say that creating such a faithful impression of reality was in fact the ultimate goal of all those proto-cinema inventors and entertainers with their magic lanterns and picture shows. For Kracauer, cinema was in fact the fulfilment of a long-held “longing for an instrument which would capture the slightest incidents of the world around us” (1960:27).

The indexical nature of the relationship between the photographic image and its referent, its similarity to the object it reproduces, gives the photograph an extraordinary affective power. This *vraisemblance* increases in film, where the rapid series of photographic images gives an impression of life-like motion. Charles S. Peirce, who invented the indexical-iconic-symbolic trio of signs, noted that “Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent... they... correspond point by point to nature” (in Wollen, 1972: 123-4). Half a century after the start of cinema, French film theorist and champion of realism André Bazin wrote his seminal essay on the objective nature of photography, “The ontology of the

photographic image.” In it, he suggested (not unlike Kracauer) that humans’ enduring quest to mirror reality through the arts had finally been made possible through the motion picture. For Bazin, cinema’s ability to capture reality was no less than the “preservation of life by a representation of life” (Bazin, 1967: 10). He identifies a “mummy complex,” a desire to preserve oneself and one’s world for posterity, as being at the heart of the plastic arts, and traces the increasing tendency towards “duplication of the world outside” as evidence of humanity’s desperate drive to record and preserve the world through its replication in the visual arts (Bazin, 1967: 10). Only the photographic lens could provide “the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation...,” he wrote (1967: 14). If one accepted that the history of the plastic arts was less about aesthetic production and more a bid for self-preservation, the whole history of these arts, with cinema at the pinnacle, could be seen to be essentially “the story of their resemblance [to reality], or, if you will, of realism” (1967: 10). To track the development of the plastic arts through recent centuries would therefore be to track the degree of resemblance strived for and attained in those art works. Cinema, which provided faithful photographic representations of its subjects more true to life than any painting could muster, but also captured these subjects in motion, could therefore most completely satisfy the human appetite for self-reproduction which had “consumed” the plastic arts for centuries.

It is the camera’s supposed objectivity which, for Bazin, set it apart from its fine art fore-runners. Whereas with painting “no matter how skilful the painter, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity [which] cast a shadow of doubt over the image” (1967: 12), the camera presented a way in which this enduring need to record and preserve the world could be met supposedly without human intervention, by “mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part” (1967: 12). This further distinguished photography and the cinema from the rest of the plastic arts and elevated its realist capacity. “For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent,” he wrote: “For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.” Unlike all the other arts, which required a human presence, “photography derived its advantage from the absence of man” (1967: 13), and this quality of objectivity conferred upon photography an unprecedented sense of

credibility. The relation of the photographic image to its originating object was an indexical one, and the link between photograph and object was obvious, easily understood and hard to gainsay. For Bazin the photographic image was quite simply, “the object itself” (1967: 14).

In the 1970s, classical realism was derided as “conservative.” Left-wing film theorists, especially those influenced by Louis Althusser, regarded the “dominant style of dramatic realism” in cinema as being incapable of challenging “the conventional wisdom of the public, since spectators will see nothing but their own flickering ideologies in the naturalistic images on the screen,” and claimed that “[n]o matter how progressive its intentions... the prevailing ideology of realism is bourgeois,” so that realist cinema gave the public “a bath in the tepid water of its own ideology” rather than a cold invigorating shower of demystification” (Stam, 1992: 13). Critics such as Roland Barthes and Colin MacCabe critiqued classical realism’s deceptiveness and its tendency to naturalise a particular ideology, therefore entrenching dominant value systems, just as formalists critiqued literature’s status as “truth” and theorists of modern painting argued that artists should abandon the quest to capture three-dimensional reality, and should instead acknowledge that the painting is nothing but a patterning of pigment on canvas. It must be noted, though, that MacCabe’s critique, originally leveled against realist novels, was aimed particularly at the way in which classic realist texts achieved closure through their endings (see Tredell, 2002: 132), thus producing a false sense of resolution. Lack of closure, and avoidance of such palliative resolutions, is in fact a key feature in the kinds of realist film texts I have chosen to focus on, as will be discussed later in this introduction. MacCabe also points out that realist texts can in fact allow some contradiction if their content contradicts dominant ideology and that this would make such texts “progressive.” “The contradictions between the dominant ideological discourses at work in a society,” writes Tredell, “are what provide the criteria for discriminating within the broad category of ‘classic realist’ texts. And these criteria will often resolve themselves into questions of subject matter” (2002: 136).

## The realist-formative dichotomy

My discussion thus far has focussed on the use of cinema to satisfy an age-old quest for self-preservation through image-making, and on cinema's ability to make those images as objective and true-to-life as possible. But from the start, cinema did not confine itself to capturing reality. With the early discovery of editing and its capacity for trickery in particular, filmmakers realised how potent the camera could be in creating deceptive *illusions* of reality, of rendering the unreal real or of staging narratives on screen so that a "reality" now existed where none existed before. Anti-realists such as Rudolf Arnheim, Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage argue that what is considered to be the mere mechanical reproduction of reality does not constitute art at all, and that the true artistic urge is to originate and to create something new. Kracauer famously identified this formative tendency as the second major tendency in film-making, claiming that a realist-formative dichotomy was established at the outset of cinema and can be seen in the very earliest films ever made, exemplified by the realist Lumière brothers and the illusionist Méliès (1960:30), who substituted "staged illusion for unstaged reality, and contrived plots for everyday instances" (1960: 32). Kracauer made it abundantly clear that he, like Lumière's cameraman Félix Mesguich, considered the Lumière brothers to have established "the true domain of cinema in the right manner," claiming that while the novel and theatre sufficed for the "study of the human heart," cinema's main aim should be to convey the real world in all its dynamism (Kracauer, 1960: 31). "Films may claim aesthetic validity if they build from their basic properties," said Kracauer. "Like photographs, that is, they must record and reveal physical reality..." (1960: 37). He stated quite plainly that any film which followed the realist tendency was automatically more cinematic than any contrived fictional narrative created for the screen. "This implies," he continued, "that even films almost devoid of creative aspirations, such as newsreels, scientific or educational films, artless documentaries etc., are tenable propositions from an aesthetic point of view – presumably more so than films which for all their artistry pay little attention to the given outer world" (1960: 39). Of course it would be reductive to perpetuate this dichotomy to too slavish an extent,<sup>1</sup> and Kracauer himself

---

<sup>1</sup> Though the dichotomy still persists, despite the fact that, as Stephen Prince points out, computer generated digital images and their indistinguishability from "real" footage in many instances have further complicated the distinction (in Braudy, 2004: 275).

is quick to point out that tendencies have always existed side by side and in many instances in combination.<sup>2</sup> He saw cinema's main obligation as being to record and believed that films could only be properly cinematic if the realist and the formative tendencies were "well-balanced," meaning for him that "the latter [formative tendency] should not try to overwhelm the former [realist] but eventually follow its lead" (1960: 39).

I would like, at this point, to draw a distinction between realist films and films which are, more broadly, "realistic." I am fully aware of the danger in drawing an artificial dividing line here, and of the danger of reducing realism to one particular approach. As Christopher Williams has said, "Realism is not a singular or univocal style. It is not a homogeneous or finished effect, nor is it a side effect of a genre... Nor can it meaningfully be divided into two distinct, antagonistic entities – illusionist realism on one side and formal and intellectual consciousness-raising anti-realism on the other" (in Hallam, 2000: 13).<sup>3</sup> If I separate the tendencies here, I do so for the purposes of defining my focus, rather than suggesting that they are two completely distinct entities. Hollywood or mainstream fiction films, sometimes referred to as classical Hollywood realism (David Bordwell) or classical realism (Robert Stam),<sup>4</sup> typically aim to construct an appearance of realism through the use of an apparently plausible cause-and-effect narrative structure, believable acting and clear psychological motivation of characters, seamless continuity editing, and obedience (to a large degree) to a set of established cinematographic, lighting and sound conventions which erase the traces of the technical production and conceal the construction of the text. This thesis focuses not on these *realistic* texts, these apparently seamless, flawless illusions of the real, but on *realism*, which has at various points in the history of literature, the performing arts (theatre) and the plastic arts earned itself a capital R: the realist approach which has its origins in the realist and naturalist art and literature of

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Stam writes that "[i]llusionism and anti-illusionism have been locked in dialectical struggle since the beginning, with the degree of reflexivity varying from era to era, genre to genre, from film to film, and even from sequence to sequence within specific films" (1992: 15).

<sup>3</sup> Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment's *Realism in Popular Cinema*, which I quote extensively throughout this thesis, was an invaluable source of background material and greatly enriched my understanding of contemporary cinematic realism.

<sup>4</sup> According to Philip Rosen, the "economic power, aesthetic influence, and cultural unification of Hollywood cinema were such that Bazin labeled it 'classical'" (2001: 4).

the nineteenth century, and which I would argue has established its own set of formal and aesthetic traits and characteristics.

The Oxford English dictionary further defines the word realism against its antonym, as being “opposed to idealism” and having “often been used with implication that the details are of an unpleasant or sordid character.” Realism is more preoccupied with accurate reportage, while idealists invoke a truth that lies beneath – or “above” – the surface. This sets realist films apart from their Hollywood counterparts, which (while they certainly “mimic the facticity”<sup>5</sup> of the real world (Armstrong, 2005: 8), tend to be spectacular, populated by (successful) idealistic heroes, and preoccupied with the psychology of those individuals rather than contextualising the character sociologically (Morris, 2003: 6). Realism’s purist cousin, naturalism, is characterised by a more stringent avoidance of stylisation than is the case with realism. Whereas realism involves a particular aesthetic and formal approach which emphasises the representation’s correspondence to actuality, naturalism, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, manifests “an adherence or attachment to what is natural” and “an indifference to convention.” Naturalists aim to represent their subject-matter in “objective” and abundant detail, and with clinical, quasi-scientific accuracy. Like realism, naturalism often features scenes, events or characters which may be hard to stomach and tend towards brutality.<sup>6</sup>

The works covered in this study are all examples of a realism that sets itself against such optimistic idealism, and are characterised by a tendency to show the gloomier, more mundane aspects of life which classical realist films tend to avoid. Like its literary counterpart, this form of film realism “has been associated with an insistence that art cannot turn away from the more sordid and harsh aspects of human existence” (Morris, 2003: 3). More specifically, this thesis explores examples from the interrelated categories of realism variously described as “objective realism” (Bordwell, 1985: 230), social realism (episodic, observational, slice-of-life dramas about everyday, often marginal characters) or expositional realism (a character-

---

<sup>5</sup> Stam describes the effects of the classical realist text as being “transparent” in that it attempted to efface all traces of its construction, making it pass for “natural” (see 2000: 143)

<sup>6</sup> While the *aim* of naturalism is to document things in a way that is as unmediated and close to nature as possible, naturalism is as much a style as any other representational approach and comes with its own associated conventions, techniques and aesthetics.

centered episodic, picaresque narrative which serves to “explicate the relationship between characters and their environment” (Hallam, 2000: 101). Bordwell quotes Marcel Martin in distinguishing two sorts of verisimilitude which predominate in art cinema: the interior or dream worlds and fleeting states of a more “subjective” strand of realism, and “the aleatoric world of ‘objective’ realism” (1985: 206). While subjective and objective realism frequently occur together, the focus here is more on the category “objective realism,” which follows neorealism in its depiction of the “vagaries of real life” and its “dedramatisation” of the narrative by showing the mundanity, repetition and “downtime” of everyday life. Bordwell is struck by the pervasiveness of this “objective” realism as a formal principle in art cinema, and the formal characteristics which he outlines overlap considerably with those which I outline later in this chapter as being fundamental to contemporary fiction cinema. Many of the films deemed “realist” fall into what Bordwell more generally defines as “art cinema,” and the realist aesthetic techniques which I describe later in this introduction are curiously close to those which Bordwell uses to describe the “‘objective’ realist” strain (as opposed to the more psychological expressive realist one) which he finds so prevalent in art cinema (see Bordwell, 1985: 206-213). These include authentic locations, plausible verisimilar acting, psychologically motivated responses, events and situations that are credible in terms of the film’s loose, episodic narrative structure and also antecedent, factual credibility (Bordwell 1988: 206, 230-1).

Hallam divides realism dealing with social and political issues into three main categories “for heuristic purposes,” namely expositional (which would incorporate social realism), rhetorical (films which try to convince viewers of a particular argument, often through heroic individuals) and spectacular (high-budget epic historical biographies) (Hallam, 2000, 101). While many of the examples I have chosen, and indeed many expositional realist films, focus on specific socio-political issues, the films in this study do not fall squarely into the rhetorical camp: their function is not to persuade viewers of a particular argument, and their protagonists are more frequently anti-heroes rather than idealised heroic individuals whose examples we are urged to follow. I have also avoided examples of spectacular realism, whose characteristics frequently have more in common with more mainstream classical realist cinema than with expositional realism.

The critical rhetoric of realism claims a greater degree of truthfulness and authenticity due to its avoidance of contrivance and illusionist artifice, with the result that realist films (and those which Bordwell more broadly terms “art films”) are often seen as being films of “quality” in comparison to their more entertainment-orientated Hollywood counterparts.<sup>7</sup> While I am certainly not endorsing that value judgement, all of the films I look at most closely would fall into the category of “art films.” I also discuss several films which are constructed as expositional realist texts but which simultaneously interrogate realism’s motivations and its claims to truthfulness, revealing the artifice and constructedness that realist filmmakers have traditionally gone to great lengths to conceal. Both *Shooting Bokkie* (2003) and *The Idiots* (1998) are mock documentaries which attack the truth claims of realist film texts from within that mode.

### **A brief historical overview of realist film “movements”**

There have been numerous “waves” of realism in fiction film history, all of which have contributed to the establishment of a repertoire of realist techniques and conventions which still largely apply today, even if they are constantly called into question in a more doubting age.

The realist approach which was perhaps the most removed from the objective, “documentary” realistic style was Eisenstein’s practice of montage (1924-1933). His innovative confrontational editing strategies broke away from the prevailing continuity editing approach at the time and his highly “wrought” works foregrounded the construction of the film. Eisenstein’s aim was to document and comment on social and political conditions (the territory of the “real,” hence its inclusion as a realist approach) using strong juxtapositions in the editing to create an intellectual comment or “thesis” rather than to document “objective” slices of life.

Dziga Vertov’s approach, on the other hand, is more consistent with later “objective” approaches to realism. Vertov aimed to create *kino pravda*, or film truth. He wrote with great passion of the camera’s ability to be an observing, “objective” eye, a

---

<sup>7</sup> Hallam (2000: 77) discusses this phenomenon.

mobile “mechanical eye” which could go anywhere and had the ability to capture “life caught unawares” (in Michelson, 1984: 41). “I am the ‘kino-eye,’” he wrote in his 1923 manifesto:

I am the mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies... (in Michelson, 1984: 17)

Highly influenced by Eisenstein’s montage, Vertov was simultaneously fascinated by film’s capacity for trickery and illusion and its ability to expose social reality. His most famous work, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), includes superimposition and animation alongside footage of everyday working life in Moscow and footage of the construction of the film itself (how the cameraman conceals the camera for the railway shot, the editor at work), thus blending “objective” footage with created footage and with footage documenting the construction of both. Vertov’s film was as much about everyday life in Moscow as it was about the highly selective process of filmmaking itself, creating a form of realism which resists categorisation as pure documentary, and his exploration of reflexivity was pioneering. His work continues to influence contemporary documentary, fiction, and experimental filmmakers.

French “poetic realism,” a tendency which arose in France in the 1930s in the lead-up to World War II, raised “real” issues such as war, class conflict, economic conditions and the changing role of women. The films were a “poetic” take on these issues. The tone of the films was often highly nostalgic, bitter and fatalistic with sad endings, as can be seen in Renoir’s short film, *Une Partie de Campagne* (1936). The protagonists were often marginalised characters who got a last chance at love but were ultimately disappointed, and the style involved a heightened aestheticism that sometimes draws attention to the representational aspects of the films (Sesonske, 1980). Poetic realism is epitomised in the work of Renoir, whose use of deep space, deep staging, and long mobile takes epitomised the realist aesthetic advocated by Bazin.

Poetic realism, with its increased naturalism involving location shooting and the use (in some cases) of non-professional actors, had a significant impact on Italian neorealism (1945-53). Bordwell's notion of "objective" realism has its roots in the neorealists' approach, which is characterised by the use of actual locations, non-actors, and the "slice-of-life" stories of ordinary people told using an episodic narrative structure without a happy ending. As is frequently the case with realist fiction, the line between documentary and drama is deliberately blurred to increase the film's sense of authenticity. The protagonists of neorealist films frequently represent a social class, struggling with problems that are widely shared, and the films explore their sociological rather than psychological conditions. Many of the formal and aesthetic characteristics of neorealism are key ingredients in realist films to this day, and neorealism as a whole has become a "benchmark for authenticity" and an "alternative to lavishly financed productions" (Bondanella, 2006: 39).

*Cinéma vérité*, or "film truth," started around the same time as neorealism in the 1940s and lasted until the 1960s. It is considered to be a documentary mode, although the key difference which distinguishes it from its Anglophone counterpart, "direct cinema," is that *cinéma vérité* filmmakers acknowledged that their presence inevitably altered the reality they were trying to capture. As the father of *cinéma vérité* Jean Rouch put it, the camera is "a kind of psychoanalytic stimulant, which lets people do things they wouldn't otherwise do" (Bruni, 2002: n.p.). For Rouch, an altered reality provoked by the presence of the camera was no less real than reality itself.<sup>8</sup> "If you're a good storyteller then the lie is more true than reality," he claimed (Bruni, 2002: n.p.). There is a performative, narrative quality to this "provoked reality" that gives it the feel (and sometimes the appeal) of fiction, just as unscripted improvised sequences in fiction film add a sense of the real or documentary. The *cinéma vérité* filmmakers used handheld cameras, synchronised sound and a participatory, ethnographic approach to capture everyday stories about ordinary people. They avoided invasive zooms and "voice of God" narration, and focused instead of intimate portraits of

---

<sup>8</sup> In an interview with Dan Yakir, Rouch echoed Vertov in saying that *cinéma vérité* was a quest for the "truth of cinema" rather than the cinema of truth. He further claimed that "objectivity consists of inserting what one knows into what one films, inserting one's self with a tool which will provoke the emergence of a certain reality" (Yakir, 1978: 7).

everyday life. The *cinéma vérité* approach, at once observational and highly reflexive,<sup>9</sup> continues to influence both documentary and fiction filmmakers.

*Cinéma vérité* in turn influenced the approach of the French New Wave filmmakers of the late 50s and early 60s, who embraced *vérité*'s use of a highly mobile and explorative handheld camera which follows the action (rather than waiting for the action to come to it), natural lighting, and therefore high speed film stock (which increased the documentary reportage look of the films), synchronised sound, real locations, and loosely structured improvised dialogue and scenes. The New Wave filmmakers, in league with the critics and theorists writing for André Bazin's highly influential journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, eschewed strict *découpage* in their planning and incorporated spontaneity and improvisation into their working methods. Their aim was to work as *auteurs* rather than simply "*metteurs-en-scène*," developing a filmmaking language as personal, flexible, and open to improvisation as written language, using the camera as a pen or *caméra-stylo* as Alexandre Astruc referred to it. "I'll say goodbye because I must work out what to film tomorrow," Jean-Luc Godard wrote in a letter to French producer and actor Pierre Braunberger during the shooting of *Breathless*, released in 1960 (Marie, 1990: 204). It was a groundbreaking approach, highly disconcerting for professional actors Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg, for whom this ad hoc method of working felt terrifying close to the amateur and out-of-control (Marie, 1990: 204). For the most part, New Wave directors used new faces rather than established actors or stars, though several actors and actresses, notably Bardot, emerged as New Wave stars. Although the New Wave filmmakers and theorists rejected the formulaic "production-line" approach of Hollywood, certain maverick Hollywood directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles and Howard Hawks were lauded as Hollywood auteurs, whose innovative and individualistic approaches were highly influential (Darke, 2003, MacNab, 2001). The movement was intended as a reaction against the *cinéma du papa* (daddy's cinema) and the "tradition of quality" which was churning out endless remakes of French novels shot staidly (the New Wavers felt) in studios. The New Wave directors explored innovative and experimental techniques and broke a few technical rules, challenging conventions that

---

<sup>9</sup> Jon Dovey refers to Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) as being "[p]erhaps the first reflexive film of the post-modern era" (2000: 52).

maintained the classical realist illusion: the jump cut came close to being a New Wave cliché, and deliberate continuity errors and disjunctive sound and image abounded.

British New Wave filmmakers of the 1960s were influenced by the British documentary movement of the 1930s, the “social problem films” and the work of the British Free Cinema group of the 1950s and 60s (Lay, 2002:2), and by the French New Wave. They too avoided stars, used actual locations and used loose narrative structures through which to raise working-class social issues, particularly the experience of rebellious working-class males, the kind of “angry young men” who featured in John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* or Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Hallam, 2000: 45), both of which were made into films. By the 1980s, the British realist style had developed into “Brit Grit” and Kitchen Sink social realism, which documented the declining welfare state under Thatcher and the effect of rising unemployment. The two most well-known filmmakers working in the “Brit Grit” tradition are Ken Loach, a committed socialist who addresses working-class issues using a quasi-documentary style involving wide shots, long takes and non-actors, and Mike Leigh, whose films are largely family dramas featuring ensemble casts, and who uses improvisation to create both the characters and the scripts for his films in an attempt to achieve socio-psychological authenticity. Since 1997, significantly the year of the election of the Labour government in Britain and the “New Labour project to repackage Britain under the cool Britannia label” (Lay, 2002: 1), Brit Grit has come into its own. According to Valerie Thorpe, films such as *Nil By Mouth* (Gary Oldman, 1997) and *TwentyFourSeven* (Shane Meadows, 1997) point to a renewed interest in social realist filmmaking in Britain (in Lay, 2002: 1).

While there is a strand of American filmmaking which does focus on social realist issues (particularly, for example, in depression-era Hollywood films), it is arguably not as strong a tradition as in Britain. A notable exception can be found in black urban American cinema of the 1990s, which shares many common concerns and formal traits with its British equivalent. In the early 1990s a spate of “ghetto” films was commissioned by Hollywood. The films showed a preoccupation with “real life” issues such as the social and psychological effects on disenfranchised young black men in particular, of living in the harsh, violent conditions of the poor urban environment. Stylistically the films draw from both mainstream Hollywood and from

the tradition of American independent cinema, with an emphasis on depicting authentic content. Filmmakers aimed to reveal the black urban experience and to move away from the stereotyped depictions of black characters as criminals, prostitutes or family retainers, as well as from the blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Diawara suggests that these realist films “imitate the existent reality of urban life in America” (1993: 23-5), depicting the black urban male’s perilous journey to manhood in a violent and impoverished environment. The films frequently blur the boundaries between representation and reality in their search for an oppositional film form. John Singleton cultivated a documentary, ethnographic feel in *Boys ‘N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991). Footage shot by an intrusive “objective” camera opens the film, which is then intercut with pixellated news and actuality footage which contextualises the narrative within a “real” environment.

British social realist filmmaking and black urban American realist “ghetto” films continued into the second century of film, celebrated in 1995, and the earlier realist filmmaking movements of the first cinematic century provided a rich tradition of cinematic realism from which the second century of realists has drawn.

### **Realism in film: the second century.**

The year 1995 marked the first centenary of cinema. It was also exactly half a century since Bazin wrote his seminal essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” and the year in which a group of young filmmakers from Copenhagen, calling themselves the Dogme Collective burst onto the scene with a manifesto calling for a rejection of the “cinema of illusion” and vowed to commit themselves to a “search for the genuine” ([www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk)). It was an explicit call for a revival of realism and a commitment to naked<sup>10</sup> film which was neo-Bazinian<sup>11</sup> in many ways.

The end of the first cinematic century also coincided with the end of the twentieth century, during which a scientific, rational, realist understanding of the world had been severely called into question. This questioning has a long history – the subversion of the grand narrative of the Enlightenment and its values begins in that very century with the rise of the eighteenth-century Gothic sensibility, increasingly

---

<sup>10</sup> Vinterberg uses this term on the official Dogme website ([www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk)).

<sup>11</sup> Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell explore this aspect of the Dogme approach (2000: n.p.).

evident in Victorian fantasy. The nineteenth-century challenge reaches its apogee in the revolutionary work of Freud, which found artistic expression especially in the counterculture of surrealism in the early twentieth century. The challenge to Enlightenment values has become, arguably (and ironically), the new dogma under the influence of seminal thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Jean-François Lyotard, the latter claiming that “[m]odernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without the discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities” (1992: 146). According to Baudrillard, contemporary society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, with simulacra, so that human experience has become a simulation of reality rather than reality itself. If realism is, as Morris claims, “based upon an implicit or explicit assumption that it is possible to communicate about a reality beyond the writing” (Morris, 2003: 6), where does that leave us in an age where the real has supposedly ceased to exist? If the radical twentieth century critique of realism denies that the text can communicate truths about the real world, or that, as Derrida famously stated “*Il n’y a pas de hors texte*,” is there a place for realism today? And what form could this take?

Lyotard argues that the Enlightenment grand narrative of rational progress and mastery, and associated realist expression is no longer valid, and that we should “wage war on totality” (1992: 149). According to Lyotard, this outdated realist mode, which aimed to “preserve certain consciousness from doubt” (1984: 74) can be replaced by “little narratives, local truths, unfinished meanings.... our own instantaneous little histories making a playful burlesque out of all the cultural fictions available to us” as Morris summarises it (2003: 31). Dogme 95 is a call for exactly these elements. With its indexically bound realist aesthetic, its attack on illusionism, its focus on narrative and acting, and its appetite for the provocative, Dogme could be said to be yearning for a return to the stability and certainty of a less jaded (and perhaps more shockable)<sup>12</sup> era of film-making, focusing on basic cinematic elements

---

<sup>12</sup> Richard Falcon claims that Dogme’s cinematic discourse “mimics a revolutionary stance that pretends to want to revive a modernist transgressive cinema within a sceptical post-modern climate” (1999: 12).

such as story and performance. “The great thing about the Dogma<sup>13</sup> manifesto,” writes German film critic Daniel Kothenschulte with reference to the manifesto’s anti-auteur clause, “is that it is a typical post-modern thing to revive something that is considered old-fashioned and dated” (Raskin, 2000 np). But the outcome of what Lyotard advocates and what the Dogme brothers call for in their manifesto is remarkably similar: little instantaneous, everyday stories set in specific locales in a filmmaking style which can incorporate a sense of playfulness. *The Idiots* is particularly interesting in this light. Its style is highly postmodern: a self-referential mock-documentary which exposes the process of its construction and plays with the concept of realism throughout, yet the “truth” that von Trier finds through this process is an emotional, visceral one.

But the quest for small-scale, intimate, localised stories is not confined to Dogme, and neither are the fundamental principles which the Dogme brotherhood espouse. In many ways the Dogme manifesto concretises a lot of the theory and practice that came out of previous realist movements and which remain in contemporary realist fiction films. Dogme drew particularly from *cinéma vérité*, Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, as do many realist contemporary filmmakers, and the Dogme manifesto to a large extent formalised filmmaking tendencies which were already very much in use amongst digital video and low tech filmmakers. “When the Dogma manifesto came out, some people were yawning and saying ‘We’ve been doing that for ages’, while others were saying ‘Fantastic, now we can carry over what we’ve been doing into features,” says British digital filmmaker Chris Cooke (in James, 2001: 24).

The Dogme brotherhood called for films which countered “certain tendencies” in contemporary cinema, notably the tendency towards cosmetic, illusionist, special-effects-dependent, generically predictable multi-million dollar extravaganzas epitomised by *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997), one of the most expensive effects-laden films ever made, and which enjoyed massive box office success.<sup>14</sup> If technology was to

---

<sup>13</sup> I have chosen to use the spelling of the word ‘Dogme’ as it is featured on the official website, manifesto and other key documents, however where it forms part of a quote using the ‘Dogma’ spelling I have not altered the spelling.

<sup>14</sup> According to an article by Hennig-Thurau et al published in 2001, Cameron’s *Titanic* had a budget of over \$200,000,000 and made over \$1.8 billion in box office takings.

democratise filmmaking, it was important that one veered away from “decadent” auteurist works (which were condemned as “bourgeois” and the downfall of the French New Wave), embraced discipline, and put one’s films into (Dogme) “uniform.” This “uniform” entailed stripping away the cosmetic layers which “illusionist” mainstream film relied on, and adherence to the brotherhood’s “Vow of Chastity,” the ten Dogme commandments:<sup>15</sup>

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).
4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera).
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.

---

<sup>15</sup> The Dogme manifesto can be found on the official Dogme95 website at [www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk).

9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.

10. The director must not be credited.

In addition to following these “commandments,” the director (who would not be credited in accordance with their anti-auteur stance) had to swear to “refrain from personal taste,” no longer to consider him or herself as “an artist” creating “a work,” and to regard “the instant as more important than the whole.” The “supreme goal” of the Dogme filmmaker was to be to “force the truth out of [his or her] characters and settings” and to do so “by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations” (www.dogme95.dk).

These rules were seen as liberating rather than hampering the filmmaking process, and the aim was to free filmmakers from the constraints of conventional filmmaking processes so that they could focus on what was at the heart of the film: story and performance. The rules were formalised common sense to a large degree, and greatly indebted to previous realist movements such as Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, as well as to other contemporary realist filmmakers, independent, low budget filmmakers and digital video directors who had been practising along these lines for years. Some of the more “bureaucratic,” churlish and provocative rules have been bent since the manifesto was first produced. The ban on formats other than academy 35mm was quickly found to be a bit of unfounded officiousness, and it has subsequently been taken to mean that the final product must be transferred to this standard format for distribution, with most of the Dogme directors choosing to shoot on the infinitely more appropriate format of digital video. The somewhat misconceived anti-auteur stance stating that no one should be credited as the director of the film naturally fell by the wayside. In an interview with Bo Green Jensen, Thomas Vinterberg confessed that in trying to “step back from the product [and] be as un-auteur-like as possible” the result was “funnily enough... some pretty auteur-like films” (1998: n.p.). Not surprisingly, the genre ban has also been flouted. The most successful Dogme film thus far (and most successful Danish box office hit since 1975),<sup>16</sup> *Italian For Beginners* (Scherfig, 2000) is officially touted as a romantic

---

<sup>16</sup> See Bondebjerg, 2003: 76.

comedy, a flagrant violation of the eighth Dogme rule. Without these rules the Dogme manifesto comes dangerously close to reiterating French New Wave theory of almost forty years before, and it also harks back to Bazin's earliest writing on film realism.

For Jerslev, "...the essence of Dogma 95's realism seems to be the effort to aesthetically accentuate the indexical component of the audio-visual sign – speaking from a semiotic point of view. Or, in a more phenomenological manner, towards aesthetically constructing an impression of an immediate and unmediated almost Bazinian transmission of the represented 'reality' into the cinematic image" (2002: 48). Ian Aitken suggests that the work of Bazin, Kracauer and Grierson, a body of work he collectively refers to as forming part of the "intuitionist realist tradition," has been regarded as "relatively passé" until recently but has now (rightly, he suggests) been revisited and recognised as "[making] up one of the most sophisticated bodies of theory to emerge within film studies" (2006: 137). More specifically, a renewed interest in the phenomenology of film in recent years has brought about a renewed interest in Bazin's work and a reconsideration of our "physical" experience of film. Jill Nelmes refers to this recent "strand of film studies" as having "explored the appeal that film has to the senses, cinema as spectacle, as visual language, as affecting the body directly, and importantly as having its own visual language" (2003: xx). In a conference paper entitled "What My Fingers Knew", Vivian Sobchack speaks of being "struck" continually "by the gap that exists between our actual *experience* of the cinema and the *theory* that we academic film scholars write to explain it – or, perhaps more aptly, explain it away" (2000: 1). Sobchack emphasises a "*materialist* rather than *idealist* understanding of *aesthetics* and *ethics*," foregrounding the notion of embodiment and emphasising "human experience, perception and bodily activity" (2004: 2). Our visceral response to film may be difficult to reconcile with the cynical postmodern stance, but it's harder still to explain away. We still flinch when a razor blade cuts flesh on screen, however much we protest that images are not to be believed. Our *bodies* believe them in a pre-reflective way, as the phenomenologists would say, before our brains begin to process them. Immediacy and a sense of presence are key realist traits, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Some writers, such as Mary Alameny-Galway, have in fact disputed that Bazin's phenomenological understanding is naïve and in conflict with postmodernism, suggesting instead that there is in his work "a demand for both an automatism that allows the meaning of

reality to shine through the lens and a regard for the structure of meaning imposed by the filmmaker” (2002: 50).<sup>17</sup> According to Alameny-Galway, just as phenomenologists attempt to “bracket” or “[filter] out all our preconceptions about phenomena by holding them in suspension and then describing what we perceive” before they can “seek to find the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon,” so Bazin sees the film medium as being “capable of duplicating the phenomenological bracketing of human preconceptions and allowing unreflected reality to emerge” (2002: 48-49).

There has been a glut of realism on television and in cinema in recent years, which, despite the jadedness of the current era and our awareness of the ease with which images and video can be manipulated using computer software, still relies on the indexical “objective” capacity of the photographic and filmic image. The Dogme brothers and their followers were not the only people who had grown tired of Hollywood's immaculate illusions. Many other filmmakers (and far *too* many aspirant filmmakers) embraced the accessible new video technology available and opted, like the makers of reality TV or of *cinéma vérité* before them, to reveal rather than to conceal the constructedness of their texts. This led to the proliferation and the rise in popularity of the mock-documentary, of which *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sanchez, 1999) is perhaps the best known (but certainly not the first) example.

"There hasn't been a new film genre since Fellini invented the mockumentary," claims one of the Kaufman twins in *Adaptation* (Jonze, 2002) and indeed mock-documentary, is a, perhaps *the*, quintessentially postmodern genre (if it is indeed a “genre”). Although versions of the mock-documentary existed well before Fellini's *8½* (1963) the mock-documentary has all the qualities expected of a postmodern text. Mock-documentary is reflexive, intertextual, ironic and prone to pastiche. It attacks the fundamental tenets of “factual” texts dear to documentary by undermining its claims to objectivity, exposing the tenuousness of its connection to truth and mocking our acceptance of the validity of “scientific truth” with its experimental “hypothesis, experiment, conclusion” model. The mock-documentary mimics the documentary, reproducing all the established conventions such as the interview, the handheld

---

<sup>17</sup> Von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998) in particular, and mock-documentary in general, have found intriguing ways of reconciling these contradictions, relying simultaneously on signifiers of immediacy derived from documentary films to suggest realism, and on reflexivity which foregrounds the constructed nature of the work to do the same.

camera, the use of archival or amateur footage and the re-enactment that we have come to accept as a shorthand for actuality programmes and to associate automatically with truth. They deconstruct and undermine our careful divisions between reality and representation in a typically post-modern way. “Our own realist movement,” says Hallam, “is one in which the evidential claims of our visual auditory recording instruments are increasingly called into question” (2000: 24).

South African mock-documentary film-maker Rob de Mezieres, whose provocative mock-documentary *Shooting Bokkie* raises questions about the ethics of convincing viewers that what they are watching is real, ascribes this preoccupation with the “real” to what I would call a kind of fiction fatigue. In an interview with me in 2004, De Mezieres said

I think we have been so bombarded by so much contrived stylised product and at the back of my mind the suspension of disbelief is no longer there. Once upon a time people went to the movies and they got locked in, and they were *there*. Now you’ve got the EPK, the trailer, the behind the scenes, the DVD extra features telling you how it’s done, you know swinging in front of the blue screen... showing you how the magic is made, showing you where we hide the rabbit under the hat... there’s no mystery anymore.

Technological developments such as the tiny lightweight high resolution digital video cameras have greatly influenced the kinds of films which are being made. The cost-effectiveness of this technology has meant far greater accessibility than ever before, and it has also encouraged a documentary immediacy and a revisiting of realism in contemporary filmmaking, partly because this is what the medium of digital video does best and is most associated with. The stripped down realism advocated by the Dogme manifesto also has budgetary implications: if, as the Dogme doctrine proposes, films should be made with existing sets and props, synch sound and no non-diegetic music, no expensive equipment, small crews and no lighting, filmmaking becomes infinitely more accessible. It may also be that people need a little breathing space in a media-saturated world dominated by mega-budget Hollywood features with stunning special effects. The massive global Reality TV phenomenon over the last few years, which is a natural extension of soap opera in that it purports to show

people's everyday lives and "downtime", and the widespread popularity of talk shows such as *Oprah*, which feature everyday people and their problems alongside celebrities, attest to the fact that audiences need to see everyday people like themselves on screen, not just the celebrity superheroes of blockbusters.

And so, a hundred years from the inception of film and over half a century after Bazin first started writing about film realism, there has been a revival of the sort of realism which Bazin had been advocating, encapsulated by, but not exclusive to, the Dogme manifesto. Theorists now fully acknowledge the importance of Bazin's insights into what drives people to make films in the first place. Of course film has an important entertainment value, as spectacle and quasi-magical illusion, but the other main drives of filmmaking are a quest for the authentic, for the unearthing and the replication of the real, the desire, as Bazin said to "mummify" and preserve the world around us. If we look at the realist moments in film history it becomes clear that we constantly return to this quest. I have chosen 1995 as the cut off point for the film texts I analyse in any detail for two main reasons: the first is that this represents the start of the second century of cinema's existence, and the second being that this was the year in which the Dogme collective officially and very publicly called for a revival of "anti-illusionist" realist film – precisely the kind of realism which pre-occupies me in this study.

## **Realist form, techniques and aesthetics**

Is there such a thing as a "realist aesthetic?" I have already established the particular kind of realism I will be focussing on in this study, and I have briefly traced the moments in film history when this kind of realism has come to the fore and described some of the films that have emerged from those realist moments. But if the realism under scrutiny here is essentially the "objective realism" of expositional and social realist texts, which strives at least for a semblance of naturalism and has aspirations to scientific and factual engagement with the unmediated "truth," are the terms realist and aesthetic not oxymoronic?

Since the focus of this thesis is on realist films rather than the broader classical realist films, one can begin to define a realist aesthetic to some extent. Of course realism can never be the same as real, it is only ever a representational form which aims to mimic the real, but if one considers the representational forms which have come out of these various realist moments one can identify a number of techniques, themes, formal aspects and an overall aesthetic which is commonly employed to convey a greater sense of realism. Even Bazin, who stated that the “photograph image is the object itself” (1967: 14), ended his impassioned essay on the ontology of the photographic image with the words “On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language” (1967: 16). In his essays on the neorealist filmmakers in particular, Bazin begins to pinpoint a number of formal and aesthetic techniques which are integral to the realist “language.” Most of these attributes were to be found in the neorealist films which he praised so highly, and which contributed formally “to founding conventions of objective verisimilitude” (Bordwell, 1985: 230). Despite his firm belief in the primacy of cinema to convey realism, Bazin stressed the importance of formal and aesthetic considerations in the making of realist film and wrote at length about this evolving realist aesthetic. He describes this union of the aesthetic and the real in his discussion of the work of De Sica: “...it is by way of poetry that the realism of De Sica takes on its meaning, for in art, at the source of all realism, there is an aesthetic paradox which must be resolved. The faithful reproduction of reality is not art” (Bazin, 1972: 174). He acknowledged the role of selection and interpretation in the creation of the photographic image, as well as the fact that, however great the measure of reality attained in realist film, this was still only an effective way of serving an abstract purpose, be it dramatic, moral or ideological. Bazin also refuted the notion that naturalism and the aesthetic were in opposition to one another: a realist art, he asserted, was one “capable of creating an aesthetic which integrates reality” (in Williams ed. 1980: 40).<sup>18</sup> The slow, meditative, reflective style of some earlier realist filmmakers has undergone some revision necessary in the contemporary climate; however, despite these shifting emphases, the basic principles underpinning objective realism have remained constant. Contemporary filmmakers have adapted many of the

---

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Williams’ collection of essays on film realism, *Realism in the Cinema*, was crucial in helping me to formulate my understanding of the subject. I have since gone directly to many of the original texts he uses, which means that my references don’t reflect the significant influence of his book, but I would like to acknowledge its importance. This quote from Bazin comes from an essay entitled “William Wyler or the Jansenist of Directing,” which is not included in the two-volume collection of his seminal essays, *What Is Cinema?*

stylistic techniques favoured by a century of realist filmmakers to satisfy the aesthetic and narrative demands of a contemporary audience, while keeping a character-driven focus on social issues at the core of the film.

The question of how to represent and raise consciousness about injustice, exploitation and oppression and other hard-to-swallow aspects of human existence in realist film without alienating one's audience is a challenging one, particularly to filmmakers seeking mass audiences. The chapter on Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995) in this study examines how the popular and critical success of Kassovitz's film is due in large part to his ability to create a highly appealing realist aesthetic, which is essentially a reworked and enhanced naturalism combined with a revisiting and reworking of past cinematic styles. The success of this stylistic blend meant that the film resonated with critics and the general populace alike. In achieving this, he avoids the potential miserabilism of some naturalist texts with their "[stink] of cabbage" (as Jameson puts it) where the "content seems somehow to contaminate the form" and the text "[exudes] the misery and boredom of its subject matter, poverty itself" (1991: 280). Instead, his revisionist realism allowed him to raise some unpalatable issues without losing his audience.

Kassovitz had a century of cinema from which to draw, including the work produced by the various realist filmmakers throughout that century who had already grappled with the reality-aestheticism paradox and established a range of stylistic and aesthetic conventions deemed to be more "realist." Noel Carroll points out that "cinematic realism is not just one thing but a triangular relationship between reality, a parallel group of films and another contrasting group of films" (in Jerslev 2002: 53), and this shifts with changing conceptions of realism. The first century of filmmaking established a kind of continuum, a series of conventions that (through seeing them used in films which claim to have a greater or lesser link to reality) have come to be interpreted as being associated with either with "truth" or with illusion. Definitions and understandings of realism may change from one decade or country to the next, or even from one filmmaker to the next, but there are also many significant common formal and aesthetic characteristics, and film, like the other visual and literary arts, has developed a fairly distinctive tradition of realism as a representational form. Glancing through the brief outlines of these realist movements one can already begin

to discern a continuity, both formal and in terms of content, between the various realist movements. John Ellis, in his book *Visible Fictions* (1992) discusses the ways in which certain codes can elicit reality and truth effects and how these codes resurface continuously in realist works. Surface reality or verisimilitude, realism of psychology or character motivation and the sense of “truthfulness” achieved by the narrative construction in a film text are all factors which influence the extent of the text’s reality and truth effects. Particular approaches to cinematography, editing and sound also endure from one realist movement to the next. My aim here is to isolate the “ism” of realism, the particular modes and codes through which the real is conventionally represented.

### **Realism and the aesthetics of presence**

At the heart of the realist aesthetic is a quest for a sense of presence, of immediacy and more specifically of un-mediated-ness, so that the representation appears to resemble the original (or “reality”) as closely as possible. Even though Barthes critiques realism’s deceptiveness and its claim to truth, this concept of presence is central to his analysis of photography. For Barthes, “every photograph is a certificate of presence” (1981: 87) and the photographic image can never be separated from its referent. The photograph “bears testimony” to the existence of the object it reproduces, without which there would be no photograph, and the photographic icon presents “a kind of natural being-there of the object” (Wollen, 1972: 124). Both Bazin and Kracauer try to “account for the peculiar sense of presence that the film can give the spectator” (Tredell, 2002: 267). Not only does the camera provide “evidence” of the object or event’s existence, however contrived that might be, but the *presentation* of that footage can draw the audience into that moment in a highly experiential, even visceral, way; an aspect of film-making which is not accounted for by a great deal of film theory, as Sobchak discusses in her article on the Cinesthetic Subject (2000). This is essentially the “something more” that Bazin strove to identify and articulate: cinema is more than a language, it evokes a sense of presence. Anne Jerslev, in her chapter on Von Trier’s *The Idiots* (1998), suggests that the central tenets of the Dogme manifesto are founded on creating precisely this sense of presence. For Jerslev, “Dogma 95 may be interpreted in continuation of Bazin’s thoughts but the 1995 Manifesto is not glaringly naïve either. Dogme 95 may be understood as an

extension into the age of the digital images of Bazin's thoughts of the photographic presence, its temporal actualization of photography's having-once-been-there" (Jerslev, 2002: 51). Roscoe too suggests that specific profilmic and filmic codes and conventions, frequently present in and derived from "factual" films such as documentaries, "work towards a richer sense of 'being there' for the viewer" (2001: 15). The Dogme brothers made their elevation of the "instant" explicit in their manifesto. Directors had to swear to making "the instant... more important than the whole" ([www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk)), and Dogme's realism is predicated on the assumption that there is a direct link between the original object and the photographic image of that object, creating an "indexically bound *aesthetics of presence*" (Jerslev, 2002: 52, emphasis in original).

But the Dogme manifesto essentially concretised the attitudes and many of the formal aspects of the brotherhood's realist predecessors, and this quest for a sense of presence and immediacy has been central to the approach of many realist filmmakers. This has made a significant impact on the formal and aesthetic decisions that are made concerning how the film is shot and edited, generating a set of character traits which survive, with some revision and addition, in today's realist works.

One of the first major formal distinctions that was drawn between the realist and the formalist tendencies was the tendency either to focus on cinematography or to focus on montage. Lumière's interest in documenting the world as it was led him to let the camera run, creating in a sense a proto-long-take. Méliès on the other hand built on Lumière's initial approach and began to experiment with editing and its illusionist capacity for fantasy. The sequence, which joined several shots together, is necessarily more compromised by human intervention, whereas the unbroken shot highlights its photographic qualities and emphasises the camera's ability faithfully to reproduce the objects or events which find themselves before its lens. The unmediated shot has therefore been seen as having a closer relationship to reality.

The long take can be used in conjunction with deep focus and deep space to intensify this reality effect. Deep focus and deep space increase the shot's apparent integrity and objectivity by minimising the interference of the apparatus and reducing selectivity, allowing viewers more freedom to interpret the footage. The long take or

sequence shot, particularly using deep space, deep focus and layering is seen as allowing reality to establish itself and to “be” without the excessive stamp of the filmmaker upon it. Such shots are integral to the realist style and have been since they were first practised by filmmakers such as Orson Welles (with cameraman Gregg Toland) and the poetic realist Jean Renoir. For Bazin, Orson Welles’s use of the long take in particular contributed to the fact that he “restored to cinematographic illusion a fundamental quality of reality – continuity,” and his use of deep focus similarly contributed to Welles’s success in “[restoring] to reality its visible continuity” (Bazin, 1972: 28). While, as Patrick L. Ogle points out, “not all examples of deep focus cinematography were necessarily realist in nature or style,” nevertheless the “primary influences upon the development of deep focus were strongly involved with the concept of realism as a proper means of expression and communication” (in Williams, 1980: 200). Both static and mobile long takes are favoured by realist filmmakers. Static long takes give an impression of raw, unmediated footage. One masterful example of this can be seen in Mike Leigh’s *Secrets and Lies* (1996), where a static camera and an exceptionally long take (eight minutes and eleven seconds) puts the focus wholly on the performance in the scene where the mother and daughter finally meet. This static observational camera increases the reality effect by appearing to capture the characters’ interactions “on-the-fly” as they unfold, suggesting a lack of control by the director over the performances and therefore a greater sense of authenticity. Mobile long takes, on the other hand, allow one to explore the character’s environment with them, keeping them constantly contextualised, as I will discuss in the relation to Kassovitz’s *La Haine*. This is particularly the case where shots are layered and deeply staged, presenting a vast canvas with a profusion of activity or viewers to “choose from,” all of which tells us more about the character and their locale. The mobile camera is free to follow the performer, encouraging a sense of spontaneity in the performance and privileging the actor rather than the equipment in a bid for more authentic acting.

Technology, and in particular the development of lightweight cameras and sound recording equipment and sensitive film (and more recently video) stock, have facilitated the roaming and spontaneous long takes. With the French New Wave, the recent invention of lighter equipment and sensitive film stock allowed filmmakers to get out of the studios and to shoot in urban spaces and in a more improvised,

unstructured way. Today's extremely lightweight cameras and sound equipment and the availability of ultra-sensitive celluloid and video make this abundantly possible, with the added benefit of video's greatly reduced costs. This means that filmmakers using video can afford to shoot very lengthy improvised takes without spending a fortune on film stock.

Extended establishing shots allow the camera to explore the space, and to show us the effect of the environments on the character. Hallam likens this to the lengthy descriptions of setting in nineteenth-century naturalist and realist novels (2000: 48) which contextualise the characters rather than providing what John Hill calls "exotically realist spectacle for those who don't have to inhabit it" (in Hallam, 2000: 48). The long take is of course also used in observational documentary and ethnography, and its use in fiction cinema enhances the film's sense of realism through those documentary associations.

Where editing does occur in realist films, it tends to be used to support the revelation of character psychology, rather than character action, and realist filmmakers tend to avoid the classic, somewhat televisually-influenced, technique of close-up shot reaction-shot, using more midshots and long shots and particularly favouring long-take two-shots, which in turn favour the more sustained performances called for in realist works. Infrequent cross-cuts to different locations further enhance the sense of temporal and spatial immediacy. Realist editing can either cover its tracks in the seamless continuity editing style of classical realist texts, where nothing flashy or spectacular is countenanced for fear of drawing attention to itself (for instance *verité* style in-camera editing or the meditative, considered style of a Satyajit Ray, for whom the material dictated the form and for whom the form needed to be as unnoticeable as possible). Alternatively, the editing can foreground the construction of the text, incorporating jump cuts or abrupt, jarring edits (such as were used during the French New Wave and are favoured by the Dogme filmmakers).

This effect (or affect) of immediacy is further enhanced by using techniques such as shaky cam or the inclusion of grainy, over-exposed handycam or amateur footage, surveillance or surveillance-style footage and home movie interludes in conjunction with long takes. These apparently unplanned, uncontrolled shots, which have become

ubiquitous in recent years, particularly since the overwhelming success of *The Blair Witch Project*, are intended to give the impression of guileless innocence, of the camera just having been there at that moment: the camera is the eye-witness, capturing what occurs before it. Technology such as lightweight or even lipstick cameras, which can easily be concealed, no doubt play a role in the ubiquity of these techniques in realist films, but they are essentially revisions of an impulse that has been with realist filmmakers from the start. British Digital Filmmaker Chris Cooke talks about the documentary immediacy of working on digital video, its “instantaneous” aesthetically familiar quality and its rawness, and another British video director Kate Davis describes as one of the huge benefits of DV “the ease and intimacy” of the medium (James, 2001: 20). This approach harks back to Vertov’s writing on the all-seeing cine-eye almost a century ago, and to Bazin’s notion of the objective “automatic” nature of photography. Films using this cluster of techniques profit from their association with modes of filmmaking (such as documentary, news and actuality), which use the camera and microphone as mechanical recording instruments. This shooting style suggests that the footage and the sound (complete with inconsistencies and fluctuations in the levels) have not been tampered with and are therefore inherently more truthful.

Patricia Erens has set out a description of typical home-movie aesthetics and techniques, which are calculated to include exactly the sort of “mistakes” found in real home movies (jump cuts, light flashes, tilt shots, over-exposed lighting, shaky camera) and therefore to code the footage as documentary and truth-bearing. In her article on the use of “home-movies” in commercial narrative film she sums up the main reasons for using home-movies as being “to denote past tense, to provide insight into fictional characters, to indicate a higher truth, to serve as a Rorschach for the emotional states of the protagonists, to offer visual contrast, and to constitute an extended metaphor for the entire work” (1986, 101). British digital video director David Mackenzie has declared amateurism to be “one of the great hopes for the creative future,” claiming that he and his crew “tried to be as amateur as possible on our film. I had to fight the crew to stop them being professional. I needed to find the material, to have it evolve in its own way and to shoot it in lots of different ways so it could be created in the edit suite because I wasn’t comfortable with the script” (James, 2001: 24). The incorporation of amateur, home-movie or documentary footage is a

technique which has certainly been appropriated by the “illusionist” films of Hollywood as well as by more independent and non-commercial filmmakers. Joel Black suggests that raw footage is one of the “general effects” (as opposed to special effects) at the contemporary filmmaker’s disposal:

As commercial animation, action-adventure, and sci-fi movies leave the medium of recorded film behind in order to devote ever greater shares of their budgets to digitalized special effects, raw footage is coming to play a greater role in low-budget independent cinema. Instead of using special effects to alter, enhance or simply dispense with recorded images, non-commercial filmmakers have devised innovative ways of presenting the unedited film record of the real itself, recontextualizing it through a variety of what might be called “general effects.” (2002: 11)

Although the incorporation of raw or amateur footage remains a signifier of the real in both mainstream and realist films, the latter are more likely to reflect upon the use of such footage in a more self-conscious manner.

Pseudo documentary, news, actuality or surveillance footage similarly makes a claim to truthfulness and artlessness, and is frequently used to anchor narrative fiction films in an apparently real context. As Black points out, “fictional movies have increasingly adopted the long-standing documentary practice of using archival photographs and films” in order to motivate their narratives, and this apparently authentic footage can serve as “a kernel of truth around which the cinematic fiction persistently circles” (2002: 11,12), as is the case in *Shooting Bokkie*. The incorporation of factual or news footage (or simulations of such footage) into a fiction film can also allow filmmakers to question the media’s truth-telling agenda, as is the case in *La Haine*. Reality TV programmes such as *Big Brother* rely on the unmediated look of its “surveillance” footage to give an impression of life caught on-the-fly and documented directly without intervention. Other Reality TV programmes incorporate amateur footage which is then contained and slickly packaged within the programme as a whole. Reality television and cinema are mutually influential. Films such as *Series 7: the contenders* (Minahan, 2001) mimic the Reality TV format and narrative, but there are numerous other examples of films which are directly influenced by Reality TV’s real-

time, surveillance-style, observational documentary techniques. Mike Figgis's *Time Code* (2000) follows several characters through one particular day in real-time, on a split screen, dropping and raising sound levels in order to draw the viewer's attention to the most relevant story strand at that moment.

Whereas black and white, with its newsreel associations, was always used to lend credence to realist texts, full televisual colour has largely replaced it as the de facto realist standard, just as the grainy, over-exposed digital video look associated with television actuality has for the most part replaced the celluloid documentary look as the most obvious signifier of the real. In order to construct an authentic representation of everyday life, filmmakers strip away the cosmetic trappings associated with "illusionist" films, and choose natural lighting and film (or video) stock which replicates genres which are closely associated with the everyday and the ordinary – televisual genres in contemporary society. The use of the cheaper video format establishes the film's low-budget credentials thereby suggesting that the representation is authentic rather than being a highly mediated and expensive illusion. It is also an astute political choice considering the left-wing inclinations of many social realist filmmakers, in particular.

In terms of narrative and content, the focus tends to be on everyday events and unexceptional (often marginalised) characters in straitened economic circumstances, frequently in grim, violent domestic situations. Realist film narratives frequently involve confrontation with authority figures, for instance intergenerational conflict or struggles with police or teachers. Emphasis is placed on the ordinary rather than the extraordinary, although realist films frequently encourage a re-evaluation of the commonplace. "I am naturally drawn to people with ordinary working lives" says realist filmmaker Mike Leigh. "I think it important to make films about a side of life that films don't normally deal with" (in Riding, 2000: 101).<sup>19</sup> Events are de-dramatised and come across as unscripted to encourage a sense of immediacy and an impression of authenticity. The narration tends to be character-centred and

---

<sup>19</sup> Leigh has also commented rather wryly, one presumes, on the advantages in terms of budget of making realist films. "If I decide to do a film that is monochromatic and generally a downer... then it's cheaper. But if I want to be jolly then it's more expensive" (Raphael, 2008: 261). It's hard to tell how seriously the comment is meant, particularly coming from the dry-humoured Leigh, but considering the extra costs involved in elements such as lighting, costumes and settings for more "upbeat" and perhaps slicker-looking films there may well be some truth in it.

foregrounds the revelation of the characters' psychology rather than being driven by their actions: the events are generally out of the characters' control, and often portray what Bordwell calls a "boundary situation" (Bordwell, 1988: 208), a moment of existential crisis. Things *happen to* the characters, and they often happen by pure chance, further emphasising their lack of control over their situation. The character's psychology as well as their sociological situations are seen as significant, and characters' lives are related to their social contexts and to other characters: realist films tend to explore human relations to their limits. This is reinforced by particular technical and aesthetic choices, for instance the use of the roaming wide-angled Steadicam in *La Haine* which contextualises the three main characters within their space, or the use of lighting in realist films which causes characters to blend into the background rather than standing out from it. Realist narration is episodic, picaresque and character-based rather than goal-driven; it is unmotivated by causal logic, and the events which occur are not always "explained" rationally. Instead, the narratives chart the meandering everyday activity and conversations of "real life," with no particularly striking scene or even necessary order of events, providing what Helen Goritsas calls the "total impression of average moments" (Goritsas, 2002, np).

Realist films tend to resist a happy ending, denying the viewer the soothing effect that a sense of closure and resolution provides in more mainstream Hollywood film. With momentous endings, the push to the climactic resolution is so strong that it removes the viewer's attention from potential complexities of the situation, staking all the importance on the final outcome. Since this is generally related to the triumph of the central protagonist, if that individual is allowed to triumph over the problem, there is a deflection of attention away from the issue. Palliative endings are less likely to elicit an active response from the viewer, and are, anyway, seen as being inappropriately "unrealistic" for realist films. Realist films aim to explore rather than to conceal the inherent complexity in a character or situation, and for this reason too, they generally eschew closure, preferring to let the exploration of the characters and issues linger in all their complexity after the film is over. Mike Leigh remarks that his films are more about questions than about answers, and his endings reflect this: "I don't make films which are prescriptive, and I do not make films that are conclusive. You do not walk out of my films with a clear feeling about what is right and wrong. They're ambivalent. You walk away with work to do. My films are a sort of investigation. The

ask questions; they're reflecting" (see Riding, 2000: 104). The ending of Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948) is a masterful example of this approach: the narrative denies the viewer the false resolution of a happy ending for the father and son, and the final shot emphasises the fact that their plight is in fact shared by masses of others. The protagonist and his child melt into the crowd until they become indistinguishable, suggesting that the issues raised by the film are symptomatic of a broader sociological and economic malaise and cannot simply be solved by the relocation of a bicycle. While the film makes good use of the services of pathos to engage the viewer, this subtle final shot forces us to disengage and to consider the issue more broadly rather than confining ourselves to considering the protagonist's individual situation: there should be no individual catharsis at the expense of the "crowd." In realist films, the social conditions are the problem and the threat to human happiness, not some "baddies" who can be eradicated to allow for an easy, comforting resolution.

Realist filmmakers gravitate towards political and social issues which mainstream filmmakers tend to shy away from, and they tend towards the didactic at times in their conscientising or awareness-raising efforts. Hollywood films are frequently (and somewhat reductively) associated with entertainment: "If I want to send a message I'll send it by Western Union," Metro Goldwyn Mayer founder Louis B Mayer is famously reported to have quipped. But Hollywood too has had its realist phases and filmmakers. In the twenties and thirties, for example, when MGM were making "films for the middle class, full of noble socialites and madcap stunt pilots who always settled down in the end" and Paramount was making films for the "upper class, supplying a combination of sophisticated dialogue and baroque setting that was *très snob*," Warner Brothers were making films about and for the working class (Baxter, 1968: 50). Their musicals acknowledged the context of the depression and featured stories about ambitious young chorus girls and tenors working hard to make it in a tough environment. It was "the cinema of poverty," a realist moment in Hollywood filmmaking, and Warner Brothers made films at a great pace out of financial necessity and employed sequels to extract as much value as possible from each production (Baxter, 1968: 51).

Realist films are frequently explorations of the human condition, and in the past have typically offered a humanist outlook on the world, acknowledging and, in fact, examining human failings but never condemning those flawed individuals. Empathy for all the characters tends to question the existence of evil. Jean Renoir was so intent on not demonising the German enemy in *La Grande Illusion* (1937) that the film was lambasted after the atrocities of the Second World War. More recently, the gentler “softening” humanism of the French poetic realists or the Italian neorealists has come to exist side by side with films which show the brutality of human existence. *Shooting Bokkie* is one example of the latter, and emerges as one of a clutch of similarly violent realist films about irredeemable social pathology. It is an example of what Hallam refers to as a New Brutalism in film, incorporating more “realistic” graphic violence than was previously typical of realist film. This is in keeping with an escalation of violence in today’s film and media, but the inclusion of graphic violence and real sex in contemporary realist films serves other purposes too: it adds a sensational edge to films which allows them to compete at the box office with the more spectacular high-budget mainstream films (see Krzywinska, 2005) and the realness of the events on screen (for example the penetration shots in the orgy scene in *The Idiots* or in *Romance* (Breillat, 1999) are calculated to imbue the film as a whole with a greater sense of authenticity. The chapters on *Shooting Bokkie* and on realist romance discuss the treatment of “real” sex, violence and death.

Another authenticating code of realist texts is the inclusion of “unnecessary” details or irrelevant actions, again to give the impression that there has been minimal tampering or intervention (mediation) and to give a feel of uncontrived everyday life with all its downtime and mundaneness. The neorealists in particular were responsible for instituting this redundancy in the realist repertoire, but from the earliest, Lumière films capturing apparently insignificant detail added something of the texture of real life “objectively” rendered. This was the crux of what Roland Barthes termed the “reality effect,” which was achieved through the inclusion of certain apparently unnecessary particularities “whose very gratuitousness [serve] to authenticate the fiction” (Barthes, 1975: 182). Barthes noted that writers of realism employed “structurally superfluous notations” to give a stronger sense that what was being written about was “concrete reality” (1986: 146), the imperative being, through this descriptive “exactitude” to “authenticate the ‘real’” similarly to the way in which a

photograph claims to constitute a report by an “immediate witness” of “what was here” (1986: 145, 146).<sup>20</sup> Cesare Zavattini, Italian neorealist theorist and scriptwriter, insisted on the importance of immanence, of remaining in the moment, and identified the neorealist tendency exhaustively to observe “explore [the] interior value” of any given moment as a key way in which “the American position is the antithesis” of the neorealist position. “There is no question of a crisis of subjects,” says Zavattini, “only of their interpretation.” To illustrate this substantial difference in approach, he outlined a conversation which he had had with an American producer: “This is how we would imagine a scene with an airplane. The plane passes by... a machine gun fires... the plane crashes... And this is how you would imagine it. The plane passes by... the plane passes by again... the plane passes by once more...” He was right, Zavattini concedes, “but we still have not gone far enough. It is not enough to make the airplane pass by three times; we must make it pass twenty times” (2007:22-23).

Kristin Thompson asserts that a film is realist if cues within it ask us to appeal to our knowledge of the real world, however mediated. Further, she suggests that if “through engagement of a spectator’s sympathies with particular characters and / or situations in a fiction, film can moderate our responses towards a fictive situation, then securing this will be an important strategy in certain types of realist fiction” (in Hallam, 2000: 16). Realist filmmakers tend to encourage more active responses from their viewers, and to provoke a reaction, be it compassion, debate, or even action. For this reason it is crucial that the work be plausible and believable; that the codes and cues used have the required “reality effect” and the characters and events be credible, even if the viewer is aware that what they are watching is true *to* life rather than actually true life. “I know it’s only fiction but these things are happening somewhere,” a viewer of *Oranges are not the only fruit* told researchers Hallam and Marshment during an interview (in Hallam, 2000: 133). Making the audience link the fictional text and the real world is key to the realist pursuit.

---

<sup>20</sup> For Barthes, the reality effect occurs when the “tripartite nature” of the sign is degraded “in order to make notation the pure encounter of an object and its expression.” He writes: “[J]ust when these details are treated to *denote* the real directly, all that they do – without saying so – is *signify* it,” that the seemingly superfluous and futile details in realist narratives “finally say nothing but this: we are the real; it is the category of “the real” (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified, in other words the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity” (1986: 148).

Contemporaneity and locality are also realist trademarks. The realist filmmaker Pagnol said that “[y]ou attain the universal by staying at home” (in Vincendeau, 2007, np): setting the film in a particular (typically current) time as well as a particular place provides both the sense of presence and “liveness” which is key to realist films, as well as the fullness of detail and surface realism of a specific, authentic environment.<sup>21</sup> While realism filmmakers obviously draw from their forerunners both stylistically and in terms of content and thematic focus, realist films are typically set in the time in which they are actually made. “The cinema should never turn back,” the ardent realist Zavattini once insisted, “[i]t should accept, unconditionally, what is contemporary. *Today, today, today*” (2007: 31). The thematic preoccupations of realist films are broadly materialist as opposed to idealist and, as Morris points out, “Whereas idealism is grounded upon a view of Truth as universal and timeless, empiricism finds its truths in the particular and the specific” (Morris, 2003: 3). Realist filmmakers have always tended to shoot in actual locations, avoiding spectacular locations which might overpower the content, and they focus on authentic, specific environments and everyday details. “On the whole people assume with my films that we’re mainly talking about people and relationships. But one of the major elements of what preoccupies me is time and place” says Leigh (in Raphael, 2008: 38). While this can lead to a focus on the gloomier aspects of daily life, realist films can also explore the ways in which the mundane can be transformed into the extraordinary: the singing telegraph poles which captivate the children in Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (1955) come to mind as an example of everyday magic.

Hallam suggests that there has been a revival of locality in recent years, but that films must still be saleable internationally. Expository realist films foreground locality through “use of local language idioms and indigenous actors, spatial specificity, detailed references to local attitudes, beliefs, points of cultural references” (Hallam, 2000: 195). Typically, they address local issues in a local way, and they emphasise the “locatedness” of characters in a particular environment (Hallam, 2000: 105). Mike Leigh, who has steadfastly refused to “genuflect” towards Hollywood, deplores the

---

<sup>21</sup> Realist films have other factors in common with Pagnol’s, whose work is characterised by meandering narrative on unimportant topics and charts the shifts in conversation that characterise everyday dialogue, rather than grand action.

deculturalised British films supported by the UK (he cites the James Bond films as an example) and remains committed to making indigenous, highly localised film. He described his 1991 film *Life Is Sweet* as an “ethnic, foreign language, Third World movie from a little island off the French coast” (Brunette, 2000: 33). Ian Buruma in turn describes Leigh’s England as a “personal as well as a local product. And yet it is universal” (in Coveney, 1996: 14). Leigh’s nose-thumbing attitude to Hollywood “internationalism,” his use of unglamorous real locales, and his refusal even to entertain diluting the local language and expression or the use of sub-titles (“you’re buggered if you give in there”<sup>22</sup>) are characteristics shared by many contemporary realist filmmakers. “British, and other European filmmaking has a desire to be what is basically pastiche Hollywood fare” says Leigh, “as opposed to what Ozu or Satyajit Ray – or I – would be doing, which is to make a film straight from the scene” (Bank, 2000: 119). Leigh’s resolute stance on this issue despite his recent successes led interviewer John Naughton to comment, with great wit, that Leigh had “come in from the cold, but he hasn’t wiped his feet” (2000: 130).

The Dogme manifesto’s seventh rule explicitly disallows any temporal or geographic alienation: the action must happen in the “here and now” ([www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk)). To maximise the sense of presence and to minimise the sense of interference and “illusion-making,” the anti-illusionist or realist film has to have a sense of contemporaneousness, and must take place where it purports to be set, in an authentic locality: studio shoots and period films are forbidden by Dogme law. If a film is going to succeed in portraying the everyday and the ordinary, exceptional attention must be paid to surface realism and verisimilitude. There is a striking concurrence with Lyotard’s thinking here, in his call for small-scale, local, instantaneous truths and histories, what he calls “little narratives” or “*petit récits*,” to replace the worn-out grand narrative of the Enlightenment (1984: 60).

The emphasis on authenticity and physical verisimilitude extends to the film’s soundtrack: the realist soundscape privileges diegetic sound and there is a tendency to minimise non-diegetic sound effects and music. This is taken to the extreme once again in the Dogme manifesto, where non-diegetic sound and even sound not captured

---

<sup>22</sup> (Brunette, 2000: 33)

on the actual location are prohibited for just the same reasons that props must be found on location and may not be brought in from elsewhere. The objects and the audio must belong to that real environment, and cannot simply be added on for effect. Rouch bemoaned the addition of the emotionally charged musical soundtrack as “the opium of cinema” and a “musical sauce,” which concealed a poorly conceived and edited film which could not engage the audience in its own right (1995: 93-4). For similar reasons, Kassovitz made the choice to limit the non-diegetic music in *La Haine* significantly. His editor tried putting various tracks from other films over the ending of the film, some of which meant that you “couldn’t help crying,” as Kassovitz put it, adding that he hated that effect (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 191-2). The final credits in the film appear in silence.

In addition to real locations and real sound, realist filmmakers have frequently chosen to cast “real” people or non-actors in their films. From the Lumière films and their factory workers, to the everyday citizens of Moscow in Vertov’s *Man With the Movie Camera*, to the workers in De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* or the people with Down’s syndrome in *The Idiots*, realist filmmakers have populated their films with the authentic characters of everyday life. Where actors are used, a battery of techniques is employed through which to authenticate their performances and to encourage maximum verisimilitude. Performance style has changed significantly since the inception of film, and the acting style has moved from melodramatic and histrionic to a subtler, more low-key naturalistic approach. This is particularly the case in realist cinema, where multidimensional characters with complex psychologies require appropriately nuanced performances if they are to come across as credible. Script and performance must complement one another and work in tandem: aspects of the writing such as the reduction of over-determined dialogue and the inclusion of telling redundant details work in conjunction with aspects of performance such as redundant actions or byplay (quirky, individual, physical mannerisms), over-lapping or cross-dialogue, improvised, rambling (and apparently unstaged) conversations and a subtlety of gesture to convey authenticity. Ensemble acting presents a typically realist multiplicity of viewpoints, and allows the actors to play to each other as if the audience is not there, once again creating an illusion of everyday life.

Improvisation is a key technique for realist filmmakers. The chapter on improvisation in this thesis discusses the use of improvisation as a means of authenticating performance, focusing on Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* (1996). "My films aspire to the condition of documentary," says Leigh. "If you're a newsreel cameraman and you go and shoot a real event, you know that that world exists whether you film it or not. What I want to do is create a world with that kind of solidity to it, something so three-dimensional and solid you could cut it with a knife" (in Turan, 2000: 88). Leigh uses a complex and highly idiosyncratic process of improvisation and rehearsal to create characters so real, with such strong and well-developed histories and lives of their own, that they seem to exist independently of the filmmaking process.

All of the formal and aesthetic techniques mentioned thus far contribute to creating an impression of "liveness," of presence, of objectivity and immediacy and particularity of detail in realist films. But in addition to all these factors, realist texts also frequently incorporate elements of reflexivity, which reveal and to some extent comment on the manufactured nature of the film. As Robert Stam writes, "reflexive works break with art as enchantment and call attention to their own factitiousness as textual constructs" (1992: 1). This flaunting of the conventions of the film's own construction is intended to give the viewer the impression that all layers of artifice have been stripped away to bare the production process in a display of candour.

Reflexivity is nothing new in film. The reflexive element of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, the revelation of film's construction process, is as important as the observational footage of everyday urban life in the Soviet Union. But the reflexive impulse takes on a new urgency in a postmodern context, where notions such as fact and truth have been thrown into question and filmmakers must acknowledge the artfulness and artificiality of their texts. This tendency to document the construction of the text within the text itself takes many forms: actors can address the camera directly, breaking the fourth wall (for example when Emily Watson as Bess smiles directly into camera in Von Trier's 1996 film *Breaking the Waves*) or the filmmakers can include technical equipment or crew within the frame to varying degrees, highlighting the manufactured nature of the film. This is the case in both *Shooting*

*Bokkie* (De Mezieres, 1998/2003<sup>23</sup>) and *The Idiots* (Von Trier, 1998), where, true to mock-documentary form, the real subject matter of the film is filmmaking itself. A form of Brechtian distancing can also be achieved through the use of reflexivity, where the viewer is encouraged to distance him or herself emotionally from the text and to engage instead on an intellectual level. Primarily this revelation of the film's process of manufacture functions as a metaphorical showing of the filmmaker's hand, and can to some extent guard the filmmaker against accusations of illusionism. But reflexivity also carries a certain political valence. If, as Robert Stam writes, "the cinema, despite its superficial modernity and technological razzle-dazzle, has generally fostered a retrograde illusionistic aesthetic... corresponding to that of the nineteenth-century mimetic novel" (1992: 10), the use of reflexivity can suggest a breakaway from what left-wing critics have perceived as conservative bourgeois realism and a leaning towards the political left. For Brecht, discontinuity formed part of a "politicised aesthetic" which sought to "break the charm of spectacle in order to awaken the spectator's critical intelligence" by encouraging involvement and self-reflective responsibility, and left-wing film theorists of an Althusserian persuasion, who (somewhat restrictively) saw realism as reactionary by definition and "came to regard reflexivity as a political obligation," (Stam, 1992: 9, 13).

Needless to say this use of reflexivity is as much a manipulation of a set of stylistic techniques and devices as the most illusionist and spectacular Hollywood blockbuster,<sup>24</sup> but since Hollywood film has traditionally taken great pains to conceal its constructed nature, this reflexivity legitimises the realist film as more honest by contrast. Curiously, then, reflexivity undermines the illusion of realism created by the photographic image, but is simultaneously a signifier of authenticity in itself and can even reinforce the "realism" of the photograph at a higher level by showing the workings behind the creation of that image.<sup>25</sup> Film texts can either use documentary conventions to convince, or expose constructedness or do both simultaneously, as is

---

<sup>23</sup> De Mezieres initially cut a half-hour short in 1998, which was later extended into a 72-minute feature version in 2003.

<sup>24</sup> There is also, of course, nothing to stop "mainstream" or "Hollywood" filmmakers from appropriating reflexivity for their own non-political illusionistic ends, which films such as *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen, 1952) attest to (Stam, 1992: 16).

<sup>25</sup> Stam writes that "it would be a mistake to regard reflexivity and realism as necessarily antithetical terms" since many texts "combine a measure of realism with reflexive technique. They illuminate the everyday realities of the social conjunctures from which they emerge, while also reminding their readings or spectators of the artificiality of their mimesis" (1992: 15).

frequently the case in mock documentaries. This makes them resist easy analysis. Both *The Idiots* and *Shooting Bokkie*, are prime examples of this multilayered “slipperiness” and are also examples of how realist texts, far from being generally unable to show contradiction as MacCabe would have it, can actually thrive on it.

Barthes talks about a “certain kind of reading” of the literary realist greats which might save sceptics from dismissing nearly a century of writers such as Dickens, Eliot, Balzac and Tolstoy. If one can, as Morris puts it, demonstrate that the works of these writers are “covertly proto-poststructuralist, experimental, sceptical, and self-reflexive” (2003: 37), one exempts their authors from accusations of linguistic and cognitive complacency. Contemporary realist filmmakers use self-reflexivity and self-irony pre-emptively in self-defence against charges either of complacency or of naivety, as can be seen in my chapter on Rob de Mezieres’s *Shooting Bokkie*, where I examine the ethics of the mock-documentary hoax.

About the constantly shifting understandings of realism, Bazin had the following to say:

[The realist tendency] has been through many mutations, but the forms in which it has appeared have survived only in proportion to the amount of aesthetic intervention (or discovery) – conscious or not, calculated or innocent – involved. There is not one but several realisms. Each era looks for its own, that is to say the technique and aesthetics which can best capture it, arrest and restore whatever one wishes to capture of reality. (1980: 41)

This study aims to identify the ways in which the real is “claimed” in contemporary fiction films, focusing on several exemplary key texts in which the use of these “techniques and aesthetics” can be seen in practice.

## **Text selection**

My interest in exploring the realist aesthetic in contemporary fiction films was initiated over a decade ago when colleagues in the film industry showed me a rough cut of a short South African film they had worked on, entitled *Shooting Bokkie*. The

film, which at that stage was very rough, was essentially a gangster film, shot in a rough documentary style, about a juvenile assassin or “*bokkie*” carrying out his hits in the rough gang heartland of the Cape Flats on the outskirts of Cape Town. Film and video are interspersed, as are instances of direct address to the camera, archive footage and sections of seemingly on-the-fly coverage of shockingly violent content.

It would be an overstatement to suggest that *Shooting Bokkie* belongs to a specific South African “tradition” of gangster films, but there are numerous examples of gangster films in South African film history, of which the Oscar award-winning *Tsotsi* (Hood, 2005) is perhaps the best-known. Lesley Marx traced aspects of these films and their relationship to South Africa’s apartheid context in her article, “Underworld RSA”, concluding that “[w]hat is notable, in the end, is that [the protagonists of gangster movies] come from the historically abused section of South African culture, foregrounding more strongly than ever the ways in which the gangster world offers its ironic mirror both to the continuing legacy of the old South Africa and to the burgeoning fears of pervasive corruption in the new” (1996: 27). The films which make up the gangster genre as practised in South Africa – for example, *Mapantsula* (Schmitz, 1988), *Wheels and Deals* (Hammon, 1991), *Tsotsi* (Hood, 2005), *Hijack Stories* (Schmitz, 2001), *Jerusalema* (Ziman, 2008) – are conventional fiction films, with occasional formal innovations, but do not engage their violent realities with the same daring and destabilising that we see in *Shooting Bokkie*. One might look, as well, to *documentaries* about South African gangsterism, such as Cliff Bestall’s prison film, *Cage of Dreams* (2001).

As a gangster film, then, *Shooting Bokkie* may lend itself to inclusion in a discussion of South African filmmaking practice with respect to a particular focus on gangsterism, but this was not what I have chosen to write about in this thesis. Generically, *Shooting Bokkie* was neither a fiction film about gangsters nor a documentary. It was a mock-documentary. The director, Rob de Mezieres, claimed during an interview which I conducted many years after seeing the original short film, that they had wanted to make a more conventional gangster film “like *Boys ‘N the Hood* in South Africa,” but that they chose the mock-documentary format due to financial constraints, the “no-budget circumstances of the production” (De Mezieres, 2004). It was the resulting mock-documentary nature of *Shooting Bokkie*, and the way

in which the filmmakers had built up a convincing realist aesthetic aimed at persuading viewers that the content was authentic, which interested me. What complicated this aesthetic technique in the case of this particular film, and at the same time bore testimony to its potential persuasive power, was the filmmakers' ethically questionable intention to make viewers believe that they had watched authentic documentary footage of people being killed.

I began to research other mock-documentaries<sup>26</sup> and to construct a clearer picture of the "repertoire" of techniques in use. Von Trier's Dogme mock-documentary *The Idiots* (1998) exemplified the aesthetic approach favoured by mock-documentary filmmakers. In this film, Von Trier put into practice the theoretical approach explicitly spelled out in the Dogme manifesto through the use of many of the same techniques which had already emerged as central to the realist repertoire. Although Von Trier's choice of the mock-documentary format for his realist Dogme contribution was a logical one considering documentary's association with authenticity and truthfulness, the other films made by the Dogme filmmakers, which were not mock-documentaries, used similar techniques and conventions to persuade viewers of their authenticity. Minimal non-diegetic music and lighting, a roving camera (often handheld) which follows the performers, improvisation, episodic narratives without happy endings and a focus on the everyday and the "unlovely" emerged as some of the key stylistic techniques used by realist filmmakers more broadly: this aesthetic and narrative approach was not confined to mock-documentary or to Dogme filmmakers. I began to analyse other realist fiction films in which certain key elements of this common aesthetic and narrative strategy – in particular the cinematography, the performances and the narrative style – were exemplified.

The cinematography in *La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995) made the film an obvious candidate for inclusion in this study since the camera techniques and the overall look and feel differed so distinctly from that in most mock-documentaries or Dogme films. Kassovitz, and his cinematographer Pierre Aïm, were also striving to create an

---

<sup>26</sup> Many of these mock-documentaries are referred to in later chapters, and there are too many to mention here, not all of which are germane to this thesis. I watched extensively and across a wide range of mock-documentaries spanning decades, from Fellini's groundbreaking *8½* (1963) to the comic mock-documentaries of Rob Reiner (*This is Spinal Tap*, 1982), and the more self-reflexive and critical mock-documentary works such as *Man Bites Dog* (Belvaux and Bonzel, 1992), which, like *Shooting Bokkie*, encourage viewers to question their acceptance of the notion of documentary truthfulness.

impression of authenticity in the film, which they did through the use of deep space, wide contextualising shots, layering and mobile long shots reminiscent of the work of Orson Welles or French Poetic Realist Jean Renoir rather than through rough, handheld camerawork as was the case in the Dogme films – including Von Trier’s *The Idiots*. I was drawn to the work of Mike Leigh for similar reasons: although Leigh’s aim, like Von Trier’s, was to elicit believable performances from his cast through improvisation, their approaches to improvisation and direction differed significantly. Whereas Von Trier experimented with improvisation during the shoot itself and encouraged spontaneity and a degree of volatility in his actors by probing them psychologically both in rehearsal and on set, Leigh confined his use of improvisation strictly to the pre-production phase of his work, and developed his own rigorous working process to manage this.

Narrative style was the final key element in the realist “repertoire” that I wanted to focus on. *Before Sunrise* and its sequel *Before Sunset* (Linklater, 1995 and 2004) were particularly intriguing to me as realist narratives because they were essentially transformations of a conventionally non-realist genre, romance. Through his use of credible improvised dialogue (which frequently undermines the potential romance of the situation) as well as through a meandering, episodic, real-time feel, Linklater reworks the romance as a realist text without losing its romantic appeal.

Despite the apparent diversity of these films, all of them are examples of contemporary realist fiction film in which an identifiable repertoire of aesthetic and narrative conventions has been employed in order to create a sense of realism and authenticity. An attempt to “claim the real” is the common thread which binds both the films themselves and the studies of these films in the chapters which follow.

## **Chapter outlines**

The specific content of each of the chapters has necessitated some variation in approach across the body of the thesis.

In the first chapter, I explore the radical return to realist “purity” embodied in the Dogme 95 manifesto and exemplified in Lars Von Trier’s Dogme film, *The Idiots*. For

this chapter I focus on Von Trier's directorial techniques, exploring his working methods through his intimate journal, the "making of" documentary by Jesper Jargil (*The Humiliated*, 1998), interviews with the actors concerned, and other contemporary comment and analysis.

Mike Leigh is the inheritor of a long tradition of theatrical and cinematic improvisation, and in the second chapter I felt it necessary, in examining his improvisatory style through an analysis of his film *Secrets and Lies*, to do so against the backdrop of that tradition. I have quoted extensively from interviews with Leigh in order to build up a firsthand picture of his influences and his working methods.

In the third chapter, I propose that Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* constitutes an exemplification of the kind of cinematic exploration of space and place championed by André Bazin. Through analysis of key scenes in the film, and drawing especially from the critical commentary of key scholars such as Ginette Vincendeau and Julia Hallam, as well as background information provided by Kassovitz himself, I argue that the film's popular and critical success owes much to the highly distinctive directorial style he has created, which strikes a fine balance between youthful dynamism and cinephilic homage to the classics.

Chapter four focuses on Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995) and its sequel, *Before Sunset* (2004), and examines the revisiting of cinematic romance and romantic comedy and its revision to suit the mistrustful contemporary climate. I suggest that film audiences hunger for romance despite their own scepticism, and I analyse Linklater's attempts to create "realist romances" which satisfy that craving.

In the final chapter in this thesis I shift the focus to issues of realism and ethics, through a discussion of voyeurism and the filmic hoax. In order to do this I explore a South African mock-documentary, *Shooting Bokkie*, directed by Rob de Mezieres. Posited as a documentary, the film features several apparently genuine killings, which places its audience in a moral conundrum since it makes them believe they have looked upon death.

## The Naked Stare: stripping with *The Idiots*

“The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind.”

- (from the Dogme 95 manifesto)

On the afternoon of the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1995 at the Odeon Theatre in Paris a directors' symposium was held to mark the centennial of film and to discuss its future. When it came to Danish film director Lars von Trier's turn to speak, he announced that he represented the group Dogme 95 and, in a dramatic agit-prop gesture, threw a handful of red leaflets bearing the Dogme manifesto off the stage and stalked out of the theatre.<sup>1</sup>

Dogme had begun, and the manifesto, written by two of the Dogme “brothers,” Lars von Trier and the younger Danish director Thomas Vinterberg (a graduate of the same film school as von Trier), quickly made its mark.

“Dogme 95 is a rescue action!” it claimed, with the “express goal of countering ‘certain tendencies’ in the cinema today.” Film had become cosmetic, illusionistic, and overly-reliant on expensive special effects, and Dogme was invented to combat this. To this effect, a list of ten rules was developed which challenged filmmakers to shoot with natural lighting only, using hand-held cameras, in natural locations and “found” props, and without the benefit of post-production polishing or the addition of sound or music not recorded on location.<sup>2</sup>

The aim, as Vinterberg said on the official Dogme website, was to “undress film, to reach the ‘naked film’” ([www.dogme95.dk/faq/faq.htm](http://www.dogme95.dk/faq/faq.htm), n.d.: n.p.). Deprived of their customary box of tricks, film-makers would presumably be thrown back upon their own (and their actors') resources and forced to go back to the basics: story (or more

---

<sup>1</sup> According to an account in Jack Stevenson's *Lars von Trier* (2002: 102).

<sup>2</sup> The full Dogme manifesto is available online on the official Dogme website at [www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk)

appropriately scenario, since traditional dramaturgy is eschewed),<sup>3</sup> setting and performance.

Lars von Trier's provocative and controversial Dogme film, *The Idiots*, was finally released in 1998, three years after the manifesto was written. Although it purports to be a film about a group of young people searching for their inner idiot by "spassing" (acting mentally disabled), *The Idiots* is actually more a film about film-making and about the Dogme project itself. "If I have to describe the real aim of the project, it is a sort of search for authenticity," Von Trier remarks in the *Intimate Journal* which he dictated throughout the making of the film (1998: 46).<sup>4</sup> *The Idiots* is a relentlessly reflexive film, deconstructing itself even as it is constructed. The film is merciless in its scrutiny of the Dogme ideals, of the titular idiots whose antics it "documents," of the actors who play those roles (the distinction between actor and character is deliberately unclear), and most cruelly of von Trier himself as an individual and as a director. Von Trier, his actors, and the characters they portray are stripped naked (figuratively and literally), ruthlessly exposed in the unlovely natural light and the results are "captured" on stark, unfiltered video. It is a fascinating, surgical, laboratory experiment, painful and extraordinary to watch. It is rawer than naked: this is a vivisection.

Technically and aesthetically the *The Idiots* could not be truer to the ideals expressed in the Dogme manifesto. The film's realism consists of a constant process of baring at every level. The film is raw, rough, and deprived of any of the cosmetic tricks that might take the edge off the unfiltered, handheld video images. Sound is limited to natural on-location audio, and editing is typically harsh and abrupt. The Dogme rules explicitly prohibit any cosmetic finishing in post production (the manifesto states that "optical work and filters are forbidden") and it also prohibits the addition of non-diegetic sound in post-production ("sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa" and music "must not be used unless it occurs where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.") This prohibition applies both to sound effects and to what French filmmaker and father of *cinéma*

---

<sup>3</sup> Ove Christensen remarks on the "unfocussed" nature of the narrative in *The Idiots* and its lack of narrative drive (2000: n.p.).

<sup>4</sup> All translations from the French version of Von Trier's *Intimate Journal* (*Journal Intime*) are my own, unless otherwise stated.

*vérité* Jean Rouch referred to almost half a century before as the “musical sauce” so frequently and insistently used in both fiction and documentary film (1995: 94). The only music in *The Idiots*, effective by the sparseness with which it is used and by its simplicity, is *The Swan* by Camille Saint-Saëns, which is being played on the melodica (apparently off-camera) at the beginning of the film as Karen rides on the wagon, and is reiterated sparingly elsewhere in the film. Otherwise, there is no music to hide behind.

Von Trier himself did “about ninety per cent” of the camerawork (Bjorkman, 2003: 214). He claimed that he was not composing the shots but “seeking out content” and “pointing” at it with the camera (in Jerslev 2002: 49), in keeping with the Dogme specification that “the film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.” Von Trier claimed that “[w]hen you construct an image you are actually going for control. But you must ignore that for a moment and try to put yourself into the frame and find out what’s inside, what’s in the middle. Then you just point in that direction because then it comes to you” (in Jerslev 2002: 49). But this belies the sense of anxiety of von Trier’s “truth-seeking” camerawork. This is not a clinical, detached observing eye at work. The camerawork, whether Von Trier is filming himself or directing DoP Kristoffer Nyholm, is insistent, invasive and frantic. He gets closer than is comfortable for the audience to watch (or, one imagines, for the actors) and he is no enemy of the zoom-button or of the intrusive rather than empathic close-up. “It was great, really wonderful,” he told Bjorkman. “It’s the best way to make a film. Especially in this case, where the camera is inquisitive, invasive” (Bjorkman, 2003: 214). Whereas Rouch was adamantly against the use of zooms in his ethnographic documentaries because of their intrusive nature, von Trier has no such scruples. Lizzie Francke’s review of von Trier’s 1996 *Breaking the Waves* points to a similar tendency and her description of the Director of Photography’s shooting style could well be applied to *The Idiots*:

*Breaking the Waves* borrows a *cinéma vérité* style associated as much with urgently-paced television dramas such as ER as the social realist films of Ken Loach. But Robby Müller’s wildly mobile camera is more a distraught eye than that of the fly-on-the-wall film. It forever circles the players, scrutinising their most intimate moments – for example in the touching scene when Bess

shyly explores Jan's body or the more harrowing observation of her howling grief – as if wishing to pierce skin and burrow to the loners' souls. The camera anxiously seeks the truth, reminding the audiences of the power of the close-up as it brushes past Bess' and Jan's faces, but it can never get as close as it would like and the image breaks up. Thus von Trier measures the distance between film and the reality that he is attempting to portray. The camera, which seems to be alive as it pulls audiences in, also distracts and unbalances them. (1996: 36)

Von Trier's camera direction is likened to a hunt. The camera "circles, pierces and burrows." It is "alive" and it knows its own "power." In *The Idiots* too, naked is not enough: von Trier "seek[s] out content" and subjects that content to such intense scrutiny that at times he does seem to get beneath the skin.

While there are clearly strong similarities to the *cinéma vérité* approach, the style in *The Idiots* is closer in many ways to that more contemporary take on *vérité*, reality-TV, and in particular to *Big Brother*. Essentially, the television series is based on a similar premise: a commune of willing captives allowing themselves to be subjected to constant surveillance and intense scrutiny by numerous cameras and a voyeuristic audience, and (purportedly, anyway, in the case of *Big Brother*) offering themselves up as the subject of research in a grand social experiment. Von Trier would have taken the similarities further by making his cast actually live together in the house during the shooting, but they refused. Stylistically, both productions make similar claims to realism through the use of conventional indicators of authenticity, the most obvious being the apparently amateur or documentary "'shaky camera' footage and the visibility of the cinematic apparatus on-screen" (Crago, 2002: 110). In both cases, cameras follow the action and, as Peter Keighron writes, "the fly is off the wall; the camera need no longer pretend to be a passive observer, but can accept the role of participant" (in Crago, 2002: 112). Even the competition element is a factor in both *Big Brother* and *The Idiots*, the difference being that while the *Big Brother* contestants compete to avoid eviction in their quest for the prize money, the only prize the idiots seem to battle for is Stoffer's approval of their spassing.<sup>5</sup> When Axel and Henrik

---

<sup>5</sup> Or perhaps it is the actors battling for von Trier's approval of their performance?

realise they have failed to live up to Stoffer's expectations, they fall on their swords and evict themselves from the house.

In discussing the inclusion of the cinematic apparatus on screen in reality-TV, Crago suggests that "[j]ust as television audiences have learned to understand generic conventions such as mobile or handheld camera work as indicators of reality, it seems possible that series such as *Big Brother* are assisting in the development of new interpretive frameworks that allow the presence of the cinematic apparatus on-screen to function similarly" (2002: 112). But this is by no means a new way of signifying authenticity. Brian Winston has noted that *Cinéma vérité* practitioners were at pains to show the process of construction in their films, and to include the filmmakers themselves as well, in the belief that their audience would believe the "truth" of their work because they could "observe them apparently in the act of observing" (in Crago, 2002: 113). This technique can be, and increasingly commonly is, used in conjunction with deliberately unmediated-looking images and imperfect audio in order to create an impression of transparency and authenticity.

Peter Humm suggests screening the 'workings' of filming in this way is a "rhetorical trick; television's equivalent of abandoning the written text to demonstrate that this time the speech is from the heart, not the autocue." Furthermore, Humm points out, this "clumsiness is a ploy designed to prove that what we are about to hear and see is real, authentic, unmediated by what professionals call over-fondly 'the magic of television'" (in Crago 113). Certainly there is a kind of artful artlessness in this approach, but this is something that works in von Trier's favour in *The Idiots* and which naturally forms part of a realism based on nakedness. Not only does he strip the stylistic elements bare, he exposes the workings of the production process itself. But von Trier presumes a sophisticated audience. Far from expecting us to believe what we see, he creates a sea of treacherous and constantly shifting layers of reality and unreality which we must negotiate in order to find our own "truth" in the text. We are deliberately confused as to whether we are seeing the actors or their characters doing the interviews, or as to whether the person crying on screen is Susanne or actually Anne Louise Hassing, a confusion which is compounded by von Trier's controversial re-interpretation of certain method acting techniques which bring a great deal of the actor's own "real" past and feelings to bear on the performance. Despite the realism of

the performances, he denies us the possibility of being lulled into a seamless story world from the outset and forces us to be actively engaged as viewers, alert and wary.

Both *Big Brother* and *The Idiots* adopt quasi-scientific experiment formats, a tactic which has been seized upon by the directors of a range of realist fictional texts because it confers upon the text an immediate impression of authenticity. The subjects at the core of this experiment, the human “lab rats” (all be they willing ones) around whom the film revolves, are the actors/idiots themselves.

Von Trier has come under fire for *The Idiots* for several perceived transgressions. The first is his use of sensationalist graphic sex (including the penetration shot in the gang bang scene); the second is his inclusion of non-actors with Down’s syndrome, and the third is his apparent cruelty and misogyny which characterises his relationships with his actors. In defence of his work, he could invoke the Dogme manifesto, which states that the “supreme goal” of any Dogme filmmaker is to “force the truth out of [his or her] characters and settings” and to do so “by all the means available and *at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations*” (my emphasis). A cynic might mention that von Trier himself was probably responsible for including this clause within the manifesto, but he certainly follows the manifesto to the letter in *The Idiots*.

Von Trier strips his actors, in every sense, of their defences in his quest to “force the truth” out of them. All of the characters, with the notable exception of Karen, appear naked in the film, and in compromising positions. The orgy takes place in the harsh natural light in the main room of the house, the actors’ pale bodies intertwined and imperfect like a poorly reproduced Lucian Freud painting. Von Trier was disappointed in his hope that a spontaneous orgy would erupt among the actors, and the most graphic shot of all, the penetration shot, was achieved using stand-ins from the porn industry. One could debate whether or not this constitutes a “cheat” in terms the Dogme manifesto, and it does seem to compromise von Trier’s otherwise uncompromising attitude towards realism. For the shower scene, von Trier insisted that Stoffer’s erection had to be his own, since the use of a body double would be too obvious without resorting to colour-matching in post-production. Actor Jens Albinus obediently complied with von Trier’s instructions, with some assistance from Susanne

(or was it Anne Louise Hassing?) and a great deal of foam: all in the service of realism.

Much has been said about von Trier's prurient interest in sex, and von Trier himself speaks candidly and at length about it in his dictated journal, but for von Trier the use of explicit sex "serves a higher purpose;" it is "not just to shock the bourgeoisie, but to liberate the self from the strictures of reason and good taste" (Rockwell, 2003: 58). He denies that the foregrounding of sexuality is "simply infantilism as one might believe," claiming that it is "important because it gives the film a sort of *roughness* which it needs," as well as the necessary "danger," which suits both the message and the aesthetic (1998: 27). For Von Trier, the penetration shots which he insisted on for the orgy scene gave the film a sense of danger that prevented the audience from distancing themselves, and pushed boundaries in a way that was necessary for the film (1998: 7).

In order to relinquish some of his control as a director as well as for relaxation purposes and fun (Björkman, 2003; 216-217), von Trier declared certain shooting days as "all-naked days" and stripped down with the rest of the cast, once again exposing himself to the same humiliations as his performers. Von Trier defends this practise as a great leveller, and a useful method for stripping away the defences of everyone involved, saying

... you can keep control of your face; you know which side is best and which angle is most flattering. But you don't have the same control with tits and willies. You just don't have that control when you're naked. You have to give up your vanity one hundred per cent. That's not a bad realisation, and it's something you can make use of when you're making a film, even if the film in question doesn't require any nude scenes. (in Bjorkman, 2003: 216)

In von Trier's defence, he did also capitulate in several instances where cast members felt nudity or sexuality was unmotivated and gratuitous. Bodil Jørgensen argued that Karen would not participate in the orgy, let alone appear naked and masturbating as was initially described in the script, and von Trier conceded, noting in his *Intimate Journal* that he couldn't make it "stick" to her character anyway (1998: 50). He has

Jørgensen, and his own second thoughts, to thank for preventing that from happening, as it would undoubtedly have detracted from the powerful ending; the shock of the emotional nakedness of that final scene has all the more impact because Karen is never physically naked in the film, and because she is a mystery until that moment.<sup>6</sup>

The performances which von Trier elicits in *The Idiots* go beyond nakedness. At times, it is as though the actors have been emotionally flayed, and the fact that we are scrutinising them as they experience such disturbingly genuine-seeming awkwardness, anxiety, vulnerability and pain causes us great discomfort. This was undoubtedly von Trier's intention. The intensity and authenticity of the acting is at the core of the particular brand of realism he was striving for, and it was crucial to accomplish this if the film was to have the desired impact on the audience.

Von Trier went to some extremes to ensure that *The Idiots* would be a “rock in the shoe,” which he claims is the proper role of film (in Walters, 2004: 44). The methods he used to “force the truth” out of his actors (and particularly his actresses) have been condemned as sadistic and misogynist. “The very level of extreme emotion he elicits from his actresses has been called erotic,” writes John Rockwell, “and even likened to rape – of the characters (as with Bess in *Breaking the Waves*), of the women who act them, and of the audience that is (von Trier's detractors fear) forced to watch them, to open themselves up to them” (Rockwell, 2003: 43). The behind-the-scenes documentary about the making of *The Idiots*, *The Humiliated* (Jesper Jargil, 1998) features some very unflattering interchanges between the director and his cast. Von Trier used improvisation sessions to bring to life his rapidly written script (the initial draft was written in only a fortnight, a feat which von Trier likened to De Sade's swift penning of Justine while incarcerated in a tower (in Knudsen, n.d.: n.p.), but in conjunction with this, he developed an approach using amateur psycho-therapy to dredge up feelings and experiences in the performer's past. Painful experiences in particular were revisited in these “sessions” in order to extract a more convincingly “real” and authentic performance, potentially at great cost to the performers themselves. Von Trier stated that he “didn't want actors playing parts but instead wanted real people experiencing real emotions” (Rockwell, 2003: 65). Actors had to

---

<sup>6</sup> Bodil Marie Thomsen suggests that Karen is “an idiot in this word's etymological (Greek) definition: a private person” (2000: n.p.).

“live their characters rather than act them” (Björkman, 2003: 208). To accomplish this he also “eagerly exploited every life-art parallel he could uncover” according to Rockwell (2003: 45), including the illness of Bodil Jørgensen’s young son, whose heart operation resulted in his coming down with a temperature of over 40 degrees on the eve of the crucial alcove scene. Since von Trier had not got the performance he’d wanted from Jørgensen and Hassing in this scene, he decided that since the child was getting better but Jørgensen was still anxious, to ask her to redo the scene. Hassing too was tearful due to problems in her own private life, so Von Trier thought it would be an opportune moment to re-attempt the scene: “Yes, I cynically assumed we’d succeed [in getting the performance],” Von Trier admits in his journal<sup>7</sup>, but the tears that they’d shed with “such abandon” in their private lives never came, despite their lengthy attempt and the fact that Von Trier was “almost lashing them” (1998: 32-3).

It was an approach that he had been developing over several of his previous works, and which had already caused some controversy. When shooting *Epidemic* (1986), Von Trier hypnotised his main actress, Gitte Lind, into thinking she had the plague so that he could capture her genuine hysteria on film.<sup>8</sup> He cast Emily Watson as Bess in *Breaking the Waves* despite (or perhaps because) she was a newcomer to film acting. “She had had no earlier film experience,” Von Trier told Stig Björkman shortly after the release of the film, “which means that she was, to a great extent, forced to trust me as a director” (Björkman, 1996: 14).

Until he started his Golden Heart Trilogy in the 1990s (*Breaking the Waves*, *The Idiots* and *Dancer in the Dark*), von Trier had a reputation as a director who was uncomfortable directing actors, and who arrogantly believed that the actor’s job was simply to follow the director’s instructions. This did not endear him to *The Kingdom* actress Kirsten Rolffes, who stated in a press conference as late as 1997 that “Lars von Trier cannot direct actors” (Rockwell, 2003: 56). But after years spent obsessing

---

<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that Von Trier regarded the writing of the journal itself as a “kind of authorial therapy” which came out of the “heightened emotional state which was the technique itself of the film” (1998: 5).

<sup>8</sup> See Rockwell, 2003: 65. Von Trier is not the first director to use such extreme methods to get the performances he required. When filming *Heart Of Glass* (1976), Werner Herzog made all but one of the cast members work in a state of hypnotic trance to “create a sort of ‘waking dream’ quality for the film’s action” where the “characters drift about almost aimlessly, their actions emerging abruptly from beneath an eerily emotionless stupor” (Church, 2006: n.p.).

over technique at the expense of character development, von Trier changed tack and prioritised realism in the performances he directed. *Element of Crime* (1984), *Epidemic* (1986) and *Europa* (1991) were all criticised for their obsession with technique, and the apparent lack of interest in characters. “I had an almost fetishistic attraction to film technology,” von Trier says to Björkman (1996: 11) He was aware of the “limitless possibilities” that the film school’s equipment offered and it was “fantastic just to be able to touch all these appliances” (Björkman, 1996: 11), but he later “[felt] the need to give [himself] parameters, and it is in that spirit that the manifesto came into being” (Björkman, 1996: 13).

Although this may seem like a major shift in focus, von Trier felt that his core intention, of taking film “...beyond fiction at the moment of shooting,” was “something [he’d] aimed for in all [his] films.” He claimed that “[w]hat used to happen on the technical side is something I’m trying to transfer to a more psychological level” (Björkman 2003: 206), and this “transfer” came into being with the start of his Golden Heart trilogy. Von Trier told Stig Björkman

I made use of a different technique in *Breaking the Waves*... and that technique is based on a relationship of trust between the director and cast, a classic technique. I have probably also come closer to the actors in this film. But this is very easy to *state*: that now von Trier has learned this technique also! In the earlier films it was a conscious decision not to be too close to the actors. (in Björkman, 1996: 14)

This new attitude to directing actors suited the form of narrative structure he now sought out, in which, as Caroline Bainbridge points out “dominant themes encompass emotional trauma, transgression, and, ultimately, transcendence” (2007: 118).

The performances that resulted from von Trier’s new approach disturbed and astonished audiences and critics. The agonising vulnerability which Emily Watson managed to convey on screen and the intensity of her performance were a realist triumph. As Francke writes:

Anchored in humanity, *Breaking the Waves* is a film that rolls with the emotions, that shudders with the frustration of not being able to do more than simply observe. At the same time it also repels us with just how much it can reveal. The close scrutiny of Bess' disintegration is at times so painfully raw and shocking that sometimes one doesn't want to look anymore – especially as Emily Watson's performance, in which she seems to empty herself out onto the screen, is so believable. (1996: 36)

Although there are clear similarities of style and approach between *Breaking the Waves* and the Dogme manifesto (published the year before *Breaking the Waves* was released), von Trier's Dogme film was still to come. Von Trier pushed this directorial approach further with *The Idiots*, with the manifesto's explicit direction to search for truth "at the cost of any good taste" justifying his increasingly extreme techniques.

The Dogme manifesto called for the director to renounce his or her auteurist stance and necessitated a relationship of complicity and mutual trust with the actors. For his Dogme film, von Trier would set out a situation described in the script and then "allow [actors] to improvise, following them with his camera" (Rockwell, 2003: 68). The use of video rather than film allowed for long takes and numerous retakes, where each new version of the scene frequently stripped the dialogue to a barer, more realist minimum. It was also easier to "see how it was working... to follow the development of the characters in a more natural way" and to ensure psychological consistency (Björkman, 2003: 211). Von Trier also introduced non-professional cast members into several scenes in the film in order further to disconcert his performers and to create freer, more authentic interactions. The arrival of the "Mongoloids" for a picnic is the most extreme example, but the old ladies in Hendrik's art class and the biker gang who help Jeppe to urinate fulfil the same function. These improvisatory tactics led von Trier and the actors away from the script and then largely back to it (Rockwell, 2003: 49), and helped to crystallise a series of intense moments in a script that was already "realist" in its episodic nature.

This is not a new technique, but it was for the most emotionally raw scenes with Jørgensen and Hassing in particular that von Trier took this technique from complicity to cruelty. The "scenes of naked emotional compassion between Karen and Susanne"

(Rockwell, 2003: 69) underpin the film and form an essential contrast to the relatively frivolous cavortings of the other “idiots.” To achieve the desired level of authenticity, von Trier developed a process of emotionally “stripping” the performer to the point where she (since it is invariably a “she” who undergoes this treatment in all von Trier’s films) is completely exposed and vulnerable.

To unblock Hassing in one such scene, the alcove scene where Susanne comforts a weeping Karen (*fig. 1*), von Trier and the actress “spoke for a long time about her childhood and all sorts of things, and a little therapist was born in me” (1998: 38). With what seems like scant concern for the actress’s well-being, or apparently for much beyond the immediate authenticity of performance which such an emotional release would provide, he found Hassing’s resulting mad tearful outbursts “very exciting,” stating that he had “extracted from Susanne exactly what I wanted” (1998: 38) though he did acknowledge that his techniques were “not far from sadism” (Rockwell, 2003: 71). His treatment of Hassing in *The Humiliated*, which von Trier himself partly filmed in secret by leaving the camera rolling when he put it down behind a chair, are shockingly cruel, brutal and personal and suggestive of a very close relationship turned sour. He reduces her to tears, insulting her for her incapacity to produce the desired performance. He also calls her a “bitch” and essentially accuses her of manufacturing her illness (which sent her to hospital) so as to get out of that day’s difficult shoot.

In order to “extract” a sufficiently intense and genuine performance from Karen in the final scene, which von Trier calls the “main moment of the film” (Rockwell, 2003: 71), von Trier used another trick to open Jørgensen’s emotional well-springs. The actress’s own young son had been severely ill during the shooting of the film. To tap into her maternal emotions, he unexpectedly slipped a photograph of a baby into the scene and shot an unscripted scene where Karen looked at the photograph. Jørgensen was quickly reduced to tears, prompting a similar response by Hassing in the consolation scene that followed: “[Hassing] sobbed for half an hour and it was fantastic,” as von Trier happily noted in his journal (1998: 59).

In his “search for the truth” von Trier is uncompromising. The moral acceptability of his working methods, in particular his psychological dredging tactics, is sometimes

questionable, and von Trier has come under fire for the cruelty of his approach. Björk, whom he was to direct in *Dancer in the Dark* the year after *The Idiots*, was traumatised by the process. “Acting is extreme cruelty, or *this* acting was,” she said on an American chat show. She condemned von Trier as unnecessarily sadistic: “I think creativity doesn’t have to be cruel to be good. I think it’s a sign of impotency if you think you have to add cruelty to your work for it to be considered art. I think if you are confident in your art, you would just nurture it with positive energy” (Rockwell, 2003: 55). Neither Jørgensen nor Hassing have objected (publicly, anyway) to von Trier’s treatment of them during the shooting of *The Idiots*, a process which clearly demanded that actresses dug deeply into themselves in order to make the film work, and according to Rockwell, von Trier himself believes that “far from wallowing in new levels of depraved cruelty, he has evolved from antagonism to complicity with his actresses” (2003: 65).

But there is another level of nakedness, of exposedness, to this deceptively simple text which we need to consider both in the face of the allegations of cruelty and misogyny levelled against him, and more importantly, here, in terms of his realist approach. Von Trier made the actors bare their bodies and their souls for his Dogme film, but he subjected himself to the same treatment. He kept an “intimate journal” during the making of the *The Idiots*, which he then published with the screenplay, and he allowed Jesper Jørgensen to document the entire process in his video documentary, *The Humiliated*. *The Idiots* should, as Jørgensen rightly points out, not be considered as a text on its own but as a project consisting of a number of connected texts, namely the Dogme manifesto, the *Idiots* script, *The Idiots* film, von Trier’s *Intimate Journal*, and *The Humiliated* (see Jørgensen, 2002). Seen in this light it becomes a kind of über-mock-documentary project consisting of various fictional, semi-fictional and purportedly factual texts, which further confuses the distinction between truth and fiction in *The Idiots* itself.

Jane Roscoe suggests that “Trier’s film *The Idiots* (1998) offers a tenuous link to mock-documentary in its use of interviews with fictional characters” (2001: 92-3), but the “link” is arguably more complex (and less tenuous) than that. *The Idiots* uses many techniques typical of the mock-documentary. The Dogme rules, which advocate a stripped-down style, natural settings and the principle that the camera should follow

the action and not vice versa, automatically make for a documentary aesthetic, and this is certainly the case in *The Idiots*. Although *The Humiliated* exists as a separate documentary on the subject of *The Idiots*, the “making of” the film is also documented within *The Idiots* itself, since camera and sound equipment are featured in several scenes. In addition to this, the fictional narrative is framed by a (mock) documentary one, which reinforces the apparent realness of the text and further confuses the boundaries between documentary and fiction. There are several devices which contribute to creating this effect. The structure of the film as a whole owes more to documentary than to conventional fiction film’s narrative structure, and there is no grand narrative here. The “moment” is privileged over the whole, the narrative is episodic, and the interviews punctuate and comment on the “fictional” scenes.<sup>9</sup>

Von Trier includes himself in the film, an increasingly common strategy in documentary films which reinforces the sense of authenticity and amounts to a “showing of the cards,” however illusory that transparency might in fact be. As Stella Bruzzi writes, this “recently prevalent acknowledgment of the filmmaker’s presence” is a means of “accessing the personal and the everyday” (Bruzzi, 2000: 96). The fact that von Trier is asking the interview questions in the most obviously “documentary” section of the film posits him as a *documentary* filmmaker capturing what he sees rather than the auteur and mastermind behind what the director himself has called Trier’s “puppet theatre” (1998: 26), and cleverly absolves him of the crime of auteurism.

Like many mock-documentaries, and in particular those which fall into what Roscoe calls the deconstruction category, *The Idiots* appears to be a film about one subject when in fact it is its own main subject (Roscoe, 2001: 72). It is a mock-documentary not about a group of people passing in a country house but about the process of Dogme film making itself, and more specifically about von Trier’s interpretation of Dogme and his film making process. It is a film which experiments with developing a

---

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Bainbridge asserts that, rather than being an example of mockumentary in the style of *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984), it is “fiction in the guise of what Nichols has defined as a performative mode of documentary” (2007: 94). While I agree that the mock-documentary approach differs from that of *This Is Spinal Tap*, which mimics the rock documentary and is shot in a mock-observational documentary style with concert footage and interviews, there is nothing except the difficulty of the challenge to keep filmmakers from using the performative rather than the observational documentary style for a mock-documentary.

new film language to talk about film language and to question the Hollywood film language that we have come to accept.

It is hard to imagine a film which could so thoroughly bring to life what von Trier calls the “pure theory” (Björkman, 1996, 13) of the Dogme manifesto, and interrogate it simultaneously. *The Idiots*, like many mock documentaries, is highly reflexive and deconstructive, so that along with von Trier’s diary and *The Humiliated*, the process of interpreting, applying and testing the limitations of Dogme is exhaustively (and, it appears, exhaustingly) documented.<sup>10</sup> Rather than revealing the private thoughts of the housemates (as is the case in *Big Brother*) it is von Trier himself who is revealed. Through publishing these texts, he has exposed himself to our scrutiny, just as he has exposed himself to the scrutiny of the film “academy” through the publication of the manifesto in the first place.

In addition to the diary, the documentary and the camerawork, all of which help him to “put [himself] into the frame and find out what’s inside, what’s in the middle” (Jerslev 2002: 49) von Trier places himself literally within the film as the (off-screen) interviewer and “in spirit” as a fictional character, the arrogant and controlling Stoffer, who very obviously functions as his “representative” in the narrative. “The similarity between me and Stoffer in the film is becoming more and more glaring and grotesque” wrote von Trier in his journal, “aside from the fact that Stoffer’s infantilism is nowhere near mine” (1998: 56). This facilitates a process of auto-deconstruction within *The Idiots*, allowing him to question and criticise his own approach as a director, as well as exposing himself to further criticism from his audience. It’s one of several risky strategies which led von Trier to moments of extreme self-doubt and insecurity. “Who,” wonders Rockwell, “is being humiliated in the idiots as documented in *The Humiliated*? Critics... apparently think it’s actresses like Jørgensen and Hassing. Karen might think it’s the idiots embarrassing themselves with their cruel and childish games. Von Trier seems to think it’s himself (Rockwell, 2003: 63). Von Trier lays himself open in his journal, confessing his initial infatuations with Hassing which later turn to bitterness and hatred. On numerous

---

<sup>10</sup> When I made enquiries about how to get hold of the elusive and out-of-print journal, von Trier’s assistant at Zentropa, Janus Schumaker, told me that “Lars really regretted publishing” such intimate thoughts and would prefer me not to use the diary anyway. Naturally that made me intensify my search until I finally found a copy.

occasions he admits to feelings of jealousy, anger, loneliness and paranoia, sensing his growing separation from the actors and his fall-out with Hassing in particular which conspire to making him feel “unloved” (1998: 56). Towards the end of the shoot he is desperate to get away from the actors, miserably convinced that “one is 195 per cent alone in one’s tiny little world, ridiculous and humiliating” (1998: 56).

Von Trier invites us to judge. He exposes himself, his Dogme, his diary and his actors... and finally he exposes us. The largely bourgeois art-cinema-going audience is constantly teased by images of themselves on screen: the restaurant patrons disturbed by the idiots’ intrusion, the Rockwool factory manager, the neighbours emotionally bludgeoned into buying ugly Christmas ornaments made by the idiots.... Through our reactions to our “representatives” we are forced to question our own stance on the idiots’ project, and to confront our moral squeamishness about the taboo-breaking scenes (the encounter with the people with Downs syndrome and the graphic gang bang) in particular. Within the general ambit of the Dogme philosophy, the intention is to force the audience to consider their own attitudes and morals as individuals and as cinema-goers. Nothing and no one escapes inspection in the harsh light of von Trier’s laboratory, least of all the director himself. The fact that von Trier is there too, wriggling naked on a pin of his own making for the viewer and the reader to examine, must at least in part exonerate him for his pitiless treatment of the other willing actors/idiots in his grand experiment.

Through the film’s storyline, the criticism of Stoffer/von Trier becomes all the more apparent, and two scenes in particular are responsible for engendering a sense of doubt and even contempt for him and his ways. Rather than characterising Josephine’s father as a tyrannical patriarch, he is suave and devastatingly cool. Next to him, Stoffer cuts a weak and petulant figure, enthroned in his wheelchair, cut dead by the father when he tries to explain the group’s exploits. Shot from the far end of the table and from a high angle his stature is further diminished. “Maybe you’ve heard of our group?” he asks with apparently uncharacteristic timidity. “No,” says Josephine’s father decisively. “What do you think of us?” Stoffer then asks, to which the father replies “I couldn’t care less.” So much for “*épater les bourgeois*” and “*tuer le papa*”. It is a subtle and intriguing bit of casting by von Trier, who once again does not pull his punches when the blows are directed at himself, or at the aspects of himself which

he considers less positive. But it is the scene with Stoffer and his uncle Svend which delivers the most devastating blows, despite the fact that Stoffer gets the comic upper hand. From the moment Axel announces Svend's arrival Stoffer becomes a pantomime of well-behaved normalcy. "Were they spassing?" he asks anxiously about the "idiots" that have greeted his uncle. He has no qualms about sending these same "idiots" to spass in front of their own family and colleagues later in his experiment. Stoffer, entirely unlike von Trier in this instance, is not expected to prove his own idiot credentials in front of someone who matters. Uncle Svend has come to check how far his nephew has got with selling his house, and it is the first time we are informed that the commune in which the idiots are staying in fact belongs to a member of Stoffer's (presumably well-off) family. Stoffer's claim that the idiots are all "craftsmen" of various sorts is amusing, but his anxiety about the spassing and his soapy, unctuous tones once he's alone with his uncle give him away as hopelessly bourgeois. Significantly, von Trier lives in Søllerød, the same middle-class neighbourhood whose residents he satirises so sharply here. Through his criticism of Stoffer and his self-exposure on every level, von Trier escapes the double standards which Stoffer displays.

The closure of the film constitutes both the failure and the triumph of the Dogme/idiots project and the search for the genuine/inner-idiot. Whereas the penultimate scene shows the failure of a political and social experiment, the final scene provides a vindication of exactly that idea. Karen is "the real thing" that Stoffer hoped would be revealed through his spassing, just as this scene (and Jørgensen and Hassing's performances in it) are a triumph of Dogme filmmaking at the end of a film which has, implicitly at least, been deeply critical about the project. "For all their rational anti-rationalism," writes Rockwell, "they are redeemed only by the pure feeling of Karen" (2003: 38), and it is this "pure feeling" which von Trier seems to hold up as the holy grail he has been searching for in his quest for the genuine. Karen has been critical of the spassing from the start (*fig. 2*). "Some people are really sick. So how can you defend playing the idiot?" she asks Stoffer, who simply replies "You can't." She voices the audience's misgivings about the group's antics, yet she is the only one who can spass when it really matters. But although we may side with her we don't actually want to *be* Karen. There's something so damaged about her that we are discouraged from coming too close, and we must watch from a distance, transfixed by

her abjection. Even her triumph comes only through abasement, perhaps itself a metaphor for her working process with von Trier.

For all the criticism of his methods, if von Trier's aim was to find "the genuine" *The Idiots* is a coup for this scene alone. This ending is derived from the ending of a childhood fairytale, "Golden Heart," which was the genesis for *Breaking the Waves* and for *The Idiots* and *Dancer in the Dark*, the other two films in what has variously been called his "Golden Heart" or his "Good Woman Trilogy." Von Trier keeps coming back to the final image in "Golden Heart" as if it, to him, contains some essential truth in its purity. The story, significantly one which von Trier's father detested for its sentimentalism, is about a little girl who goes into the woods with pieces of bread and other things in her pocket. By the end of the story, after she's passed through the woods, she stands "naked and without anything" but certain that she'll "be alright after all" (Jerslev, 2002: 61-2). Karen, naked but redeemed and immaculate, is an adult, realist take on this fairytale heroine, whose extreme piety and martyrdom inspired von Trier. It exposes a vulnerability in the otherwise cynical Von Trier and indicates that for all his doubts about himself and the Dogme project, his faith in the naked truth remains.<sup>11</sup> Von Trier told Peter Øvig Knudsen that his films "have become highly moral recently... The moral is that you can practise the technique – the Dogma technique or the idiot technique – from now to kingdom come without anything coming out of it unless you have a profound, passionate desire and need to do so. Karen discovers that she needs the technique, and therefore it changes her life" (in Rockwell, 2003: 73). She is the only character with a genuine need to find her inner idiot and who is not, like the other characters, in it for fun, for sex or for their research. In a film where the characters are already more flayed than naked, the final scene when Karen returns home to "spass" is almost unbearable to watch (*fig. 3*). New York Times critic A.O. Scott felt that this scene "descends to a truly contemptible emotional brutality" (in Rockwell, 2003: 57), and certainly although Karen triumphs in her ability to spass, it is an excruciating victory for Karen and for Bodil Jørgensen, whose agonisingly convincing acting meant the success of this risky

---

<sup>11</sup> There is something of the immaculate virgin in von Trier's Good Women, which perhaps provides a clue to von Trier's decision to embrace Catholicism, apart from simply as a means of irritating his determinedly agnostic, communist parents. Bodil Marie Thomsen also notes that Von Trier's religious and aesthetic pathos flies in the face of the "disdain in the name of high-modernism" that has existed in relation to such pathos throughout the twentieth century.

make or break final scene for von Trier. The scene, writes Rockwell, “sweeps up the viewer... it validates an aesthetic, it makes one fearful how any actor could be so emotionally exposed and how any director could surgically peel back her and our normal human defences to reveal such agonised depths” (2003: 5).

However problematic his methods, the success of von Trier’s realism rests principally on the combination of real emotion accessed by the actress and channelled into her fictional character, and the impression of reality created by the Dogme style. As Rockwell writes, “... beneath all the Euro-conceits of *The Idiots*, lies emotion of the most primal sort, and Dogma techniques – the fluid camera movements, the improvisational acting, the close-ups, the *cinéma vérité* crudeness of the camerawork, the illusion or actuality of things on the screen being ‘real’” and the absence of music “all contribute to that emotion” (2003: 54).

Jerslev makes a compelling argument that the realism of *The Idiots* is premised upon the creation of a sense of presence. Further, she writes that “... what is really interesting about *The Idiots* is that the film’s highly reflexive discourse negates the distance usually built into reflexivity. Instead, distance is replaced by immediate transmissions of affect” (2002: 48). But although the choice of the mock-documentary form and the rough, unmediated aesthetic style of the piece do indeed give this impression of immediacy, the sense of presence created in *The Idiots* remains voyeuristic and distanced rather than emotionally engaged. Despite the rawness and realism of the performances, we are not “swept up” by the emotions on screen due to von Trier’s deliberate anti-illusionist tactics. Von Trier has stated that Brecht was a “household god” when he was growing up (Stig Björkman, 2004: 25), and although von Trier has rebelled against many of the childhood “gods” of his freewheeling parents (including his conversion to Catholicism), the influence of Brecht’s *verfremdung* (or “distancing”) technique on *The Idiots* is clear. If von Trier is to get his larger “political” agenda across, he must necessarily distance us from the intense drama on the screen, however painful-seeming the emotions we are witnessing. It is an approach he had already used in *Breaking the Waves*, where he specifically adopted a very raw, documentary style to counteract the melodrama of the story, which he believed would otherwise be intolerable: “I felt it important to give [*Breaking the Waves*] as realistic a form as possible” von Trier told Stig Björkman.

“One normally chooses a style for a film in order to highlight a story. We’ve done exactly the opposite. We’ve chosen a style that works against the story, which gives it the least opportunity to highlight itself” (Björkman, 1996: 12).

The same could be said of *The Idiots*. It is a complex realism, where we are simultaneously encouraged to believe what we are seeing and to stand back and consider it cerebrally. The style, the performers, the script, the director and finally the construction of the text itself are bared for our scrutiny, but there are also numerous strategies which are used to distance us from the action and which encourage reflection on the “real” issues that are thus raised. These detach us from the psychological realism of the performance and prevent us from indulging in an emotional catharsis which might allow us to evade the film’s intellectual message.

The episodic structure and the documentary “interruptions” in the form of the interview complement the “visible” editing of both sound and image. Where the seamlessness of classic Hollywood films hides its construction and “naturalises” the ideology it conveys, *The Idiots* invites and provokes argument through a style that jars us out of our complacency. It makes us consider the implications not just of the action on screen but also of the way in which film communicates, the language itself. From the very start, von Trier begins the assault. For the first few shots we are introduced to Karen. We naturally presume that she is our protagonist and, since we are about to spend an hour and a half focusing on her and her world, we start on a process of engagement. We see her on a carriage in a park, lulled by the sentimental music we assume is being played off-screen, but a split second later we are thrown into a new setting and the music is simply amputated. We are, for the first time, caught out just as we are tempted to settle into the diegesis and forced to be wary and to watch more actively. In the few minutes that follow, this sense of wariness is compounded by our discovery that the idiots are only acting and that we (like Karen and the other rather more contemptible diners) have been tricked. When Stoffer and Hendrik burst out laughing it feels as though their laughter is directed at us, and we distance ourselves to avoid being “poked fun” at again: it is our first warning not to watch passively. In several scenes the camera is caught in the shot (*fig. 4*), and once the interviews intrude into the story-world after this scene, von Trier has introduced the last of the “big guns” in his anti-illusion arsenal.

The nine interview sequences are the most obvious detachment device. They were “completely improvised” and “the actors answer for their characters and at the same time they defend their characters” (Bjorkman, 2003: 213-4). Von Trier believes that the “breaks caused by the interviews have a kind of distancing effect. But they’re also an affirmation. This whole idea of a few people running round playing at being idiots gained a whole other significance because of the interviews. If the members of the cast could sit down afterwards and talk about their experiences, then it must have meant something to them. And that validates the interviews, as well as giving impetus to the plot and the film as a whole” (Björkman, 2003: 214). These interludes, be they semi-documentary or simply improvised mock-documentary, make us reflect on what we are seeing and simultaneously reinforce the overall impression of authenticity. They are intrusions which, like the sudden appearance of a camera in shot, foreground the construction of the story world but simultaneously attest to its actually having happened.

The humour in *The Idiots* has a similar function in that it also serves to detach us from the emotional drama. Comedy, rather than tearful catharsis, allows us to let off some emotional steam while remaining intellectually engaged: without such comic moments the purity of the film’s ending would be lost. In an interview in 1996, before he began work on *The Idiots*, von Trier told Stig Björkman “[y]ou could say that when you introduce humour into your work, you also step back a little from it. You create a distance. Here [in *Breaking the Waves*] I didn’t want to distance myself from the strong emotions that the story and its characters contain” (Björkman 1996: 14). The opposite is true in *The Idiots*, where he is determined to force us to reflect on what we see. “This is authenticity in the guise of comedy,” von Trier claimed shortly after completing the film, “and comedy isn’t really something you associate with authenticity” (Björkman, 2003: 217). Numerous very funny moments in this film, notably the hilarious scene in the Rockwool carpark, help to break the “spell” of the more intense dramatic scenes and serve to increase the sense of authenticity precisely because they invite us to consider the action from a distance. The rough, improvised nature of the comic scenes increases the impression of candour and spontaneity, albeit part of von Trier’s cunning illusion of non-illusion.

There are also less obvious ways in which this distancing is effected throughout the film. We frequently see characters, Karen in particular, in close-up, but the presence of the intruding handheld camera is evident and our viewpoint remains voyeuristic. In another Dogme film, *Kira's Reason: A Love Story* (Ole Christian Madsen, 2001), which interestingly is also about a woman who has lost a child, the extreme close-up is used to encourage a profound sense of emotional identification with the viewer. In *The Idiots*, however, von Trier uses such close-ups for the opposite effect. These shots encourage the viewer to scrutinise, uncomfortably, without engaging emotionally. Both uses of the extreme close-up (in *Kira's Reason* and in *The Idiots*) showcase the performance as “authentic,” but while one maybe engrossed and horrified by what one sees in *The Idiots*, one does not identify, even with Karen.<sup>12</sup>

Big close-ups render the actresses in particular enormously vulnerable to our gaze, and in several of the close-ups here “it’s as if the barriers of actorly craft have fallen away, as if something almost unbearably real is confronting you unmediated from the screen,” (Rockwell, 2003: 53), but this confrontation, while allowing us to get disturbingly close as voyeurs, disallows any lasting emotional intimacy. It is an intriguing combination: the nakedness and authenticity of the performance, coupled with a distancing camera style which belongs to another more cerebral and deconstructive form of realism.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, Karen is shot in semi-profile in the restaurant scene at the start of the film, setting a trend which continues throughout, including in her most harrowing scenes. In the early scene where Karen weeps with Susanne because she has “no right to be this happy” the profile becomes so extreme that we are almost seeing the back of her head as she looks out of the window. This is a standard realist ploy to suggest that

---

<sup>12</sup> Bainbridge makes the very interesting observation that the camerawork changes in the closing scenes to anticipate rather than follow the action, for instance when Anders slaps Karen, which rips us violently into a different viewing mode, reminding us that “we are watching when we seemingly should not be” and forcing us “into the uncomfortable position of the voyeur” (2007: 95, 96).

<sup>13</sup> Ove Christensen remarks on this contradiction. He points out that the rough, unconventional camerawork repels the viewer and creates “a distance or disconnection between the spectator and the film,” rejecting direct communication and making it in one sense a very abstract and cool film. “Simultaneously and contradictorily,” Christensen goes on to say, “*The Idiots* draws the spectator into the film’s universe, making it a very intense (and warm) film to watch” particularly through the use of the home video style which “minimises the distance between the story and the telling of the story in that the position of the enunciation becomes, if not equivalent to, then very close to that of the spectator” (2000: n.p.).

action is not staged or composed, and is in keeping with the Dogme assertion that the camera must follow the performance rather than the performers playing to camera. But it also increases the distance between the performer and the audience and reinforces a sense of voyeurism: we are eavesdroppers, we are not included. Conversations are frequently shot as two-shots with swish pans cutting between the characters. This allows for more “flow” in the performance and is considered a more realist style than the classic shot reverse-shot technique (and more appropriate for this mock-documentary) since it is less obviously constructed. The actresses play to each other rather than to camera, in an apparently unstaged visual style. In *The Idiots* this also makes for many profile shots in scenes where full-face shots may have “let us in” more to the emotional action.

Linked to this is the use of oblique eyelines. Karen’s eyes are always elsewhere, which is an entirely plausible characteristic for someone such as her, but which also ensures that we are held at bay. In the scene where Karen takes leave of the idiots she seems actively to be trying to avoid the intruding camera, to shut it (and us) out. Von Trier’s camera may have pinned her into a close-up against the wall, but still she remains impenetrable. She turns her head from side to side as she addresses each of her new-found friends in turn, giving only a series of profiles, eyes averted. Since there are no clear point-of-view shots, we are also denied the extra insight of seeing things as she does. We are permitted, throughout the film, to watch her at her most emotionally naked, but watching is as far as it goes. While there is certainly an impression of “immediate transmissions of affect” onto the screen, we remain voyeurs, shut out and helpless to intervene: we are invited to *watch* people, rather than *become* them. Von Trier is unwilling “to let us off the hook without paying for our psychological urge to look,” (Bainbridge, 2007: 97), and he intentionally maximises our voyeuristic discomfort.

Karen is also the only character who does not feature in the interviews, so while the other characters address the camera directly, staring straight at us, we are once again denied this insight into Karen and she remains an enigma. This adds impact to the final scene where we finally discover the reason for her emotional distress. Once she has spassed we are treated to the clearest, best-lit close-up of her in the whole film. Her face is almost fully to the camera, her eyeline far more acute, and her eyes well-lit

and “readable” as she smiles at Susanne, radiant and transcendent. She has found her “truth,” her “inner idiot,” and we are momentarily allowed a bit closer to her to share her triumph.

Von Trier has developed a complex form of realism in *The Idiots*. In keeping with the Dogme manifesto, which advocates a “pared-down cinematic sensibility premised on technological restrictions” (Bainbridge, 2008: 86), he shoots in a minimalist style which mimics the documentary and suggests a lack of mediation and manipulation. He constructs the film as a mock-documentary, framing the realistically episodic narrative with a series of improvised interviews with the actors.

But perhaps his most impressive achievement here is the way in which he has combined two apparently contradictory realisms, which one could broadly term emotional and intellectual. Von Trier uses amateur “therapy” techniques and improvisation to add authenticity to the performances, which are critical for the film’s emotional realism. Having convinced his audience, he proceeds to disengage and distance them emotionally using various detachment techniques, thereby promoting a more “intellectual” consideration of the film. It is the ultimate Dogme film,<sup>14</sup> which questions, criticises and deconstructs the theory of the manifesto even as it constructs a text which is perfectly in accordance with its spirit and rules. As Tim Walters writes, von Trier “has made a film in this way that is simultaneously about making a film in this way, and most importantly about why he has chosen to do so” (2004: 42).

It is also the ultimate naked film. Common to both forms of realism is that they involve a baring process, the “surgical peeling back” of layers that Rockwell speaks of (2003: 5), which von Trier pursues with such determination that it verges at times on sadism and, I would argue, masochism. The style and aesthetic, the script, the actors, the director and even the filmmaking process are stripped and left with nothing to hide behind. We, the voyeuristic audience, watch engrossed as von Trier takes this ungainly and uncomfortable striptease to another level. He insists on probing beneath the skin, culminating in an excruciating nakedness in the final scene where the flesh

---

<sup>14</sup> Clearly I am not alone in thinking this, since I have subsequently discovered and read an article on *The Idiots* by Jan Jensen and Jakob Nielsen entitled “The Ultimate Dogma Film,” published in p.o.v as part of a special edition on Dogme in December 2000. The article is an interview with actors Jens Albinus and Louise Hassing.

itself seems torn away to reveal the pure, beating heart of the film. For von Trier, this is the truth that he has been looking for. It is his Golden Heart.

University of Cape Town

## **“That white-hot moment”: improvisation, authenticity and the work of Mike Leigh**

“The best thing an actor can do for you is to fuck up.” Lars von Trier in *The Five Obstructions*

“...chance, as every artist knows, is the enemy of art.” Sonia Moore, a disciple of Stanislavski

For many people, the word improvisation suggests making do in adverse circumstances, “mending motor cars with bootlaces on Blubberhouse Moor” as John Hodgson and Ernest Richards put it in their book on the subject of theatrical improvisation. But, as they go on to point out, there are other forms of improvisation which we practise in everyday life, which help us to adjust and respond to the unexpected happenings which fate throws our way. “The more unexpected the happening, the more spontaneous and frank the response is likely to be,” they suggest (Hodgson, 1966: 3), and it is this frankness, this candid “real” reaction to an event or situation which realist filmmakers hope to create (or recreate) through the use of improvisation in their working processes.

The ways in which improvisation is used by various filmmakers is as diverse as the practitioners who use it. Some, like von Trier, rely on improvisation to provide the sense of the unscripted or unmediated that he strives for. Impromptu run-throughs were the order of the day when shooting *The Idiots*, and these sessions were frequently filmed and some even included in the final film. Conversely, for directors with a more Stanislavskian bent, improvisation is a part of a highly controlled and technical process through which actors prepare for their “finished” performance. It is a technique reserved for pre-production and rehearsal. But what these different instances appear to have in common is that broader aim of using improvisation to heighten the sense of authenticity and realism, even naturalism, in the script and performances. While Von Trier aims to give a *vérité* style sense of life unfolding before our eyes in all its chaos and messy emotion, a film-maker such as Mike Leigh uses improvisation strictly in the development of the script and characters. For Leigh,

improvisation is a vital element in a carefully-controlled process of accretion in the development of the script and characters, but it has no place in the final performance.

These two broad categories of improvisation have been referred to by Theodore J. Flicker, as public improvisation and private improvisation (Wright Wexman, 1980: 29-30), a distinction which has also been made by Method Acting pioneer Lee Strasberg whose work I discuss later in this chapter. Private improvisation is more commonly associated with the training and preparatory phase of acting and is something that happens behind-the-scenes, in “private,” and in preparation for (rather than as part of) the final performance. Public improvisation, on the other hand, is improvisation that is actually incorporated into the final performance and therefore needs to be accessible to the viewer. Public improvisation needs to form part of a more structured and disciplined approach which takes into account the needs of the audience. It is the director’s responsibility to ensure that the actors don’t lapse into esoteric, inaudible, irrelevant or overly-indulgent rambles which might alienate the audience, a criticism which has been levelled at filmmakers such as Robert Altman and John Cassavetes, both of whom were renowned for incorporating improvisation into their finished works. While the audience at a stage performance “shows its responsiveness to what is happening by reacting to the performance as it is in progress and often by actively participating in it,” film audiences lack this active ongoing relationship with their audiences, and filmmakers “face an increased danger of lapsing into private rather than public improvisation,” a tendency which, “[at] its worst... makes audiences feel like outsiders at a private party or spectators at a pointless exercise in reality... irritated by mumbling, incomprehensible dialogue and indecipherable inside references to the personal lives of the movie’s cast and crew” (Wright Wexman, 1980: 30-31). Von Trier’s approach, in films such as *The Idiots* and *Breaking the Waves* (1996), blurred the distinction between private and public improvisation, and entailed bringing private improvisation into the public domain. His attitude to the actors in *Breaking the Waves* changed dramatically from that in previous films, as has been discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas, before, he had fetishised the technical aspects of filmmaking and marginalised the actor’s contribution, he now deliberately came closer to the actors, placing a great deal more trust in them and allowing them significant freedom. “We had shot very long scenes

and no scene was like the other,” he says of his working method in *Breaking the Waves*:

The actors were allowed to move within the scene as they pleased and they never needed to follow any determined action. When we later cut down the scenes, our only thought was to increase the intensity in the performance, without regard as to whether the image is in focus, well composed or as to whether we cross the line. (in Bjorkman, 1996: 14)

Von Trier would regularly start rolling the cameras if the moment seemed right, with little or no warning to his actors. The scene where Josephine’s father comes to find her was shot on the spur of the moment because the atmosphere around the table, where the cast were chatting to Anders Hove who’d just arrived on set to play Josephine’s father, felt right. There are numerous such scenes in the film, where boom poles enter the shot in the crew’s haste to follow and capture the action, or the handheld camera swings wildly to find a new object of interest, and Von Trier explicitly stated his desire to use the script purely as a basis from which the actors could work.

Many filmmakers before Von Trier had taken a similar approach in their own quests for cinematic “truth.” Godard shot a twenty-five minute improvised scene in the middle of *Breathless* (1959), which departed entirely from Truffaut’s original script, inspired by the freedom of the ad-libbed scenes in *cinéma vérité* films that preceded the New Wave, and experimental filmmakers in the sixties were fond of shooting improvisatory happenings, but it was really American independent film director John Cassavetes, renowned for his loosely-structured, improvised dramas, who took this approach to new heights and inspired emulation from several likeminded filmmakers after him. Cassavetes prioritised the performance “moment” above all else. “Sometimes we’d shoot when the lights weren’t ready,” he said during a discussion of his 1968 film, *Faces*, “We’d shoot whenever the actors were ready. We were slaves to them. All we had to do was record what they were doing” (in Wright Wexman, 1980: 31). Von Trier’s determination to allow actors to determine the action at the expense of technical or aesthetic perfection echoes Cassavetes’s prioritisation of the

improvisatory moment, although almost four decades separate *Faces* and *Breaking the Waves*.

For Henry Jaglom, a contemporary director who works intensely with improvisation in his quest for realism, Cassavetes's work was a revelation. Jaglom was first exposed to his work when, as a college student, someone took him to a screening of *Shadows* (1959):

I saw real life on the streets. I was thinking already about becoming a director, and I thought, 'This guy is telling the truth. It's awkward, it's rough, the actors aren't very good, the lighting is terrible and the sound is off, but there's something very *truthful* that doesn't exist in all those wonderful Hollywood movies that I love...' I wanted to try and capture the life that I knew all around me, rather than create a sort of artificial Hollywood world. I wanted to try and create the world that I know and get bits and pieces of it up on the screen. (in Williams, 2003: n.p.)

American independent director Robert Altman, who died in 2006, was renowned for his use of improvisation and spontaneity on screen. "Chance is another name that we give our mistakes," Altman told one interviewer, "and all of the best things in my films are mistakes. I am a blunderer. I usually don't know what I am going into at the start. I go into the fog and trust something will be there" (in Mackenzie, 2004: 43). In his obituary for Altman, David Ansen describes Altman's method as

The opposite of Hitchcock, who storyboarded every sequence in advance. Altman's movies spilled out beyond the edges of the frame, alive to the messiness of life. Notoriously laid-back, in love with improvisation and multiple cameras, Altman was the director as party host, throwing a bash and letting the camera capture the results... both ringmaster and spectator at once [the joy he took in] simultaneously creating and discovering those moments of cinematic truth... was so contagious. (2006: 56)

One of the words that surfaces constantly in discussions on the effect of using improvisation is the word "truth." Jaglom talks about Cassavetes "telling the *truth*"

and believes that “something very *truthful*” emerges from the roughness and spontaneity of his improvised work. Altman is credited with creating “moments of cinematic *truth*” and Von Trier describes his improvisatory work as a quest for *truth* and commits himself to “[forcing] the *truth* out of [his] characters and settings” in the Dogme manifesto. With its rawness, its messiness and its apparently unmediated quality, improvisation at its best can greatly intensify the sense of realism. Improvisation is used in conjunction with a less actorly-seeming style which aims to conceal or modify the conventional rhetorical devices of acting, increasing the overall naturalism. James Naremore points out that the chief mark of realistic, psychological drama from the late nineteenth century onward has been the tendency of the actors to turn away, moving out of the strong or shared positions, facing one another on the diagonal so as to make the stage seem less “rhetorical,” more “natural” (1988: 37). He gives as examples the groundbreaking performance, in 1898, by the Moscow Art Theatre of *The Seagull*, which opened with actors standing with their backs to the audience, and the American tour of the Abbey theatre in 1911-12, which was heralded by critics because the actors frequently played to the rear of the stage or walked into dark corners at dramatic moments rather than declaiming dramatically to the audience. More than half a century later, Brando’s mumbling delivery in *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954) was a cinematic version of the same anti-rhetorical devices, lending the film a quality of verisimilitude (though it may, of course, seem mannered by today’s standards). Actors in realist works play to each other as though they are just getting on with their everyday lives, and as though the audience (or the camera) do not exist. They make use of byplay which makes their appearance less actorly and more everyday: they “slop down food and talk with their mouths full... turn away from the camera, speak softly and rapidly, repeat words, slur or throw away lines, sometimes ask ‘huh?’ or let dialogue overlap” (Naremore, 1988: 44). In addition to their indistinct speech, they adopt verbal tics and

preface speeches with meaningless intensifiers or qualifiers – a technique especially apparent on television soap operas, where nearly every remark is preceded with “look”, “now” or “well”. Naturalistic actors also cultivate a halting, somewhat groping style of speech: instead of saying “I am very distressed,” the actor will say “I am dis-... I am very distressed.” By the same

logic, he or she will start an action such as drinking from a glass, and then pause to speak before carrying the action through. (Naremore, 1988: 44)

A director who makes frequent use of improvisation in his work, and whose dialogue has precisely this rough-hewn, real-life quality, is Woody Allen. The stuttering, self-deprecatory uncertainty and “unfinished” nature of his dialogue, and the constant use of cross-dialogue and interruption is crucial both to creating a sense of realism in Allen’s work, as well as to his particular brand of comedy. In addition to this, Allen frequently uses two-shots where characters walk in out and of shot even as they deliver crucial lines (for instance in his *Hannah and Her Sisters* made in 1986). He also, somewhat perversely, uses extreme long shots of the characters in large public open spaces for some of his most intimate scenes. In *Hannah*, the microphone captures every quiet word despite the unusually distant shot scale, as though they were caught unawares by a spy camera, and in *Annie Hall* he films a significant conversation between Alvy and Rob with the characters initially so far from the camera that one can barely distinguish them from their surrounding until they have walked quite a distance into the shot. Allen relies on his ensemble of actors who are “sharply attuned to the manners of a specific new York social set” (Naremore, 1988: 44) to give convincing, well-observed, true-to-life portrayals of characters in a very specific, localised environment, complete with the subtle peculiarities of local language.

Mistakes, or “the actor screwing up” as Von Trier puts it in *The Five Obstructions* (2003), are essentially unintentional moments of improvisation, and the spontaneous responses which they can bring about, and which actors build on when they continue the scene and “play through” as it is called in industry parlance, are frequently incorporated into the final cut of the film to lend an extra element of authenticity.<sup>1</sup> Capturing genuine reactions helps to fulfil one of the goals of naturalist filmmakers: to give the impression that what the audience is seeing is happening “first-hand” and for the first time. Mistakes can engender this sort of reaction, but so can carefully-planned improvisatory techniques which take the actors by surprise. A director can set

---

<sup>1</sup> Naremore mentions that an example of such “playing through” can be seen in Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974), where Jack Nicholson fumbles with his lighter and can’t get it to function. Polanski preserved this take both because it lent a quality of verisimilitude and because it makes the audience “vaguely aware of the actor behind the performance” (1988: 45).

things up so that actors will have to react spontaneously to something unexpected, a “trick” that can freshen up the quality of the acting. It’s a technique that Ken Loach, a committed social (and socialist) realist British filmmaker, uses frequently in his work, along with his propensity to use deliberately rough-edged non-actors, in order to “signal a distance from conventional actorly modes and to create a more realistic form of acting” (Hill: 1998: 20). Although Loach has always used improvisation in his work, he is quick to point out the potential pitfalls of using it in an undisciplined way. “It can become indulgent very quickly,” he says. “If it works, it has to be very focused and very tight—not just rambling for the sake of rambling. We shoot our films in six or seven weeks at the most, so you've got to be very tight in what you're doing and I think actors respond better if they have a strong sense of where they're going in each scene” (in Williams, 2003: n.p.). Loach will often use improvisations to play out the action before the scripted scene begins, or keep the camera rolling after the scripted dialogue has run its course to see what happens spontaneously.

It's changing the odd line or two—or just letting a scene continue rather than cutting. I try not to say 'cut.' The two words we don't use are 'action' and 'cut.' Every take should have a kind of natural start: you never pick up in the middle of a scene; you need to have gotten there somehow. It's a question of starting each take where people feel comfortable starting. The text is the line of the melody and you sometimes work like a jazz musician who will skit around it. There should be a sense of freedom about the words you use, but invariably you end up coming back to the words in the script or a close approximation of them. (in Williams, 2003: n.p.)

Mike Leigh’s approach, on the other hand, uses a more systematic and controlled form of improvisation. Leigh confines his use of private improvisation strictly to the preparatory phase and uses public improvisation through rehearsals to enhance the final performance. What you see on the screen in a Leigh film is not improvisation but the *result* of improvisation<sup>2</sup> which goes through a lengthy process of synthesis and distillation. “Leigh makes use of improvisation to magnify behavioural traits (physical idiosyncrasies and patterns of speech) and in so doing clearly displays the element of

---

<sup>2</sup> McDonald makes this distinction in his chapter “Acting for Mike Leigh” (1999: 140)

performance in the acting,” says John Hill (1998: 20). Loach uses improvisation and unrehearsed responses to suggest that his work is observed and recorded rather than acted. He compounds this with his use of non-actors which is anathema to Leigh, who nevertheless elicits performances so authentic-seeming that his actors are often mistaken for non-actors “playing themselves.” “As a filmmaker with pretensions to making films about real life, I am often asked whether I have used actors or ‘real’ people” says Leigh: “My answer is of course always appropriately shocked and outraged: how could I possibly achieve this reality with people ‘off the street?’” (in Watson, 2004: 28-9).

Leigh’s “influences” vary, depending on whose account you are reading, and one does get the distinct sense that he suffers from “interview fatigue,” this being one of the much-repeated questions he gets asked.<sup>3</sup> When asked why he wanted to become a filmmaker, Leigh cites the moment when, one cold day, his grandfather was carried downstairs in his coffin by four old men with drips at the ends of their noses and the young Leigh’s response to this “tragicomic occasion” was that he wanted to make a film about it (Miller, 2000: 82). “My history and motivation boil down to two very basic, uncluttered things” says Leigh. “One is that I am by nature a storyteller, and that is all there is to it. And secondly and equally important, is I am by nature a filmmaker. My earliest memories of conceiving stories are in visual film terms. I’ve never really compromised” (in Bank, 2000: 121). While Leigh is frequently associated with directors such as John Cassavetes and Robert Altman, whose work he admires, he prefers to acknowledge the influences of directors such as Yasujiro Ozu, Satyajit Ray and Jean Renoir since he identifies with the spirit of their films (McDonald, 1999: 139). He is also an admirer of Fritz Lang’s work (Hebert, 2000: 10) and of the films of Stephen Frears (see Ellickson and Porton, 2000: 75). Leigh insists that he is an “entirely visual filmmaker” and is drawn to the scriptlessness of the silent era films, noting approvingly that silent filmmaker Feuillade improvised his entire 1914 series *Les Vampires*: “[H]e just got out into the street and made it up” (in Pride, 2000: 111).

---

<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to his collection of Mike Leigh interviews, Howie Movshovitz points out that Leigh has a reputation for being a bit of a bear to interview, that he “doesn’t suffer fools gladly” (2000: x) although Movshovitz himself found him engaging and expansive. He suggests that the question of what influenced Leigh’s style yields “different yet complementary answers” (2000: vii) depending on the circumstances of the interview and the interviewer him or herself, but that Leigh’s discussion of his work is always precise and considered.

Leigh is also significantly influenced by fine art and theatre. He greatly admires the work of cartoonist Georg Grosz, and he counts Beckett and Pinter among his theatrical inspirations, praising them for the way in which they “mix... naturalism and heightened realism” (see Hebert, 2000: 10). Also influential are the Living Theatre and happenings, Grotowsky, and Brook, the great improviser, “above all” (Gore-Langton, 2000: 13). In his twenties, Leigh saw a television documentary about Brook’s production of Peter Weil’s *Marat/Sade* for which actors went to an insane asylum and based their characters on an inmate. He was struck by Brook’s technique and immediately wanted to elaborate on it, thinking “if you can do all that to serve a play, then surely you can go one step further and make one up...” It was an epiphany for Leigh, when he “sort of decided that [he] wanted to work in a fairly instinctive and intuitive way” (in Riding, 2000: 102-103). Brook’s dictum that the new task of a director is like starting out blind on an unknown journey also appealed to Leigh’s sensibility, and he took solace in Brook’s wisdom – and, one imagines, in his success (see Pride, 2000: 109). The Ealing comedies, the “broader British comic tradition... comic in a social context” and the radio comedies Leigh listened to in his youth made a lasting impact on him, and as an avid Gilbert and Sullivan fan he made a biographical film about the composers, *Topsy Turvy*, in 1999. *The Goon Show*, Groucho Marx and The Three Stooges are other favourites, all of them renowned for their comic, anti-establishment nose-thumbing, and Leigh was inspired by how the Beatles helped bring about the collapse of the old order (see Bank, 2000: 114-5). Despite the fact that many reviewers said Leigh’s *Bleak Moments* (1971) was “obviously an homage to [Ermanno] Olmi” (in Bloch, 2000: 25), Leigh had at that point not seen an Olmi film. He has since become familiar with his work and told interviewer Judy Bloch that he does indeed “like Olmi a lot,” suggesting with characteristically dry Leigh humour that after seeing his films he “realised, of course, that [he’d] been very deeply influenced by Olmi” (2000: 25). Leigh also acknowledges the impact on his work of the French Nouvelle Vague (see Bank, 2000: 115), the British New Wave (though he avoids literary adaptations unlike the British New Wave filmmakers), and of Milos Forman’s early films from the sixties, *Blonde in Love* (1965) and *Fireman’s Ball* (1967), which Leigh remarks were an inspiration to “our generation of hopeful filmmakers” rather than an influence per se (in Bloch, 2000: 25).

Leigh is frequently compared to Cassavetes, and although he certainly acknowledges Cassavetes as an inspiration he points out that their approaches differ significantly in certain key respects. In an interview with Mirra Bank in 1997, Leigh said that although “nowhere along the line was anyone doing what I actually turned out to have done – there were all sorts of things that pointed in that direction” and cites one of the first “pointers” as Cassavetes’s *Shadows*, made in 1959: “The discovery that *Shadows* had been in some way improvised was inspirational” (in Bank, 2000: 116). Both Leigh and Cassavetes develop their work through improvisation, and both of them are chroniclers and dramatists of the real and the everyday,<sup>4</sup> but their approach is in fact diametrically opposed in certain key respects. While Leigh’s never brings private improvisation into the public domain, and uses it only in the preparation of the work, Cassavetes allows his improvisation to happen as the work is being filmed, during the production process itself, which entails the incorporation of a great deal of “private” improvisation. Virginia Wright Wexman points out that this can result in rambling, self-indulgence and in-jokes, which “[make] the audience feel like outsiders” (1980: 31). Leigh, though inspired by Cassavetes, levels a similar criticism at his work: “I’ve never regarded Cassavetes as a real influence because I found his work patchy – some of it very fine and some of it extremely tedious – limited to the actors, really – spewing it out – which is the antithesis of what I’ve been concerned with – getting the essence of the real world” (in Bank, 2000: 116). Although Leigh found some of Cassavetes’s work “brilliant,” he felt that his less impressive work was marred by “actors behaving like actors – improvising as themselves, so what pours out of them is actor behaviour, actor thoughts. Which doesn’t work for me” (in Raphael, 2008: 13). Leigh bemoans the “curse” of “art’s sake,” of using improvisation during performance as “an exercise” and the gratuitous “displays of experimentation” that such an approach generates:

...for me, the real inspiration and the real influences include Vermeer, you know, all art comes out of a progression from there being nothing to the finished thing... a synthesis of improvisation and order. And the only

---

<sup>4</sup> Hoberman compares the work of Leigh and Cassavetes in “Cassavetes and Leigh: Poets of the Ordinary,” *Premiere*, vol 5, no 3, 1991, pp 25-26, referred to in McDonald, 1999: 151

difference is that I share the process with the actors at a different stage from normal in the making of a film. (Bank, 2000: 116)

Leigh suggests that the comparison with Cassavetes “has more to do with a foreknowledge about something that I do with actors than what the actors do on the screen; indeed, what happens to the actors is in many ways pretty different, not only in result but in principle”: rather than allowing actors to “spew out” their own emotions and characters, Leigh’s actors must “[extend] themselves beyond themselves to play characters who are not them, but who are socially-placed, character-acting...” (in Bloch, 2000: 24). The only time when improvised material made it onto the screen in a Leigh film was in *Hard Labour* (1973), which Leigh claims was because of the influence of Tony Garnett, who in turn was influenced by Ken Loach with whom he’d been doing a great deal of work: “It was fine, but it doesn’t really belong in my films... There are many ways in which Ken and I have a lot in common, and many ways in which we are at absolutely polar ends of the spectrum” (in Ellickson and Porton, 2000: 75). Loach and Leigh are constantly compared because of their exploration of social issues, their use of improvisation, and because their characters are “working class and wear anoraks while generally rummaging about at the bottom of the social heap” as Michael Coveney scathingly quipped, annoyed by the “sloppy generalisation” about Leigh (1996: 13).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, their politics, their formal strategies, and the ways in which they work are fundamentally different, as are the films that result from their different approaches.

Other more personal influences on Leigh’s approach have been his father, a physician, and his upbringing in a less affluent neighbourhood in the North “where people talk plain and direct” and are “in your face and honest” (Turan, 2000: 89). Leigh’s father, “an interesting combination, in many ways very Jewish but also very Lancashire: direct and blunt” (in Stone, 2000: 28) turfed out his private patients the moment the Labour government started the National Health system, a fact of which Leigh is obviously very proud, and which appears to have stimulated the young Leigh’s intense interest in everyday people. Interestingly, Leigh’s own experience of

---

<sup>5</sup> Coveney took particular offence at comments by filmmaker Peter Greenaway that Leigh’s films had their heart in the right place but were boring (1996: 12).

fatherhood has also brought about a greater level of complexity in his work, with people and their issues less “black and white” than in the work he did before he had children (Bloch, 2000: 16). Leigh also cites the Zionist camps which he attended in his youth as an important influence. The youth pooled their money and learned about socialism at the camps, which were essentially aimed at preparing the youth to be kibbutznicks. “We were actually rather anarchic, but we also worked by getting people together in groups and working creatively,” Leigh explains: “It finally contributed to my ability to be sympathetic to everybody and at the same time be comic and tragic” (Stone, 2000: 28), something which he notes may also be a peculiarly (though not exclusively) Jewish trait (Ellickson and Porton, 2000: 76). While he is wary of overstating the “Jewishness” of his work, he does acknowledge it as a significant factor, feeling sometimes that he “[carries] on a great Jewish tradition of a rebbe surrounded by Talmudic students, talking things out” (in Turan, 2000: 89). The communal approach of the habonim youth camps resonated with Leigh despite his inherent individualism, and later influenced his approach to direction. But Leigh’s work itself is anything but anarchic, and he has had to defend himself against this presumption from the time he began developing his working process. In an interview with Sheridan Morley around the time his first stage play, *Abigail’s Party*, was produced (1977), Leigh bemoaned that fact that “as soon as you start talking about improvisation people expect anarchy: in fact our objectives in *Abigail’s Party*, the things we wanted to say about these people and their social habits and surroundings, remained rock solid from the very first: only the surface text is flexible” (in Morley, 2000: 4).

Also influential was Leigh’s reaction *against* the atmosphere he encountered during his training as an actor at RADA in the mid-sixties, which he found “extremely sterile, extremely uncreative” and where they “never did any improvisation or anything; it was really the worst aspects of English boulevard theatre acting, or Shakespeare, the old-fashioned mould” (Bloch, 2000: 19). RADA gave Leigh “a chance to question everything” (in Bank, 2000: 114) while providing none of the answers Leigh was looking for, and it “stood as a jumping off point for what I’ve been doing ever since” (in Naughton, 2000: 126). Ironically, it was later during his stint at an art school that he had an epiphany about the improvisational direction that his work would take, and it was working with young actors at the Midlands Art Centre in

Birmingham that Leigh realised the crux of what was later to evolve into his working method: “I’d got how to do it,” he said. “Work separately with actors to create characters, gradually introduce them together, let it build and grow then distil and refine” (in Turan, 2000: 91). While Leigh acknowledges the influence of both Stanislavski and the Method acting approach, he had already invented the basis of his improvisatory working method before the end of the sixties.

Virginia Wright Wexman, one of surprisingly few academics who has written critically on the subject of improvisation in cinema acting, despite its extensive usage, believes that improvisation encourages a “spontaneous, unrehearsed quality” (1980: 29), a sense of liveness, immediacy and presence which is at the heart of many of the techniques of realism:

What the directors who work in collaboration with actors seem to be striving for is the sense of discovery that comes from the unexpected and unpredictable in human behavior. If we think of art as a means of giving form to life, improvisation can be looked at as one way of adding to our sense of the liveliness of art, a means of avoiding the sterility that results from rote recitations of abstract conventional forms. (Wright Wexman, 1980: 29)

The use of improvisation for increased realism is nothing new, and improvisation has always been a crucial tool at the theatrical practitioner’s disposal. When Constantin Stanislavski began to develop his highly innovative acting “System” at the turn of the twentieth century, aimed at establishing a universally applicable approach which would help actors to enhance the realism of their performances in keeping with the new naturalism of writers such as Chekhov, improvisation was integral to his “System”. In her book *Stanislavski Revealed: The actor’s guide to spontaneity on stage*, Stanislavskian devotee Sonia Moore shows how this process of achieving “spontaneity” is in fact a most cultivated, disciplined and ultimately “unspontaneous” one. Stanislavski’s mission was to pursue, analyse and thereby harness inspiration on stage so that any capable actor could exert conscious control over it. In the normal run of things, inspiration was an “infrequent visitor,” and for an actor to try to push himself when he was not feeling inspired would result in a “dead” performance. Stanislavski believed that acting would only be clear and real to the audience when

the actor was inspired and “[reincarnated] himself as the character” (Moore, 1991: 1). This required extraordinarily intense work in the rehearsal phase in particular.

Throughout his working life, Stanislavski developed, expanded and revised his System,<sup>6</sup> building up an approach which he referred to as “Spiritual Realism,” though it is now more commonly referred to as psychological realism. Through his system he aimed to develop artistic truth on stage by training actors to “become” the part during performance since the only way that the super objective of the play – the main thrust of the plot and the over-arching objective or “motivation” driving the characters’ behaviour – could be communicated was through having actors functioning as emotionally engaged human beings. In addition to drawing from previous theatrical approaches, Stanislavski turned to neurophysiologists and psychologists for clues as to how to “build a character” and to assist the actor in inhabiting that character on stage. Initially he concentrated on the psychological aspects of character development, focusing on activities such as “concentration of attention,” “relaxation” and “sense memory” (Moore, 1991: 2) to bring the actors’ own experiences and memories to bear on their portrayals of the characters through a series of discussions and improvisatory exercises, thereby encouraging emotions to flow, enabling an organic” and “natural” performance. The actors were to study and experience certain feelings and to manifest them vocally and physically to the audience in their performances. There was no getting away from the fact that the actor on the stage was always aware that he was an actor acting a part, and that his or her emotions were “repeated” rather than “primary” emotions, but actors could stir genuine “repeated” emotions because they had experienced and tapped into analogous emotions in their own lives. As is frequently the case in all aspects of a realist approach, the aim was for immediacy, for mastering techniques which made the second-hand seem first- hand and primary. “From many preserved traces of what was experienced, one big condensed, magnified memory of emotions of the same nature is formed,” claimed Stanislavski: “There is nothing superfluous in such a memory, only the very essence. This is the synthesis of all emotions of the same kind. It does not refer to a small, separate, private instance, but to all those of the same nature” (in Moore, 1991: 3).

---

<sup>6</sup> Stanislavski initially referred to his System with a capital S, but later dropped the capital since he came to consider this too dogmatic.

Later, Stanislavsky realised that this excessive focus on the psychological aspects meant that he had been undervaluing the physical elements of performance. Once actors understood about emotional memory their work became focused almost exclusively on the psychological. Actors would arrive hours before the start of the show to “isolate themselves and to concentrate on a personal tragedy” and in rehearsals they “sat around the table for months discussing the play in an effort to understand the psychology of the characters” (Moore, 1991: 3-4). Stanislavski began to perceive the over-emphasis on the psychological to have a paralysing rather than a liberating effect on the actor’s subconscious. The actors were “walking around with swollen heads but couldn’t play anything” (in Moore, 1991: 4), many of them were abusing the technique and were becoming unacceptably prone to hysteria, and he also found that while the exercises were helpful they didn’t guarantee the kind of naturalistic performances that he was looking for: pretending naturalism and the experience of emotion became as much a cliché and a formal convention to fall back on as those found in the grand rhetorical style which he had turned away from in the first place. While he never rejected his earlier theories of “emotional” or “affective” memory, Stanislavski began to broaden his technique in order to counter these problems and to search for less traumatic and draining ways of accessing emotion. He encouraged actors to use their imaginations rather than perpetually tapping into their personal memories, and his focus fell on analysing and working with the given circumstances of the text. From the early thirties, at the Opera Dramatic Studio in Moscow, he developed his Method of Physical Actions, which had as its premise the notion that physical actions inspired truthful emotion, rather than the reverse. Actors would come onto stage and carry out simple, concrete actions rather than forcing out emotions before he or she even entered the stage. “Only purposeful action, expressive of the inner state, will involve the actor’s emotion and remain rich in content and fresh in performance” writes Sonia Moore of this revised approach. “Simply running will not produce fear... but running from a madman waving a knife rarely fails” (1991: 8). Stanislavski’s focus, however, remained on accessing the subconscious through the conscious in the pursuit of theatrical truth, and the one core technique which remained constant despite the changes in his approach was his use of improvisation.

Stanislavski's system had a significant and lasting impact on ensemble playing in particular (and it is interesting to note how frequently realist works rely on ensemble casts) because it encouraged actors to play off one another in a fresh, spontaneous and life-like way. To Moore, Stanislavski's system is a

powerful weapon against dilettantism, against stagnation in the theatre and against distortion of theatre art. It enables the actor to stir in himself the emotions of his character every time he performs. It teaches the dramatist how to construct a play and provides criteria for critics and directors to judge acting and directing. It is the solution to spontaneity on stage and the key to inspiration. (1991: 11)

Stanislavski's system proved easy to "translate" and to apply in a wide range of contexts, and is now taught and practised globally. The degree to which elements of his system are regarded as "common sense" and the fact that actors and directors frequently find themselves "doing Stanislavski" without knowing it, speak volumes about the value of his approach. Other theatrical masters adopted, adapted and expanded Stanislavski's techniques. Notable among these were Lee Strasberg, who studied at the American Laboratory Theatre under one of Stanislavski's students, Ryszard Boleslawski. Strasberg co-founded The Group Theatre (1931 to 1940), the first American acting company to put Stanislavski's methods into practice. It was Strasberg and his colleagues at the Group Theatre who first developed "The Method" in the 1930s and popularised it among film actors as well as those working in the theatre, thus taking Stanislavski's quest for "theatrical truth" into the cinematic domain. The Method drew substantially from Stanislavski's techniques (to the extent that Stanislavski is often wrongly credited as having invented Method Acting) and has a similar goal of building convincingly "life-like" performances. But while in Stanislavski's system the actors analysed the motivations and emotions of their characters in order to portray them in a way that rang true psychologically, Method actors recall emotions or reactions from their own lives and use them to try to replicate the real-life emotional conditions of the character, drawing on their own memories and experiences to add detail and particularity to their portrayal of the character. Combined with this attempt to replicate the character's emotional state,

actors working according to the Method would have to consider very carefully the psychological motivations of the character and to act and react accordingly. This led Method Actor Dustin Hoffman to put himself through a series of tortures when he was working on his character for *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1976), so much so that his more old-guard co-star Laurence Olivier is reputed to have asked him “[w]hy not try acting? It’s much easier.” Hoffman has repeatedly denied this ever happened, but whether or not it is apocryphal, the comment has passed into cultural lore.<sup>7</sup> Sanford Meisner and Viola Spolin developed their own related techniques in their theatrical world, and Stella Adler, who actually studied under Stanislavski and who numbered among her students stars such as Marlon Brando, Al Pacino and Robert de Niro, founded her own variation on the Stanislavskian theme, helping to usher the Stanislavskian principles firmly into the cinematic camp.

Interestingly, while Mike Leigh resented the “sterile” approach at RADA in the mid-sixties for not teaching him about Stanislavski, he found his own way to a very Stanislavskian approach. Shortly after his stint at RADA he was studying at Camberwell Art School when he had a revelation, a “clairvoyant flash” as he later called it (Bank, 2000: 117), about working from the real:

There in life drawing class, I suddenly realized what it was I’d always hated about RADA: we never made an organic or truthful statement about what we were experiencing – everything was second hand or borrowed or learnt. Nobody ever confronted themselves with in-the-street experience, or tried to distil or express it, Now you will find the importance of all that in Stanislavski, but to me it was a revelation: suddenly you are into an area of creative investigation instead of mere reproduction. (Morley, 2000: 4-5)

For Leigh, improvisation is the basis not only for the performances in his work but for the creation of the characters and the script itself. He regards improvisation as part of all creative endeavours: “All art is a synthesis of improvisation and order... You arrive at it by improvising and distilling that down. Putting order on it and working

---

<sup>7</sup> The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) account (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074860/trivia>) concludes that Dustin Hoffman was in fact looking the worse for wear due to the emotional trauma and lack of sleep resulting from the divorce he was going through at the time, but a quick Google search will reveal a plethora of variations on the anecdote.

and working until you have something which is refined and precise” (McDonald, 1999: 140). While he has developed certain techniques used in his working process, he is reluctant to see them as any sort of method. “Improvisation is endemic to all of [the creative arts]” says Leigh. “I just take that process much further, collaborating on it with the people who will finally perform it. That seems to me to be sensible” (in Coveneny, 2000: 37). Steadman likens Leigh’s working method to “planting a seed,” with the story and characters growing out of a three-month rehearsal period (Stone, 2000: 28). Leigh’s initial idea is developed and revised constantly through rehearsal, and the premise itself emerges from that rehearsal process. As the core idea of the work is arrived at, so the premise comes to inform the final ordering of the materials, and this final structuring work extends into the pre-production period and even into the shooting phase: Leigh only “found” his ending to *Secrets and Lies* (1996) well into the shooting phase of the production. Before the filming of a given scene has started, the performances all have to be locked down and word perfect. “Absolutely no spontaneous speech is allowed once filming begins,” reports Kenneth Turan, “a situation that demands that actors be able to switch from the free-flow of rehearsal to absolute precision” (2000: 96).

Leigh may *start* without a script and characters, but his use of improvisation is entirely confined to the development and rehearsal process: the end result is highly structured and polished. “I believe in improvisation within a structured surrounding; this is not some kind of all-in anarchic democracy” he told interviewer Sheridan Morley in 1977 (2000: 3), and to Turan he said that his work was “no happening” but a “great deal of order and discipline” (2000: 92). In an interview as early as 1988, Robert Gore-Langton perceived that Leigh was already “weary of the battle to undermine the connotations of the word [improvisation] – scriptless happenings, unfocused creation, embarrassed actors and the rest,” claiming that “Leigh would argue that, on the contrary, finesse has always been his aim” (2000: 13). Moments of on-screen “improvisation” or spontaneity in *Secrets and Lies* are few and far between. Leigh points out to Paul McDonald in an interview, with dry humour one imagines, that “the little kid sitting on a miniature chaise longue putting his finger up his nose, that is not the result of six months’ rehearsal... that is a two-year-old putting his finger up his nose. And the dog with Alison Steadman was not doing Stanislavski” (in McDonald, 1999: 139).

Leigh's directorial approach necessitates a highly unconventional working process, which he has developed and refined over the years, though he is quick to point out that he is "not a manufacturer of esoteric formulas" but an "emotional and intuitive filmmaker" (in Sterrit, 2000: 44). He finds people's focus on the method rather than the final product irritating, stating that "in the end, the only thing that matters is what is on the screen; everything else is neither here nor there" (in Turan, 2000: 92), and more bluntly "I'm not interested in anything as much as the end product; I don't give a fuck about the processes" (Pride, 2000: 109).<sup>8</sup> He also points out that this highly idiosyncratic and individualistic technique is not intended to serve as a formula which he'd prescribe for anyone else and that there's "nothing holy" about the improvisations: they are "only a means to an end; they're not an artefact in their own right" (in Raphael, 2008: 43). Leigh has said that although he used to "proselytize about it" in the early days, he is no longer interested in converting people to his way of working: "what I actually specifically do is so idiosyncratic that I suspect it is exclusively useful to me" (in Turan, 2000: 96). The process is something he undertakes in order to "get a rock-solid inner truth – textural-social accuracy – and a heightened, distilled cinematic, dramatic and even hopefully... poetic end product" (in Movshovitz, 2000: 52).

Although there is no "Leigh Method," his initially exploratory techniques have crystallised into something fairly systematic. The process starts with the earliest phase, in casting, where the lack of script means that characters are not chosen to "fit" particular parts and can obviously not read from the script for an audition. Instead, Leigh interviews potential actors and actresses for about twenty minutes each to assess their general acting skills and their suitability, recalling "successful" candidates for a longer working session with him. "I like actors who have a social sense, and a sense of humour, and who are character actors," says Leigh: "I don't work with stars, not because I am against stars, but because they usually do not want to work in the way I do. Fair enough" (in Coveney, 2000: 41). Leigh finds it "immensely beneficial" to "get the actor in on the ground floor, to draw on the actor's experience, to be able

---

<sup>8</sup> When Leigh made his appearance at the Lincoln Centre after the screening of *Secrets and Lies* he was asked how they arrived at the script. "We didn't make a script, we made a film" was his bearish reply (Pride, 2000: 111).

to make the part fit the actor... to know that only [that actor] could have played that part..." (in Movshovitz, 2000: 54).

Once they have been selected, the actors (though not necessarily all of them) will then meet each other socially and be told what the "idea" behind the film will be. In the case of *Secrets and Lies* the film centres on the issue of adoption, but anything more than this, even the basic premise of the film, comes as a result of the rehearsal process and is not necessarily established at this point. Leigh's approach involves the actors at every level, and is entirely collaborative: "The real truth is that this is a medium in its own right, it's a plastic medium; everything I do that's worth talking about happens in conjunction with the actors," he says of his creative process. "Obviously I make the decisions, I have ideas of who the character is going to be, but then it's different than what happens... it really is indivisible" (in Bloch, 2000: 23).

Leigh's next step is to work individually with each of the actors developing their characters and their detailed backstories separately from other cast members, thereby limiting their knowledge of each other. Leigh starts by asking each cast member to bring a list of names of people they know or have met. Through discussion of those characters and their characteristics the list is then narrowed down to focus on one or two of the names. Leigh and the actor then start to develop a parallel fictional character, drawing from the attributes of various characters and then "researching" details for that fictional character such as the neighbourhood they live in, the kinds of activities they might get involved in, or the school they might have attended. Leigh aims to create "a microcosm of society through improvisation" (Morley, 2000: 4), simmering down all the real-life ingredients to make an intense reduction and focusing on what Leigh calls "the poetry of character": "We always use a real person as a jumping off point" says Leigh, "I always get the actors to talk about different people they have known. Then, the character develops and expands. My job is to push and pull it and cajole it and bully it in the direction of what's dramatic and cinematic" (in Stone, 2000: 28). They develop a highly detailed backstory for the character in absolute secrecy, never letting the other characters know anything that they could not feasibly know about their character and never writing anything down, only committing it to memory. The aim is to create a set of characters and their "world," which is so fully rounded that they seem to exist in their own right, in reality. "Details

are everything in [Leigh's] work" says Ray Carney. "There is nothing but specific, local expressions. There is no avoiding particulars – for the viewers or the characters" (in Carney, 2000: 26). Leigh advocates this approach in his discussions with aspiring filmmakers:

Whenever I occasionally teach film, what I say to student directors is that... we should aspire to the condition of documentary. By which I mean that when you shoot a documentary you do not question that the world you're pointing the camera at actually exists in three dimensions and that it would exist whether you filmed it or not. (in Brunette, 2000: 32)

Once the character has been created, Leigh and the actor do a series of one-on-one exercises to help the actor or actress to "inhabit" the character, as Claire Rushbrook puts it, and to do very little: "It's quite scary the first time you get on your feet because you want to get it first go. It's all about retraining your attitude. You want to show off or be perfect... and of course you can't because you haven't really got a clue what you are doing" (in McDonald, 1999: 144). The actors are expected to do some of this "inhabiting" work on their own, but Leigh has been known to turn up disconcertingly to monitor the actors, lurking (says one of Leigh's regular actors Phillip Davis) "like an invisible garden gnome... he will pop up leaning on the bar, keeping an eye out." Davis continues that while "some English actors are a bit snooty about all this kind of thing" and the work is "extremely hard," it is also extremely worthwhile and "there is nothing else like it" (in Coveney, 2000: 41). "You build up memories, experiences, a whole life that becomes almost as real to you as the one you live yourself; it infiltrates the fabric of your subconscious" said the late Katrin Cartlidge who acted in *Career Girls* (1997) and claimed that she began dreaming as her character as the process intensified (Turan, 2000: 93).

During this phase of the working process Leigh advocates a sort of physical and mental method acting. Since Brenda Blethyn's Cynthia worked ten hour shifts in a box factory, so did the actress. She also spent time in libraries, reading newspapers from her "formative years." Marianne Jean-Baptiste, on the other hand, diligently attended optometry classes three times a week for three months in order to give substance to her character Hortense (see Turan, 2000: 93), and Timothy Spall learned

the photographic trade “with a professional photographer in Barking, Essex” for his role as Maurice. According to Michael Coveney, who spent time on the *Secrets and Lies* set while researching his book on Leigh, Spall “seems to know where everything is” on the camera (1996: 235). Since one is actually creating the characters, a process which, to a large extent, in turn creates the script, the creation of histories for the characters becomes very significant. “I could create an entire history for Lady MacBeth and nobody would ever be the wiser,” said Cartlidge. “Your responsibility is far greater here – I’m being invited by Mike to use every ounce of my creative and imaginative soul to provide the fabric that goes into the making of this film” (in Turan, 2000: 94). Steadman points out that actors can be very afraid of improvisation because it makes them very vulnerable.<sup>9</sup> To protect them to some degree from this vulnerability, Leigh ensures that the actors know everything about their characters. He devises what he calls “quiz club,” where he asks questions such as “what does your character think about Thatcher” or “what does he or she think about sex before marriage?” which each cast member answers in their minds. “When you realize you are secure enough in your character to answer all those questions, you know that everything’s clear and watertight,” says Steadman (in Turan, 2000: 94). Leigh himself believes that his working method liberates actors because they don’t feel pressure to produce “results” through these improvisations. Rather, they are encouraged to experience “truthfully” what his or her character is discovering in the moment, “[a]s in real life” (Bank, 2000: 117).

Gradually, the entire world of the characters is brought into existence and the premise for the film is discovered and developed. The process happens collaboratively, organically (Leigh is fond of this word<sup>10</sup>) and almost entirely through discussion and improvisation. Leigh then writes a very basic set of “guidelines” and rehearsals continue into the shooting phase. “I write a structure that is very brief, like three pages” says Leigh: ‘Scene 1 Wendy at dancing class. Scene 2: Wendy goes home.’ And each scene is built and rehearsed on location and built up through lots of discussion and very thorough rehearsal until it’s ready, and then it gets shot” (Brunette, 2000: 31). Coveney described Leigh’s shooting script as a list of “seventy-

---

<sup>9</sup> See Turan, 2000: 94

<sup>10</sup> Turan writes that Leigh is fond of calling his method “organic,” as in “growing properly rooted and centered” (2000: 89).

odd scenes, each pithily described in one line...made up in green and white markings on a double-sided featherweight piece of foamboard measuring approximately five inches by four inches – exactly the right size to fit into his top shirt pocket” (1996: 234). By the time anything is shot the scenes are fully formed and finalised, the detailed work in the rehearsal process allowing them to refine the minutiae of the performances. The highly developed and detailed backstory of each character creates a depth and a sense of personal history which ground the characters in their contexts, bringing a sense of authenticity to the film as a whole, even though the content of that backstory is confined to the rehearsal and improvisation work and, in Pinteresque fashion,<sup>11</sup> only hinted at on the screen. This runs counter to the highly over-determined and loaded dialogue that crops up in Hollywood cinema: as is frequently the case with realist works, a great deal of the dialogue in Leigh’s work is “redundant” and doesn’t forward the narrative, sentences remain unfinished, and taboo subjects are alluded to in a way one might hear them if one were overhearing a private conversation (particularly in *Secrets in Lies*). We are kept in the dark about several issues which we have to sniff out for ourselves based on throw-away comments or body language which itself is rooted in those months of backstory and improvisation. The final performance which we see on the screen is the “tip of the iceberg” as Leigh puts it (in *Brunette*, 2000: 32), but we are very aware of the solidity of the rest of the iceberg which is supporting that tip. According to Leigh,

[t]he thing is to develop the whole world of the characters and that’s not done in theory but in practice. I don’t do it in my head or on paper. There’s a lot of discussion about the characters. We create and live through years and years of their experiences. There’s a lot of improvisation, most of which has nothing to do with what winds up on the screen. One moves forward without necessarily knowing where we’re going. (in *Stone*, 2000: 28)

Asked by interviewer Judy Bloch whether the acting “workshops” were a serious business, Leigh responded that the process is “very serious but there are plenty of laughs along the way... there are times when it’s an absolute scream, of course, but it is, in the end, serious, and I may say an extremely gruelling and arduous business” (in

---

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the first play Leigh ever directed at RADA was Harold Pinter’s *The Caretaker* (see Raphael, 2008: 18).

Bloch, 2000: 19).<sup>12</sup> Perhaps one of the reasons why Bloch posed the question about the “seriousness” of the character workshoping approach is due to the use of improvisation, which is commonly associated with actors having to respond off-the-cuff and wittily to a given situation, for example in TheatreSports or happenings. Improvisation in Leigh’s process has nothing to do with actors having to be funny, inventive or entertaining: it’s a much calmer more internal process. Leigh stresses that this approach is unusually demanding of the actors and that not every actor is a suitable candidate for this working process:

A great many actors find it impossible to work like this: the ability to improvise intelligently is not the same as the old Rep actor’s ability to ad lib in a crisis. The actor here has to think only of his own character: once he starts worrying about the overall framework of the play or if it will work, then he’s lost: it’s really only good for actors who want to play real people instead of stage characters. (in Morley, 2000: 4)

The performers who make it into Leigh’s casts are generally “young actors who are prepared to go out and bring back material to the rehearsal room” (in Gore-Langton, 2000: 15).

Leigh’s process has resulted in some highly quirky, idiosyncratic characters and a tendency towards caricature. One of the results of Leigh’s distillation is a simplification and exaggeration of traits, sometimes with comic results. It’s no surprise that satirical cartoonist Georg Grosz is one of his favourite artists. Leigh’s characters are constantly wanting to “pop the Beaujolais in the fridge” or to proffer “a nice little cup of tea,” and these “compendious deposits of exaggerated lower-middle and working class conversational argot” as Coveney describes them are then “orchestrated by Leigh into a final, brutally edited story” (2000: 37). This has led a few critics to make mistaken disparaging remarks about Leigh’s sneering, patronising attitude to the working class and lower middle class and his excessive tendency

---

<sup>12</sup> Leigh’s comment brings to mind Vinterberg’s defence of the Dogme95 manifesto against accusations of gimmickry and frivolity, when he says that it was “written in only 25 minutes and under continuous bursts of merry laughter” but nevertheless “most seriously meant” and “in earnest” (<http://www.dogme95.dk/faq/faq.htm>). The notion of liberating play within very strictly disciplined rules is common to both these realist approaches.

towards grotesquerie. “The British don’t like to see themselves portrayed warts and all” explains Leigh’s cameraman Dick Pope: “They find Mike a tricky customer. He gets under people’s skins... he shows what’s inside the dustbin” (in Turan, 2000: 91). Leigh has consistently found that his work is more appreciated in America, or elsewhere off his home turf, and feels that the British are exceptionally hard on anything British, that they tend to be “self-loathing and self-deceiving” (in Bank, 2000: 120). For him, the criticism says “more about England than it does about my films... People see what I do as a patronizing attack on the lower orders; they say it’s wrong and immoral to patronize. But I’m not doing it and Dickens didn’t do it either” (in Turan, 2000: 91).

Nevertheless he has come in for some harsh criticism, none more so than that of Dennis Potter who, in 1979, verbally flayed Leigh in his critique of *Abigail’s Party*, calling it “nothing more edifying than rancid disdain... a prolonged jeer, twitching with genuine hatred about the dreadful suburban tastes of the lower middle class” (in Turan, 2000: 87). Leigh is highly resentful of these comments, and his responses to the topic in interviews since have frequently taken on a defensive note. He refuted accusations about his having patronised the working classes with the character of Vic in *High Hopes* (1988), who is seen as having pretensions above his station, saying that “if you create a character so idiosyncratic, some people won’t engage because the character is not easily placed, So in some quarters he is seen as an affectation, but he’s absolutely real” (in Hebert, 2000: 9). Talking about the reception of his television work, Leigh said that “on the whole it’s been positive, except for the minority of middle-class dissenters who always accuse me of being patronising towards the working-class characters, which I completely reject.” He’s also adamant that this is “absolutely not” a complaint that he has ever received from working class people, that he “[n]ever heard of it” from those quarters (in Bloch, 2000: 23) and that his work is popular with “ordinary people” who “just get on with it” (in Bank, 2000: 120). Leigh claims that his empathy has at times been mistaken for disgust, and although he says he is

not given to whining about critics, [he resents] that brand of criticism which runs ‘these Hampstead Guardian readers are sneering at working class values etc’. These plays are not about ‘them’ but ‘us’. They’re a lamentation, not a

celebration. The biggest tragedy for me was that *Ecstasy* [1989], which many thought to be the best thing I'd done and in itself a deeply serious statement, was written off – in the most extraordinary ignorant way – as a superficial sneer at the working class. (in Gore-Langton, 2000: 15)

When Judy Bloch suggested that the animalistic name-calling at the end of *Home Sweet Home* might be a moment of extreme caricature where the work clearly revealed itself as art rather than life, Leigh refuted this adamantly:

The point is, that is what *happens* to people. All that happens in that scene is that they are behaving like some people behave in certain circumstances. The only way I can really explain anything, in any of the films, is in terms of a real world going on, real life. I mean obviously I can talk about it on another level, about the aesthetics, the literary style, the shooting style, the choice of visual elements, the juxtaposition of comic moments and all that, but that's not the same thing, I don't think.... (in Bloch, 2000: 21)

Desson Howe suggests, in a similar vein and in Leigh's defence, that "Leigh's characters seem to have more *elbow-room* to air their idiosyncrasies than others. The possibilities before them seem as unpredictable and serendipitous as life" (Howe, 2000: 45). Comic it may be, and coincidental, but such is real life. Movshovitz points out that Mike Leigh's films "cut close to the bone," that he "shows shocking events and characters who [true to realist form] aren't necessarily people his viewers would like to invite for dinner" and that he "rejects heroes and villains because life doesn't break down that way and he finds it more interesting to see the complexity of human personality." But Movshovitz goes on to say that "perhaps more dangerously, Leigh believes in a profoundly comic vision of human struggle. Life in all its problems is also funny. These attitudes leave him open to misinterpretation because viewers often think that to depict a character is to approve of what the character does, and that laughter means Leigh isn't serious" (in Movshovitz, 2000: 107). "Gotta laugh, aint yer sweet' eart? Else you'd cry" says Cynthia to Hortense in the tearoom scene in *Secrets and Lies*, echoing Leigh's own tragicomic outlook. There is also a presumption from some quarters that the laughter means he isn't compassionate, when nothing could be further from the truth. John Naughton describes the affection with which Leigh talks

about the characters in his films “almost with an implicit belief in their reality and a real paternal concern” (2000: 128). When Cynthia exclaims in the Italian restaurant, in a delightful malapropism, “Where’s this food, then? I’m ravishing!” Hortense bursts into affectionate laughter, as do we: there’s no sneering here. When the rather dreadful Beverly in *Abigail’s Party* realises her husband is dying she declares that she is really rather fond of him, and in that moment we understand her own weakness and neediness. To write off Leigh’s approach as sneering is wilfully to ignore the very obvious compassion that Leigh has for his wounded, vulnerable characters. Richard Porton writes that “a fair-minded analysis reveals that he treats his characters with equal amounts of compassion and astringency, a fact that is sometimes obscured by the films’ dispassionate tones” (Ellickson and Porton, 2000: 60), and Coveney writes that Leigh “likes people more than anyone I know; but he is also more alive to their frailties and inadequacies, and his work rejoices in those shortcomings and quirks” (1996: 9). People who work with Leigh talk about his compassion for his characters: “As a man, as a person, he’s working from a loving, caring point of view” Steadman asserts (in Turan, 2000: 88). Leigh’s characters are exposed and extremely vulnerable, but they are never pathetic. A binding theme of *Secrets and Lies* is the ability of all the characters to overcome difficulty and pain with dignity and through finding solace in one’s fellow human. “As a matter of first principle when I create these characters I do actually like them” says Leigh: “I don’t just see them as ciphers. I do believe in them as people. And I deal with what happens in that spirit” (in Pride, 2000: 110). Leigh’s focus remains at all times on the characters, always rooted in their specific context but functioning very much as individuals nevertheless. The social and the psychological are inextricably fused in Leigh’s works, and his treatment of issues is remarkable for its understatement and its lack of dogmatism. At the heart of *Secrets and Lies* is a story of a black woman finding her long-lost white mother, but the film never gets bogged down by the race issue.<sup>13</sup> As Leonard Quart remarks, the fact that Hortense is black is very low on the list of problems: “other things have priority, so they accept her” (2000: 132). And while the issue of class is ever-present, it’s not something that Leigh feels obliged to dwell on overtly, or to unpick in any deliberate

---

<sup>13</sup> “I do not see class as a ‘structure’, nor even as a ‘category’, but as something which in fact happens... in human relationships” says E.P. Thompson (in Watson, 2004: 185). Thompson’s assertion that class is “something that happens between people” is a view which would no doubt come close to Leigh’s. In *Secrets and Lies* issues of both class and race are explored purely through their impact on human relationships.

way: “It’s an issue but it’s dealt with by its implicit absence as an issue... [the film] deals with it head on – by not making it an issue... There are black people and white people in the film, and they get on with it. It’s a modern film” (in Raphael, 2008: 272). Leigh prefers to avoid “American-style film where everything is spelled out” and tries “not to suggest that there is an unambiguous, fixed truth in these relationships that can be conveyed,” wanting his films instead, “in a Talmudic way, to raise questions and posit possibilities” (in Quart, 2000: 134). To raise social issues is, for Leigh, an inevitability rather than a choice, it is simply the way in which these issues are handled that remains to be decided on. “*Secrets and Lies* is not about class” says Leigh, “but you can’t make a film in England that doesn’t include the class element” (in Bank, 2000: 120). And that is even more the case if you happen to be Mike Leigh. Garry Watson suggests that “one main reason why Leigh’s characters seem so exceptionally real is that they are so exactly situated within the English class system” (2004: 186). Leigh treats weighty issues with a remarkable lightness and humanness of touch, and it is his compassion for his acutely-observed characters that makes this possible.

While some comic caricature does result from his improvisational process, the point is to capture the essence of reality, to draw from ordinary characters rather than simply create strange and extraordinary characters. Claire Rushbrook’s Roxanne character, for example, was based on someone she knew who was a “twitchy, nervy, chewy” individual (in McDonald, 1999: 143). But, as Leigh told interviewer Sheridan Morley, “[i]mprovising has nothing to do with writhing and twitching or exploring an arty process for its own sake: what we’re trying to do here is a form of social documentary” (2000: 4).

After the initial period where actors develop their characters in isolation, a series of exploratory introductions occurs. Various members of the cast are introduced to one another and the individual character development can be built into a more complex and integrated ensemble and relationships between characters developed, with cast members working together to create their shared “histories” where appropriate. In the case of *Secrets and Lies*, Rushbrook, Blethyn and Spall met to discuss their mother-daughter-brother-uncle relationships which were key to the film, together constructing a history for Roxanne from the age of two. Although characters meet each other cold,

“the improvisations, which regularly go on for hours, can have explosive results” (Turan, 2000: 94). This was certainly the case with *Naked* (1993), where the meeting between David Thewlis’s character Johnny and Ewen Bremner’s Archie ended up in a street fight. Leigh had to break it up by calling the actors out of character and producing his Channel Four documents for the police. Thewlis imagined the bystanders asking themselves “What did the little man with the beard say to these hoodlums” to stop them so quickly (in Turan, 2000: 95).

Leigh refers to the first improvisation of a scene as the “master improvisation” (in McDonald, 1999: 144), which is a crucial and unrepeatable stage in the creation process since it is only for this first improvisation that the actors’ knowledge of the situation is limited. Subsequent improvisations are always influenced by the preceding ones and can never have the same “innocence” as actors can’t unlearn the knowledge they have gained. But the subsequent improvisations are crucial in allowing characters to examine and re-examine their motivations and for the process of refining and eventually polishing the scene. Leigh’s genius is in choosing from the hundreds of improvisations which to go ahead with, and paring them down and refining what is kept.

Because the storyline is constantly being developed during this improvisatory process the actors are constantly on call, even if they were not initially called for the improvisation session. *Naked* lead David Thewlis describes working with Leigh as “very stimulating” but definitely not easy:

You work until the early hours of the morning, without any predictability. You’re never able to make arrangements in your social life. Sometimes you will be required to wait by the phone – and if an improvisation by other actors requires your character to be brought back the Assistant Director will call you up. He tells you to warm up, and go to such and such a place. It’s a bit like being a fireman. (in Howe, 2000: 49)

Thewlis found himself becoming obsessive about his character in *Naked*, although Leigh actually cautions his actors against total immersion in the character since he considers it unhealthy: he insists that they try to maintain a degree of objectivity and

that they refer to the character in the third person in discussion (see Carney, 2000: 11). For the actors, being constantly on call like this can lead to burnout if one *is* constantly called upon, but it can also lead to self-doubt if one is *not* called in the end. “You need a huge amount of patience and the ability, if possible, to keep paranoia well and truly out of the door and under lock and key” said Cartlidge, “you have to have nerves of steel” (Turan, 2000: 93, 94). Even Brenda Blethyn, the “star” of *Secrets and Lies*, became convinced that everyone else had been called and was in a particular scene, and that scene was what the film was about. Despite this, it’s Leigh’s unusual and challenging working method that attracts actors to his projects in the first place: “[P]eople kept talking to me about the script, asking me what attracted me to the role of Hortense,” says Marianne Jean-Baptiste. “There was no role – what you’re attracted to is the process” (in Turan, 2000: 92).

Once the characters and their relationships have developed, Leigh will “monitor and follow and push through to a dramatic conflict of some kind” (Morley, 2000: 4) to take the narrative to the next level. This is not necessarily easy to achieve: as Porton writes, “By the standards of Hollywood narrative cinema, very little happens in a Mike Leigh film” (Ellickson and Porton, 2000: 60). Leigh, like many other realist filmmakers, must frequently find sources of drama in inaction rather than in action. Judy Bloch suggested in an interview that in lieu of a plot climax, Leigh had “a moment when the character does realise who or what he or she really is, sort of a degree-zero realisation” (2000: 18). Leigh acknowledged this, but said that this only came with his later work, since characters didn’t tend to come to terms with things or face up to themselves earlier. Bloch’s perceptive observation certainly applies to *Secrets and Lies*, though, and there is an element of the Bildungsroman, the moment of personal epiphany, which lends structure to many of Leigh’s films, and on which many of his works end. They are moments of transcendental clarity which arise firmly out of ordinary, everyday situations, where there is suddenly what Eric Santner refers to a “a surplus of the real within reality” (in Watson, 2004: 31). As Terence Rafferty writes in his 1991 review of *Life Is Sweet*, Leigh

prepares us to accept the moments of piercing, almost miraculous clarity that arise, as if by happy accident, at the end of his best films. What he’s searching for in his movies is the possibility of seeing the world through someone else’s

eyes, someone specific whose life can be shared only through patient observation of its random and stubbornly idiosyncratic details. His art consists of making such moments of sudden, profound understanding seem worth any slapstick catastrophe. (in Watson, 2004: 31)

After years of being asked the same questions about his working process (questions which at times he has resented since they suggested greater interest in his working method than in the work itself), it seems Leigh has “distilled” his response to these two key principles. In an interview with Jerry Talmer in 2005, Leigh summed up his working process as follows: “First, the actors take part without any idea of the process. Second, each actor only knows what his character would know” (2005: n.p.). Both strategies are aimed at keeping the work “fresh,” particularly by capturing the actors’ responses. The restriction of knowledge is a key technique in Leigh’s improvisatory working process. Since there is no script, or even story, at the outset, the actors can’t simply flip through to the end to find out what happens: they are kept partially in the dark and denied certain information until Leigh deems it appropriate for them to know it. Characters should only know as much as they would plausibly know about the other characters, the aim being to give their encounters a freshness and honesty, to encourage more genuine and off-the-cuff reactions from the cast, and to ensure that individuals have a greater or lesser understanding of the circumstances of the other characters and of the narrative as a whole. This makes the “master improvisation” all the more crucial, since it is only at this point that the characters will be motivated and informed only by the limited knowledge they have been given, on a “need-to-know” basis, of the other characters. Some directors use the element of surprise similarly during the actual shooting process: Kassovitz had one of his cast members throw small stones unexpectedly at another while he was performing and the cameras were rolling, Leigh’s fellow Briton and fellow realist Loach surprises his actors on set, and even Alfred Hitchcock, the master of meticulous planning, surprised Janet Leigh in the shower scene in *Psycho* (1960) by making the shower-water unexpectedly cold. But Leigh, as always, keeps such improvisatory moments strictly to the pre-production phase. In *Secrets and Lies* this technique worked very well to support the revelatory nature of the narrative. The most dramatic moments in the film happen around those revelations, and by limiting the actors’ knowledge until that point the actor-characters’ immediate reactions could be incorporated into the scenes,

increasing the sense of authenticity. The film centres on Hortense (Marianne Jean-Baptiste), a young black woman who goes in search of her birth mother when her adoptive mother dies, and Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn), the white woman who gave up her daughter for adoption many years before. The two eventually meet as mother and daughter and finally reveal their relationship to their family at a family gathering.

In both key revelatory instances, the scene where Hortense and Cynthia realise they are mother and daughter despite their different races, and the final scene disclosing this fact to the family, Leigh held back information from some of the actors so that they were initially as surprised as their characters. In preparation for the scene where Cynthia and Hortense meet, he instructed the two actresses to meet outside a cemetery. But since neither actress knew who to expect, and since Blethyn had been expecting the daughter to be another of the cast members, Emma Amos, she was caught unawares when Jean-Baptiste came up to her and announced “I’m Hortense.” According to Leigh, their interaction in that moment was a “genuine organic thing” (McDonald, 1999: 146). This made for a breathtaking performance in the film itself – or perhaps it could be more exactly described as a *breathholding* performance since one hardly wants to breathe – the interaction is so intense and engaging. The scene in the café, after the two women meet outside the tube station and Hortense persuades Cynthia to come and look at the documents even though she is convinced that Hortense has the wrong person, is shot with a static camera throughout and is largely covered by one exceptionally long take, permitting no distraction from the performance. Due presumably to the strongly developed backstory and the improvisatory exercises of the rehearsal period, Cynthia’s entire history flickers across her face as she realises that she is indeed Hortense’s mother and recalls that she had indeed “been with a black man” (*fig. 5*). The camera stays mercilessly static on the twosome as Cynthia cries: “I’m so ashamed!” turning her face away from Hortense and from the camera but unable to move (she is pinned on the banquette between Hortense and the wall) or to hide. “Best to tell the truth, isn’t it? That way no one gets hurt,” says Hortense later in the film. This is one of the most intense moments of truth, and just as the characters are forced to face that truth, we are compelled to watch.

Kenneth Turan writes that *Secrets and Lies* “typifies the expert way Leigh zeroes in on the emotional stress points of relationships,” and points to this tearoom scene, a “scene of exceptional emotional power” as a scene which does so more than any other in the film, and which “tears at the heart” (2000: 88). Remarkably, Brenda Blethyn’s Cynthia manages to move with utter authenticity between laughter and tears, sustaining a performance in a single shot that lasts over eight minutes.

Cinematographer Dick Pope agrees with Turan that “that moment is devastating... you can’t believe it’s acting, the emotion is so true” (in Turan, 2000: 88). Leigh himself points to this scene as being evidence of the real value of his method:

That film [*Secrets and Lies*] cost over £3 million, and people might say, ‘where’s the value for money? Where’s the helicopter shots?’ That scene is where. You can only do that kind of stuff because of weeks and weeks of preparation, of building history. Anyone can get two actresses in a room and say, ‘She’s your mother, improvise,’ but it will still be crap. We’ve lived through it all, we’ve built it, and it all earns its keep. That time spent gestating is value for money, and nobody gets it for free. (in Turan, 2000: 97)

It’s no coincidence that the two most dramatic moments, this initial encounter between Cynthia and Hortense and the barbecue scene where Cynthia reveals Hortense’s relationship to the family, are both shot in typically realist style in very long takes, allowing Leigh to showcase the results of months of rehearsal and development. Although they did in fact shoot mid-shot singles and close-ups, Leigh found that “when [they] looked at the dailies the following day – and we only did two takes – the second take was so totally, utterly perfect that we knew straight away without a shadow of a doubt that this was it” (Pride, 2000: 111). Leigh’s reason for shooting the extra close-ups was not necessarily because he was worried that the scene wouldn’t work (there should have been little concern about that considering the polished nature of the performances by that stage) but because he didn’t know how it was going to need to work within the overall structure of the film: unusually, it is the structure of the film rather than the performances which are left open to chance as the shooting starts.

Three quarters of *Secrets and Lies* was shot without knowing what the ending would be, and because of the organic nature of the script the emphasis changed constantly. Coveney, who was allowed to view some of the early rushes of the film while he was writing his book on Leigh, remarked that the early footage of *Secrets and Lies* gave very little indication of the most important themes and characters in the final film. Leigh firmly believes in keeping things open-ended and finds that if he gets everything going in the right direction “then the end is there like a harvest to be plundered. Obviously, I’ve got all kinds of ideas about it, but I don’t have to commit myself” (in Brunette, 2000: 32). Added to this is the fact that “the actors never know anything more about the whole thing than their characters do,” which is “important because it means that you really preserve those tensions and get the reality of the thing” (Brunette, 2000: 32). When it came to improvising and developing the final barbecue scene for Roxanne’s birthday in *Secrets and Lies*, only Cynthia and Hortense knew the full story and the fact that they were mother and daughter. To the other main characters in the film and in the scene – Cynthia’s brother Maurice (Timothy Spall), his wife Monica (Phyllis Logan) and Cynthia’s daughter Roxanne (Claire Rushbrook) – the revelation that Hortense was Cynthia’s daughter was a bombshell. Maurice and Monica knew that Cynthia had given up a baby for adoption many years before but had no idea that Hortense was that baby, and Roxanne had no idea about any of it. Characters speak in half-truths and half-finished sentences, holding information back from the audience just as Leigh held information back from them. In the scene where Monica and Maurice are talking about whether Roxanne knows about Cynthia giving a baby up for adoption they can’t utter the taboo words – infertility, adoption – out loud. “Does she know?” asks Monica? “About us?” asks Maurice in reply, to which Monica responds defensively with another question: “What’s there to know about us?” and finally “No, I mean about Cynthia, before she was born....” Dialogue is understated to the point of ellipsis, mimicking authentic conversations where things are left unsaid. The dialogue is rich with subtext, having emerged from a long process of exercises and rehearsals aimed at establishing exactly that: “You can’t miss what you never had” says Monica, referring to Roxanne’s father but the applicability of the line to the “missing” child which they are unable to bear is clear and painful.

The use of surprise and restriction of knowledge is intensified in the climactic barbecue scene by the fact that it is Roxanne's birthday they are gathered to celebrate, and she is therefore the centre of attention but also the person who knows the least about the situation at this point. The revelation elicited a very strong reaction from Rushbrook:

When Cynthia said 'this is my daughter' I could not believe my ears... I remember Mike asking me 'Did you really have no idea?' because of course he had been so diligently keeping this secret for months. I don't think that I could have played it as honestly as I did if we'd worked on it any other way. I remember feeling as Claire, as an actress, and no doubt it helped my performance... really appalled that those other actors kept it from me, and that Mike had been working out this whole secret, and I felt like an idiot... This is a side which came very easily to Roxanne. (in McDonald, 1999: 147)

The scene was then further developed, after the initial "master improvisation," so that the actors could investigate and reinvestigate the motivations of their characters. Some of Rushbrook's own confusion and sense of having been left out is clearly conveyed in her final performance in the film, as Roxanne struggles first to understand her mother's confession at all, then resists believing it (turning in one terribly poignant moment to her uncle and uttering his name like a plea in the hope that he will reveal it as a lie), then is filled with anger and humiliation as she realises that she is the last to know and that it has been kept from her all her life. When Rushbrook initially found out who Hortense was, she felt that Roxanne should run away, never to return. It was the character of Roxanne's boyfriend Paul (played by Lee Ross) who persuaded her during the improvisations to return, so it was only through the process of improvisation and Rushbrook's in-character exploration of Roxanne's motivations that the film's final resolution and ending was achieved.

The fact that there is no script means that knowledge is limited for other crucial individuals working on the film as well: as the cinematographer, Pope claimed that he had "not-a-clue" about what he was about to shoot (in McDonald, 1999: 148). Pope tries to "prepare an area for the actors to work in that is free of any encumbrances"

(McDonald, 1999: 148) and takes his lead from them.<sup>14</sup> To shoot the final barbecue scene, Pope opted for a characteristically realist long take to film all the characters around the big outdoor table, which suited the ensemble feeling of the conclusive climactic scene: “you just hold the one shot and all the characters are well featured, they’re in, they’re out, they’re foreground, they’re background, they’re moving around and disappearing out there, and coming back around here,” says Pope, “*you feel like you are actually sitting there at the table observing them*” (in McDonald, 1999: 148, my emphasis).

Phillip French of the *Observer* describes the barbecue scene as “masterly moviemaking that never draws attention to itself,” commenting particularly on the use of deep focus, a well-used technique in realist cinema from as far back as Jean Renoir, which allows the characters to interact without ever specifically favouring any one of them. Maurice stands apart from the rest at the barbecue but is still “vividly of the group” and kept literally in the picture through the deep focus and the long take (in Coveney, 1996: xx). Ray Pride also praises the barbecue scene, “portrayed in a sustained take that mingles the strengths of theatre and cinema with [the] immaculate timing of physical farce and an overlap of the characters sniping at each other. It doesn’t literally have plates spinning in the air, but it keeps topping itself, in the style of silent comedy. You think ‘How can it keep going? Can it keep going?’” (2000: 111). Pride asked Leigh how he had decided on this approach, and was told that it was because they had no cover shot, and because the sound was terrible and the light fluctuated constantly. But apart from these pragmatic concerns, Leigh wanted to focus on the domesticity of the scene, charged as we know it to be with the tension of the inevitable revelation that’s about to happen. “There’s a huge network of relationships and on top of that, the audience is waiting for the shit to hit the fan” says Leigh:

I knew that in the next scene, when the bomb does go off, I was going to want to cut a lot. So that dictated, ‘Let’s just do it in one shot’. In the end, there’s a level at which you want film to aspire to the condition of documentary – you want the event to feel like it really is happening whether you’re filming or not.

---

<sup>14</sup> Leigh has pointed out, however, that while they are “looking for a way for the camera to serve the action... the actors are so solid in what they’re doing that the action can and must also serve the camera” (in Raphael, 2008: 37).

But you also want the film to aspire to the condition of theatre, or circus. Is he or she going to fall off the tightrope? The only way to get that to happen is just to be very very thorough. [The key to the tearoom and the barbecue scene] and most of the film, really, is just rehearsing it all very thoroughly so that the only things that can go wrong are those things you can't control... the human element is under control. (Pride, 2000: 111)

Richard Armstrong, who calls this scene “one of the most powerful scenes in recent British cinema,” likens Leigh and Pope’s return to two-shots in the scene after the “bomb” has gone off to a process of “rebuilding a smashed status quo image by image” (Armstrong, 2005: 114).<sup>15</sup>

The sense of documentary-style observation recurs throughout the film, sometimes more overtly than others, and is crucial in Leigh’s ability to create what Porton has described as a “fictional landscape that is instantly recognizable” (Ellickson and Porton, 2000: 60). For all the observation, though, there is never the sense of confrontational invasiveness that a director such as Von Trier goes in for. Leigh and Pope steer clear of zoom lenses, just as *cinéma vérité* father Jean Rouch did, opting instead for prime lenses (Greer, 2006: n.p.). In the initial sequence, Hortense’s mother’s funeral, we are shown a long shot of the graveyard where the funeral is taking place. There are echoes of Realist painter Gustave Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans* (1849) here, which may well be deliberate considering Leigh’s art history background.<sup>16</sup> A slow, very mobile tracking shot skirts the edge of the graveyard, distant and watchful like an uninvited guest angling for a closer look. A series of close-up shots follows, shot on a long lens as if from a distance, faces partly obscured in many instances by objects or other characters so that it takes some time until we realise who, from this crowd of close-ups, we are going to be engaging with. It is as if the camera has been watching from afar, and has finally settled on Hortense as its subject of interest: we see her in passing for less than a second in the first shot she features in, but the camera finally returns to dwell on her tear-stained face in close-up,

---

<sup>15</sup> In a similarly apocalyptic moment in *Persona* (1966), Ingmar Bergman literally shatters and rebuilds the image, using a different stylistic approach to achieve the same effect.

<sup>16</sup> This is not the only instance in the film where a shot resembles a painting. The vignette, so short and static it could be a snapshot, of Maurice miserably drinking his beer beneath a huge portrait in a pub could equally be a realist portrait, with its Courbetesque Realist pallet of terracottas and its pensive bearded subject.

almost direct to camera. There's a suggestion, through this initial refusal to privilege any one particular character, that the film could choose to follow the life of any one of the faces in the crowd and that there is a sense of shared experience, pain and issues in the film to come: a sense of community and locality. "We're all in pain. Why can't we share our pain?" wails Maurice in the final climactic scene, summing up a key thematic focus of the film.

Although Leigh uses more conventional shot/reverse-shot/close-up sequences for several of his more intimate scenes, he also employs a significant number of long shots throughout the film, as well as shots from behind the character's backs or partly obscured, as if they have been caught unawares carrying on with their everyday lives. When we get our first shot of Roxanne, it is a long shot of a woman sweeping the street. Even though we have been introduced to her in the previous dialogue (she has been described as "on the streets" again), the distanced way in which she is shot and the fact that she is in profile and doesn't engage with the camera makes it almost like a background for the entrance of the "real" character, until Leigh cuts in closer on her and we realise she is "it" (*fig. 6*) The observing camera functions similarly in a number of other scenes: in the scene where Hortense and Cynthia are both waiting outside the tube station the camera is at a distance on a long lens with cars constantly obscuring our view of the two women so that we have to search for them in the crowd just as they search for each other; in the intimate scene where Roxanne and her boyfriend make up and confess their affection for each other, the camera is placed behind them, so that he in particular has his back to the camera for the whole long take, and the film closes with an extreme high angle long shot of Cynthia in the back yard with Roxanne and Hortense, looking (as Cynthia says) "like a couple of garden gnomes." We leave the characters as we found them: merged with their setting, ordinary and unremarkable except that we now know their stories: "This is the life, aint it?" says Cynthia, as the final line in the film. Again, there is the sense that we could have chosen to focus on anyone in the neighbourhood, and the camera, having documented the lives of this group of people for two hours, now quietly takes its leave again.

The observational camera style suits the improvised, character-centred *vérité* nature of the work, although Pope is at pains to point out that there is nothing improvisational

about the shooting once the scene has been locked down: “Once [Mike’s] blocked the scene with the actors and we’ve worked how we’re going to shoot it, that scene is buried in concrete. It is written down and that scene is shot conventionally... there is no improvisation whatsoever” (in McDonald, 1999: 14). Leigh regards Pope as having major input into how scenes are filmed. On one hand the camera must respond to the rehearsed action and interaction of the characters (this brings to mind Von Trier’s insistence that the camera should follow the actors and not vice versa, a characteristic realist camera technique), and on the other hand the camera adds new opportunities to the scene. McDonald notes that it was Pope’s idea to put the camera in the bathroom when Hortense leaves the dinner table so that he could capture her response to what is going on in the other room (1999: 148-9).

*Secrets and Lies* was a make or break film for Leigh, particularly after the popular and critical acclaim for *Naked* (1993), which won Leigh the prize for Best Director and Thewlis the prize for Best Actor at Cannes. *Naked* was a hard act to follow, but Leigh and his cast and crew pulled it off with aplomb, securing for themselves both the Palme d’Or and the International Critics’ Prize and the Best Actress award for Brenda Blethyn at Cannes in 1996, followed by a “similar double” at the Sydney Film Festival where *Secrets and Lies* was named best picture by audience and critics alike (see Turan, 2000: 86).

Leigh’s is a highly arduous, disciplined and rigorous process, and he himself has confessed that after many years of dedicated work in this vein is tiring of this somewhat relentless rehearsal and development approach. “To be honest,” Leigh told one interviewer in 1991, “twenty years ago I found long rehearsals, investigating relationships, the research endlessly fascinating, and in some respects I find it something of a chore now” (in Bloch, 2000: 19). More recently, Leigh has referred to the rehearsal process as “a form of purgatory” (in Raphael, 2008: 256). But however burdensome the process has become for its inventor, it makes for extraordinary, and extra-ordinary, performance moments. Despite its arduousness, Leigh remains committed to this process and is not about to start writing scripts:

I couldn’t do it, certainly couldn’t do it as *well*. [Our process] is partly long-winded because no stone is to be left unturned; you have to investigate

everything you can think of, and more, in terms of the characters, their world, their background, everything they've experienced... it's part of the job which is not to be underestimated of actually creating them so that we really believe they exist. (in Bloch, 2000: 20)

Even though we are aware that this is fiction rather than factual documentary *per se*, the aim is to build the characters so fully that they take on a life of their own: "you have to keep reminding yourself that these are actors" said Judy Bloch (2000: 20), and while it seems unlikely that one would actually mistake the actors for their characters, there is a realness and a solidity to them which comes out of Leigh's lengthy collaborative process and which is key to his achievement of realism. A great deal of Leigh's skill (and his actors') lies in the ability to create characters so rounded and full, so fully inhabited by the actors, that they have been mistaken for "playing themselves," something which Leigh hotly contests: "These people aren't playing themselves, they're creating characterizations. I cast in a very empirical, instructive way, partly because I work with people who are known to be highly versatile character actors" he argues. It's only after a tough three-month rehearsal period and nine weeks of shooting that "an actor's able to go into character pretty thoroughly and deliver the goods," according to Leigh: "You want it to feel like it's always been there" he says, "and by the time we get to shoot it it bloody well feels like it has" (Brunette, 2000: 31).

Later in her article, Bloch goes on, after suggesting that the actors in Leigh's films seem like real people, to contradict herself in a sense by pointing out exactly how the characters *do* differ from real people. There's a "sort of paradox in that kind of intense creation of reality" she says: "in the end... they're not real, they're super-real characters" (2000: 20). And Leigh agrees. Part of the reason why he thinks this is the case is that even sophisticated audiences have expectations about how people behave in the movies, and this is "not like real people, in behavioural terms" (Bloch, 2000: 20). "On the whole" says Leigh, "characters in movies behave like actors behave when they're playing characters in movies. Which is to say, with all the twitches, tics and behavioural and physical characterization and defects removed and sort of

blanded and bleached out of existence” (in Miller, 2000: 82).<sup>17</sup> Instead, Leigh (similarly to many other realist filmmakers) uses improvisation and careful, unrelenting observation to zero in on people’s behavioural and physical idiosyncrasies, including their less palatable attributes, refusing to turn away from what he sees:

... what we’re dealing with is making people like people really are, behaviourally... Obviously there are considerations involved which have to do with heightening things – which actually are *not* heightening beyond what’s real, but because you look at it, you actually start to perceive... As when you’re in a subway, right up against someone, you have to look at them, though you try not to, you have to see them, hear them, smell them. That’s what it’s about, really. (in Bloch, 2000: 20)

Despite Leigh’s defensiveness at being labelled as a sneering patroniser of lower class characters, he does also admit that he is “in a sense... a caricaturist. And I say that without apologizing” (Stone, 2000: 27). As a very young cinephile Leigh pondered how great it would be “if we could have people in films like people *really are*” (in Howe, 2000: 47). His aim, he says is

to put characters on the screen like real people: idiosyncratic, unique and individual and properly placed in their social context. Not to do characters like you get in many films. Bland. Real people are by definition interesting. I can sit in an airport or bus station for as long as I have to and I don’t get bored because my job is to put that on screen. It involves processes of detail and heightening and distillation. That is in the nature of caricature in the best sense. (in Stone, 2000: 27)

---

<sup>17</sup> Both Cassavetes and Altman, committed realists and improvisers, similarly bemoan the typecasting, homogeneity and flawlessness of conventional movie characters: “The trouble is on screen everyone is perfect. They’re a perfect heavy. They’re a perfect good guy. That’s boring. I encourage the actors not to be better than they are” says Cassavetes (in Coveney, 2000: n.p.), and Altman claims “I don’t have any superhuman people in my films because there have never been any people without flaws” (in Mackenzie, 2004: 44). It must be acknowledged that Cassavetes and Altman’s views are polemical rather than accurate. The ability of mainstream cinema to provide ambiguous heroes, anti-heroes and, even, villains, launched the careers of such icons as James Mason in Britain or Humphrey Bogart in Hollywood, and enabled shifts in persona, such as that of John Wayne in *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956).

The words “heighten” and “distil” crop up constantly in relation to Leigh, particularly in interview transcriptions. They are clearly his own words, which sum up his way of working: not naturalism but heightened and intensified realism, capturing the essence of the world around him, the *zeitgeist*. Leigh has said that his films are “primarily... a response to the way people are, the ways things are as I experience them. In a way, they are acts of taking the temperature” (in Howe, 2000: 45).<sup>18</sup> Leigh “heightens” elements he draws from the real world in much the same way that caricaturists well loved by him, such as Georg Grosz, have done. Directly contradicting the advocates of chance and serendipity as “art,” Leigh says, “no work of art is truly naturalistic. Art is not real life, and has to be organized, designed, and distilled because it’s dramatic. There is nothing accidental, it’s all contrivance” (in Quart, 2000: 132). If Cassavetes, for example, uses improvisation for the purposes of naturalism, Leigh’s use of improvisation puts the “natural” through a distilling process to create a heightened realism that (according to Leigh, certainly) eliminates the more rambling, potentially tedious, undisciplined results of “private” improvisation. This distillation process intensifies the “good stuff” that you choose to keep. It also, in the hands of Leigh, occasions comedy. “[W]e are in the business not only of making people believe and care and all those things but *laugh*” he told Judy Bloch in 1991: “we are in the business of being funny, basically, of being comedians, and that’s not to be underestimated” (2000: 20).

On one hand, Leigh’s work undoubtedly has strong documentary qualities, his earlier less stylized work (pre-*Naked*) in particular being endowed with a “near anthropological precision” (Ellickson and Porton, 2000: 62). Characters are drawn from real life, develop extensive and deep lives of their own through improvisation and rehearsal, and are frequently shot with long takes and an observational documentary style camera. On other hand the intensification of characteristics that comes out of Leigh’s “distillation” process can lead to comedy, grotesquerie and some potentially exaggerated-seeming performances – for instance Alison Steadman’s spectacularly awful Beverley in *Abigail’s Party*. It comes with the territory of

---

<sup>18</sup> Originally in International Herald Tribune 2 February 1994

heightening the real, which is key to Leigh's own particular brand of realism, and it's a process he has honed through years of dedicated work.

Leigh's collaborative, improvisational process, however arduous, is an indispensable part of Leigh's realism, of his creation of fictional "social documentary." As McDonald notes:

The actual substance of the film, the actual quality and the discipline of the order and the form of the film, must go beyond being merely people improvising... obviously you try and make it as natural as possible... You could even say it aspires to the condition of improvisation but even that is to miss the point, which is that it aspires to the conditions of reality. And obviously people in life are improvising. (1999: 150)

Alan Riding remarks that "by the time his films reach the screen, nothing is accidental yet everything seems natural" (2000: 99). This meticulously finished yet spontaneous-seeming quality of Leigh's work is made possible only by his improvisatory way of working. "To get everything right for that one moment on film, that's what interests me" says Leigh: "You want the spontaneity of the theatre to happen at that white-hot moment when the camera is rolling" (in Watson, 2004: 31). Despite the uniqueness of his particular approach, the fact that as Alison Steadman puts it "nobody works quite like Mike" (Bloch, 2000: 22), Leigh's working method puts him in the camp of many other good realists, preceded and informed as it is by a long lineage of practitioners who have similarly turned to improvisation in their own quests for theatrical and cinematic truth.

## Space, place and the everyday in *La Haine*

“Everything had to seem real and yet be graphically interesting.”

Mathieu Kassovitz (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 192)

One of the extraordinary successes of Kassovitz’s 1995 film *La Haine* is the fact that it is a genuinely popular realist film. It was the surprise hit of the year, voted number fourteen out of the top twenty movies in France for 1995 despite the absence of stars, a relatively unknown young director, a modest budget and no special effects (Vincendeau, 2005: 82).<sup>1</sup> As Jill Forbes writes, it has become a “cult movie inside and outside France, attracting large audiences and generating websites and electronic discussion groups – a success which is based on its ability to appeal to widely different audiences” (2000: 171).

*La Haine* deals with social issues that France was, and still is, grappling with. While *La Haine* was clearly a work of fiction, it was based on actual events and issues and also foreshadowed the riots that happened shortly after the release of the film in 1995 and 1997. Ginette Vincendeau writes that “[d]espite Kassovitz’s insistence that *La Haine* was fictional, his film thus acquired a semi-documentary status, and a debate raged about the film’s ‘responsibility’ in the later riots” (2005: 7).

The film features marginalised, unexceptional, unglamorous, unemployed working class characters doing unremarkable things, and in fact, for the most part, doing very little at all. As is generally the case with expositional realism, issues are raised through a character-driven story. The narrative is episodic and based on a collection of sometimes unrelated scenes which, according to Kassovitz’s claims, has no real story or structure. But the triumph of Kassovitz’s particular brand of realism in *La Haine* is his invention of a style which is at once utterly contemporary and in many ways an act of cinephilic homage to past masters, without allowing that style to override the importance of the content and the issues within the film. He also avoids

---

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Ginette Vincendeau’s excellent study on *La Haine*, which clarified, confirmed and substantiated a great deal of my own thinking, and which I consequently refer to extensively in this chapter.

falling into the trap of making an extended MTV-style music video,<sup>2</sup> despite the potential appropriateness of this style with its rapidly edited sequences, jump cuts, driving hip hop music and its easy appeal to the target audience. Kassovitz kept his Steadicam shots motivated and his soundtrack minimal.

The stylistic feature which truly distinguishes *La Haine* is the interplay between cinematography and *mise-en-scène*, which owes as much to cinematic classics as it does to contemporary music videos. Through this interplay Kassovitz explores characters, context and space, creating a realism with a heightened aesthetic which is assured, engaging, and integral to the film's broad-based popularity.

*La Haine* shows us Paris through the eyes of the film's three protagonists, dispossessed angry young men trapped in the city's economic, ethnic and social underclass. It was released in 1995 at the time of the election of a new right wing government in France, and is based on ongoing unrest and the real-life shooting (in 1993) of sixteen-year-old Zairean Makome Bowole while he was handcuffed and in police custody (see Cousins, 2004: 463). *La Haine* is one of many films of the 1990s which explore the issues of displacement, alienation, masculine identity and globalisation (Hallam, 2000: 184-5). It signalled the "arrival" of the *Jeune Cinéma Français* (Young French Cinema) of the nineties, which is perceived as a whole as offering a "new realism" in a "post-ideology" era" (Vincendeau, 2005: 33-5), and it is also "the most successful but also most idiosyncratic example" from amongst a spate of *banlieue* films made at the time, which describe the life of marginalised characters on the urban outskirts (Vincendeau, 2005: 98).

Despite the initial misgivings of potential financial backers, *La Haine* earned huge critical and popular acclaim – quite an achievement for a subtitled black and white

---

<sup>2</sup> Jill Forbes and Sarah Street suggest that "much of Kassovitz's *La Haine* is filmed in the so-called MTV style" (2000: 43). While Kassovitz does cultivate a cool, "graphically interesting" style, and the youth-orientated subject-matter is similar, this is a rather reductive categorisation of his approach. Kassovitz avoids using many of the ubiquitous MTV techniques (jump cuts, over-filtering of the images in shooting and post-production, ramping and other "trendy" editing techniques) in his shooting and particularly his editing of *La Haine*. He also avoids non-diegetic music almost entirely, which MTV obviously relies on significantly. Chris Darke points out that the films of the Young French Cinema (exemplified by *La Haine*), "do not have the 1980s ad-man's gloss of the French *cinéma du look*, and in many ways they can be seen as a reaction against this highly exportable style that exploited the lingua franca of television and music video" (2000: 154).

film about police brutality, shot on a modest budget and set in a depressing social situation where nothing much happens and there is no redemptive fairy-tale ending.<sup>3</sup> Through his innovative treatment of this potentially unpalatable subject matter, director Mathieu Kassovitz ensured not only that he distinguished *La Haine* from other miserabilist social realist films but also that the film and the issues it raises got the recognition and coverage they deserved.<sup>4</sup> In the process he earned the coveted director's prize at Cannes while still in his twenties and has even been compared to Godard (by Alan Riou in the *Nouvel Observateur*) in terms of his contribution to the emergence of a new cinema (in Vincendeau, 2005: 85).

In his commentary on the ten-year anniversary special edition DVD, Kassovitz claims that the youth, commitment and dynamism of the cast, crew and producers Lazennec were crucial to the success of the film. Perhaps only such a youthful, passionate crew would have insisted on taking such an uncompromising position and flouting the counsel of more experienced, and potentially more jaded, filmmakers or financiers. Vincendeau writes that a focus on social issues and on marginal characters connects the disparate films of the recent *Jeune Cinéma Français*, pointing out that this “makes a markedly different cinema from the narcissistic personal relationships in bourgeois milieux favoured by many traditional French auteur films, and the sleek 1980s *cinéma du look*” (2005: 34). As a critic in the *Evening Standard Magazine* delightfully put it, this young French cinema was a welcome relief from “those genteel pieces in which Emmanuelle Béart fiddles while Daniel Auteil smoulders” (in Vincendeau, 2005: 93). The consensus is that the young filmmakers of the 1990s choose to engage with social problems. In the case of *La Haine*, the clarity and passion of their approach, as well as their proximity in age (if not class) to the main characters in the film certainly paid off in the box office, and took the “*jeune cinéma français* [into] the mainstream, beyond its normal cinephile circle” (Vincendeau, 2005: 33).

---

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, while both Kassovitz's short film *Fierrot le Pou* (1990) and his first feature *Métisse* (1993) deal with racial issues, his generic approach was quite different. *Fierrot* is a comedy poking fun at a gangly basket-ball-playing white youth (played by Kassovitz himself) who is completely outclassed by a black player, and *Métisse* is a gently satirical romantic comedy about a young pregnant woman whose two suitors (one black, one white) want to know which of them is the father of the unborn child.

<sup>4</sup> The film sparked a media frenzy, Kassovitz went into hiding due to the threatening response of the Front Nationale, and the French Prime Minister was given a special viewing of the film (see Hallam, 2000: 197)

The accessibility and hybridity of the narrative style which Kassovitz and his youthful crew adopted was a significant reason for the film's popularity. Kassovitz combines an expositional realist narrative form, which incorporates broader issues into a character-driven story and is cyclical and episodic in nature, with expressionistic techniques drawn from European arthouse cinema and melodramatic elements from generic fiction (Hallam, 2000: 192). There are moments of cinematic homily to European and American classics, notably Godard's work in the exploration of Paris's urban spaces and *Taxi Driver* (1976), Scorsese's study of urban alienation, which is overtly referenced in the film. Forbes remarks on Scorsese's aesthetic influence, notably his combination of the realist and the poetic and his incorporation of street noises and urban diegetic sound into the soundtrack (2000: 177). *La Haine* also shares certain characteristics with the spate of 1990s ghetto films which Elizabeth Mermin claims "leapt into Hollywood as hybrids between pseudocus and gangster films, constructing a lucrative new nineties realism" (in Hallam, 2000: 218). Kassovitz succeeded in his determination to set his film apart from other "hood films" (as he says in the Behind the Scenes DVD) by creating his own distinctive, accomplished, realist cinematic style. The heightened aesthetic which he adopts and his poetic exploration of everyday space recalls the work of the French poetic realists of the 1930s, as well as Bazin's writing on realism. This stylistic treatment appealed to an impressively diverse range of viewers and distinguishes *La Haine* from other films on similar subjects.

In *La Haine*, Kassovitz strikes a balance between the studied, highly aesthetic realism which was pioneered by Welles in *Citizen Kane* (1941), and much-praised by Bazin in his writings, and the documentary realist style favoured by the Italian Neorealists (and exemplified in Bazin's writing by Rouquier's *Farrebique* (1946), which relentlessly omits any "non-natural" material. Whereas *Farrebique's* realism "derives from the object itself" and *Citizen Kane's* from the "way it structures what it represents" (Bazin, 1972: 42), Kassovitz skilfully fuses elements from both approaches creating a quintessentially cinematic realist style. At the core of this is the use of a highly mobile, fluid camera which explores the characters, their spaces, and their existence in those spaces to the fullest extent, constantly ensuring that we remain aware of the individuals *and* their context. Bazin praised the Italian neorealists for achieving something similar, noting their ability to "portray an action without separating it from

its material context and without loss of that uniquely human quality of which it is an essential part” (1972: 38).

Apart from the reportage-style credit sequence, Kassovitz liberates us from the current preoccupation with documentary-style handheld camera work as being the natural signifier of “the real” and draws instead on earlier masters of a more determinedly aesthetic cinematic realism such as that of Welles and his cinematographer Gregg Toland, whose groundbreaking work with the long take, deep focus, deep space and the simultaneous layering of action in space within single shots is legendary.

As mentioned above, Bazin wrote of Welles that he “restored to cinematographic illusion a fundamental quality of reality – its continuity” (Bazin, 1972: 28) and in a sense Kassovitz does the same in an era where television in particular has led to an increasingly fragmented and frenetic shooting and editing style. Kassovitz draws us in to the *cité* context in particular through slower, longer duration shots, so that we experience time and space similarly to the characters. The camera stands in for us and we “hang out” with the trio, whether they are ambling around the bleak streets (where we follow them with the help of the Steadicam) or immobile in empty open public spaces, talking about nothing of consequence.

Kassovitz’s cinematography in the *cité* scenes sets *La Haine* apart from other *banlieue* films. Here, particularly, he found his aesthetic solutions in the cinematographic approach rather than in costly set design, which would have compromised the desired naturalistic feel of the film. And here is where Kassovitz’s work, and that of his Director of Photography, Pierre Aïm as well as a dedicated team of grips and electricians, becomes in several ways a masterful contemporary reworking of Welles’s approach. Somewhat contrarily, perhaps, Kassovitz made the decision to use the majority of his budget on shooting the *cité* scenes. This was partly due to the financial constraints, and partly because Kassovitz wanted the shots of the estates to look as good as possible, to avoid the clichéd depictions of the *cité* as “site of containment for the marginal or threatening ‘other’” (Higbee, 2001: 199).<sup>5</sup> He also

---

<sup>5</sup> William Higbee goes on to argue that by reinforcing the binary opposition between the city and the *cité*, Kassovitz entrenched the sense that it was the turf of the other – the marginalised male youth. He argues that “this deliberate distinction between the centre and the urban periphery in *La Haine* is

chose to shoot in one of the less run-down *cités* because he wanted not “a derelict *cité* of the kind that they exhibit in the media, but a more ordinary one, in order to show that their explosive problems are not caused by the architecture” (in Vincendeau, 2005: 15). By contrast, Kassovitz aimed to get away from the usual depictions of central Paris as a city of beauty and romance by shooting it in a more documentary, less lyrical manner, suggestive of the points of view of the lead characters who experience it as a claustrophobic and alienating environment. In this way the camera is crucial in expressing the key theme of the film. The central issue in *La Haine*, as William Higbee points out, is “social exclusion, not ethnicity” (2001: 200). The freedom of the camera in the *cités* represents that of the characters, just as the claustrophobic static shots in central Paris express their sense of both entrapment and exclusion in that environment. The trio is forced to camp out in the liminal spaces of the city, the peripheries. Always shut out, they spend their time in Paris in the streets, on doorsteps (shut outside the hospital, the club, Astérix’s flat, the last train) and in lobbies. Outsiders in every sense, they seem to experience Paris as a giant waiting room, permanently denied access to wherever they’re trying to go. As Saïd points out when the last train leaves, they are “*enfermés dehors*” (locked in outside). Always the joker, Saïd changes a billboard advertisement which reads “the world is yours” to read “the world is ours,” but it is clear that this is wishful thinking. Likewise, when the one of the trio tries to “switch off” the lights of the Eiffel Tower by clicking his fingers it remains “stubbornly illuminated,” which is, as Chris Darke points out, “a sideways swipe at the mythologised city” of Eric Rochant’s 1989 film *Un Monde Sans Pitie*. “Paris,” says Darke, “most emphatically does not belong to them” (2000: 107).

Kassovitz spent what budget he had on cranes, Steadicams and even a remote controlled helicopter for the *cité* scenes. The mobile camera allows us to enter that

---

consistently reflected in technical and aesthetic choices made by the director, allowing for a highly stylised representation of this ‘other’ Paris to emerge” (2001: 200-201). Higbee compares it, somewhat unfavourably, to *Ma 6T Va Craquer*, another banlieue film made in 1997 by Jean-François Richet, who was raised in the neighbourhood where he shot the film, used non-professional actors and standard colour film stock, had a less classical narrative structure, focused more on the crowd than on any individual, and made what Higbee clearly feels is a more authentic film. Perhaps in trying to redress a longstanding imbalance in terms of the depiction of the *cités* Kassovitz has tipped the scale in the other direction, but his determination to show the beauty and warmth of these areas rather than dwelling endlessly on the negative aspects yielded a refreshing and engaging point of view, the importance of which should not be underestimated if one is to win over a broader audience used to a steady diet of Hollywood films. A bit of over-stylisation and a somewhat exaggerated binary opposition seems a small price to pay if it means that the film’s message gets through to a significantly larger audience.

world and explore the screen space. Steadicam inventor Garrett Brown refers to this as the “the 3-D effect”: “When the camera begins to move, we are suddenly given the missing information as to shape layout and size. The two-dimensional image acquires the illusion of three-dimensionality and we are carried across the divide of the screen, deeper and deeper into a world that is not contiguous to our own” (in Calhoun, 2003: 73-4). Wide shots, in clear daylight, predominate in the *cité* scenes in order to suggest the characters’ integration into their surroundings. In the scenes in Paris, Kassovitz and Aim went to the other extreme, shooting at night, frequently using a handheld camera with a long lens and even changing from stereo to mono sound with the intention of creating a more “documentary” feel through which to express the characters’ sense of alienation from their surroundings.

The camera acquaints us intimately with the characters through numerous long takes, follow shots, close-ups and extreme close-ups, and reveals the effect of their environments on the characters, showing how their “background” actively defines their identities and shapes their destinies. We are shown their points of view and even at times their interior mental states through the cinematography, as will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Occasionally Kassovitz uses shots of the back of the head of one or more of the characters, typically flanked by the other two, to increase the sense of realism by giving the impression that characters are not “playing to camera” and have been caught unawares. In several shots we are shown close-ups of the back of characters’ heads. One of the first shots we see is of Saïd, eyes closed against the sound of the gun and in some distress (in a shot which is echoed in the final shot of the film as he waits for a gun to fire in the standoff), then the camera moves behind his head. In the boxing match scene a similar technique is used to show Vinz “in context” as if caught on camera without his knowledge. The effect is to align us in each instance with the character’s point of view, keeping him in the shot, making us mindful of how this scene might be affecting him psychologically but keeping the focus on the broader context and the issues at hand simultaneously.

Throughout the film, the psychological reality of the characters and their broader social reality – their psychological and social personae – are shown to be inextricably connected. This happens at the level of the narrative as well as through the

relationship between camera and *mise-en-scène*.<sup>6</sup> We are constantly shown the effects of the social environment on the individual, which emphasises the relation between the location and the identity of the characters. The social context is shown to be a major determinant of the characters' psychological states, so that the social and psychological "real" are inseparable. This is supported by the cinematography and in particular by the camera's exploration of the carefully detailed *mise-en-scène*, which is carefully selected, and subtly "doctored" and composed in order to convey a particular point of view without losing its appearance of authenticity. Kassovitz and Aïm frequently favour wide, deep shots, long takes and very long takes; many of the shots in *La Haine* are over forty seconds long, when (according to David Bordwell) the average shot length in contemporary American films is three to five seconds (see Vincendeau, 2005: 50). The depth of the shots, both in terms of the staging and the focus in the *cit * scenes, contributes to this effect. Bazin suggested that depth of focus, which is often combined with long take, "implies... a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress," therefore allowing the audience to settle in and to decide for themselves what to focus on (1967: 35-36).<sup>7</sup> The long take, or sequence-shot, is also associated with coverage of real events and can give the impression of having simply left the camera to roll without interfering. "In informative films concerned with current affairs, the sequence-shot is often the natural way of translating reality into images," wrote Italian semiotician Gianfranco Bettetini. He further asserts that "the sequence shot tends to increase the moving image's credibility..." (in Williams 1980: 221), and this association with realism and "credibility" was no doubt one of the factors that Kassovitz took into account when choosing to use long takes in *La Haine*.

The scene in the burnt-out gym where we meet Hubert is a virtuoso example of the use of the long mobile take. The sequence, shot as two long Steadicam shots, is choreographed to ensure that we are introduced not only to Hubert, but to his particular "world." Vinz and Saïd lead us into the gym where the sound of a punch bag being hit draws our attention to Hubert, far in the background. The camera tracks in from an extreme long shot to a long shot of Hubert and changes to slow motion.

---

<sup>6</sup> My use of the term *mise-en-scène* here obviously excludes the camerawork in accordance with Bordwell and Thompson's definition in *Film Art* (2008).

<sup>7</sup> John Higgins refers to Bazin's notion of deep focus as being "democratic," since shooting using depth allow the viewer greater choice as to where to focus his or her attention (in Higgins, 1991: 113).

We then cut back to Vinz and Saïd as they lean against a pillar to smoke a joint, discussing Hubert. A poster stuck on the pillar advertises a boxing match and features Hubert's name and photograph, and this provides us with the final "background" to Hubert before we meet him in close-up. The sound of the punching continues as we see the poster flanked by a close-up of Saïd, but when the camera pulls out to a two-shot it is Hubert's face in close-up next to his, rather than Vinz's, since Vinz and Hubert have swapped places at the punch bag in the interim, in one continuous shot. The introduction, with its element of surprise, is elegantly achieved, and the choreography of the shot as a whole (and the skillful interplay between camera and *mise-en-scène*) echo the dance-like movements of Hubert at the punch bag, which Kassovitz dwells on admiringly in slow motion. The scene is a masterpiece of cinematographic storytelling, exemplifying what cinematographer William A. Fraker, describes as the whole point of using a mobile camera in the first place: "Camera movement's great," says Fraker, "but it's got to be about exposition. You have to involve the audience visually..." (in Calhoun, 2003: 73).

Kassovitz's mobile long takes are frequently facilitated by the use of the Steadicam following shot, which, while being "more direct than a dolly" is also "far more controlled than a standard handheld move" (Calhoun, 2003: 82) and permits smoother shots and a less obtrusive presence. He uses them to acquaint us intimately with the characters in their environments. This is particularly the case in the first half of the film, set in the *cités*: there are eighteen long takes of forty-five seconds or more in the first half as opposed to eight in the second half (Vincendeau, 2005: 51), in keeping with Kassovitz's intention to make the *cités* more habitable than the alienating centre of Paris. In addition, the exploratory nature of the mobile camerawork in the *cités* in particular encourages a strong sense of familiarity and identification with the characters and their environment because the viewer is swept along with the characters and allowed to experience places with them as they move through the space, all the better to contrast the vast "concrete phobic expanse[s]" (Higbee, 2001: 69) of the *cités* with the cramped living quarters of its inhabitants.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly Higbee, while critical of Kassovitz's attempts to portray the *cit * despite being an outsider, points out that this technique is widely used in authentically *beur* (a slang word for Arab) films. He says that "pairing of claustrophobic HLM [*Habitations   Loyer Mod r *] apartments with the accompanying tundralike wide-open spaces underscores a state of emotional and geographical

During the many hiatuses in the film, when ennui sets in and movement seems impossible, the viewer is held in a comparable motionless limbo by the long static takes. In addition to the enhanced realism that comes from this sense of unmediated presence in the shot, Hallam further points out that “maintaining a static observational camera or alternatively following a character as if capturing their actions and interactions as they occur” serves to extend the reality effect “by an apparent lack of directorial control over the camera and audiovisual input” (2000: 106). The static long take is used to great comic effect in several scenes, notably the playground scene where the young boy tells his pointless story, and in the scene where the trio are trying to steal a car. In the latter scene, not only is the camera static but there is almost no movement visible within the initial wide shot itself, as all three of the characters are wedged under the dashboard trying to work out how to hotwire the car. In addition to the lack of movement there is no editing to break up the long take, no frantically paced action sequence intended to convey the growing sense of panic. This static quality reinforces the sense of absurdity in the scene and their entrapment within the city, both of which are compounded in the following scene when it becomes apparent that none of them can drive.

Patrick Ogle quotes a write-up of *Citizen Kane* in *American Cinematographer* in 1941, where the reviewer wrote of Welles’s deep focus technique that the “conventional narrow plane of acceptable focus is eliminated and in its place is a picture closely approximating what the eye sees... the result is realism in a new dimension: we forget we are looking at a picture and feel the living, breathing presence of the characters” (in Williams, 1980: 199). This effect (and affect) of realism is precisely what Kassovitz achieves in a number of his shots. Similarly to Welles, Kassovitz constructs layered shots with a number of simultaneous points of interest or action for the audience to choose from, creating exactly the kind of “democratic” shots using deep focus and deep space which Bazin so greatly admired.

---

dislocation prevalent in some of the best-known beur films, such as Medhi Charef’s *Le Thé au Harem d’Archimède* (*Tea in the Harem*, 1995)” (2001: 46).

One particularly striking example is a scene outside a nightclub in Paris. Vinz has been separated from Saïd and Hubert, and hooks up with two other young men on the streets. When they are refused admission to the club, the other youths lose their cool, return to the club, and (in Vinz's imagination) shoot the bouncer. Instead of shooting a sequence of reaction shots to convey the effect this action has on Vinz, Kassovitz chooses to include the shooting and Vinz's reaction as layers within the same shot (fig. 7). The camera stays on Vinz in big close-up in the foreground, his face directly into camera (in itself a confrontational realist technique which Kassovitz employs several times in *La Haine*) while the others are visible in the background as they carry out the shooting. It is a moment entirely worthy of Welles, and which Bazin would surely have applauded.

Kassovitz makes the perennial realist choice, once again championed by Bazin several decades before, to limit the use of the shot reverse-shot technique of filming dialogue which has now become so ubiquitous on television. Instead, he favours two (or three)-shots, long takes and mobile shots which keep characters contextualised and include their environment almost as another constant player in the drama. Long takes (or "one-shots" as Kassovitz refers to them) linger on the characters and their settings, allowing the action to unfold at its own pace. "One-shots are important in movies like that... you keep the energy up for the actors," says the director in his DVD commentary, referring to one of the many immaculately-choreographed long takes in *La Haine*.<sup>9</sup> The frequent use of the Steadicam in the *cit * scenes and the fluid handheld camera in the Paris settings allow us to explore and move through space with the characters so that we are never distanced from their reality. Kassovitz, who has confessed that he is "obsessive about framing" (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 192) was resolute about keeping the camera mobility motivated:

You can't have tracking shots for the sake of it. There is a kind of ethic. If you use a crane or a steadicam there has to be a reason. To me, this business about cinematic ethics is more a question of how you frame a shot than how you light it; which is why I like the camera operator and the director of

---

<sup>9</sup> In his DVD commentary on the Canal Plus DVD of 2001, Kassovitz claimed he likes doing *plans-s quences* because he was very lazy and didn't like editing (see Vincendeau, 2005: 51), but the obviously un-lazy meticulousness with which he plans these one-shots gives this the lie.

photography to be different people. The job is not the same. Framing shots is a kind of choreography. It builds rhythm... pace is of the essence (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 191).

The use of the wide angle lens in the *cit * scenes, complemented by the mobility that the Steadicam, dolly, crane shot or car-mounted shot allow, means that Kassovitz avoids creating the impression that the *cit * setting is used simply as a “backdrop” to the action, a charge which might be levelled at many films set in poor, politically unstable locations.<sup>10</sup> As opposed to the boxed-in overshadowing environments in Paris itself, the youth “own” the spaces in the *cit *, the streets and rooftops from which they (and we as viewers) can see the broader context, as opposed to being “seen” and monitored as they are in the city. In one transcendent shot, Kassovitz puts the camera on a remote-controlled helicopter which flies out of the window where a famous Parisian DJ is mixing two legendary hip hop tunes. It glides over the streets and buildings in the *cit *, giving us a bird’s eye view of the *cit * as strains of Piaf’s “*Je ne regrette rien*” come into the mix, complicating and enriching the associations that the music evokes and once again refusing to allow easy categorisation. It’s a little anthem to hybridity: yes, these youths identify with the streetwise black masculinity and possibly even the “Americanness” evoked by hip hop, but they are also French, and can hail Piaf, a poor, white Frenchwoman, as one of their heroes too. It is a sublime moment, contextualising us in a world that is at once political, prosaic and poetic.

Kassovitz’s sweeping camera style, particularly in the *cit * scenes, certainly has the effect of “involving the viewer visually.” It supports the narrative in that it pulls the viewer along and creates a strong sense of inevitability. Like Hubert and his friends, we are swept inexorably towards the “landing” at the end of the fall which Hubert refers to in his story, which frames the narrative and acts as a *mise en ab me* for the narrative as a whole. Interestingly, this same moving camera is used to different effect in the interrogation scene in the first police station sequence. Even though they are under constraint in the police office, the camera is mobile, circling menacingly. In the

---

<sup>10</sup> Films such as *The Year of Living Dangerously* (Peter Weir, 1982), *Beyond Rangoon* (John Boorman, 1995), *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick, 2006) and *The Killing Fields* (Roland Joff , 1984) could be said to fall into this category, to name but a few. While these films frequently raise political issues they tend to foreground the experience of the “foreigner,” an American or European journalist being a common choice of protagonist, and the films are essentially genre films set in exotic locales.

Parisian police office, on the other hand, during that interrogation scene, the camera has lost its mobility. Here the characters are out of their depth, removed from their home ground. Kassovitz aligns us not with the protagonists but with the point of view of the young trainee policeman, who must look on horrified but is unable to act. Instead of “hanging out” with the trio, almost like a fourth character, the camera now confronts them and scrutinises them, forcing us to confront our own roles as viewers. It is a painful moment because we, like the young cop, cannot look away, and in looking on one can no longer claim ignorance or innocence. We are forced to watch every detail of what is happening since the camera is held immobile, taking everything in.

In his DVD commentary Kassovitz confesses himself particularly proud of the acting in the film, achieved through a mixture of professional actors and amateurs (whom, he rightly says, it is often hard to tell apart), and through the use of some clever directorial “tricks” and improvisation sessions. For the sake of realism, all the characters were given the same name as the actors,<sup>11</sup> and the actors were encouraged to bring a lot of their real-life characteristics to bear on their screen characters and to make unscripted contributions of their own. The Jewish dance that Vinz breaks into at one point, one of several musical “interruptions” in the film, was Vincent Cassell’s own idea (Vincendeau, 2005: 59). Vinz’s visions of the cow strolling the streets of Paris, on the other hand, came from Kassovitz, whose anarchist grandfather used the old anarchist motto “Mort aux vaches!” (“Death to the cows!”) where cows referred to police (Vincendeau, 2005: 78). Even the cow hallucinations do not rupture the film’s sense of realism because they can be explained as emerging from Vinz’s subjective reality under the influence of a few joints. Such flights of fancy work within this realist text because they are plausible personal quirks.

This is not unlike Mike Leigh’s approach, in which a long improvisation process creates detailed, highly specific and idiosyncratic characters. It is no coincidence that,

---

<sup>11</sup> The same choice was made in *The Blair Witch Project*, which had unforeseen legal implications when the actors were prevented from applying for work in their own names because they were publicised as missing, presumed to have been killed off during the making of their student documentary. Even the highly respected Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) listed the three actors as “missing” (in Irsay, 2007: n.p) and led to legal battles over the use of their names in *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (Irsay, 2007: n.p.).

while jesting with Saïd Taghmaoui in one of the behind-the-scenes videos, Kassovitz punningly refers to himself as Cassavetes, master of the art of improvisation and the long take, who valued verisimilitude and believability in his actors' performances above all else. Kassovitz elicits less actorly performances than would be the case in more generic films, perhaps with the slight exception of the most established actor of the three, Vincent Cassel, whose blackhead-picking, spitting Vinz is more mannered than the other two, and who sometimes seems to be played more for laughs than for strict realism. Kassovitz himself has said that his favourite performance moment in the film was by the young boy in the playground who tells his pointless TV show story. It had been written and rehearsed in advance, but, says Kassovitz,

... the boy brought it to life. He was incredible. There he is on the estate with three stars and a two-page soliloquy to be done in a single take, the director shouting 'Off you go!' not to mention the fact that I'd told Saïd to chuck stones at him. And I'd told the kid, 'When he appears, don't stop, use whatever happens.' He was superb. The second take is the one we used, Which gives one faith in the notion that if everything is as it should be, you just step up the camera [sic] and roll. (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 192-3)

Kassovitz uses a confrontational editing style in *La Haine*, which, like the sweeping camera movement, drives the narrative forward, despite the ubiquity of lingering long takes and scenes where little happens. Kassovitz juxtaposes long scenes against short, action against inaction, so that pace never lags, without resorting to the relentless MTV style of cutting that characterises many films dealing with marginalised youth, gangsterism and rebellion. This confrontational editing style suits the episodic, fragmented nature of the narrative and provides ample opportunity for the juxtapositions to "comment" and to shock. The contrast of the lyrical breakdancing scene and the scenes of escalating violence and rebellion which follow is one such example. Vinz first notices the breakdancers and points them out to distract Saïd, who is bemoaning the behaviour of his errant younger sister. "Kids these days," Saïd grumbles, mimicking disapproving adults in his usual joker style, just as Vinz points to the dancers, obviously admiring the skill of these "kids." After a few shots of the dancers Kassovitz cuts to a shot of Hubert, watching from the background, smoke

curling from his mouth and nose in slow motion, and when we return to the breakdancers we are aligned with Hubert's point of view: stoned, captivated and in slow motion (*fig. 8*). The music, too, slows at this point in keeping with Hubert's state of mind. After two slow motion shots of individual breakdancers we return to a normal-speed shot of another dancer, with Hubert crouching and watching in the background. "Shit's happening!" shouts one of the youths, and Hubert joins everyone else as they rush off the scene in disarray. The music cuts abruptly, but the camera stays, leaving us with a lingering, dreamlike shot of a solo dancer as he spins on his head with faultless precision, mesmerising in its perfection (*fig. 9*). It is interesting that Kassovitz chooses to wake us up more gradually from the dreamlike state that he encourages in this scene. In doing so he aligns us with his own admiring gaze, but leaving the camera, and us, on the scene after everyone else on-screen has left has another significant effect. It draws attention to the presence of the camera and makes us conscious of the fact that we are watching a film and aware of our own status as onlookers.<sup>12</sup>

This sequence also constitutes one of the few precious moments of evasion in the film, though it is no less "true to life" in the *cités* as the scenes of brutality and despair. It is exemplary of Kassovitz's insistence on showing the beauty as well as the problems in the tough world of these marginalized characters. Kassovitz uses contrasting pace and duration both within the shots themselves (in terms of camera technique and movement) and between shots to draw attention to elements which might otherwise go unnoticed, occasionally allowing us to dwell on things in the midst of a flurry of activity. His intention here is to ensure that we are "on the side" of the *cité* kids, immersed in their world and engrossed by the lyrical movements, so that the intrusion of the police and the seemingly inescapable troubles of the outside world come as a greater shock. For a moment reality is suspended and we are allowed to focus on the dancer's movement, so balanced and smooth that it becomes almost abstract: it is an ode by Kassovitz, an avowed hip hop fan, to the dancer's consummate skill. The chaos and aggression of the shoot-out and the police violence which follows this shot make a more visceral impact as a result. After admiring the

---

<sup>12</sup> Steadicam inventor Garrett Brown believes that "out-of-sync camerawork, moving too soon or carrying on after the actors stop" all tend to foreground the presence of the camera (in Calhoun, 2003: 80).

skills of the dancers in the previous shot, the youth are once again written off as “scum” by the aggressive and inadequate Sergeant “Nôtre Dame.” Through confrontational editing such as this, Kassovitz aims to garner our support for his stand against police brutality and the political system which gives rise to it. Interestingly this use of an abrupt change of tone from one scene to the next once again recalls the work of poetic realist Jean Renoir, who frequently used this technique to intensify the contrast between scenes and characters in his work. It is highly likely that Kassovitz, the cinephile, would have drawn from such works in creating his own contemporary “poetic realist” style.

Despite the scenes of rioting and violence, *La Haine* is a film more about inaction than about action. “It’s so much part of life... not doing anything,” Kassovitz asserts in his DVD commentary. He sets the narrative over a single day, as representative of the “everyday,” and uses time lapses, marked by a time-flash screen at the beginning of each new scene. The countdown drives the narrative forward despite the periods of inaction on screen, and is used for dramatic as well as comic effect. In the playground scene, the wide shot where the boy tells Vinz his long pointless story is followed by a virtually identical shot, where no one has moved but the time-flash suggests that a significant amount of time has been spent doing nothing. At the end of the film it is used to dramatic effect: the clock ticks over by just one minute as we wait in suspense for the outcome, but the overall effect of the clock is to anchor us in real time in the same way that the ever-present television is used to anchor us in the “real context.”

This real-time quality is increasingly being used to give films and television programming a heightened sense of realism. Films such as Mike Figgis’s *Timecode* (2000) and the television series *24* (produced and largely written by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, currently in its seventh season in 2009) are prime examples of this trend. The rise of Reality TV, and particularly programmes such as *Big Brother*, have given rise to numerous other instances where this real-time technique is used. *La Haine* dwells on the everyday and the unexceptional. Miraculously, Kassovitz makes a film about *ennui* which is never boring itself. We become increasingly engrossed in the characters’ lives as the day unfolds. Kassovitz said in an interview that the twenty-four-hour structure actually came to him later in the production process, and that he hoped it would

emphasise the fact that this is a diary, like *24 hours* on Canal Plus. It's always nice to know exactly when something takes place. And it enables the audience to understand that they are not following a linear plot, they are being presented with an event at a specific time: the hours go by and then something is going to happen at one precise moment. That's why the audience don't mind there being no plot, it's like a diary or a news report. (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 188).

Infrequent cross-cuts to different locations reinforce our focus on the characters and their inaction and, as Hallam points out, this also give us an ongoing sense of temporal and spatial immediacy (2000: 106). Listless, idle youths are a feature common to most contemporary "slacker" and "'hood" films, but there are also echoes of the Parisian *flâneur* – immortalised by Baudelaire – in this wandering threesome, and the reference is reinforced by the inclusion of a mural painting of Baudelaire in the square which forms the backdrop to the characters in the dramatic final scene. For Vinz, Hubert and Saïd, as for the *flâneur*, "the street becomes a dwelling" (Benjamin ed. 1997: n.p.). These idle city pedestrians are careful observers of everyday life, providing eye-witness accounts of the reality they encounter: they, again like Baudelaire's *flâneur*, "[go] botanizing on the asphalt" and are the "chronicler[s] and philosopher[s]" of the streets (Benjamin, 1983: 36, 37). Much though Kassovitz might balk at the idea, the real-time technique he employs also suggests the influence of daytime soaps. These too chart the "downtime" in a selection of characters' daily lives rather than sticking to the high points in order to elicit a strong sense of identification, familiarity and intimacy.

Kassovitz studiously avoids using shooting or editing techniques associated with action crime films. The one striking exception to this is the sequence in which Vinz "shoots" the policeman. In this short sequence Vinz emerges from underground where he has been watching a television wall in a shopping centre to pass the time until the first train home. He has just found out that Abdel has died and in his angry frustration he pulls out his "gun," pointing it into the foreground of the shot in typical action-hero stance, and shoots a policeman he sees ticketing cars on the street. To add to the impression of Vinz as some kind of saintly avenging angel, he is framed so that a ring

of lights on the building in the background provides him with a perfect martyr's halo above his head: an example of Kassovitz's masterful use of composition and framing so that "found" settings and objects contribute symbolically to the film (fig. 10). Vinz fantasises in action-movie style, as we have already seen earlier in the film in the ingeniously shot mirror scene where he re-enacts a scene from *Taxi Driver*. This fantasy sequence is filmed as a series of very brief, punchy shots which are edited together in rapid succession in typical action style, and it is shot this way precisely because it is happening entirely in Vinz's head, as we realise when Hubert comes running up the escalator to find Vinz pointing not a gun but a finger at the cop. It is a particularly subtle way of differentiating a fantasy sequence or an interior state from the rest of the ("real") sequences in the film, without resorting to the usual somewhat over-used cinematic conventions. This is one of several instances where we are given insights into Vinz's fantasy world: this scene as well as the recurring hallucination of the cow and the Jewish dance all contribute to making Vinz the most fully fledged character to whose subjectivity we have the most access.

Kassovitz also conveys Hubert's interior state at various points in the film, using expressionistic cinematographic elements familiar to the audience from art house cinema. At one point, an extreme close-up of Hubert on the train, his eyes closed and his face screwed up in anguish, is followed directly by a shot reminiscent of Hitchcock's famous shot in *Vertigo* (1958). The three friends are filmed on what looks like a rooftop, looking out over a boulevard. A compressed zoom (tracking in and zooming out simultaneously) suggests Hubert's mental dislocation and his sense of alienation from the Parisian environment. Once again, his psychological state is premised on a specific social situation and the cinematography suggests the inseparability of his emotional and social realities.

Writing about Max Ophuls, who is famous for his use of sweeping camera movement, film critic Andrew Sarris said that the meaning of "Ophulsian" movement is that "[t]ime has no stop. Montage tends to suspend time in the limbo of abstract images, but the moving camera records inexorably the passage of time, moment by moment" (in Calhoun, 2003: 76). In *La Haine* too, time has "no stop" until the climactic ending, the "landing" of the bomb. The action unfolds in real-time, and even though this means there are moments of immobility where nothing happens, where characters are

simply “marking time,” as Hallam phrases it (2001: 206), and the clock keeps ticking, the sweeping camera propels us endlessly forwards towards the unavoidable. In this way, the cinematography embodies the key theme of inescapability and a lack of control.

“I feel like an ant in intergalactic space,” says Vinz, in a moment of poignant articulacy, and we are constantly reminded that the characters’ lives unfold largely due to chance and external circumstances out of their control. Hubert’s attempt to break out of this stifling and destructive situation, and to stop dealing and doing drugs, is thwarted when the gym is burned down. When Vinz and Saïd find him in that ransacked space Hubert’s defeated attitude suggests the inevitable failure of any attempts to escape: he was clearly expecting disappointment. This is echoed by Hubert’s mother’s bitter-comic response when Hubert tells her he has to get out: “When you come back, bring me a lettuce,” she says with ruthless pragmatism. There is nowhere for him to go. If the gym was his fantasy of escape those hopes have been dashed; the narrative offers no palliative wish fulfilment for him or for either of his friends. Hubert, Saïd and Vinz are essentially naturalist characters and, like the original naturalist protagonists of nineteenth century novels, their lives (and deaths) are determined by fate and by factors over which they have no influence. Hallam (2000: 210) refers to Deborah Knight’s work on Ken Loach, where Knight situates Loach within a tradition of nineteenth century naturalism which traces the effects of the environment on the characters within it. The same could be said of the trio in *La Haine*. However hard they try to resist the constraints of their environment or to bring about change, their circumstances prevent it. Rather, the environment is seen to be exerting pressure on the characters and effecting unavoidable changes on their lives.

Hubert’s story about the man falling from the building towards an inevitable landing,<sup>13</sup> which he refers to at the end of the film more explicitly as a story of “a *society in freefall*” frames the film and introduces this theme at the start. The clock ticks on relentlessly, emphasising the aimlessness of their lives and their inability to

---

<sup>13</sup> The story brings to mind Camus’ novel *La Chute (The Fall)*, originally published in 1956, which explores similar issues of conscience and freedom and questions the meaning of human existence, though this may be coincidental. Kassovitz has expressed frustration at intellectualised readings of his work.

influence their situation. This sense that they are trapped becomes literal when they miss the last train due to their detention by the police and are forced to mark time waiting for the first train of the next day. For most of their time in Paris in particular they are immobilised. Their actions are arbitrary, and the very banality and ordinariness of these actions help to convey a sense of everyday realism. As Hallam writes, the “depiction of actions regarded as redundant by conventional narrative standards is often perceived as a hallmark of realism” (2000: 106). Although there is a lot of movement in the *cit * scenes in particular – the characters constantly wander the streets, Hubert does his boxing, the breakdancers gyrate – there is a sense of futility in these movements. These are all ways in which the characters resist the inertia of unemployment and inactivity in the *cit s*, and *pass*-times such as boxing and breakdancing provide moments of evasion and freedom, and a taste of “elsewhere,” in particular a taste of the freedom mythically associated with the United States. But the outside world always intrudes and interrupts these moments, putting a stop to the movement. The characters have no clear-cut goals or motives, and their actions don’t propel the narrative forward. We understand “retrospectively” that Hubert was trying to run the gym, but that is already a thing of the past, rather than a goal which might, in a very different kind of movie, drive the narrative forward to end with the character triumphing over adversity. One could argue that Vinz has a stated goal: he frequently expresses his desire to avenge Abdel’s death by killing a cop, and fate conspires to provide him with a means to effect this, the cop’s lost gun which Vinz picks up. This makes the fact that he dies an accidental, unheroic and essentially arbitrary death at the hands of the contemptible Sergeant “N tre Dame” all the more pathetic.

Kassovitz has claimed that his focus on the banal everyday life of the three main characters led him to eschew generic narrative (Hallam, 2000: 205). He set out to write an unstructured script in which “nothing should happen” but had to concede that “if we had stuck to that everyone would have got bored... we have to have a story, even if it’s not really plausible. Supposedly in Jarmusch’s movies nothing happens, but you still get people escaping (*Down by Law*)” (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 190). Far from seeming unstructured, *La Haine*’s script in fact comes across as highly structured. Framed by Hubert’s story, the film propels us towards an inevitable (if not predictable) ending. Kassovitz’s inclusion of several short, self-contained scenes which were essentially arbitrary and apparently unnecessary or irrelevant to the

overall plot, led to an *episodic* rather than an unstructured script, where, as a reviewer in *L'Express* put it, “each scene constitutes a short film in itself” (in Vincendeau, 2005: 40). As I have mentioned, realist filmmakers frequently rely on the accretion of layers and detailing in a number of telling scenes to create the desired richness and sense of authenticity. This tendency is exemplified in Vittorio de Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), of which Bazin wrote that the succession of events had an appearance of “accidental and... anecdotal” quality as if they had happened by chance. They are unique events in themselves, “not necessarily signs of something” (1980: 52). Expository realist narratives typically “explore social issues through character-centered narration but have looser, less predictable plot structures” than their classical equivalents (Hallam, 2000: 104 – 5), and *La Haine* is no exception. These scenes are relatively interchangeable and are not significant in terms of narrative progression. Instead, we get a “total impression of average moments” as Helen Goritsas describes a similar approach in the work of Indian realist director Satyajit Ray (2002: n.p.), or “the sense of events observed haphazardly as the hours roll by” as Bazin said of De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1972: 58). By using an ensemble cast, even if only a trio in this case, Kassovitz can introduce more complex, interwoven plotlines and a multiplicity of points of view, a common technique in expository realist films, and he can also raise a variety of issues, which keep us firmly tied to the context and background (see Hallam, 2000: 191).

The premise of the film, an apparently average day in the life of the three main characters, lends itself from the start to an episodic treatment. Kassovitz dwells on most seemingly arbitrary and inconsequential moments and stories which do nothing to drive the narrative forward but give us insights into the characters’ world. The stories told by the very short Polish man in the public toilet or the young man in the playground are not intended to impart clear messages and they remain unexplained, but in addition to their entertainment value, the stories give us insights into the world and the psychology of the characters. The young man in the playground with the pointless story conveys the pervasive sense of ennui they experience, Beckettian in the sense that the punchline they are waiting for never comes, and the Pole in the toilet gives the characters (and the audience) a reminder that human suffering and foibles are nothing new. Such scenes have no specific causal effect. They mimic the arbitrariness and the unexpectedness of everyday life, and are not part of a grand

narrative plan. Rather, as Hallam writes, they “reveal character psychology” (2000: 105) through the reactions they elicit from the characters and their interactions with one another and with their physical environment, and they give us a picture of the characters’ world which is fuller and seems more real for their inclusion. Where there *are* pivotal moments or high points, these tend to “happen *to*” the main characters rather than as a result of their actions or intentions. True to the kind of expositional narratives typical of social realism, it is situations and events outside the characters’ control rather than deliberate actions by those characters which motivate the progression of the plot (see Hallam, 2000: 208).

The full “impact” of this lack of control is felt in the ending, where the fatal and inevitable “landing” of Hubert’s story translates into the senseless, accidental and brutally abrupt shooting of Vinz. Whereas the trio have spent much of the film marking time, trapped in Paris and trying to get back to the *cités*, the climax takes place in a matter of seconds. Something is actually happening, and time suddenly seems to pass more quickly. After Vinz is shot, each second becomes painfully tense and significant. For the first time, the clock ticks over on screen (from 6:00 to 6:01) as the suspense mounts. There is no reason for the outcome, and while we are prepared for the “landing” at the end of the fall, the impact and the unexpected accidental shooting come as a shock. Vinz is a victim of fate, but martyrdom eludes him even as he dies at the hands of a cop, and while Hubert has spent much of the film trying to dissuade Vinz from killing a policeman fate conspires in this split second to force him to choose between killing a cop himself or being killed – a choice which we are literally kept in the dark about since the screen cuts to black as the final shot is fired. A “Hollywood” ending may have had him triumphing over adversity, or at least martyring himself for the cause, but here there is no such redemptive or reductive ending. To allow an individual to triumph would have risked allowing the ending to have a palliative effect, where the success of the individual means that the viewer loses sight of the broader social context. Kassovitz avoids simple narrative resolutions which might soothe the viewer rather than forcing them to interrogate the issues at hand. He also refuses us full closure in terms of the ending since we remain unsure as to whether Hubert or Nôtre Dame fires the next shot. It remains to some degree open to interpretation, and the issues remain uncompromised by any forced sense of moral resolution. The open ending means that there is scope for the story to continue if only

in our minds, and because there is no neat resolution the issues which the film raises are more likely to nag even once the film is over.

*La Haine* has been described as having the “look of an expensive documentary” (Hallam, 2000: 205). Alex Duval described its “strong documentary qualities” in the *Guardian Arts* (in Hallam, 2000: 218), *Forbes* says that it “looks like a television current affairs or documentary programme” (2000: 171) and Richard Armstrong talks about the “jittery hand-held style” camerawork (2005: 80).<sup>14</sup> While there are certainly documentary elements in the film (in particular the use of long, often mobile takes which are reminiscent of observational documentary), the overall aesthetic of the film seems to owe more to narrative cinema, in particular the French New Wave (which itself was highly influenced by documentary and journalistic reportage), the French Poetic Realists, and directors such as Orson Welles, who developed the use of deep space and deep focus in their work and who frequently used a more lyrical, poetic style as a vehicle for social commentary. A roaming camera, frequently handheld, has been used by filmmakers to suggest liveness, immediacy and realism ever since technological advances first made it possible to use the camera in this way. The use of the handheld shot increased dramatically with the advent of the French New Wave. Talking about shooting Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Band of Outsiders*, cinematographer Raoul Coutard explains on the DVD that the “idea was that we were filming live reporting. Live reporting means handheld cameras and no artificial lighting” (in Calhoun, 2003: 81).

The camerawork in *La Haine* has this sense of dynamism without the roughness associated with handheld cameras. Kassovitz was emphatic that he did not want to shoot *La Haine* in a gritty, documentary-style. In a *Télérama* interview, entitled “Talking to guys from the *banlieues* is not prohibited” (a sensitive point for this middle class director, as he admits in his DVD commentary), Kassovitz said “[t]his film cost 15 millions francs. One could have made it for 300 000 francs, but it would have been a different film. I didn't want a *cit * film shot on a shoestring.... It's a very sophisticated fiction, not a reportage on 'life in the *cit s*'” (in Higbee, 2001: 204, my translation). While Kassovitz was adamant that *La Haine* was “not an anodyne film, it

---

<sup>14</sup> Darke talks about the “camera's restless mobility” which is perhaps a more apt description than “jittery” (2000: 107).

speaks of serious social problems,” he was just as adamant that he “did not want to make something boring, even if *La Haine* talks about problems which concern [him]” (in Vincendeau, 2005: 90). “I admire Ken Loach because he gave a voice to people who don’t normally have it. But it does not stop me from making my film attractive” he said told *Le Figaro* (in Vincendeau, 2005: 90).

Kassovitz’s decision to do something different stylistically than what would commonly be expected from a “social issue” film was key to its popularity. In *Les Inrockuptibles*, a trendy music-orientated journal likely to come down hard on earnest social representation, Oliver de Bruyn praised *La Haine* for *not* being “too realistic” and for steering clear of the clichés and “sociological parades” of the *film à thème* (in Vincendeau, 2005: 86), and in *Télérama* Pierre Murat recognises the originality of the film as ‘[a] very successful attempt not to illustrate truth but to recreate it’ (in Vincendeau, 2005: 86). Vincendeau points out that “Kassovitz’s wedding of a new style to the topic... is clearly behind much of this critical praise,” and suggests that the “[t]he originality of *La Haine* was also seen to present its picture of the *fracture sociale* in a radically different way from the naturalistic or documentary style adopted by most filmmakers of ‘social’ subjects” (2005: 86).

Even in the Paris sections, where Kassovitz intended the camerawork to be less polished and more documentary, the overall effect is too fluid to resemble a “jittery documentary.” A key thematic in the film is the way in which the media tends to “other” marginalised youth through its representation of them, and Kassovitz goes out of his way to avoid doing this himself in *La Haine*. Where Kassovitz does use “jittery” camerawork the contrast is notable, and is used for specific effect. One obvious instance is in the staged reportage-style footage of the “riots” at the start of the film, which is taken up and reiterated by the ubiquitous television (and surveillance) coverage throughout. Vinz is caught on camera by the television journalists, the trio follow “the riots” on television, they learn of Abdel’s death through the television wall in the shopping mall, and the threesome is caught in the video entry-phone in Asterix’s flat.

Surveillance cameras of various sorts are a constant presence in *La Haine*. Not only is there no escape from the city for the three protagonists, but their thwarted attempts to

get out, in fact almost their every movement, is monitored and “captured” on video in an apparent collusion between police and media. This monitoring is aimed at containment, bringing to mind Bentham’s bee-hive-style panopticon where prisoners subjected to constant surveillance eventually regulated their own behaviour, and of course Orwell’s Big Brother or its more contemporary television show namesake. “The major effect of the Panopticon,” wrote Foucault, was “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (1977: 200-201). While Europeans once looked upon the security cameras posted in British cities as Orwellian, security cameras have become increasingly prevalent and accepted on the continent, particularly as the perceived terrorist threat intensifies (Pape, 2006: 8), and *La Haine* illustrates how this containment strategy exacerbates the sense of exclusion and aggression experienced by marginalised outsiders in the city. In addition to the containment function with its connotations of a police state, the cameras have another main purpose in *La Haine*. The visuals and sound bytes which they capture are grist for the broadcast mill.

“This is not Thoiry!” shouts Hubert, who is then echoed by Vinz, when they are hassled for an interview about their involvement in the riots by a pushy TV interviewer and her cameraman, who rolls the camera without asking the trio’s consent. Hubert is referring to the Thoiry drive-in animal park in France, and indeed one of the strengths of the film is that it avoids the sense of voyeuristic distance or “othering” that Hubert’s animal park metaphor suggests. Kassovitz nurtures a strong feeling of identification, familiarity and involvement with the characters, and we are drawn in through the narrative, the camerawork and the appealing characters so that we are completely invested in the story by the fatal finish. This scene makes plain Kassovitz’s criticism of the tendency in the media to “ghettoise” places which other people live in through depicting them voyeuristically as irredeemably ugly, violent and dangerous (Hallam, 2000: 193). As has been discussed, Kassovitz and Aïm use a range of strategies to achieve this, including close-ups to encourage intimacy, and keeping us close to the characters in their context through the use of the Steadicam. Vinz in particular is frequently shot staring directly at or through the lens and addressing the viewer directly. He talks back: “What do we look like? What are you filming you son of a bitch?” he demands of the television journalists, responding angrily to being the object of their (and by extension the viewer’s) gaze. The

observing camera, the scrutinising television or surveillance camera shooting grainy video, is ubiquitous throughout *La Haine*, and there is a sense that these marginalised characters are constantly under scrutiny and seen as some sort of threatening “other.” But this is an effect that the main camera, the cinematographer’s camera, captures rather than creates. The film camera, Kassovitz and Aïm’s camera, films these intrusive, othering recordings as part of the characters’ environment, framing them, distancing them from the overall cinematographic approach of the film itself, and inviting reflection on the effect of their scrutinising gaze.

In addition to the use of particular cinematographic techniques to keep the characters “in context,” the television functions as a constant “extra window” onto their world, although the ability of that medium to provide a faithful representation of what is happening is often called into question. The television is a reflection of their lives and actions which the threesome continually refer to, even if only to refute the way in which they are being portrayed. Vinz in particular, desperate to formulate himself as some kind of hero along the lines of De Niro’s vigilante character Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976), whom he imitates in the bathroom mirror, looks to the television to provide him with his moment of fame. He consults it continually in search of himself and is bitterly disappointed when footage of “the riots” features someone he was standing next to but excludes him. This emphasises the three protagonists’ marginalisation: they are not the major players in the riots and they are by no means the heroes – they are simply everyday guys from the *cités* trying to get by. The television current affairs coverage functions as a framing narrative around that of the film, providing the viewer with background information about their context which increases the impression of currency and actuality (and therefore of realism), and in fact provides the characters with information about their own world. This technique cleverly allows Kassovitz to employ the authenticating devices of documentary and current affairs programmes without infusing the cinematography of the film itself with that aesthetic or buying into its value system.

While the trio refuse to serve as “eye-witnesses” for the television journalist, this is of course an essential part of the role they play in terms of Kassovitz’s film. Using characters as fictional but plausible eye-witnesses, where history is focalised as personal story, is a device which is frequently used to claim authenticity and

truthfulness. Filmmakers often use characters such as journalists, lawyers or teachers as points of entry for the audience, (for instance the character of journalist Donald Woods in *Cry Freedom*, (Richard Attenborough, 1987), or Michelle Pfeiffer as a teacher in *Dangerous Minds*, (John N. Smith, 1995), aligning them with white, middle class figures in order to minimise any potential alienation for cinema-goers of a similar demographic category (Hallam, 2000: 156-157). Kassovitz avoids this device in *La Haine*. Vinz may be white but he is certainly not middle class, and Kassovitz uses insiders from amongst the marginalised outsiders to express his scepticism about media values and ethics.

*La Haine* also avoids being “Thoiry” through the fact that Kassovitz almost exclusively used real locations as his setting, and was at pains to keep these as true to life as possible. To this end, Kassovitz and his actors and crew moved into accommodation in the housing *cité* where they were to shoot the film some time in advance, in order to get the permission of the local residents as well as to get a stronger feel for the place. This would no doubt also have helped to ensure a greater sense of authenticity in the actors’ performances, particularly in terms of their linguistic expression, since it would have given them a chance to get better acquainted with *verlan*, the “back-to-front” argot spoken in the *cités* and therefore by the three main characters. Tampering with the actual settings was minimal, though detailed attention was paid to the construction of the *mise-en-scène* and to framing, which was meticulously planned. This is exemplified by the way in which Kassovitz introduces each character, in each instance giving us both an iconic and an indexical reference for them and featuring their name on the screen. We are introduced to the character of Saïd, to his trademark verbal rebellion (here in the form of the anti-police graffiti on the police van), and to his name itself (also written on the van). We are introduced to Vinz lying somnolent on his bed, his face close to the wide-angle lens of the camera, and we see his name on his ring – a cool, celebrity-gangster piece of jewellery which suggests that he “is somebody” and which Americanises his name. Hubert, in turn, is introduced through the boxing poster, also featuring his name and photograph. They are also referenced symbolically: Fatima’s hand, for Saïd, a star of David for Vinz, and a cross for Hubert. Little is made of their different religions, however, and Kassovitz stresses throughout (through characters’ particularities and quirks) that the characters are individuals with their own specific family lives and backgrounds. They

are not symbolically representative of Jews, Muslims or Christians, neither are they “representing” blacks, whites or Arabs.

Having the characters’ names come up in the *mise-en-scène* was a technique used by Scorsese in *Taxi Driver* and later copied by Tarantino, much to Kassovitz’s irritation: “I found it so annoying in *Reservoir Dogs* that he should copy Scorsese. So I tried something different, it’s a little joke,” he told interviewers Thomas Bourguignon and Yann Tobin. But he went on in the same interview to point out that his intentions with stylistically overt techniques such as these went beyond the “little joke”:

It’s also a way of showing that the protagonists are these three and no one else. In fact, it reminds us that this is a movie and not some news report. It’s both fortunate and unfortunate that cinema needs to embellish reality, we need a bit of romance. Even when we’re trying to be as realistic as possible, we caricature things a little bit to keep the interest up... That’s why we do so much work on character, what they look like, their way of walking, their hairstyles... *Everything has to seem real and yet be graphically interesting.*”  
(in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 188, my emphasis)

While Kassovitz certainly doesn’t shy away from stylisation, the settings themselves were kept much as they were found. No doubt they enhanced the found environments for effect, for instance adding the ironic graffito “We are the future” in the syringe-littered playground where they while away part of their day,<sup>15</sup> and of course they would have designed key sets such as Vinz’s bedroom and dressed them very carefully, but for the most part they opted to leave locations “natural,” as Kassovitz claims in his DVD commentary. This was partly due to a dedication to “keeping things real,” but the budget was so tight that it ruled out major art department intervention anyway. If, as Bazin put it, “...realism in art can only be achieved in one

---

<sup>15</sup> Hallam points out that the documentary look of some scenes is frequently undercut by such deliberate juxtapositions within the *mise-en-scène* (2000: 208). While I would question the extent of this “documentary look” in the first place, I agree that these juxtapositions in the set further distance the style from a documentary one. While the presence of just the right ironic graffito, billboard or advertisement could feasibly be serendipitous, they are more likely to have been contrivances, artfully incorporated into the shot for specific thematic purposes. The way they are used draws attention to their artfulness and suggests that Kassovitz did not intend to pass them off as “found.”

way – through artifice” (1972: 26), and the difficulty lies in “the need to fabricate aesthetically satisfactory representations of reality which do not destroy the ‘truth’ of that reality” (in Williams, 1980: 69), Kassovitz has clearly chosen the artifice of carefully designed cinematography rather than contrived settings to provide an aesthetically pleasing yet convincingly truthful impression of realism in *La Haine*.

With his sound, too, Kassovitz aimed for stylised realism rather than strict naturalism. As we move from *cit * into city and day into night, Kassovitz changed from stereo sound to mono, though Kassovitz concedes that this “doesn’t really come across” and that “[t]he sound in Paris ought to have been less clean” (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 187-8). He also heightened and re-mixed certain location sounds throughout the film rather than opting for the kind of driving soundtrack one would typically associate with a film about youth in rebellion. Kassovitz wanted to convey the “violence” of central Paris as his three protagonists experience it, and amplified natural sounds in order to achieve this: “We used city sounds which became a music of our own – a growl, a layer of sound but a natural layer,” he told interviewers (Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 192). The sonic treatment matches Kassovitz’s approach to the visuals, where real “found” sound is manipulated, intensified and treated expressionistically to suggest the hostility and aggression of the city. Kassovitz avoids resorting to a musical soundtrack which might have provided instant atmosphere, emotional enhancement and dynamism:

I didn’t want a score... There is only the music which is played, radio and records and a music hall scene. Sometimes, it is hard to stick to the no-music rule. The editor would try to lay on great layers, which always seemed to work. He tried the music from *L on* at the end. It’s incredible, you can’t help crying. I didn’t like that. Getting rid of the music means you work harder at editing sound properly. (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 191-2)

Vincendeau points out that although people remember a lot of music in the film, they had to add several *La Haine*-“inspired” tracks that weren’t there in the film to the CD soundtrack because the film’s musical soundtrack is so sparse. There are, as Vincendeau points out, “only six moments in the film when music is more than a background, and all, apart from the opening Bob Marley song, are brief or very brief”

(2005: 57). Kassovitz likens the importance of pace in acting as well as in choreographing and framing shots to interpreting music and asserts that “even if you’ve got a metronome going all the time, if you’re out of [time/tune] the audience can sense it” (in Bourguignon and Tobin, 1999: 191-2). The fact that people “remember” extra music in *La Haine* points to the how successfully he has managed to maintain the pace of the film and the sense of movement through the editing (the dynamic juxtaposition of scenes in particular), the performances and above all the camera work.

It must have been tempting for Kassovitz to tap into the easy (and potentially appropriate) allure of the MTV editing rhythm or the safe appeal of the ’hood action film, but although he pays homage to hip hop and other aspects of popular youth culture he has said explicitly that he “did not want to do a ’hood movie or keep it a hip hop thing” (Kassovitz, 2005). As he told *Télérama*, he “wanted the topic to be treated seriously, the spectator to realise they were not simply being presented with guys who put their caps on the wrong way round and said ‘yo’” (in Vincendeau, 2005: 14).

This was one of his main motivations for insisting on printing the film in black and white, although the negative was actually shot in colour because it proved impossible to convince potential backers that a film about police brutality shot in black and white had any hope of success. Orson Welles once quipped that although “life was in colour, black and white was more realistic” (in Doherty, 2003, n.p.). Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when news and actuality footage on television is in full colour, there is an enduring association of black and white with newsreel or documentary footage and actuality, or “realness” rather than spectacle and fantasy. But this is not the only connotation. Black and white is also evocative of narrative cinema classics. The Dogme 95 manifesto explicitly forbids the use of black and white in its “ten commandments,” deeming it an affectation and as much of a distortion of reality as we truly see it as if one were to use a filter on the camera ([www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk)). If Kassovitz had been aiming at the kind of perceptual realism which requires an apparently unmediated “record” of the subject in its original state, the obvious contemporary choice would have been to use grainy, handcam-style footage – in full-colour. Roscoe points out, that “the use of black and white footage is still seen to be more authentic, and, given that so much contemporary material is manipulated, this

material is assumed to be more 'original', because manipulation is a recent phenomena [sic] associated with the development of certain technologies" (2001: 17). But the main reason for his use of black and white footage was aesthetic rather than realist: he simply felt it looked better. "Black and white makes everything look good," he says in his DVD commentary. "It's difficult to work with colour because reality doesn't look that good in colour." Since time and budget constraints meant that they couldn't rebuild reality to make it look better on screen, Kassovitz felt that black and white would provide the "artistic feel" that he wanted, which would set it apart from its bling colour 'hood movie counterparts. Since *La Haine* deals with "things you see on television all the time," Kassovitz was intent on making the images "exceptional... and that's what black and white allows," as Levieux reported in *L'Humanité* (1995, n.p). "I wanted people to come into the movie and *think*... to put you in the middle of the story," Kassovitz claims in his DVD commentary: "You've got to respect black and white."<sup>16</sup>

Kassovitz's black and white is not the grainy *verité*-style associated with documentary television. The look and feel of these images is quintessentially cinematic rather than televisual, a distinction which Kassovitz reinforces by contrasting the initial reportage-style television footage of the credit sequence (and the intermittent television news "updates" which punctuate the narrative) with the clear, saturated black and white images in the main body of the film. Even the scenes in central Paris, which he intended to shoot with more grain than the *cit * scenes, never really lose their saturation or become grainy enough to resemble observational documentary, and through the use of some "classic noir photography" such as the shots of Vinz smoking in the cinema, "black and white constructs a noir mood of urban edginess and expectancy" (Vincendeau, 2005: 48)<sup>17</sup> rather than reportage-style realism. *La Haine*

---

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, young British realist director Shane Meadows made similar choices for similar reasons when he made *Twentyfourseven* in 1997. In an article for *Sight and Sound* entitled "The Natural" Meadows said that "British films have earned a reputation in certain quarters for looking like they're made for television. I think people associate black and white with cinema, and I wanted the film to have a dignity. There are two types of black and white: there's the gritty 'we had to make it on 16mm black and white because it was cheaper', and there's the black and white which is more expensive, shot on 35mm through a bleach by-pass process. This type is quite beautiful, and that is what I was going for" (in MacNab, 1998: 14).

<sup>17</sup> Scorsese, to whom Kassovitz pays homage in *La Haine*, claimed to have chosen black and white for *Raging Bull* because it made the blood less disturbing (Vincendeau, 2005: 48) and because it fades less disastrously than colour does (Taubin, 2000: n.p.). Whether or not Kassovitz's decision was prompted by either of these reasons, alluding to such heavyweight film classics also held the promise of

recalls a bygone era and puts a contemporary twist on this arthouse influence. “Ultimately,” writes Vincendeau, the brilliance of *La Haine* is that it draws equally on the realist and anti-naturalist connotations of black and white, making the film appear both ‘gritty’ and ‘cool’, drawing us into the topic and at the same time giving us an aesthetic distance from it” (Vincendeau, 2005: 50).

*La Haine* is a film about marking time in that it dwells on the boredom and nothingness of the central characters’ lives as they hang around for twenty-four hours, waiting for the inevitable “landing” at the end of the fall. But it is also about marking a *particular* time (and place) in history, and is based on real events in a specific locality. Forbes describes *La Haine* as a “*zeitgeist* film which sums up the mood and preoccupations of a particular time and place, but in a way that is internationally appealing” (2000: 39). This counters the homogenising tendency of some mainstream film, where a striving for universal appeal can sometimes mean that local issues and particularities are bleached out of the text in favour of a more bland and accessible version of the global. According to MacCabe, Hollywood films arguably fail to “locate its characters and action in a determinate social and historical setting” and “are, therefore, unrealistic” (1986: 180). This can result in what Robins and Morley refer to as “a ‘placeless’ geography of image and simulation” (in Hallam, 2000: 188). A focus on the local, in all its detail and peculiarity is a common approach in realist films, as is discussed in my introduction. Expositional realist films foreground locality through “use of local language idioms and indigenous actors, spatial specificity, detailed references to local attitudes, beliefs, points of cultural reference” (Hallam, 2000: 195). Typically, they address local issues in a local way, and they emphasise the specific environment in which the characters live and work, aiming for as strong a sense of authenticity as possible. When Kassovitz and his young crew initiated the project there was no suggestion of the success the film would enjoy internationally. Perhaps this led them to be less pre-occupied with global reception than “doing the right thing” from the outset, but authenticity of character and locality was always considered of paramount importance. Kassovitz was uncompromising about shooting in *verlan*, despite the possibility that it might make the film less accessible, and he

---

conferring on the new work some of the importance of the old, which resonates with his insistence on making a “serious” movie. Noël Carroll discusses this function of allusion in his 1982 article “The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (And beyond).”

refused to add subtitles. He felt that his characters had an oral culture, a “griot” culture which he wanted to capture accurately. “I wondered about softening their language to make it more accessible, then I decided it was up to the audience to adapt their ear and perhaps to realise that they are cut off from the real, from a certain real. I can’t write a script in *verlan*, and I’m not going to put subtitles on it. We are not in a zoo or a circus” (Levieux, 1995). Interestingly, as Jill Forbes and Sarah Street point out, films that emphasise locality are often more popular internationally than their counterparts made with the global market in mind:

The pursuit of overseas markets encourages European films to present narratives that will ‘travel’ well, such as the films of Luc Besson, or Wim Wenders.... Yet it is paradoxical that despite the push towards globalisation and hybridity, films that do best in overseas markets are often quite specific in their engagement with issues of national identity.... This is not to say that globalisation has intensified the defence of traditional nationalism; rather it is to observe that contemporary cinema articulates the crisis experienced by European identities when challenged by the economic and cultural forces of globalisation.... (2000: 48)

Using real locations, real time, and lesser-known actors were all factors which contributed to creating a strong sense of specificity, authenticity and contemporaneity. This also adds a sense of realism and urgency to the issues raised in the film: it is harder to distance yourself from something that is potentially happening currently on your doorstep. Kassovitz shoots the characters in front of sculptures on the streets of Paris (outside Les Halles), in front of murals of great figures from French history (in the *cit *), backlit by anti-alcohol posters on a bus-stop (“identikit photo of a killer” reads the text over a bottle, since Hubert’s head blocks out the adjective “thirst” before “killer”) and interacting with a billboard (which they humorously deface, “adapting” it with their graffiti). There is no doubt as to when and where this is happening. The Dogme brothers made this focus on the immediate and the specific explicit in their manifesto as one of their ten commandments: “temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden... the film takes place in the here and now...” ([www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk)) and Hallam suggests that there has been a “renaissance of locality and region” in film in recent years (2000: 188). In keeping with this trend, Kassovitz

uses his camera to explore the characters in their environments and to understand them in and through their broader contexts.

The triumph of *La Haine* lies in Kassovitz's ability to convey so strong a sense of this reality without compromising the overall aesthetic or diminishing the popular appeal of the film. *La Haine* succeeded more than other *banlieue* films, says Vincendeau, because it "harnessed its 'local' message to international modes of representation" (2005: 72).

Far from being compelled to choose between what Bazin referred to as the "contrasting but equally pure forms of realism represented by *Farrebique* on the one hand and *Citizen Kane* on the other" (1972: 29), Kassovitz has succeeded, aided by the significant advances in technology since these two films were made, in reconciling them, and in doing so exemplifies Bazin's assertion that a "*realist* art is one capable of creating an aesthetic which integrates reality" (in Williams, 1980: 40).

University of Cape Town

## “This Little Space In Between...”: Romance Gets Real

“The bad stuff is easier to believe. You ever notice that?”

- Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*

“Novels gave you a completely false idea about life, they told lies and they implied that there were endings when in reality there were no endings, everything just went on and on.”

- Kate Atkinson in *Case Histories*

If the notion of a single truth has become passé and unfashionable in the post-modern context, much the same can be said of true love, and its literary and filmic manifestation, the romance. Just as belief in truth and the real has been eroded, mocked, and ironised, the ideal of transformative, redemptive, eternal romantic love no longer holds much currency and may be the object of disdain. In their article on the decline of romance and the demystification of love in the postmodern age, Dowd and Pallotta assert that the “rationalization and demystification of the world that has proceeded apace throughout the twentieth century has not been contained within the public sphere of commerce and contracts” but that it has “moved inexorably into the private realms of love and intimacy as well. Historical circumstances have reinforced in our culture an increasingly hedonistic, strategic, monitored, self-reflexive, rational, and instrumental approach to the relationships of everyday life” (2000: 549-550).

But just as “truth” and “the real” are continually revisited in contemporary artforms despite the jaded environment, romantic love – with its associated fictional genres – lives on, if somewhat tailored and adapted to suit a more cynical audience. Viewers are still prepared to suspend disbelief despite the current climate of scepticism, or perhaps *because* of it, as the surplus of romantic comedy in recent years suggests. In his study of romantic comedies in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>1</sup> Frank Krutnick points out that the resurgence of this genre has been underway since 1984, peaking between 1997

---

<sup>1</sup> Krutnick’s study is confined to romantic comedies produced and/or distributed in the US.

and 1999. Hollywood studios bought an unprecedented number of romantic comedies during 1998, leading the InHollywood website to comment that “If even half the projects picked up this year actually get the greenlight, the first decade of the millennium may be known as ‘the romantic comedy decade’” (in Krutnik, 2002: 131). Dowd and Pallotta’s statistics for romance films in the US also confirm a remarkable upsurge in the numbers in the 1990s, of both romantic dramas and romantic comedies (2000: 560). With 33 romantic comedies and 24 romantic dramas made in the US in the 1990s, the figures for romance were far higher than for any genre other than “supernatural” (34 films) and mixed genre (126 films).<sup>2</sup> Further, Krutnik points to a sharp increase in the mid-90s in the number of imported romantic comedies, largely from Australia and Britain, with the huge success of films such as Mike Newell’s *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1993) and Baz Luhrman’s *Strictly Ballroom*, released in 1992 (2002: 132). At the turn of the millennium, mainstream filmmaking seems to have been simultaneously characterised by a revival of realism and a glut of romantic comedies; by the stripped-down style of the dogme-style films or indie slacker films, on the one hand, and, on the other, spectacular, supernatural or action films featuring a superfluity of special effects. The second century of film starts with the dichotomy between the Lumières and Méliès, or at least the sliding scale, firmly in place, with an unlikely combination of favourite genres bleeding into each other, true to postmodern hybridity.

This hybridisation process has certainly been the case with romance films, and their astonishingly popular cousin the romantic comedy. While some of the recent romances are contemporary remakes of older films, others deploy fantasy and fairy-tale, and savvy studios have looked to crossbreeding with other popular genres in order to broaden the audience base for romance and romantic comedies. This has meant including action or thriller subplots or “gross-out comedy” (for instance, the extremely popular *There’s Something About Mary*, directed by Bob and Peter Farrelly in 1998) through which to draw bigger audiences from among the significant cohort of young male cinemagoers. According to Mernit, “[f]or romantic comedy to stay alive it’s had to hybridise and what used to be perceived as classic romantic comedies

---

<sup>2</sup> It must also be noted that many of the mixed genre films would have contained elements of romance. Dowd and Pallotta confined their study strictly to films which clearly had a romantic love relationship as the central focus of the narrative.

doesn't pull in an audience anymore" (in Krutnik, 2002: 133). While there may have been increased pressure in the current environment to revise romantic comedy in particular, it must be noted that romantic comedy is of its very nature a hybrid genre, and one that is no stranger to generic crossbreeding.

In addition to this hybridisation, there is also an increasing tendency to foreground the conventions of the romantic genre *as conventions* in a self-reflexive manner, putting potentially clichéd romantic statements and even moments in metaphoric scare quotes so as to avoid falling into the trap of appearing unworldly or outdatedly idealist.<sup>3</sup> Krutnik asserts that users of romantic discourse "can productively reanimate [this] discredited legacy of expression in a manner that both addresses and transcends its redundancy" (2002: 139). By indicating his or her awareness of the second-hand nature of the discourse, by employing an ironic twist, the postmodern lover makes use of cliché with impunity, as Umberto Eco suggests in his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*:

...the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, 'I love you madly,' because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, 'As Barbara Cartland would have put it, I love you madly.' At this point, having avoided false innocence, he will nonetheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: That he loves her, but that he loves her in an age of lost innocence... both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded... in speaking of love. (1983: 67-8)

Conventions are shown up as conventions and foregrounded as fictional constructions because of "a contemporary uncertainty about what we once thought were eternal

---

<sup>3</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald remarks on the usefulness of self-reflexivity in less traditional romantic comedies in which the aim is still to "bring about the happy union of a woman and a man," but which "as modern films... have to show themselves to be beyond the naivety that such uncomplicated couplings rely on" (2007: 69). In striving towards greater realism such romantic comedies tend to keep the traditional "boy meets, loses and re-gets" girl story structure but incorporating difficult issues such as "loss and death," using more realist language, adopting a franker approach to sex, and keeping the narrative structure open-ended (2007: 70, 72).

verities” (Paul, 2002: 128). William Paul notes how in *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987), one of the first new romantic comedies which came about after romantic comedy re-established itself as the dominant comedic form in 1984, set a precedent in this respect. In *Moonstruck*, romance is “set in quotation marks, with ironic self-conscious reference to the romanticism of Italian opera and... the seemingly supernatural properties of the moon” (2002: 126), injecting a more worldly-seeming sense of realism into the fiction while still giving audiences the romance they can’t quite let go of.

In part the demystification of love has to do with an increasingly prosaic, consumerist and jaded contemporary *zeitgeist*, but it also has something to do with the fact that romantic love has lost something of its transgressive power. With the increase in globalisation and the opening up of previous social boundaries, issues such as differing social or racial backgrounds are no longer as much of an impediment against which star-crossed lovers must struggle. Stories are less likely to feature bitter struggles against the constraints that family feuds, or cultural, racial or class differences once imposed on lovers, and, since the sanctity of marriage has also been eroded, already being married also presents less of an impediment to romance and adultery does not pose as much of a danger. Dowd and Pallotta point out that the great obstacles of the past no longer present themselves in contemporary romances (2000: 553), and without these struggles romance has lost some its sense of risk and passion. “Whereas romance was once pitted against the forces of tradition, it now faces the challenge of the new forces of postmodern irony and disbelief” writes Purdy (in Dowd, 2000: 563). Gone is the quest for treasure, gone are the dragons, metaphorical or otherwise, which Northrop Frye identifies as crucial to the romance (1957: 189, 192-3). With the demystification of romance and the removal of obstacles in attaining that romance, today’s lovers are stuck with nothing to fight for and nothing to fight against.

The current climate of faithlessness and of loss of meaning has necessitated a rethink of the traditional romance formula. Romances – both romantic dramas and romantic comedies – are being rewritten to conform to the non-conformist requirements of a more realist fictional mode, which acknowledges, as does postmodernism as a whole, the demise of idealism. Hybridisation, increasing inter-textuality, self-awareness, self-

reflexivity and irony are all strategies which are in common currency in contemporary romance films, and which are also frequently employed by filmmakers of a more specifically realist bent. The romantic comedy has taken over from the romantic drama as the dominant romantic form,<sup>4</sup> possibly due to its greater potential for irony, and because producers are keen to work from a formula which lends itself so well to adaptation and variations and has (traditionally, anyway) the appeal of the happy ending. But it is not only the Hollywood dream-machine which is capitalising on the popularity of the romance genre. Realist filmmakers, from the staunch social realist and socialist Briton Ken Loach, to the Danish Dogme filmmaker Lone Scherfig, or American Generation-X realist Richard Linklater, have opted to work within the framework of the romance genre, adapting the traditional formula to a more realist outlook. In terms of the intended “function”<sup>5</sup> of romances, contemporary romances have the dual intention of making one both suspend disbelief and be utterly disbelieving, and this is effected through a formal and stylistic reworking of the romance genre at several levels. Changes are made at the structural level of the text (in terms of the narrative structure and particularly the ending of the films), at the level of content (the kinds of storylines, characters and themes represented and the literal on-screen content of the film), and in the style of the films (relating to the cinematic conventions employed).

Structurally, realist filmmakers have adapted the conventional “meet, lose, get” formula common to romance texts<sup>6</sup> to suit their specific agenda, frequently putting a more pessimistic, “realist” spin on the ending. Since realist filmmakers typically steer clear of the palliative endings favoured by Hollywood films, realist romances tend not to race towards the certainty, closure or containment of a happy ending. Loach’s realist romantic drama *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004) interestingly does contain a significant impediment in the form of cultural and religious differences against which the main characters must struggle. While these differences aren’t in themselves a problem for

---

<sup>4</sup> See Dowd, 2000: 559

<sup>5</sup> In her doctoral thesis, as yet unpublished, Carolyn Wiebe asserts that changes to the romantic comedy genre have occurred at the level of form, content and *function*. The “functions” she discusses concern, firstly, what a film “invites an audience to feel (as, for instance, what it expects an audience to find funny) – what the film itself shows it expects the audience to attend or respond to” – and secondly, “how the generic narrative mirrors, reiterates and contains social contradictions” (2006: 1).

<sup>6</sup> In *Writing the Romantic Comedy Screenplay*, Mernit outlines the three acts of the romantic comedy as consisting of Meet (girl and boy have significant encounters), Lose (girl and boy are separated) and Get (girl and boy reunite) (Krutnik, 2002, 145).

the lovers, and the film could easily have rushed us towards a triumphant ending where obstacles were overcome and true love reigned supreme, Loach opts for a different route. In *Ae Fond Kiss*, the main male character's family form a chorus of doom, denying the audience any possibility of a happy ending. They couple may be happy now in the throes of first love, but this won't last forever. "For how long?" is the constant refrain, the pessimistic chorus which gradually erodes and undermines the fragile love that holds the lovers together. It also reveals their love as somewhat drab and desultory: if there were sufficient passion and conviction from the couple they could surely ignore these un-romantic dissenters, or even bind themselves together more tightly in defiance of them? "We have witnessed the end of the era of high romance" aver Dowd and Pallotta: "[Y]oung lovers view their future with a greater sense of realism" and "relationships that are more typical of today's young lovers are entered into 'for the time being'" (2000: 568-9). To endorse true love through a happy ending that flew in the face of the family's scepticism would in any case have been too much for a somewhat gloomy realist such as Loach, who typically "avoids a celebration of love as a humanist triumph over social obstacles by dramatising how its chances of success or failure are inevitably interwoven with political factors" (Hill, 1998: 21).

At a broader structural level, realist filmmakers have tended to create open-ended, episodic, everyday narratives, frequently with a sense of real-time duration, "the sense of events observed haphazardly as the hours roll by," as Bazin said of Neorealist films (1972: 58). Films such as *La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995) have gone as far as using titles to emphasise the real-time duration of events (and non-events). Realist romances are more likely not to end with their lovers happily united, that staple of romantic comedies and of all but the most tragic romance films. One notable exception is the Dogme box office hit, *Italian for Beginners* (2000). Billed as a romantic comedy despite the Dogme ban on genre films, *Italian for Beginners* ends not with two but with *six* central characters being paired off into blissful heterosexual coupledness. Director Lone Scherfig brought a magic realist element into her Dogme production, claiming that she wanted to make a film about the redemptive power of love: "Are you married?" the priest asks of his verger. "No, but I do Italian," she answers. Scherfig found it "a great challenge to make a film about a group of lost loners" but suggested that the film was "at the same time... a genuine expression of the idea that

‘you can choose to be happy’ if you seize the moment and act out the positive sides we all have, when you discover that something or somebody needs you” (in Bondebjerg, 2003: 79). If ticket sales are anything to go by, her approach certainly struck a chord with viewers who, like Gornick, lamented “the passing of love’s transformative powers” (Dowd, 2002: 553).

Scherfig may have relented and let us off lightly with a happy ending, but that was only after she tackled many painful issues in the body of the film. Death, loneliness, lack of self-esteem, illness, shame and poverty are hardly the stuff of conventional romantic comedies, and Scherfig presents this subject matter with an unsanitised directness, true to realist form. Whereas Meg Ryan’s Sally in that quintessential romantic comedy *When Harry met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989) was cutely quirky in her minor eccentricities, Olympia’s clumsiness in *Italian for Beginners*, though sometimes amusing, becomes deeply painful when we see how her father’s emotionally abusive tirades about her “uselessness” break down her self-esteem. In documenting such difficult issues in the film, Scherfig is essentially taking to a more realist extreme the existing tendency to real-ise romance texts. Just as the understanding of the word ‘romance’ has moved a long way from its courtly, chivalrous origins, so the “content” of contemporary romances, the events, settings and characters, have become far more wide-ranging. As Diane Elam says in her book *Romancing The Postmodern*, romance “as an aesthetic term uses and abuses conventional categories of genre” and “roams the range of aesthetic considerations” (1992: 4). Romance may, in keeping with the Oxford English Dictionary definition, focus on events “very remote from ordinary life” and suggest “a narrative which deals with the extraordinary,” but as Elam goes on to point out, a contemporary advertisement for Loveswept Romances promises events “so believable you’ll actually feel you’re living them” (1992: 5), pushing the romance out of the realms of the fantasy and the ideal and into a more realist camp. More plausible, everyday characters now populate romance narratives, created specifically to encourage the reader or viewer to identify with them, and although there is still a strong tendency to remove the characters from their everyday settings for at least part of the narrative, the settings too are less idyllic and more ordinary. Today it is the Bridget Joneses of the fiction world that dominate in romances and romantic comedies, flawed as they may be.

Frye suggests that the typical hero of a romance has superior powers of action to ourselves, is capable of marvellous deeds, moves in a world where the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended, but is nevertheless identified as human. The comedic or realist hero, on the other hand, is superior “neither to other men nor to his environment” but is “one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience” (1957: 33-34). The shift in cinema from traditional romance to romantic comedy or realist romance echoes the changes in European fiction over the last fifteen centuries, which has “moved its centre of gravity down the list” from myth, to romance, to high mimetic, low mimetic (including realism) and finally to the ironic mode which Frye suggests has dominated during the last century, where the typical hero is inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves. The ironic hero is caught in a form of bondage and absurdity, although the reader may still feel that he could be in the same situation (1957: 34-35). A far cry from the traditional notions of romance which originated in a more chivalrous, courtly age, today’s romances embrace the ordinary, both in terms of the events and characters they feature, and so do not differ as significantly on that level from other “realist” texts. The ways in which these events are handled, however, set a handful of more realist romantic texts apart from the rest of the romantic dramas and comedies, as is the case with Scherfig’s intense and uncompromising treatment of her characters’ problems in this film.

Realist romances typically incorporate thematic elements, characters and events which would be unlikely to occur in more traditional romances or romantic comedies, fixing them with an unwavering realist stare. Even though the characters in realist romances are frequently allowed to escape from their everyday settings – to Italy, in *Italian for Beginners*, to Greece in *Ae Fond Kiss*, to Vienna and Paris in Richard Linklater’s *Before Sunrise* (1995) and *Before Sunset* (2004) respectively – this does not preclude a rigorous examination of their everyday lives, aspects of which are far from palatable. They tend to take their problems with them, and there is a clear sense in most cases that “reality” cannot be evaded forever and difficult issues will soon have to be faced again. Psychological or social issues and “racier” themes feature strongly in many realist romances, frequently with a focus on “the perceived realities of psychosexual problems rather than anodyne romance” (Krzywinska, 2005: 225-6), and the romance element is frequently neither a solution nor as goal-driven and

uncomplicated. In Ole Christian Madsen's Dogme romance, *Kira's Reason: A Love Story* (2001), for example, the film deals with the central character's loss of a child and her mental instability as she tries to come to terms with it, but it is also the story of her romantic "return" to her husband after the loss. *Kira's Reason*, like many other contemporary romances with a more realist bent, is more about the central protagonist finding *herself* than finding her man, despite the centrality of that element in the plot.

Although this is not always the case, there seems to be a growing trend in realist cinema to depict graphic sex, and more specifically *real sex*. The representation of the body, says Steve Neale, is a "site of crucial difference between art cinema and Hollywood cinema" (in Forbes, 2000: 39), with an important aspect of the new authenticity, the realism that Bordwell, for one, claims is a characteristic of art cinema,<sup>7</sup> being a "willingness to depict sexual relations far more openly and realistically" than is the case in Hollywood (Forbes, 2000, 39). Sexual explicitness is nothing new in art cinema. Linda Williams points to the arrival of hard-core pornography in America in the early and mid-Seventies as having ushered in a "brief moment of 'porno chic'" when "explicit, as opposed to simulated, representation of sex acts" enjoyed rare prestige in legitimate film (2001: 20). Williams claims that this moment of "porno-chic" has experienced a revival in recent years, reviving the "cross-over dream" between pornography and art (2001: 20). Several recent films, notably *The Idiots* (Von Trier, 1998), *Intimacy* (Patrice Chéreau, 2001), *Nine Songs* (Michael Winterbottom, 2004), *Romance* (Catherine Breillat, 1999), *The Piano Teacher* (Michael Haneke, 2001) and *Shortbus* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006) have taken this to the extreme, featuring graphic shots of real sex. A few decades ago, Norman Mailer praised the erotic realism of Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1973) calling it "the most powerfully erotic and most liberating movie ever made" and the first sex scene between Brando and Schneider "a marvellous scene, as good as a passionate kiss in real life," but what was missing for Mailer, to his great disappointment, was a shot of "Brando going up Schneider" (in Falcon, 2001: 20). If Bertolucci were making the film today Mailer may well have got the shot he wanted. Whereas real sex, often authenticated by penetration or ejaculation shots, once

---

<sup>7</sup> Bordwell describes such a pervasive realist trend in art cinema that the terms become almost indistinguishable (1985: 230). Most realist films could be said to belong in the art cinema category, though of course the reverse is not true since a significant body of art cinema is distinctly non-realist.

distinguished “hard-core from other legitimated cinemas” (Krzywinska, 2006: 217), this distinction is now less clear. Krzywinska claims that “the hard-core film industry has successfully exploited the spectacle of real sex to carve out a market difference from other forms of cinema” (Krzywinska, 2005: 223), but that this is being challenged by European art filmmakers, who use “the attraction of real sex to compete with the sensation-inducing spectacle of Hollywood’s high-octane special effects-laden blockbusters” (2006: 218) and find sex “a major selling point for European cinema at a time when Hollywood films [are] still too frightened of public reaction to do so” (Forbes, 2000, 39).<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly this is a significant marketing consideration. But real sex is, apparently, real. And like real violence or death, it increases the believability of the text as a whole. In addition to its capacity to sell, real sex therefore also has a particular status as an authenticating signifier, making the rest of the film more “real” by extension, in much the same way that the “real” killing of animals in *Cannibal Holocaust* and the real crew briefing in *Shooting Bokkie* lent credence to the rest of those films, as will be discussed in the following chapter. Von Trier was adamant that he would not allow body doubles for the erection shot in *The Idiots* since the ban on post-production tampering meant the audience was more likely to notice the swap, and he was disappointed that the actors didn’t spontaneously conduct their own authentic orgy for that scene since it meant he had to cheat the strict Dogme rules and resort to body doubles. But despite the floating rectangles (in some editions of the film) over the scene in which Joséphine and Jeppe leave the orgy to have their own awkward, groping love-making session, Williams claims it is this scene, with its unrehearsed, unselfconscious, “awkward authenticity” that really adds an extra element of sexual realism to the film (2001: 20), in the same way that any other clearly unscripted moment which demands a “genuine” response from the actor lends credence to a naturalistic performance. The “actual bodily engagement” of real sexual intimacy goes beyond the “artifice of acting” (Williams, 2001: 22) and can have a very visceral effect on the viewer, directly engaging his or her body.

The use of certain stylistic conventions, commonly accepted as “realist,” also helps to “authenticate” realist romances. This set of conventions is much the same as for

---

<sup>8</sup> Hollywood is of course not averse to using highly aestheticised and stylized “sex,” largely consisting of beautifully and flatteringly filmed shots of stars’ bodies, as a selling point. In a spoof interview, UK comedian Denis Pennis once asked Demi Moore whether “if the script asked for it and it was tastefully done” she might “ever consider keeping [her] clothes on for a movie” (in *Desire to Shock*, 2000: 48).

realist films in general, frequently (though not always) drawing from the stylistic “repertoire” outlined in the introduction to this thesis and epitomised by the Dogme filmmakers. Handheld camera, poorly lit (or unlit) subjects and grainy images, the inclusion of home movie footage, erratic zooms, and a roaming camera which follows the actors and prioritises them in the shot are common stylistic choices for realist filmmakers intent on creating a sense of immediacy and “unmediated-ness” in their work, and realist romances are no exception.

Maverick American filmmaker Richard Linklater’s romance duo *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* are exemplary postmodern realist romances, all the more interesting because nine years and a great deal of thinking separate them. Set in Vienna and Paris respectively, the films are about two encounters between a young American man, Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and a Parisienne, Céline (Julie Delpy). In *Before Sunrise*, the young couple first meet on the train, he heading to Vienna where he must catch a plane back to America the next morning, she en route back to Paris. Jesse persuades Céline to get off the train and spend the night wandering around Vienna with him, and they part reluctantly in the morning with promises to meet in the same place in six months’ time.

The characters (and one suspects the director himself) protect themselves against allegations of romantic idealism by setting a ruggedly realist (and realistically young and gauche at times) discussion of life and love against the highly romantic backdrop of the pair’s budding romance in Vienna: the best defence against romantic idealism, it seems, is a good offence. Rather than steering clear of the “already said,” the couple pick apart and analyse the notion of romance (among many other things), embracing it, as Krutnik says of postmodern romances in general, “with the kind of have-your-cake-and-eat-it logic Eco describes” (2002: 140). Without rupturing the core romance narrative, a metanarrative exists alongside it which describes the difficulty of creating a romance film when everything has been said and done before, much of which is spoken out loud in the characters’ discussions about their own difficulty with “creating a romance” in that context. Hawkes and Delpy spend a great deal of their time in Vienna contemplating life and love, analysing everything in a

casually philosophical and mildly sceptical way.<sup>9</sup> They are self-conscious about their potential inauthenticity as individuals in the love arena. Quintessentially post-modern characters, they are prone to over-analysis and paralysing disbelief. Indeed if romance requires an impediment against which to struggle, as Dowd and Pallotta suggest in their article on the demystification of love in the postmodern era (2000), the real obstacle to Jesse and Céline's romantic union in *Before Sunrise* is their own scepticism and disbelief in the institution of love.<sup>10</sup> They are realists, caught up in the prosaic everyday world, even as they experience this small pocket of fantasy. As Krutnik writes, the new romance is characterised by an "ardent yet ironic embrace of romantic possibility" (2002: 138). Dowd and Pallotta suggest that it is "no little accomplishment that we continue to trust at all" in this "age of disbelief," that "although we understand the necessity of caution, we continue to form new friendships and to seek intimate ties with other human beings. We still hope, in other words, some day to 'fall in love,' and possibly even to marry and raise a family. And we do this irrespective of our awareness of the failings and pathologies of a family life" (2000: 550). Frye, too, comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of romance:

...no matter how great a change may take place in society, romance will turn up again, as hungry as ever, looking for new hopes and desires to feed on. The perennially childlike quality of romance is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space. (1957: 186)

People, it seems, are in love with love, which has meant that romance is constantly being adapted and transformed to suit the demands of the era in which it finds itself. In a brief monologue in *Before Sunrise*, Céline essentially states the "thesis" of the film in explaining what she is hoping for:

---

<sup>9</sup> Jeffers McDonald identifies a subgenre of romantic comedy which she calls "radical romantic comedy," largely referring to films such as *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) and *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977), which diverged in many ways (including a greater sense of realism) from the traditional romantic comedy while still locating themselves within that genre. She suggests that "the texts which make up the radical romantic comedy sub-genre are aware of the almost inevitable failure of romantic love and allow their characters to strive for it nonetheless" (2007: 71).

<sup>10</sup> In *Before Sunset* there are the more tangible impediments of her partner and particularly his wife and child.

You know, if there's any kind of god, it wouldn't be in any of us, not you or me, but just... this little space in between. If there's any kind of magic in this world, it must be in the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something. I know, it's almost impossible to succeed, but who cares really? The answer must be in the attempt.

Both Céline and Jesse are acutely aware of and self-conscious about their own unoriginality as lovers, but that doesn't stop them from knowing a moment of ordinary magic when they see it. If Loach's *Ae Fond Kiss* sets out to debunk the notion of romance through the doom-mongering chorus with their refrain of "for how long?" the characters in Linklater's infinitely more positive *Before Sunrise* use that assumption as their starting point and try to move beyond it to advocate an appreciation of the moment, of the present, which can remain unassailable as a memory if that is how they choose to play it. "Why do you think everybody thinks relationships are supposed to last forever anyway?" Jesse asks towards the end of the film, trying out a bit of bravura but clearly full of anticipatory regret: "But you think tonight's it, huh? Tonight's our only night? ... Well all right. Let's do it. No delusions, no projections. We'll just make tonight great." It may just be a fleeting liaison that amounts to nothing in the end, a short-lived interlude, a "little space in between" two bigger chapters of real life, but it is more intensely real for the concentration of experience into a few hours.

The couple come to a "rational" and "adult" decision (Céline's words) to make this their only night together and not to exchange numbers, since they "hate" the thought of their magical interlude, the "greatest night of [their] life" (as the bartender calls it) petering out mundanely like everyone else's. Significantly, this is overthrown in a moment of romantic spontaneity at the end of the film. Just as they are about to part, Céline and Jesse agree to meet in the same place in six months' time, without which we would have been left without hope. This way, Linklater creates a cunning cliffhanger, which immediately initiated speculation about whether the characters would actually meet again in six months.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> See for example Robin Wood's account (1998: 322-324). Wood insists that the "tug of longing for permanence is so powerful that one would love to see a sequel" (1998: 324).

It is clear that Linklater shares the young lovers' hopeful scepticism at least to some degree. "We all create these romantic ideals, even if they don't exist" he told interviewer Ben Thompson, "it's kind of an endearing thing about the species that we do that" (1995: 21). The film both celebrates romantic love and suggests its impossibility. Although he has made an undoubtedly romantic film, he begins it with an unsubtitled and startlingly vicious bickering session in German between a husband and wife on the train, which is witnessed by the younger couple. The fighting couple's very vocal argument is, appropriately, what drives Céline and Jesse together: to escape the fallout of what appears to be a disillusioned, unhappy marriage, Céline changes seats to sit near Jesse, and the pair quickly start up a conversation, talking amongst other things about how couples lose their ability to hear each other as they get older: "It's nature's way of allowing couples to grow old together without killing each other" says Jesse cynically. This opening sequence serves a number of functions very economically. It starts the film with an unhappily-ever-after scenario, preventing any idealistic illusions, and establishing Linklater's realist outlook. It also establishes the fact that the young couple actively want to distance themselves from the older couple, literally but also in terms of their approach to life and love: they want to do things differently. The inclusion of this scene ensures that the characters, and we as viewers, are aware that things don't always turn out that well, and it ensures that we are aware that Linklater is aware of that. By starting with an unhappy ending he strikes a warning note that resonates throughout the rest of the film, a note which in fact is struck even before the first scene with the overture to Purcell's mini-opera about tragic love, *Dido and Aeneas*, which is played over the opening credits.<sup>12</sup>

Linklater was very aware of the dangers of taking on the chartered territory of a romance, as well as the advantages. "It's like going into an old goldmine with a new process" he has claimed: "I can't say that I'm a big fan of the genre *Before Sunrise* might be said to belong to, but these films answer a huge need in people, and I was wondering if I could still answer that need, but with my own interpretation of how things really are" (in Thompson, 1995: 21). Other key directors of his generation such as Tarantino and Soderbergh have also "found a way to make exceptionally

---

<sup>12</sup> Wood further points out that the Viennese setting, the visit to the Prater, and the discussion of romantic love evokes *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948), which serves to reinforce this sense of doomed romance (1998: 325).

meaningful films within more popular structures,” but, suggests Brian Price, his “contemplative films satisfy only the most basic requirements of mainstream production (such as casting stars), and explore the many ideas that cannot simply be contained within pre-existing structures” (2003: n.p.). Linklater may make use of some elements of conventional, popular genres, but his special skill is in the way he manages to reinvent them as a vehicle for his own voice. For Wood, *Before Sunrise* is “characterized by a complete openness within a closed and perfect classical form (an unquestioned diegetic world, the unities preserved, the end symmetrically answering the beginning)” (1998, 324). There is a constant even-handedness and a balance between romance and realism in each of the characters and in their relationship, and a tension between the conventional and the generic and reality, which resists generic constraints.

If *Before Sunrise* is an interrogation of romantic love, it is also a celebration, our own dualities being played out by the characters on-screen. In this way, the romance is kept more plausible, more real, more true-to-life without denying the characters or the viewers their romantic fix: Linklater himself calls it “romance for realists” (in James, 2004: 12). It is a film about hope in the face of all evidence against it: neither we nor the characters are meant to know whether they will meet up again. In his chapter on *Rethinking Romantic Love*, written well before *Before Sunset* was made, Robin Wood mentions that despite the fact that we know that the characters do not exist outside of the fictional world, fans of the film could not help but speculate about whether the pair would keep their six-month date assignation. Most believed “with great reluctance” that they would not meet, which Wood felt testified to the “continuing pull, despite all the battering it has received, of the romantic ideal as a powerful and seductive component of our ideology of love and sexuality” (1998: 323). For Wood, “this response – the ‘realistic’ acknowledgment of uncertainty, precariousness, the transience of feelings,” the “recognition that *amor* doesn’t always *vincit omnia*, qualified by a ‘romantic’ yearning for commitment, stability, permanence – corresponds very closely to the film’s overall tone or ‘feel’,” and accounts for the resonance it has for contemporary audiences (1998: 323).

Love can’t conquer all and nor, it seems, can sex. There is a great deal of talking about love in *Before Sunrise*, of intellectualising it, but very little *making* of it. Indeed

you spend a great deal of the film just waiting for anything physical to happen: Jesse is initially too scared even to move a lock of hair out of Céline's face and they are simply too deep in conversation to get to anything else. "I think that what throws people about the film is that the first kiss takes so long," Linklater has suggested, "they're used to it being couple meets/couple immediately all over each other in bed/now we can get on with the story" (in Thompson, 1995: 21). When the moment for them to have sex finally arises there ensues a long, cerebral, and highly unromantic debate, a continuation of their earlier conversation, about whether or not it is a good idea to go ahead with it. Céline is reluctant, claiming that she fears she will miss Jesse if they sleep together, but one suspects she also fears that it is fundamentally unnecessary and extraneous to their relationship and in fact would intrude on the magic. The lead-up to their love-making is an extension of their ambivalent discussions on the subject of romance and Linklater manages to maintain this realist ambivalence even in this moment of romantic consummation: "Actually I wanted to sleep with you since we got off the train," Céline tells Jesse, "but now that we've talked so much I don't know anymore." Their "talking so much" is detrimental to romantic love because they constantly second-guess their own feelings, voicing the viewer's most cynical thoughts before we've even had a chance to think them. It's a scene which brings to mind the twenty-something-minute epic, and epically banal, improvised seduction scene in *Breathless* (Godard, 1959), where Michel Poiccard (played by Jean-Paul Belmondo) tries to chip away at his reluctant girlfriend's resolve until she eventually relents. Williams alludes to a similar scene in *Fat Girl* (Breillat, 2001), where a seduction scene becomes "a prolonged battle of wills lasting most of the night" (2001: 24). *Before Sunrise* is far more about intellectual and verbal intercourse than it is about physical sexual intercourse, but the sex scene is no less "real" than the graphic penetration shots of Breillat's *Romance* for that: the actual act is simply less important than the rest of their encounter, to the extent that Céline, to Jesse's horror, actually claims that they didn't have sex when they meet again nine (real) years later in *Before Sunset*.

Some of the film's sense of authenticity is derived from the working method, which was collaborative and open to spontaneous input and improvisation. The premise of the film was drawn from a real-life experience Linklater had had, when he'd met a woman in a toyshop in Philadelphia and wandered the city, talking, deep into the

night, the only thing keeping him “from complete immersion in this brief encounter” being the “nagging suspicion that it ‘could be a movie’” (in Thompson, 1995: 20). Linklater described his working method, with particular reference to *Dazed and Confused* (1993) as being to write “little notes on note cards... scenes, exact memory ideas... it slowly comes together in my mind. Then all of a sudden I wake up one day and the circumstances are right... As I’ve planned it all in advance, the actual writing of description and dialogues comes pretty easy to me” (in Conversations, 1994: n.p.). When Linklater’s Philadelphia toyshop encounter eventually became a film project in the form of *Before Sunrise* after a “superlong gestation period” of five years, the script came “really quickly. Same process, note cards, get organised, then boom, wrote it in eleven days” (in Conversations, 1994: n.p.). Linklater is not keen to work on someone else’s script, believing that “you have to know the film, and sure enough at the end it’s what you knew from the beginning. I try to capture that feeling I felt before I even started writing” (in Conversations, 1994: n.p.). Because of the collaborative nature of his work, casting can also be crucial to the success of the film, as was certainly the case with *Before Sunrise*. Linklater has always found that when it came to auditioning actors the “important thing [was] talking to them” and that “even the first minute, you get a sense of whether they’re kinda what you had in mind” (in Rhys, 1997: n.p.). Since most of his leads are required to be of above-average intelligence, that was a crucial factor: “You can’t just act intelligent. You either are, and you have the verbal skills and that passion, or you don’t. Casting is brutally honest about that. Who they are is a big deal” (in Rhys, 1997: n.p.).<sup>13</sup>

Once Hawkes and Delpy were cast, they were drawn into a series of consultations in which they were called upon to contribute ideas, often drawing on personal experience, a process which Hawkes described as being “like mutual group therapy, a great way to begin” (Wood, 1998: 320-1). According to Linklater, this early phase consists of “[sitting] around talking a lot about it, both individually and in groups... building an atmosphere that we’re going to create in, where we’re all sort of getting on the same wavelength. Every production has its own vibe. It’s really up to the director to set that tone, how we’re going to work, and how we’re going to get there”

---

<sup>13</sup> I have found surprisingly few substantial interviews with Linklater, and am indebted to Timothy Rhys’s very insightful interview, done for *Moviemaker* in 1997, in which Linklater makes some particularly interesting comments about his working process and his attitude to filmmaking. It was very helpful to find first-hand material by the director himself in this piece.

(in Rhys, 1997: n.p.). A long and intense period of rehearsal follows, and “the final dialogue,” says Linklater, “is really the product of rehearsal” during which he will “change a lot to make it real for the character,” avoiding the pitfalls experienced by “some directors who are also writers [who] get so in love with their own words that it hurts their performances” (in Conversations, 1994: n.p.). The performances are prepared in detail, down to the inclusion of “reality flaws” such as “Mitch’s nose-grabbing mannerism” in *Dazed and Confused* (Conversations, 1994: n.p.), which make the performances seem more natural and less “polished,” and everything is firmly locked down before the shooting starts. Linklater is quick to point out that the naturalistic, spontaneous-seeming dialogue and performances in *Before Sunrise* were the result of intense work in the pre-production phase:

The actors had rehearsed it so much it was sorta like performing it like a play. I like it when the actual production is no big deal. You try to find something new that day, but you’re pretty much there. I think with the lines – it’s really important to get there before you’re shooting. You know, people don’t understand what improvisation means. They think you turn on the camera and you start changing things around. Well, I’ve never, ever, done that... I don’t know anyone who just turns on a camera and see[s] what they get. It’s too expensive. I think that falls into laziness. *It has to be very tight before it can be loose.* (Rhys, 1997: n.p., my emphasis)

It’s a process not unlike that of Mike Leigh who, along with Ken Loach, Linklater identifies as directors he particularly admires.<sup>14</sup> Some of the most enjoyable, memorable and believable scenes resulted from this process, such as the fake phone call scene (*fig. 11*), which came from something Delpy did with her girlfriends as a teenager: Linklater “thought it was brilliant, so [they] just worked out the scene from there” (in Wood, 1998: 321). The script of *Before Sunrise* was significantly revised in the rehearsal process, as Linklater felt that “the ideas were there but it really needed to be rewritten extensively just to work” (in Rhys, 1997: n.p.). The realistic ambivalence

---

<sup>14</sup> Linklater refers to these two directors as epitomising filmmakers whose artistic spirit is clearly in evidence in their work and has endured across a large body of films (see Rhys, 1997: n.p.). “I like Ken Loach, Mike Leigh” he told David Walsh in an interview for the World Socialist Website: “These are the British filmmakers who haven’t sold out, who haven’t got hired by Hollywood... These filmmakers have stayed there and made films in their own backyard” (1998: n.p.).

of the dialogue, at times gauche and awkward, which arose out of a collaborative script written by Linklater himself and Kim Krizan, the impressively naturalistic performances which fed off that script, the spontaneous, improvised moments which were encouraged during rehearsals, and the fact that the actors and characters are both believable, highly characterised and very appealing all contributed to the “resonance,” and to the popularity of the film. Linklater specifically wanted to work with a woman on the script in order to maintain a sense of equality between the male and female voices and because he “didn’t want the woman in the film to be a projection of [him]self” (Wood, 1998: 320), resulting in an extraordinary even-handedness of treatment. Delpy also had a significant role to play in this. “I knew unless I was tough with these two American men, Céline could have possibly disappeared into some cliché-ridden feminine mass” she says in the production notes (in Thompson: 1995, 21). Krizan was not confined to writing Céline’s dialogue, and likewise Linklater did not only work on Jesse’s lines, so that the director claims to feel “equally close to both characters” and that “a lot of [him] actually goes through Julie” (Thompson: 1995, 21). He also found it “really exhilarating... really fun” working so closely with his actors (Rhys, 1997: n.p.).

Stylistically, *Before Sunrise* employs several techniques and conventions commonly used by realist filmmakers, chief among which is the use of long takes, both static and mobile. Interestingly, however, this is not used in combination with deep focus. The focus in *Before Sunrise* is solidly on the main characters and their developing relationship, and for the majority of the film, particularly once their romance starts to develop during the night scenes, there is a fairly shallow depth of field with little distinctive detail on the background (*fig. 12*). Unlike the wide shots and the deep focus of *La Haine*, for example, where the focus was on the characters in their environments, the setting here is fairly immaterial – they could just as easily have had much the same night in any other European city, and they are just “passing through.” When they meet, and when they are about to part, the focus on the background is clearer: it is not only real *time* they are back in as dawn breaks, but real *space*, and the detail in the background is appropriately sharper and more delineated. Other characters, except for those during the restaurant vignettes or who play one of the cameo roles such as the palm-reader, are also undistinguished for the most part and

often have their backs to the camera, so that neither editing nor the surroundings distract us from the protagonists.

One remarkable long take, though it is certainly not the longest in the film, happens in the scene in which Jesse and Céline end up in a record shop's listening booth, listening to a sentimental song. In a static mid-shot which lasts for over a minute, their eyes meet and quickly slide away from each other, their lips twitch with awkward semi-smiles and they try to pretend to be focusing on the uncomfortably romantic song rather than on each other in the absurdly confined space of the booth (*fig. 13*). Of scenes such as this, Wood writes that Linklater achieves

‘pure cinema’ in ways Hitchcock never dreamed of (not merely ‘photographs of people talking,’ but photographs of them not talking), precisely because it completely resists analysis, defies verbal description. All one can say is that it is the cinema’s most perfect depiction, in just over one minute of ‘real’ time, at once concrete and intangible, of two people beginning to realise that they are falling in love. (1998: 330)

The integrity of the moment, its “real time” aspect, the absence of cinematic virtuosity (and thus the focus simply on the characters in this uncomfortably close-seeming mid-shot which pins them against the wall), the lack of conventional “sappy” or stilted dialogue favoured by romantic comedies, and most significantly the absence of the ubiquitous montage sequence featuring endless dissolves that is the lazy shorthand of so many romances and romantic comedies, make the scene stand out as a realist triumph. Typical also of realist films, including realist romances as Tamar Jeffers McDonald points out (2007:72), is the use of diegetic rather than non-diegetic music, which in this instance undermines rather than adds to the romance of the situation with its tinny sound and embarrassingly appropriate lyrics.<sup>15</sup> The couple’s most romantic interludes, and indeed most of the characters’ most important moments of interaction, tend to happen without the assistance of rousing music. Non-diegetic

---

<sup>15</sup> Jeffers McDonald gives as an example a scene in *The Goodbye Girl* (Herbert Ross, 1977) in which the central male protagonist sings the lyrics of the 1941 song ‘How About You’ rather than simply playing the track. The emphasis, as she points out, is “on authentic involvement, even if accompanied by embarrassment, rather than the utilisation of a pre-packaged song to evoke a pre-packaged emotion” (2007: 72).

music is limited mostly to the beginning and the end of film, more specifically to moments when the characters are not on screen. The instrumental version of the record booth song, *Come Here*, continues into the next scene as they walk on through the streets, but for the most part, when the couple is present, it is their performances rather than any non-diegetic music which determines the mood of the scene.

The claustrophobic, static, painfully long take in the record shop won't let us take our eyes off the couple, making it virtually impossible to distance ourselves from them emotionally, and the anticipation of their first physical contact becomes excruciating. As is frequently the case with realist filmmakers who place an emphasis on naturalism in their performances (Von Trier, Kassovitz and Leigh particularly come to mind), the shot is led by the actors rather than by any grand plan of the cinematographer, which "leave[s] the actors free, permitting spontaneity" (Wood, 1998: 319). The camera wanders the streets of Vienna with the characters, appearing to take things as they come, frequently covering the characters' interaction in lengthy two-shots. The longest take in the film, a five-minute take in a tram car, exemplifies the sense of improvisation and spontaneity likely to have come out of rehearsals and which is most appropriately covered by a long take since it maintains this sense of immediacy and Bazinian continuity. In an essay on the "Seductive Slack" of *Before Sunrise*, Glen Norton very astutely remarks that it is not only the characters that embody the Generation-X slacker formula but the "text" itself, that the "wandering, searching, seemingly random aspect" of Linklater's work "mimics the Gen-X culture it wants to represent" (2000: 62).

At the end of several of the longer takes (on the bridge overlooking the river, in the cemetery), we are left to dwell in the setting once the characters have left the shot, creating an interlude of *temps mort*.<sup>16</sup> The camera stays long enough on the vacated landscape to make us conscious of its presence, as if it can't quite bring itself to leave just yet, foreshadowing the sense of loss at the end of the film where the technique culminates in a series of static shots of places they have moved through and now vacated. This fixation on *temps mort*, where the camera remains on an empty stage, is also a moment of filmic reflexivity since it draws attention to the presence of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the filmmaker most renowned for using this technique was realist forerunner Michelangelo Antonioni.

author and the process of construction. Another such reflexive moment occurs in the restaurant scene, where the camera departs from Jesse and Céline for a short while in order to provide us with a rapid eavesdropping montage of other tables in the restaurant. Once again, this draws attention to the construction of the film and to Linklater's role in what is being communicated. The shots of the other diners give one the same detached observer point of view as the final montage of vacated locations. The restaurant montage is a curious and distinctly realist technique to have chosen. It is as though Linklater suddenly felt the need to introduce, in one fell swoop, a series of reminders that many other people exist around our protagonists, experiencing the same night in the same town, but are oblivious to them and their magical encounter, unlike the fortune-teller or the poet-for-hire or the cow play cast who interact with them. They are extraneous characters whose presences do not move the narrative forward at all, but who ground and contextualise the main characters' experience. The gratuitousness in terms of the plot, the detached observer point of view, and the contextualising effect are all realist staples, removing us for a moment from the absorbing romance of the narrative, forming a counterpoint to the intimate, engaged shots of the main characters without detracting from their story. Rather than resorting to the ubiquitous "shaky cam" grainy footage techniques to acknowledge the constructed nature of the text, Linklater favours a more classical, unobtrusive style in his camera and editing.

As Wood points out, looking at the various stylistic elements of the film in isolation – the camerawork, the editing, the soundtrack – does not “take one very far in defining the feel of the films, one's experience in watching them, to which ‘style’ is obviously crucial” (1998: 319). This is in part due to the distinctly hard-to-analyse aspect of performance which is such a crucial part of the style of the film as a whole. The pinball game scene, where Jesse and Céline talk to each other but focus their attention on the game they are *actually* playing, is one of several occasions in the film where the characters use games to get closer and to overcome their inhibitions – the Q&A session on the bus and the fake telephone call being other notable instances. But in the pinball scene in particular, because they were genuinely having to interact with the pinball machine as the camera rolled, there is a sense of improvisation and of playing things dangerously close to the edge which blurs the boundary between acting and being (*fig. 14*). It is difficult to articulate exactly what this combination of scripted

and unscripted acting adds to the film, but it undoubtedly deepens the believability of the performances and therefore of the film as a whole. Christian Metz said of films in general that it was so difficult to explain them because they were so easy to understand, and this applies to the performances more than any other aspect of the film, which may be why, as Wright Wexman observes, very few people pay much attention in their analyses to performance and improvisation specifically (1980: 29). Norton believes this to be “the core of the film, where character and actor seductively melt into one” where the “randomness that seems to be the film’s objective finally comes to fruition” (2000: 67). It is also a supremely realist moment, when performance and reality become indistinguishable, which can only be achieved through a need to improvise in response to the kind of unanticipated, unscripted events that we experience in everyday life. For Norton, this “tiny, seemingly inconsequential bit of improvisation is the heart of the seductiveness of the film; it wins the viewer over by allowing the randomness of life to spill over into the actual making of the film” (Norton, 2000: 67).

Wood believed that in *Before Sunrise*, the distinction between “being” and “acting” is totally collapsed: “Hawke and Delpy made themselves integral to the collaborative creative act: have any two actors ever given themselves more completely, more generously, more *nakedly*, to a film?” he asks (1998: 321). Certainly that film has moments which would rival some of the best moments by Cassavetes, but I would argue that it is in his sequel *Before Sunset* that Linklater really takes this to new heights. The confidence that Hawkes, Delpy and particularly Linklater gained from the success of *Before Sunrise* encouraged them to take further their performance techniques, and their filmic approach as a whole.

As is so often the case in realist films, very little actually “happens” in *Before Sunrise*. Essentially it is a long, meandering, peripatetic conversation suggestive of real-time, where talking and thinking are infinitely more important than action or “big events,” which are of little interest to Linklater:

I haven’t had a lot of big events happen in my life. I don’t know many people who have in that way, I mean, you have these big events, but they’re usually such a big deal and they’ve already been done in film. What’s

underrepresented in film is the real essence of life, the in-between space that gets glossed over. (in Rhys, 1997: n.p.).

In an interview for *Moviemaker* in 1997, Tim Rhys apologetically suggested that *Before Sunrise* was essentially about “hanging out,” which Linklater heartily endorsed, claiming it belonged in fact to a quintet of “hanging out” films.<sup>17</sup> But while on one level nothing happens, Linklater was quick to point out that “we all exist in our brains anyways [sic], so that’s where everything’s happening. It’s hard to say what’s a big deal and what’s not” (in Rhys, 1997: n.p.). He, like his characters, gravitates towards the metaphysical and the philosophical, and it’s clear which camp he fits into when he distinguishes two kinds of filmmakers: “[T]here are... ones that had their little 8mm cameras and their trains and were setting fires and blowing them up and crashing into each other, and then there’re the ones who read a lot and were going to the theatre and maybe reading philosophy” (Rhys, 1997: np). While he claims to “enjoy... spectacle like everybody else,” he has made it clear that movies like *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) are “not the kind of movies I’ve made or would spend a year of my life doing” and “outside of the very basics [of technology] I can’t say I’m that interested in it” (Rhys, 1997: n.p.). Linklater had already used a similar unstructured conversational approach in his extremely popular Generation-X film *Slacker* (1991), where the camera follows a series of characters and their conversations, following “whatever person happens to walk into and participate in the ongoing conversation” then following one of the characters to another meeting and picking up on that, so that the “conversations, and ideas themselves, become the determining force of the narrative” (Price, 2003: n.p.). It was a risky choice, since it essentially did away with a main character which, as Linklater himself acknowledged, is “what people go to see” (Rhys, 1997: n.p.). The main difference between *Slacker* and *Before Sunrise* is that in the later film the camera stays focussed, literally and figuratively, on the two main characters, documenting their time together in a more intense, sustained fashion, allowing Linklater to “really dig in – where normally I’d spread over many characters – to just put it on two people and get so much into them” (Rhys, 1997: n.p.). The sunrise deadline imposes a timeframe on the piece, but there is still no real structure to speak of. The structure of

---

<sup>17</sup> The others in the quintet would be *It’s Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* (1988), *Slacker* (1991), *Dazed and Confused* (1993) and *SubUrbia* (1996).

*Before Sunrise* “echoes the trajectory of [Jesse and Céline’s] relationship... as if the characters are deciding when and how to move things on” (Thompson, 1995: 21), which to a large extent gives the film its spontaneous, improvisatory feel, keeping us in the moment rather than propelling us, goal-driven, towards an expected ending. “The film’s only agenda is to go onto the next interaction – all it propels you to is the next thing. The fact is they won’t know until they’re apart how much they really care about each other (Thompson, 1995: 21).

And therein, of course, lies the cliffhanger, because by the end of the film Linklater has succeeded in making a substantial part of his viewing public care enough about the characters to feel very “invested” in the outcome of their pact. “*Before Sunrise* didn’t make that much money” says producer Anne Walker-McBay, but I think that it affected people so much... the people that really liked it really loved it and see it again and again and again, and the same with the actors and the director... they are passionate about it” (in Sam Hurwitz Productions, 2004). The intensity of speculation that ensued among “followers” of the film is not unlike that which happens with the more successful soap opera characters, with whom you have been encouraged to become very familiar and who, because of their inclusion in people’s intimate, domestic everyday life, and because their stories unfold gradually and in real time, take on a life beyond the screen. “We’re back in real time” says Jesse towards the end of *Before Sunrise*, as dawn breaks and their enchanted night draws to a close, though in fact there has been a real-time feel to their fantasy night throughout. A real-time break of nine years adds to sense of life beyond screen, and when the characters do finally meet again in *Before Sunset* the effects of the nine years are etched into their physiognomies and evident in their bearings and changed outlooks on life, intensifying the sense of the characters as real and existing off screen in their own right. Nick James suggests that the use of flashbacks to the first film early on in the second are “shocking because they put the actors in such an unusually harsh comparison in terms of their stardom and vanity. There they are, nine years younger, then nine years older again, and the camera, in this realist mode, proves an exacting instrument” (2004: 14). For James, Céline (or Delpy) has weathered the years rather better than Jesse/Hawkes has, but it is Jesse who seems to be more struck by how Céline has changed, perhaps because he has captured his memory of her so fixedly in his imagination and in his book. “Do I look any different?” she asks him, and he

stares at her with a troubled expression, as if there is indeed something about her in the flesh nine years later that is not living up to his romantic memory. “Do I?” she asks again, nervously. Initially he fobs her off with a joke, telling her “I’d have to see you naked,” but then he tells her that her “hair was different back then.” When she takes it down and loosens it around her shoulders he still looks mildly disappointed that she is not exactly the same as before (*fig. 15*). In this tiny but significant moment, Jesse is forced to confront the reality of the woman before him rather than his romanticised memory.

The large following that Linklater had won over were not alone in speculating about what would happen next. Linklater, Delpy and Hawkes wondered endlessly about whether or not the characters would have met again and what might have happened. For Linklater, as he says during an interview in-the-behind-the-scenes DVD *On the set of Before Sunset*, all his characters “keep existing in your mind” but “especially [Jesse and Céline] – they just always kinda keep growing” (in Sam Hurwitz Productions, 2004). To all of them, the story felt unfinished, a sequel was inevitable, and once they had discussed it together they “all fell pregnant with the idea” according to Hawkes (in Sam Hurwitz Productions, 2004). The result, *Before Sunset*, surpasses *Before Sunrise* as a piece of “romance for realists.” To some extent, this arises inevitably out of the fact that it *is* a sequel: the lovers have had their initial magical night of “courtship” and that magic must inevitably yield to realism in their second encounter. Whereas, as Dowd and Pallotta write, “Hollywood romance invariably focuses on the courtship, preferring to leave the routinized “forever after” for sociologists and other realists to study” and thus preserving the “myth of romance” (2000: 565), *Before Sunset* explores the rupturing of such a romantic myth and does not shy away from the difficulties that age and experience bring. Linklater’s direction is more confident and assured, the performances he elicits from his actors are more naturalistic, and the dialogue, this time created by Linklater and the actors themselves, rings very true.<sup>18</sup> The characters’ backstories for the intervening nine years are also

---

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Delpy has since made *Two Days in Paris* (2007), which is something of a variation on *Before Sunset*. Delpy wrote, co-produced, directed and acted in the film, as well as composing some of the songs and performing them, and she cast her real-life parents as her protagonist’s mother and father. Although it has a more comic generic thrust, *Two Days in Paris* is also about the brief sojourn in Paris of a Parisienne now resident in America and her American boyfriend, this time passing through on holiday, and is characterised by similarly naturalistic dialogue and performances to those in *Before Sunset*.

convincing, and there is a strong sense that the actors brought a great deal of themselves to the story, something that is supported by Linklater during his interview in *On the set of Before Sunset* (Sam Hurwitz Productions, 2004). Added to this, there are moments when, like a minute version of the pinball game in *Before Sunrise*, it appears that the actors' are genuinely reacting to something as it happens during the shooting or at least during the rehearsals and improvisations which preceded the shoot, rather than performing something slavishly from a script.<sup>19</sup>

The intensive three-week rehearsal period consisted largely of writing and rewriting sessions, with both lead actors bringing so much of themselves to the work and having such a clear idea of their characters that Linklater rarely had to suggest, for instance, that Julie might do something but not Céline: it was “not like directing in the traditional sense” the director claims in *On the Set of Before Sunset*. Producer Anne Walker-McBay found their ability to go through an eight-minute scene without faltering once “extraordinary,” and while the rigorous writing and rehearsal process did indeed lead to an unusual level of naturalism in the acting, the apparently casual performance belies some hard work. “It’s probably one of the hardest acting jobs... that I’ve done” says Delpy, “because somehow to play someone very natural that it feels like it’s conversation that... you know we just met in a café and talked... that’s what the film has to feel like. To play a character that’s very real and that could be your friend or your neighbour... is much harder in a way because you have less gimmicky things, it’s more based on reality and it’s very fragile, it’s very... subtle” (Sam Hurwitz Productions, 2004). The acting in the sequel is even more relaxed and naturalistic, though this may equally have to do with the characters, and the actors, having lost some of the self-consciousness and awkwardness of youth: “I like getting older” says Jesse-Ethan in *Before Sunset*, “it feels... more immediate,” and their increased confidence and ease as actors and as characters come through strongly in the film.

---

<sup>19</sup> Céline’s story about the American cop telling her to get a gun, and her outraged reaction, for example, seems so authentic that I was convinced it must surely have happened to Delpy herself. Similarly, although this is also pure conjecture, the moment when Jesse puts some coins on the table for a tip in the café as they leave seems to have emerged from something that actually happened in the rehearsal phase of the film, or even during the shoot itself. “Is this enough?” Jesse asks as he puts down a coin. “Yes,” says Céline, hardly looking, then doing a barely discernible double-take as she registers how much he has actually tipped: “It’s more than enough” she says. Since tipping works differently in France and in the United States, this small instance rings true, to me anyway, as an authentic (and authenticating) detail.

Whereas *Before Sunrise* hinted at real time, Linklater in fact managed to compact fourteen hours of wandering around Vienna into a hundred and one minutes while maintaining the film's "relaxed and baggy feel" (James, 2004: 12). *Before Sunset*, on the other hand, works entirely in real time. "How long do we have? twenty minutes thirty seconds?" Céline asks with a laugh at one point, and Jesse later persuades her to get on a tourist boat with him: "Come on" he urges her, "I've got fifteen more minutes." The camerawork too has been pared down to a *vérité* minimum, making the film completely reliant on the performances of Hawkes and Delpy and the charm and romantic intrigue of the characters they portray. A substantial portion of the film is made up of plain and inconspicuous Steadicam shots, fluid long takes where the camera backs away from the approaching pair as they continue their intense, peripatetic conversation around the fifth arrondissement of Paris. Occasionally there is a long shot of the pair from a fresh, static vantage point and there are some close-ups, but fairly unexceptional mid-shot two-shots make up the majority of the film. There are no cinematographic pyrotechnics to distract us from our focus on Jesse and Céline and their "quotidian drama" (James, 2004: 14), and we are reliant on them to give the camera, and the film, a sense of direction. "It's a measure of how inconspicuous Linklater makes himself that a brief crane shot arching around the top of a staircase feels as artificial as a car chase or a special effect" averred Ryan Gilbey in his *Sight and Sound* review of the film (2004: 44). Kevin Lee praises the "singular brilliance of the film's cinematic execution, which again is tied into the limited parameters of the film's conception" (2004: n.p.), stating that "the attentiveness of Linklater's camera to every second of this interaction is such that it challenges me, as a viewer, to cast my guardedness aside for a moment, and be more attentive and generous to these moments (Lee, 2004: n.p.). The camera's role in following and documenting the action and dialogue works well with the real-time structuring of the text to ensure that the emphasis remains on the actors and in the present.

Everything takes second place to Jesse and Céline's unfolding conversation, and this includes the setting. Whereas *Before Sunrise* ended with a series of shots of landscapes once inhabited by the lovers, giving the ending a melancholy edge and foreshadowing an unhappy outcome, *Before Sunset* starts with shots of places the pair are still to inhabit. It is an upbeat, promising beginning anticipating their long-awaited

reunion, but the focus on the cities themselves is limited, in both films. In *Before Sunset* the extreme time constraint also gives a greater urgency to the focus on the protagonists: despite being in Paris, the “city of lovers” so replete with clichés that it seems impossible to avoid them, the city and its people go almost unnoticed by Céline and Jesse in their rush to cram everything into the eighty minutes at hand. Quaint cafés are simply venues in which to continue their conversation, and their boat trip on the Seine is confined to one stop so that he can meet his car and driver in time, the shot of Nôtre Dame during that short trip bizarrely obscured by his ear and the side of his face rather than being allowed to feature in all its glory (fig. 16).

The characters themselves have had to “get real” since their last meeting. It’s not, strictly speaking, a case of lost illusions, since neither character actually suffered from romantic delusions in the first place, but there is a strong whiff of compromise and disappointment that pervades the later film. Céline and Jesse are now in their thirties, he in an unhappy marriage but with a child whom he adores, she in an unsatisfying relationship and dedicated to her work as an environmental activist of sorts. They meet in Paris where Jesse is on a European tour launching his book, significantly called *This Time*, which recounts in detail his night in Vienna with Céline as told in *Before Sunrise*, and which he wrote to remind himself that their night together was “really real, it really happened.” *This Time* is also a book version of the *Big Brother*-style reality TV concept that he described to Céline in *Before Sunrise*, which documents moments from ordinary peoples’ everyday lives, which Jesse calls the “poetry of day-to-day life” and which Céline referred to disparagingly as being about “all those mundane boring things everybody has to do every day of their fucking lives.” Jesse and Céline enter into the film sequel of *Before Sunrise* just as he finishes launching the book version of the first film, so that Linklater’s text-within-a-text conceit becomes a little hall of mirrors.

In an article on *Before Sunset*, New York filmmaker and writer Kevin Lee confesses that although he emerged from the first screening of the film staggering and streaming tears, he couldn’t help but watch more critically on the second viewing after hearing of “a minority critical backlash claiming that the film flattered the nostalgically self-absorbed tendencies of its audience” (Lee, 2004: n.p.). But *Before Sunset* ventures into bolder political territory than *Before Sunrise*. In the earlier film the characters

were preoccupied with love, death and undergraduate metaphysics (albeit very intelligently discussed, for the most part). References by Céline to the war happening “300 kilometers from here” which nobody “gives a shit about,” or the “medias [sic] trying to control minds” were fleeting. In *Before Sunset*, on the other hand, the main “argument” in the film, over whether the world has become, as Jesse suggests to Céline’s horror, a better place, is political rather than metaphysical. As Lee points out, overtly socio-political discussions are rare in the “politically barren landscape of contemporary narrative cinema” though you can “gather them by the bushel” in documentary films (2004: n.p.). One should not underestimate what Linklater has achieved here: he has integrated discussion of pressing contemporary political issues into a film which is at heart a romance in a way that feels natural, since it emerges naturally from Céline’s personality and her political persuasion. This argument is also important in terms of the romantic narrative since their political differences are one of the main things, along with Jesse’s child, which threatens to keep them apart: whereas Céline makes her political commitments clear, Jesse’s metaphysical reveries from *Before Sunrise* seem to have been replaced by an excessive nostalgia for the past and for his night with Céline nine years before. If the main impediment in *Before Sunrise* was the characters’ mistrust of love and romance, it now appears to be their political convictions: one gets the distinct sense that even if they do get together again in *Before Sunset*, she will end up being irritated by his political naivety, and he will choose his son over this “commie bitch,” even if he does call her that in jest. The spectre of realism looms over their romance in both films, refusing to be ignored, even if the issues shift during the nine years that separate them.

In an interview with David Walsh for the *World Socialist Web Site*, Linklater defended his rather tangentially political approach, which clearly troubled Walsh, telling him “there are different levels of politics. I’ve always been most interested in the politics of everyday life: your relation to whatever you’re doing, or whatever your ambitions are, where you live, where you find yourself in the social hierarchy” (1998: n.p.). Céline and Jesse have had to grow up and make choices about how they live their lives over the last nine years. Any youthful idealism they had has now been crushed, though Jesse still hangs on tenaciously to his nostalgic romantic idealism. Life is no longer a “blank cheque,” as Linklater describes it; they have “found their own limits” (in *Conversations*, 1994: n.p.). But Linklater also points out that with the

“openness and possibility” of youth, there’s also a lot of fear” (in *Conversations*, 1994: n.p.), which is what compels many people to make “safe” and frequently unfulfilling choices in the first place as Jesse and Céline have both done. Having lived with the reality of those choices, the characters have gained a sense of confidence and clarity, a sense of self in the near-decade since their first meeting.

This is particularly the case with Céline, who has lost something of her dewy-eyed youthful idealism about love through a series of bitter experiences, but has gained a sexual confidence and a sense of being “in her skin” in the nine years since their first encounter in Vienna. Despite her somewhat cynical outlook on life, and despite a string of heartbreaks which have made it “not so easy for [her] to be romantic,” she nevertheless doesn’t want to be “one of those kinds of people who don’t believe in any kind of magic,” and it turns out during the course of the film that she feels as though she “used up” all her romance on that one night in Vienna nine years ago and was never able to recapture it. Céline is passionately ambivalent about a range of metaphysical issues but particularly about the nature and workings of love, mirroring our own uncertainty: “*Je t’aime, je t’aime tant... pourtant*” (“I love you, I love you so much... and yet”) she (or is it Delpy?) sings over the final credits, a song written, composed and performed by Delpy herself.

Initially Céline claims to believe that they didn’t in fact have sex in Vienna, and a very prosaic and unromantic conversation about condoms ensues, during which Jesse claims even to remember the brand of condom they used. “That’s disgusting!” exclaims Céline, but Jesse is too stricken by her failure to remember their having sex to notice: “I remember that night better than I do entire years” he tells her. Interestingly, in an era where sex is increasingly graphic and even in some cases actual in realist films, it is sidelined in *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*. The fact is that it really doesn’t matter whether they had sex or not. It doesn’t even matter whether Céline is pretending not to remember or has simply decided to mis-remember because it suited her better to imagine that they didn’t have sex. Nick James suggests that this is in keeping with a trend among recent US films, which “seem to mourn the centrality of sex,” finding that “romance is cool but sex is not” (2004: 14), but one could equally believe that sex is sidelined because the “consummation,” ultimately, is cerebral rather than sexual, even if, as Céline puts it, “it’s amazing what perverts

[they've] become in the last nine years.” *Before Sunset* leads up to and ends with a seduction, but the sex happens off-screen. To have followed them into the bedroom would have introduced an excessively sensational element into the film: to witness something as intimate and significant as their sexual union after following them around in this meandering, real time, *vérité* style, would have had to have been either quasi-pornographic or disastrously coy, neither of which is in keeping with the tone of the film or the intentions of the filmmaker.

The secret to the success of Linklater’s *Before* films lies in his ability to explore “language and concepts usually considered corrupted beyond use... love, romance, relationships and idealism, abstract notions that are always difficult to respond to in concrete terms” (James, 2004: 15). The films are about people loving love despite all the lack of evidence in its favour, about embracing romance but “keeping it real.” Linklater takes risks in flirting with sentimentality that even borders at times on romantic kitsch, but the naturalism of the acting and dialogue (and the latter’s even-handedness), the unelaborate, *vérité*-style camerawork, and the use of real time in *Before Sunset*, in particular, help maintain the films’ realist edge. “It’s very romantic” Céline says of Jesse’s book: “I usually don’t like that, but it’s really well written.” The strength of characters and dialogue is such that we remain interested in their quotidian romance and are more than prepared to watch them doing the “mundane boring things” that humans do in their “in-between-time” for a few hours on screen.

The word “tone” crops up on numerous occasions in reference to Linklater’s work, both in his own words and those of others writing about him, and it is something as intangible as a tone that makes his work so distinctive, allowing him to cover the most banal or well-worn territory without losing our interest or slipping into the well-worn ruts already created by others who’ve been there. “I can’t help but think that at the end of your life when you look back there’ll be a tone” he told Tim Rhys in an interview in 1997, “and that tone will come from the essence of how you live your day-to-day, what you did in that in-between time, because that is really your life. I enjoy exploring that” (in Rhys, 1997: n.p.). By fusing such an exploration with a journey into the well-chartered territory of the romance genre, Linklater has successfully created a credible and much-loved romance for a disbelieving age: a romance, as he rightly puts it, for realists.

## ***Shooting Bokkie* and the ethics of faking it.**

“We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise truth.”

- Pablo Picasso

For my final chapter, I have chosen to sharpen the focus on certain ethical issues brought about by the realist filmmaker's ability to create a strong illusion of realism in their fictional works. In my chapter on *The Idiots* I have already discussed some of the ethical questions pertaining to von Trier's more radical directorial techniques. In my examination of Rob De Mezieres's *Shooting Bokkie* (2003) in this chapter, I turn my attention to a more extreme ethical situation, where a filmmaker claims to be observing and recording real assassinations for our “benefit” as viewers. I also bring the thesis home to South Africa, a highly charged political environment, which contributes its own complex ethical and political load to the film.

*Shooting Bokkie* starts outside a dingy council house on the Cape Flats in the middle of night. We, the viewers, are waiting for Christo, the juvenile assassin (or *bokkie*) whom the film follows and films, to emerge from the darkness. We have been promised some action. Christo is giving the crew something to film, us something to watch. This is our first hit.

Suddenly there is a flash and the sound of gunshot and the *bokkie* comes running gleefully out, mission accomplished. Child's play.

What were the crew thinking, standing around rolling camera when someone was about to be killed? What are they thinking now? Why did they not intervene? Is it really OK to be watching this? The handheld camera is anthropomorphised: it becomes us as we watch, or we it. We are confined to its movements and its line of sight so that we experience the scene in a very visceral way, embodied by the camera. There is a moment of hesitation after Christo runs past us. The camera keeps rolling as a sense of numb disbelief settles in, and it takes a few seconds before we can break out of the trance. One can almost hear our camera-selves swallow hard in anticipation, then we are taken forward at quite a pace and thrust into the scene of the crime.

Somewhere out of sight a baby is wailing. We move into a dimly lit bedroom where a couple lie motionless on the bed, bleeding from their gunshot wounds (*fig. 17*). The camera (and we) retreat in horror, but it is too late. We have looked. We have filmed. We are involved and implicated, subject to judgment for that act of looking. And there isn't the buffer of fiction here. Whereas narrative film only "plays" with breaking the visual taboo of showing death on screen, and contains it in "a range of formal and ritual simulations" (Sobchack, 1984: 291), *Shooting Bokkie* is a documentary, and therefore we must justify the act of looking upon "real" death.

*Shooting Bokkie*, initially produced as a short film in 1998 and recut for broader international distribution in 2003, was shot in various rough neighbourhoods in and around Cape Town. Director Rob de Mezieres and scriptwriter John Fredericks (himself a reformed ex-gangster) set out to make a conventional fictional gangster story, but circumstances, particularly financial constraints, conspired to make them take an unexpected documentary turn. The premise of *Shooting Bokkie* is that De Mezieres and his crew set out to find, follow and document this bokkie as he goes about his business, providing a record of his world, including the killings he carries out, without interfering. The murder we have just seen is the first in a series of hits which they, and we as viewers, are witness to.

Vivian Sobchack writes that "documentary film is marked by an excessive visual avoidance of death, and... when death is represented as real, when its signs are structured and inflected so as to function indexically, a visual taboo is violated and the representation must find ways to justify the violation" (1984: 290-1). But she also points out that it is not just the filmmakers, it is we as viewers who cannot escape a sense of complicity in witnessing such a scene: "What eventually gets on the screen and is judged by those of us who view it in the audience is the visible constitution and inscription of an 'ethical space' which subtends both filmmaker and spectator alike" (1984: 294). In watching it we have become the audience for which this event was recorded.

The scenes which follow this one do nothing to let us off the hook. We are taken back (via a caption) to three months before the killing and introduced to the original crew that producer Adam Rist and producer-director Rob De Mezieres approached. A

filmed briefing session captures their candid responses when they are initially brought together and told about the project. "I want to make sure you all understand the content... that we'll be shooting towards the end of this week," says De Mezieres to the assembled crew. "I know they're planning to hit at least one bottle store. I know they plan to kill at least one member of a rival gang... and we have to capture it on video and 35mm from a distance." There are snorts of disbelief or derision from one of the crew members, but De Mezieres continues unperturbed. "If anyone has a moral dilemma with that, now's the time to say."

At this point we realise the full implications of the killing we've just watched. This is the first of many extracts from this briefing session which will frame the observational documentary-style sections of the film and ensure that we are forced to consider the issues involved, both the dangers to the lives of the crew and the serious implications of filming killing and death and showing it on screen. "We're just observing people who happen to be killers," insists De Mezieres provocatively, and a heated discussion about that perennial journalistic chestnut – the ethical acceptability of observing and recording in a life-threatening situation rather than intervening – ensues.

"I'd just feel like a *poes*<sup>1</sup> standing around... you know, being an art director while someone's being killed," says Josie Minty, who is the most outspoken in the initial interview and who was initially approached to be the art director on the film. Minty is horrified by what she views as a completely unethical project (*fig. 18*). Quite apart from not wanting to put her own life in danger for the documentary, she is outraged by De Mezieres's suggestion that they should film real people being killed. Another potential crew member suggests that De Mezieres's (white) presence in Cape Flats gangland may well *cause* conflict and implies that there is no hope of his filming any kind of objective or purely "observational" documentary. Having just witnessed a double murder by a 14-year old, it's not a comfortable discussion for us to watch.

Throughout *Shooting Bokkie*, shots of gangsters and life on the Cape Flats, the initial search for the *bokkie* who is the subject of the film, and the assassinations he carries out are interspersed with extracts from this discussion, which ensures that one is held,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Poes* is the Afrikaans word for cunt.

Brechtian style, at a critical distance from these potentially absorbing or even titillating “observational documentary” sections. This observational “fly-on-the-wall” documentary style was the obvious choice for the core of the film, since it “conveys the sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world” (Nichols, 1991: 43). The observational documentary style in particular “encourages belief” writes Nichols (1991: 43). In order to reinforce this sense of credibility, De Mezieres edits extracts from interviews with potential funders whom he approached about the project as well as other crew members and “informants” whom he recruits to work on the project, so that the production process itself is documented in a critical and questioning manner.

Sobchack suggests five different “forms” of visual activity in documentary films: the ‘accidental’ gaze, the ‘helpless’ gaze, the ‘endangered’ gaze, the ‘interventional’ gaze and the ‘ethical’ or ‘humane stare,’” all of which require different levels of justification (1984: 294). *Shooting Bokkie* doesn’t fit squarely into one of these categories. The crew’s presence at the sites of the assassinations is not accidental or helpless, they do not intervene in order to prevent the killings, there is no sense that these scenes are the product of a “hypnotised” ethical or humane stare. If we take the scenes at face value the crew may well have been “endangered” while filming, which Sobchack suggests serves an “ethical trade-off for breaking a visual taboo: the filmmaker inscribes the risk to his own life as s/he represents the death of another” (1984: 296). But Sobchack also describes a sixth form, a form “unsure of its ethical grounding and allegiance... the ‘professional’ gaze,” which obliges the filmmaker constantly to confront the issue of whether to keep rolling in the service of their profession or to act in order to prevent the crisis from occurring (1984: 294). It is this most problematic form which De Mezieres and Rist both use and call into question in *Shooting Bokkie*.

While this “professional gaze” has largely been turned to public, large-scale death-scenes, particularly in war-time, there are also films which document more intimate moments of death, several of which are listed by Amos Vogel in *Film as a Subversive Art* (1974: 264-282). He remarks that there has been a “calculated omission of death,” particularly in more “personal” individual situations, and points out that the “subversives of cinema” have begun to “invade this last stronghold of primitive taboo” (1974: 266). Vogel bemoans the avoidance and romanticisation of death in

commercial cinema and the fact that even the most intrepid documentary realists have “neglected” this area (1974: 263). At the other end of the spectrum in his consideration of this issue is the late Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski, who spoke about a “domain of fantasmatic intimacy which is marked by a ‘No Trespass!’ sign and should be approached only via fiction if one is to avoid pornographic obscenity” (Žižek, 2001: 72). Previously a documentary filmmaker, Kieślowski’s decision to move to fiction film was “at its most radical, an ethical one.” He found the “unwarranted probing” into the intimate life and moments of others obscene and was deeply affected and “frightened” by the “real tears” of a father holding his newborn to the extent that he questioned his own right to photograph the scene (Žižek, 2001: 72). Whereas Vogel clearly approves of the invasion of “this last stronghold of primitive taboo,” for Kieślowski, the increased undermining of this “No Trespass!” is highly regrettable: “[O]ur culture is one in which there is a pressure to ‘tell everything’, to probe into or publicly confess fantasies and intimate details of sexual lives, including the shape of the president’s penis,” resulting in the impotence of discourse (in Žižek, 2001: 75-6).

In the case of *Shooting Bokkie*, the “right” to film the moment of someone’s death is even more complicated. Added to De Mezieres’ willingness to witness and record someone’s death is his willingness to stand by and watch the killings happen without doing anything to prevent it. “You’re prepared to be amoral and play fast and loose with other people’s lives... in order to get ahead yourselves,” admonishes Johan Badenhorst (who was approached as a potential funder for the film) during his interview with De Mezieres. He confronts De Mezieres directly with the question we most want asked: “Aren't you actually sitting there watching people being killed and doing fuck all about it?” De Mezieres appears unfazed: “The reality of the situation is that those people are going to die anyway.” His reply is chilling, not least because of where it places us as viewers. While we can admire De Mezieres for his ability relentlessly to pick away at provocative, controversial issues, and his apparent dedication to the task at hand despite the criticism he lets himself in for, most of us balk at such a comment. For most of us the idea that “honesty is more important than human life” is entirely unacceptable, as it was for Badenhorst.

It's with some relief, then, that I can retreat into the knowledge that it's all actually OK. It's only a mock-documentary. All the killings are staged and what we have been watching is nothing more than a simulation of death, a "television death" as Amos Vogel would call it, with its "fraudulent stain of false blood" (1974: 78). I'm absolved from the guilt of having been implicated in this murder (and all the others that happen as the film continues) because, despite appearances, it's only fiction after all. Like Kieślowski, using fiction has enabled De Mezieres to raise very hard-hitting issues without having to put himself in the ethically compromising position of filming real death. And yet, and yet... Isn't it ethically problematic to make people think they have watched someone die? Isn't making what I call "bluff snuff" almost as bad as the real thing if the audience isn't necessarily let in on the joke? De Mezieres decided to deny people "closure" on the issue of whether or not the documentary was "real". Surely by his refusal to provide uncertain viewers with this answer he is potentially leaving "duped" viewers with a huge weight of guilt as a result of having "broken a visual taboo and looked at death" (1984: 291). For those who don't realise that the observational documentary sections, the scenes which contain all the on-screen deaths, are actually fictional narrative appropriating documentary form, this is highly problematic.

The crew's increasing nonchalance and even involvement must be particularly disturbing for viewers who are taken in by the hoax. This is most explicit in Christo's final killing scene in the barber shop, where the camera appears deliberately to distract the barber while the *bokkie* enters and slits the client's throat (*fig. 19*). Sobchack writes that in all cases where real death appears on screen

...the inscription of the filmmaker's visual activity must visibly indicate that it is in no way party to the death it views.... As well, it must visibly indicate that its visual activity in no way substitutes for a possible intervention in the event, that is, it must indicate that watching the event of death is not more important than preventing it. (1984: 294)

This scene, particularly disturbing precisely because of its understatement, makes it abundantly clear that the crew not only did nothing to prevent the killing but in fact facilitated it. It removes with violent finality any comforting sense of distance

between the crew (and ourselves as viewers) and the action that is happening on screen.

De Mezieres's on-screen statements also become increasingly disturbing as the film progresses. After Christo's killing spree in Papa Joe's Café (*fig. 20*), he and De Mezieres are travelling in the back of the car together. They are silent, until De Mezieres asks "Why'd you kill Papa Joe?" "What?" asks Christo. "Why did Papa Joe have to die?" Christo looks mildly irritated by the question. "Why, does it bother you?" he asks testily. "It doesn't bother me," replies De Mezieres. Again, taken at face value, such an apparently amoral stance is off-putting, to say the least. De Mezieres's refusal to condemn the killings or even to "care" comes across as inhuman and contrary to the moralising and often pedagogical tone of most documentaries. But his apparently callous and cynical attitude is *performed* precisely to provoke and inflame the interviewees and the viewers and to encourage questioning of the authority, ethics and ideological pretensions of documentary filmmakers. De Mezieres claims that there is "no moral dilemma because now the message is greater than the means we're using."

The "message" to which De Mezieres refers is both the wake up call about what is actually happening on the Cape Flats (we have to see the deaths to really get the message about what's happening out there), and most importantly a warning about believing that documentaries are real. In this film-within-a-film he is playing the role of an unscrupulous filmmaker and in doing so he invites criticism of such practices, forcing us to engage with the ideological issues at hand.

A similarly confrontational and unsettling technique was used in the 1992 Belgian mock-documentary *Man Bites Dog*, directed by Rémy Belvaux and André Bonzel, although De Mezieres had not seen or heard of the film when he conceived of *Shooting Bokkie*. In *Man Bites Dog* a documentary crew making a film about a serial killer gradually change from distanced "observers" of the killings to murderers over the course of the film. In both of these films the "documentary gaze, and by implication our voyeurism, are implicated in the deaths" (Roscoe, 2001: 176) and in both cases the films are violent deconstructions of the documentary form which force us to confront our ethical positions as viewers. They dismantle documentary's claim

to objectivity (Roscoe, 2001: 173) and point to the impossibility of purely observational documentary.

The sticking point in *Shooting Bokkie* is the refusal to provide the kind of absolution that viewers would get through knowing for certain that the deaths they have watched are indeed no more than simulations. This places undue emphasis on the hoax factor when the film's technical artistry lies in having created such believable scenes in the first place, and it draws attention away from the core message of the film. If it is released on circuit or on video, it's unlikely that this evasiveness would be allowed to remain, and in fact the film is quite effective and engaging enough in its own right not to be reliant on this gimmick. This would also remove what is perhaps the most ethically questionable aspect of the hoax, that of leaving people forever thinking they have been implicated, even if only through looking, in someone's death.

De Mezieres claims that he was surprised by the mixed reactions to the film and the fact that so many people were taken in by the staged footage (De Mezieres, 2004). He had expected everyone to realise at least by the outtakes at the end of the film that it was not all "real," and there are certainly other clues to be found earlier on – the anomalous presence of a potential art director for a *verité*-style observational documentary being one of the most obvious. But the sustained and skilful appropriation of documentary style and aesthetics is convincing. The handheld camera style (and the use of amateur cameramen), the sound of the unblimped 35mm camera which rolls noisily in the bottle store slaughter scene, and the frequent use of captions to locate and contextualise the viewer all signify reality. This sense of authenticity is further reinforced by the constant attention drawn to the process of construction, some extraordinarily credible acting on the part of Christo Davids (the actor's real name) in particular, and by the cunningly interwoven strands of real and staged elements. We see the lights being set up, the briefing session, the fights over issues which are raised in the making, and we watch the subliminal flashes cut into the narrative as well as the countdowns and "snow" used as transitions, all of which serve to reveal the production apparatus and draw our attention to the construction process. Christo's understated and believable performance helps to perpetuate the sense of the real. "Do you want me to act?" he asks at one point, addressing the camera-director-audience directly, and by virtue of the fact that this is included in the film we presume that he

*isn't*. But it is the technique of combining real and staged footage that makes this mock-documentary particularly convincing.

Sobchack talks about the effect of the two deaths in Renoir's *Rules of the Game* (1939): the acted murder of the aviator (death represented) and the actual killing of a rabbit (death represented and presented).<sup>2</sup> She suggests that “the rabbit’s death violently, abruptly, punctuates narrative space with documentary space.” With that intrusion of the “documentary,” the viewer's extra-textual knowledge comes into play and the representation is contextualised socially and ethically (1984: 293-4). But the juxtaposition of authentic-seeming staged footage and unstaged “documentary” footage can also have the effect of confusing the viewer into believing that more, or all, of what they are seeing is real.

This was the case with the bizarre bluff-snuff film *Cannibal Holocaust* directed by Ruggero Deodato (1980), where undoubtedly real animal-killing scenes interspersed with gorily authentic-seeming scenes of human torture and killing created such a believable overall impression that Deodato was reportedly obliged to prove in court that the human deaths were staged.<sup>3</sup> Despite the “context of a known and powerful extra-textual interdict” in which snuff movies are watched, which “suggests that the signs must ‘really’ be iconic and symbolic” (Sobchack, 1984: 294) the signifiers of documentary factuality used in combination with graphically real animal torture in *Cannibal Holocaust* left many viewers convinced that what they had seen was real. This was undoubtedly Deodato’s intention since, as Sobchack says, the “unsettling epistemological ambiguity,” or “not being able to tell” the ontological status of a film constitutes the “the titillation, ethical outrage, and moral charge” of the snuff film (2004: 265). Purely documentary films such as Georges Franju’s *The Blood of the Beasts* (1949) confront us in a more sustained manner with equally gory images of animal slaughter in an abattoir. Here too the “camera, objectively and cruelly, stays with the event, making us its shocked accomplices” (Vogel, 1974: 267), but because there is none of the epistemological uncertainty, the scenes do not provoke the same

---

<sup>2</sup> Julian Petley makes this link in his chapter “*Cannibal Holocaust* and the Pornography of Death” (2005: 184), which I unfortunately only read after submitting a much earlier draft, in which I made similar observations, for publication. Publication of my article was delayed until late 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See the FAQ section of *Cannibal Holocaust*’s listing on the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078935/faq#.2.1.6>, accessed 15 July 2008) which addresses numerous questions about the “reality” of the footage in the film).

kind of controversies as scenes that are faked, or particularly partially-faked. The pragmatic, workaday attitude of these abattoir workers is unsensational, and there is clearly no intention to titillate on the part of the filmmaker.

In addition to the highly controversial animal-killing scenes in *Cannibal Holocaust*, there is genuine footage of humans being killed. Deodato incorporates a screening of scenes from *The Road to Hell*, supposedly a previous documentary shot in Africa by the Alan Yates character. This film-within-a-film includes genuine newsreel footage of human slaughter. In the archival material in these scenes, write David Kerekes and David Slater, the “atrocities meted out... are undoubtedly real” (in Brottman, 2005: 130). For Mikita Brottman, the “irrefutable realism” of *The Last Road to Hell* “serves a number of significant narrative functions.” She suggests that because of its obvious authenticity as well as the “sheer numbers of bodies mown down, the understated tone, and the unsentimental undramatic depiction of fast, simple executions, this footage throws into perspective the only too patent phoniness” of the fake footage shot by Deodato (2005: 131).<sup>4</sup> Surely it is more likely, however, that Deodato’s intention with this inclusion had less to do with encouraging a sophisticated instance of reflexivity and more to do with *reinforcing* rather than casting doubt on the authenticity of the rest of the film? “There can be few films which display such concern with validating the apparently indexical status of their images,” says Julian Petley of *Cannibal Holocaust* (2001: 178), although he nevertheless agrees with Brottman that *The Road to Hell* is intended to undermine the authenticity of the footage in *Cannibal Holocaust* as part of the film’s “auto-critique.” Without denying the auto-critical reflexive element in the film, which is firmly and overtly insisted upon (as part of the moral justification of showing the dreadful images in the first place), it seems unlikely that the *Road to Hell* footage was meant to “show up” the rest of the film. Rather, one could equally interpret the inclusion of such “irrefutably

---

<sup>4</sup> It must be said that Brottman is more inclined to take such a positive reading as she is highly supportive of the film, claiming that few of the film’s reviewers could acknowledge the “fascinating intelligence behind a film that progressively but deliberately breaks down the boundaries between spectator and camera, between spectacle and violence, between shock and freedom, thereby questioning the nature of cinema, of voyeurism, and of the fights of the filmmaker to fictionalize reality and realize fiction” (2005: 114). Hers is an interesting oppositional reading, if somewhat more sophisticated than that of the average fan and possibly somewhat disingenuous. Most critics found *Cannibal Holocaust* degrading, racist and misogynist, particularly in the hypocritical delight it takes in displaying what it purports to condemn, and would be more likely to agree with J Zwimmer’s description of the film as “an apotheosis of voyeurism” (in Brottman, 2005: 127-8).

real” material in *The Road to Hell* as being intended to confirm in the viewer’s mind the fact that Yates was a credible documentary-maker and that the documentary footage which he is capturing in *Cannibal Holocaust* is as real as that which he previously captured in Africa. Whatever Deodato’s intention, many viewers were taken in by the film. When a group of first-year students told me about it a few years ago they firmly believed it was a documentary: this more than twenty years after it was made and several years after the *Blair Witch Project* was made and revealed to have been faked.

In *Shooting Bokkie*, as in *Cannibal Holocaust*, there are real human deaths that are documented, but in this case neither of these happens on screen. Two of the interviewees in the film were killed only months after the film was initially shot, in separate incidents (De Mezieres, 2004). The real-life slaying of Mario “Dvious” van Rooi, a well-known local DJ who is featured in *Shooting Bokkie*, is incorporated into the feature-length cut in the form of a dedication at the end of the film, once again blurring the boundaries between truth and fiction. This, in addition to the genuine reactions of the crew and the many obviously unstaged interviews in the film, is the equivalent of the use of newsreel footage and the animals killed to lend credence to the faked human killings in *Cannibal Holocaust*: the real and the unreal bleed into one another so that the distinctions between the two are no longer clear.

Framing, contextualising and legitimating are also key techniques for successful hoaxes and De Mezieres handles these masterfully. The use of the unstaged (and often unflattering-to-De Mezieres) discussions with the original crew and the interviews with potential funders, none of whom were informed about the mock-documentary nature of the project, were persuasively “real” and led many to believe (however naively) that, by extension, the rest of the footage must be real too. In South African filmmaking circles the fact that many of interviewees are recognised industry figures added weight and legitimacy to the film. This is not unlike the use of experts in the hoax documentary *Alien Abduction: Incident in Lake County* (Dean Alioto, 1998), who weren’t told how the interviews would be contextualised within the programme, or the well known New Zealand film personalities (such as actor Sam Neill) who lent credence to the story of the (fictional) re-discovered filmmaker Colin MacKenzie in *Forgotten Silver* (Costa Botes and Peter Jackson, 1995). And even though most

people would not actually recognise the interviewees in *Shooting Bokkie*, their authenticity is very convincing.

All of these factors helped De Mezieres to succeed in what he now calls “Blair-Witching” some of his viewers, but this was not his main intention in making the film. De Mezieres hadn’t even intended to make a mock-documentary at the outset, and was in fact unaware that the “genre” existed. “I had not even heard the word mockumentary when I shot,” he claims. “I had not heard of *Man Bites Dog*, *Blair Witch Project* was nowhere in sight yet. A year after we did the short film, *Blair Witch Project* came out” (De Mezieres, 2004). In fact the decision to use the mock-documentary format was the result of financial and technical constraints rather than pure directorial choice. “It arose out of the circumstances – the no-budget circumstances of the production,” says De Mezieres, as the film that he originally wanted to make

would have been a conventional gangster story like *Boys ‘N the Hood* in South Africa. In fact, from my point of view it would have been something between *City of God* and *Once Were Warriors*. But it was the usual story. Nobody was going to give these first-timers any money for this kind of film and it was also – you know – ‘do we really want white people telling this kind of story?’ ...the limitation of funds sent us in this direction. (De Mezieres, 2004)

De Mezieres’s comment about white people making a “black” story is also highly revealing, and the self-reflexive technique which developed in the film neatly sidesteps potential accusations that they are appropriating “other people’s” stories since in the final analysis the “real” documentary is about themselves and their decisions as film-makers. *Shooting Bokkie* is a cleverly devised and challenging combination of diverse documentary forms: a (real) reflexive documentary which asks challenging questions about the ethics of documentary film-making, some (real) archival footage of Cape Town's past, and a (mock) observational documentary following the killing spree of a juvenile assassin. As such, it is more a documentary about shooting *Shooting Bokkie* than it is about Bokkie’s shootings themselves – a

meditation (if one may use such a serene word for such an un-serene film) on the ethics of documentary making.

According to De Mezieres, the form of the film developed organically and by chance. “It’s kind of blurred,” he confesses.

We didn’t really know at the time that we were going to be eliciting these kinds of honest responses. I told him to roll camera and I told *them* that we were using this camera... I dismissed it as being a behind-the-scenes camera [for] EPK stuff later. And then I started the brief... lying to them. I started briefing them and telling them that we were going to be following a real *bokkie*. But then the more that happened, the more responses I got, the more I realised what I was getting... with the camera... with those heated reactions and that kind of thing. And that sort of set us in this direction, so we thought ‘well if we can do it to the crew, why can’t we do it to prospect financiers?’ (De Mezieres, 2004)

The efficacy of the approach was dependent on a kind of double con: of the potential crew and funders, and finally of the audience, and in carrying out such a con De Mezieres risked provoking the wrath of those who may have felt they had been duped. Roscoe describes some very angry reactions to *Alien Abduction* and *Forgotten Silver*. In both instances, viewers wrote angry letters to various national newspapers after the films were broadcast as though they were documentaries and subsequently revealed to be fictional (2001: 148). By contrast, the potential funders and crew of *Shooting Bokkie* were apparently fairly good-humoured when they discovered that they’d essentially been set up in the interviews, but De Mezieres still decided against telling the audience whether or not the film was “real.” His stock response was that his attorney had advised him not to say anything about the events or individuals portrayed in the film: a cunning form of obfuscation not atypical of the legally-minded and therefore all the more confusingly believable.

De Mezieres claims that despite these ploys, he and co-producer Adam Rist had not expected the hoax to work. Because audience reception is integral to the success or failure of a hoax, De Mezieres has been recording the various responses to the film

since the outset and was taken aback by the gullibility of some audience members. He recalls that on “the first night at Rotterdam there were a couple of people that looked really appalled. They thought it was really sick, what I’d done. This guy was literally pale and he was wringing his hands and he said ‘but how could you stand there and watch this and film this and not do anything to stop it?’” (De Mezieres 2004).

One wonders how someone this deeply affected by the film would have reacted if he was told it was a hoax. Few people like to be tricked, and even fewer are likely to enjoy being conned into being horrified and moved by this kind of subject matter masquerading as real. The main cause of the angry reactions to *Alien Abduction* and *Forgotten Silver*, apart from the obvious irritation at having been duped, was the sense that the documentary “compact” had been broken and trust had been lost.<sup>5</sup> This led one viewer of *Forgotten Silver* to lament that they had “lost a genius [the fictional MacKenzie] and gained another clever film maker.” The viewer then cautions such “clever film makers” against alienating viewers by “tricking or insulting” them. This was echoed by another disgruntled response: “Whatever its motive, this film could not be said to be in sympathy with its audience” (Roscoe, 2001: 148). Such viewers were angry at having been fooled and “especially at the willingness of the filmmakers to play with some of the more central aspects of the rhetoric of objectivity which is central to factual discourse” and this led many to express “a feeling of betrayal at having their expectations in some sense violated by *Forgotten Silver* not having been labelled as fictional” (Roscoe, 2001: 148). An angry viewer of *Alien Abduction* voiced similar sentiments: “What we don't need are producers and editors who think that TV ratings are so much more important than presenting truth... that they will intentionally frighten for entertainment TV audiences” (Roscoe, 2001: 154).

How much more seriously, then, must one consider the ethics of making people believe they have, through the act of viewing, been complicit in real killings. De Mezieres and Rist might have a harder time convincing such people that the message they were trying to convey was a sufficiently “noble cause” to justify this treatment. But to focus only on the efficacy (or otherwise) of the hoax is to do an injustice to the motives of the filmmakers in making this film. Roscoe points out that an overview of

---

<sup>5</sup> see Roscoe, 2001: 22

all the responses to *Forgotten Silver* and *Alien Abduction* suggests that the more negative responses to the film came from those who had faith in factual discourse, while the more complex responses came from people who read the film on a number of different levels (2001: 150). De Mezieres and Rist are warning viewers about the danger of precisely this kind of faith, which can dupe us far more dangerously than *Shooting Bokkie*. They challenge viewers to engage actively and intellectually, with this film and by extension with anything we watch. Particularly once we realise that some of the documentary is staged, we have to start actively negotiating the various different strata of reality, fiction, and reflexivity in the film text, which disallows a less complex reading of the text.

Even if we don't realise the killings are faked, and perhaps *particularly* if we don't realise, the framing of these scenes obliges us to consider the issues raised and prevents us from lapsing into a hypnotised, voyeuristic passivity. Mock-documentary expects the audience to "get the joke" and to be highly media literate, so perhaps we have to view the "duped" viewers as necessary casualties, as "collateral damage" in the war against much grander and more pernicious fakery than this. Ultimately, De Mezieres is suggesting, like the makers of *Man Bites Dog*, that "there is a kind of obscenity, or at least questionable moral attitude, underlying the ideological pretensions associated with factual discourse. The distanced, objective view which the documentary genre claims to hold is revealed as a thin veneer covering a far more mundane and easily corrupted moral agenda" (Roscoe, 2001: 178). Because mock documentaries mimic the documentary form so faithfully, the filmmakers are able to criticise from inside the form itself, a subtler and more devastating form of criticism which also demands a more active engagement on the part of the viewers. Those whose trust in the impartiality and factuality of documentary is broken will perhaps be more media savvy in future, since *Shooting Bokkie* reveals the tenuous connection to truth by any representation and the ease with which audiences can be conned. This lesson remains to some degree unlearnt if the audience remains unclear as to whether or not the documentary is "real," which is why it is necessary, now that the film has been theatrically released, to give audiences the closure on that issue that De Mezieres has denied up to now.

*Shooting Bokkie* de-stabilises and subverts the authority of the documentary, and draws our attention to the ideological and moral positioning inherent in even the purest-seeming forms of observational documentary. Most significantly, the film makes us consider the ethical implications not only of filming events such as killings and death but of *watching* them. De Mezieres and Rist are saying it doesn't matter whether this particular representation is real or not; it's a comment on values and motives behind documentary making and a questioning of the authority of that form. Mock documentaries such as this further erode the sense of "sanctity" and authority that has been accorded to documentary film in the past. Documentary has always had its detractors, who questioned the trustworthiness of the institution, but, as Roscoe points out, it has been the post-modernist thinkers over the last few decades (Bakhtin's notion of desacralisation, Lyotard's post-modern challenge to the discourses and metanarratives of science and Baudrillard's writing on the simulacrum (2001: 28-9), that have really revealed that "sanctity" to be central to the perpetuation of one of our dearest and most enduring hoaxes: documentary truth.

## Realism today: “a nostalgia for presence”

“This is the time. And this is the record of the time.”

- Laurie Anderson in *From the Air*

Realism has been a constant tendency throughout the history of film, but there have also been periodic resurgences of cinematic realism characterised by increased innovation and a sense of urgency. These resurgences have often arisen as impassioned and revolutionary responses to the existing cinematic status quo, and they are also frequently linked to, or facilitated by, technological developments.

The hugely increased accessibility, technical, practical and financial, afforded by contemporary digital technology means that anyone can make films, even if that film goes no further than the individual's cell phone or home video collections. Go to any park and you'll probably find a parent pushing a child on a swing, capturing the moment on a cell phone. The ability to record life on video, to capture the instant for posterity, is no longer the domain of the professional filmmaker. On the contrary, amateur footage is frequently “re-packaged” by Reality TV producers to increase the impression of authenticity, and news broadcasters appeal to “eyewitnesses” to come forward with their accounts of events, verbal or audiovisual, which lend credence and substance to their own reports. The shaky amateur footage of the falling twin towers must surely be among the most widely-seen and memorable footage in recent history. But this ability constantly to record and to keep under surveillance is also open to abuse, exploitation and manipulation, and raises significant ethical issues, some of which have been explored in this study. Kassovitz's *La Haine* addresses the issue of “othering” and marginalisation through surveillance and the media, while Rob De Meziere's *Shooting Bokkie* discusses the ethics of hoaxes and of appropriating realist conventions in order to pass fiction off as fact.

Throughout this thesis I have explored how realism has mutated to suit the era in which it finds itself, building up a common repertoire of realist filmic conventions along the way. Contemporary realist filmmakers, who typically aim to construct an aesthetic of presence in their work, still draw from this existing repertoire of

conventions to do so, favouring particular formal and stylistic elements which tend to distinguish realist cinema from its more mainstream counterpart.

In *La Haine*, Kassovitz manipulates the interplay between cinematography and *mise-en-scène*, using the kinds of long takes and deep focus as advocated by Bazin and frequently employed by realist filmmakers to create a sense of “locatedness” and contextual specificity. Von Trier’s directorial strategy in *The Idiots* entails a stripping away of the performers’ defences and the “cosmetic” layers commonly used by filmmakers in pursuit of “the genuine.” He creates a mock-documentary, employing a range of techniques associated with factual programming (such as interviews, graininess, spontaneous and unplanned shots, long uninterrupted takes, equipment in view and abrupt cutting) to convince the viewer of the “truthfulness” of what they are seeing, and uses reflexivity to suggest that he is guilelessly “showing his hand” and revealing the constructed nature of the work.

Like Von Trier, Leigh uses improvisation and long takes to increase the sense of authenticity in his performances, although Leigh confines his use of improvisation strictly to the preparatory and rehearsal phase. In *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*, Linklater uses improvisation as well as other stylistic techniques and conventions generally associated with realism in order to adapt the well-worn romance genre, creating a realist romance better suited to the more cynical postmodern climate than its more traditional romance predecessors.

Realism, like romance, has endured, perhaps because they both satisfy basic human needs. When I first developed an interest in cinematic realism and began to research the subject, I kept coming back to the same question: What prompts the periodic resurgences of realism throughout film history? There may have been specific historical or socio-economic circumstances which contributed to bringing about these changes in each instance (the obsession with film as a scientific record at the time film was invented, for example, or the economic and political turmoil in Italy in the mid to late 1940s, which contributed to the birth of neorealism), and increased access to technology is one significant reason for the current realist trend in cinema and television, but there appear to be other more enduring reasons related to the functioning of the human psyche for the persistence of realism in cinematic history.

One is the desire to see *ourselves* on screen (or rather characters and situations less far-fetched than Hollywood's more spectacular creations) and the other, related, desire (sometimes voyeuristic or prurient, sometimes simply inquisitive) is to see into the lives of *others* on screen. Neorealist writer and theorist Cesare Zavattini once wrote,

I am bored to death with heroes more or less imaginary. I want to meet the real protagonist of everyday life, I want to see how he is made, if he has a moustache or not, if he is tall or short, I want to see his eyes, and I want to speak to him... The time has come to tell the audience that they are the true protagonists of life. (in Williams, 1980: 30)

Half a century later, Mike Leigh made a similar observation, when he said that “[m]ost movies are about extraordinary or charmed lifestyles. For me what’s exciting is finding heightened drama, the extraordinary in the ordinary – what happens to ordinary people... the entirely disorganized and irrational business of living” (in Carney, 2000: 14). Contemporary audiences seem to concur, if the increased interest in realism on film and television is anything to go by. Perhaps people find solace in seeing that no one’s life is perfect, and that, in fact, some people’s lives are dysfunctional by comparison with their own, or perhaps the rise in talk shows such as those hosted by Jerry Springer or Ricky Lake is more about viewers indulging in some therapeutic, voyeuristic *schadenfreude*. Whatever the case, it appears that Kracauer’s belief in humankind’s “longing for an instrument which would capture the slightest incidents of the world about us,” his assertion that “film... is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates towards it” is still a significant factor in why we make, and enjoy, realist film today (1960, 27-8). Similarly, Bazin’s theory that human beings are bent on “mummifying” change and are striving for the “preservation of life by a representation of life” still seems to hold currency (1967: 9-10). Even the ardent postmodernist Jean-François Lyotard has described the “nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject” in postmodernism. He also describes and the “obscure and futile will which inhabits [the postmodern subject] in spite of everything” (1992: 147). For the postmodern subject, the sense of fragmentation and loss and the search for identity might create an increased need not

just to “be” but to have one’s existence “witnessed” and recorded through the media (see Bainbridge, 2007: 112).

Kracauer and Bazin’s observations about the human desire to capture and preserve the moment are linked to their discussions of a technological breakthrough, the invention of cinema, which went “beyond photography” in its ability to record the present since it incorporated movement and therefore also recorded time (in Braudy, 2004: 143, 149). Revivals of realism have frequently been linked to technological developments in film history. The earliest films celebrated the camera’s ability to record the movement of the leaves on the trees or of workers leaving the factory, for example, and the availability of lighter camera and sound equipment and more sensitive film stock liberated the New Wave filmmakers from the constraints and artificiality of the studio. Today, the evolution of technologies such as inexpensive, high-quality, lightweight cameras has facilitated the portrayal of ordinary life on screen, and of doing so in a way which appears appropriate and “authentic” to viewers who associate the digital video “look” with factuality, observational documentary and life caught “on-the-fly.” Digital technologies also allow greater accessibility and provide greater scope for low budget productions, which are less beholden to institutions and therefore could be viewed as less compromised or “mediated” in that sense as well. On the other hand, digital technologies introduce what David Callahan refers to as “a problematic and complex area of contemporary realisms” in which the “enhanced power of the visual image to deceive dilutes the authority of the visual as it endangers its potential to serve as a witness” and “the increasing possibilities of those in power to manipulate images, and to control the images that we see (despite the internet), further inflect the nature of contemporary realisms with a distinctive urgency in their appeal to be the vehicle of a type of truth that is superior to other visualisations” (2009: n.p.). The digital revolution is taking theoretical and creative explorations of realism in yet new directions.

Technological developments have also facilitated the human desire to see oneself on screen and abetted the recent resurgence of realism, and makers of Reality TV have taken full advantage of this, capitalising on the ability of new technology to satisfy the yearning for familiarity and the allure of voyeurism. This has been a key factor leading to the overwhelming success (and consequent glut) of this kind of

programming in the last two decades. In an article extolling the virtues of African *Big Brother* for the *Washington Post*, Emily Wax quotes the Editor-in-Chief of the *Monitor* newspaper in Kampala, Wafula Oguttu, who thinks

people want to read about and see themselves on TV... We Africans don't want to watch the imported shows from America or Europe anymore. Besides, it's humorous to us because it's very African comedy. Some of the things they discuss are very African. For instance, there are jokes about extended families, people who eat too much when they're invited over, men who have too many wives. *It's about us. That's why we love it.* (2003: n.p., my emphasis)

In her article on African Film, Television and Video, Frances Harding makes a similar observation about African television and film more broadly. "Again and again it is the 'localizing' of material that is a major attraction to viewers," says Harding. "In this respect, the video-movies are similar to the work of the African film-makers. A comment on 'Big Brother Africa' stated that it was the familiarity of the tensions between residents... that entertained and amused viewers most" (2003: 82).

This phenomenon is by no means confined to Africa. As Michael Rabiger writes, "the people of the world want to see themselves, not just Hollywood forever" (2003, 166). While the allure of the Hollywood spectacle persists, it seems there is an increasing desire for the kinds of little, local, specific narratives that Lyotard advocates, and which could be seen to be our salvation from the potential emptiness of a cynical and disbelieving age where there are no new stories and everything has been seen and done before. People want to watch themselves and people *like* themselves – ordinary people with familiar foibles and weaknesses – on screen. "Just as the theatre in England was once revitalized when local companies turned their backs on cocktail plays in favour of more explosive local issues, it now seems possible that local fiction might emerge to begin producing the modern equivalent of the regional novel," suggests Rabiger, who gives as examples the gritty, local dramas set in the industrial North of England, *Eden Valley*, made in 1994 by the Amber Production Team and Richard Grassick, and *Like Father*, which was released in 2001 and directed by Richard Grassick and Ellin Hare (2003: 166).

Similar initiatives have sprung up elsewhere in the world, the Danish Dogme brotherhood being the most highly publicised but certainly not the only example. In Scotland, an initiative called Advance Party resulted from discussions between Dogme co-founder Lars Von Trier, Lone Scherfig (whose Dogme film *Italian for Beginners* is mentioned earlier in this study), and Anders Thomas Jensen (writer of two Dogme films, *Mifune's Sad Song*, made in 1999 and *The King is Alive*, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Scherfig and Jensen are executive producers on the Advance Party projects, which, not unlike the Dogme films, will be made according to a series of rules which dictate how they will be written and directed. All the films must be set and filmed in Scotland, using the same characters and cast, but each will be directed by a different first-time director. Scherfig and Jensen created characters and backstories for the films, around which the three directors could then write their story. Their first film of the projected trilogy, *Red Road*, was directed by Andrea Arnold and released in 2006 to great critical acclaim. In addition, funding schemes have been set up in Scotland with the primary aim being to “encourage new and innovative ways of telling stories using the new technologies” (Petrie, 2000: 224).

Writing on the recent upsurge of realism in Danish cinema, Birger Lankjær suggests that “in a Danish and Scandinavian context (and a British one too, [he suspects]), realism has had a special status and has been considered a kind of mainstream film practice,” and realism has been a strong tendency in Danish cinema since the postwar years (2002:15). While Danish cinematic realism has obviously experienced a particularly strong and public revival since the arrival of the Dogme manifesto in 1995, the realist tendency is certainly not confined to the Dogme films, as Ib Bjondeberg writes:

After 1995, the New Danish Cinema was influenced not only by the Dogma 95 concept but also by a general shift in aesthetic and generic approaches to cinematic production and style. ‘New Danish Cinema’ refers to a new generation of film-makers trying to get back to the basics of authenticity and a

---

<sup>1</sup> Since both are Dogme films the director cannot, strictly speaking, be accredited, however the “writers” Anders Thomas Jensen and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen are credited as the “writers” of *Mifune's Sad Song* and Kristian Levring is credited as the writer of *The King Is Alive*.

realist film technique and acting style, characteristics which are also to be found in the New Waves of the 60s. (in Hjort and MacKenzie, 2003: 70)

This increased tendency to realism extends to countries further afield as well. Joel Black notes that in “recent Iranian and Chinese cinema where the roles in fictional stories are often played not by professional actors but by individuals playing themselves, the distinction between fiction and non-fictional cinema has become especially blurred” (2002: 12).

Despite the globalisation of culture, or perhaps more accurately in reaction to it, national and regional initiatives have sprung up internationally, bringing about the renaissance of locality and region which Julia Hallam alludes to, and proving that it is not that easy to “eradicate or transcend difference at the local/national level” (2001: 188).

Digital technology’s accessibility and affordability have meant an increase of local, low-budget films internationally.<sup>2</sup> But going digital has also had another significant effect in that filmmakers using this technology tend towards realism in their subject matter and its treatment. Digital camera and sound equipment is cheaper, more lightweight, easier to use and less obtrusive, both in itself and in that it doesn’t require a big crew, which allows more intimacy (and, of course, more voyeurism) and means greater access for independent or amateur filmmakers. This, in turn, means that people can tell their own (little, local) stories more easily on film or video. New technologies are also expanding the ways in which we *watch* films. The Pompidou Centre in Paris holds an annual “Pocket Films Festival,” 2008 being the fourth “edition,” a competition in which contributors from around the world can showcase shorts made using, or specifically to be screened on, mobile phones;<sup>3</sup> the Sundance Institute has commissioned films specifically for mobiles, and a variety of programming such as soaps have already been made for the mobile phones. In addition to this, the web, and specifically platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube, are expanding the

---

<sup>2</sup> Of course new technology has also brought about an answering glut of cinematic super-spectacle, and contemporary realist cinema exists in tandem with spectacular illusionism and perfect, computer-generated realistic images and sound.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.festivalpocketfilms.fr](http://www.festivalpocketfilms.fr)

distribution platforms substantially, and the kinds of films that are being made for these new platforms are more likely to be personal, local, quirky and contemporary.

Because of its association with documentary and factual programming, digital video is particularly appropriate for facilitating the sense of immediacy and presence which, as I discuss in the introduction to this thesis, is crucial for realism. Digital video, and the associated graininess, handheld shakiness, long takes, zooms and poor lighting, all contribute to creating an impression of life observed and captured as it happens, suggesting that the Bazinian notion of the photograph as proof of one's "having-once-been-there," as Anne Jerslev puts it (2002: 51), still persists. Uncontrolled or unplanned shots (or *simulations* of such shots) are ubiquitous in contemporary realist works such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sanchez, 1999), but, as the introduction to this thesis points out, there are many other conventions which have had an enduring association with realism since film's inception. Jill Forbes outlines the differences between Classical Hollywood cinema and Art cinema, which as Bordwell suggests shares many significant traits with realist cinema:

Classic Hollywood cinema is... transparent, easy to read, goal-orientated, and structured around narrative closure. Art cinema, on the other hand, rejects cause and effect and favours narratives motivated by realism and authorial expressivity. Its protagonists are psychologically complicated, reality is ambiguous and subjective, while the author is foregrounded as a structure in the film's system. (2000: 37)

In addition, realist films are characterised by episodic or fragmented narratives set in everyday, largely contemporary settings, the inclusion of gratuitous details, open endings without happy resolutions, flawed, unheroic, "ordinary" and socio-economically specific characters, the use of long deep takes favouring a sense of immanence in the scene, and the use of improvisation and in some cases non-actors.

Realism has adapted and endured since the inception of cinema history, and is currently flourishing despite the sceptical environment in which it finds itself. At the start of the second century of film, in the midst of the prevailing culture of disbelief there has been a revisiting of the Bazinian notions of the phenomenological and the

immediate. Little, local instantaneous narratives have come to the fore in realist films, resisting the push of homogenisation and globalisation just as the residents in modernist architect Le Corbusier's gargantuan and arguably soulless housing projects of the 1940s and 1950s, the *Unités d'Habitation*, flouted uniformity and the architect's grand design plan by hanging their own individual, motley collection of curtains in the windows.<sup>4</sup> There is also a growing tendency to incorporate an interrogation of realism within the film texts themselves, so that the text works on two levels – a fairly straightforward narrative (romance, for example) employing conventions from the traditional realist repertoire which are frequently calculated to suggest minimal mediation – and a metanarrative of sorts, often displaying a degree of irony or disbelief, which nevertheless augments and even authenticates the main narrative rather than negating or undermining it, allowing the two apparently contradictory “realisms” to co-exist comfortably within a single text. *The Idiots*, as well as many other mock-documentary texts, use this technique to great advantage, since it enables them to build complex narratives which allow them to comment on broader issues around textual construction at the same time as they explore the purported content in the main narrative.

No doubt this particular manifestation of realism will in turn be succeeded by others, which are more appropriate in years to come. Because of its ability constantly to mutate, as Bazin put it, realism shows no sign of dying out despite the adverse conditions it finds itself in. Instead, even in the postmodern era, variations of realism continue to evolve and thrive. Realism, like Le Corbusier's despised curtains, is proving harder to get rid of than might have been expected in this disbelieving age.

---

<sup>4</sup> Gérard Monnier alludes to this in his chapter on the reception of Modernism by users (2002: 364), as does Witold Rybczynski in his book *HOME: A Short History of an Idea* (see Gass, 2008: n.p.).

## List of works cited

- Aitken, I. 2006. *Realist Film Theory and Cinema: The Nineteenth-Century Lukácsian and Intuitionist Realist Traditions*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Aleman-Galway, M. 2002. *A Postmodern Cinema* Maryland: Scarecrow Press.
- Ansen, D. 2006. The Maverick of Movieland. *Newsweek*, December: 56. New York.
- Armstrong, R. 2005. The shock of otherness: Secrets and Lies, *Screen Education*. 38: 111-114.
- Armstrong, R. 2005. *Understanding Realism*. London: British Film Institute.
- Atkinson, K. 2005. *Case Histories*. London: Black Swan.
- Bainbridge, C. 2007. *The Cinema of Lars von Trier: Authenticity and Artifice*. London and New York: Wallflower.
- Bank, M. 2000 [1997]. Mike Leigh, in: Movshovitz, H. (Ed) *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 113-121.
- Barthes, R. 1981. *Camera Lucida*. trans. by Howard, R. London: Flamingo, Fontana.
- Barthes, R. 1975. *S/Z*. trans. by Miller, R. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Barthes, R. 1986. *The Rustle of Language*. trans. by Howard, R. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Baudry, L. a. C., M Eds. 2004. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Baxter, J. 1968. *Hollywood in the Thirties*. London and New York: A. Zwemmer Ltd and A.S. Barnes.
- Bazin, A. 1967. *What is Cinema: Volume I*. trans. by Gray, H. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bazin, A. 1972. *What is Cinema? Vol II*. trans. by Gray, H. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Benjamin, W. 1983. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet In The Era Of High Capitalism*. trans. Zohn, H. London, New York: Verso
- Benjamin, W. 1997. The Arcades Project. *Other Voices: The (e)Journal of Cultural Criticism*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.othervoices.org/gpeaker/Flaneur.html>. [2007, July 19].

- Bjorkman, S. 1996. Naked Miracles. *Sight and Sound*, 6(10): 10-14.
- Bjorkman, S. 2003. *Trier on Von Trier*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Bjorkman, S. 2004. Our town. *Sight and Sound*, 14(2): 24-27.
- Black, J. 2002. *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Bloch, J. 2000 [1991]. A conversation with Mike Leigh and Alison Steadman, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 16-25.
- Bondanella, P. 2006. Italian Neorealism, in: *Traditions in World Cinema*. Badley, L. Ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bondeberg, I. 2003. Dogma 95 and the New Danish Cinema, in: Hjort, M and MacKenzie, S. Eds. *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*. London: British Film Institute. 70-88.
- Bordwell, D. 1985. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London: Routledge.
- Bordwell, D. 1988. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London: Routledge.
- Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K. 2008. *Film Art*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Bourguignon, T. and Tobin, J. 1999. [1995]. Mathieu Kassovitz on *La Haine*, trans. Hodgson, P. in: Ciment, M and Herpe, N. Ed. *Projections 9*. London and New York: Faber and Faber. 183-193.
- Braudy, L. 2004. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brottman, M. 2005. *Offensive Films*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Brunette, P. 2000 [1991]. The Director's Improvised Reality, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 30-34.
- Bruni, B. 2002. Jean Rouch: *Cinéma Vérité, Chronicle of a Summer* and *The Human Pyramid*. <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/19/rouch.html>, *Senses of Cinema*. [2008, August 1].
- Bruzzi, S. 2000. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. London, Routledge.
- Butterworth, D. N. 2001. The Taped Crusaders. *Offoffoff*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.offoffoff.com/film/2001/tape.php3>. [2008, 12 February].

- Calhoun, J. 2003. Putting the "Move" in Movie. *American Cinematographer*, 84(10): 72-85.
- Callahan, D. 2009. Personal correspondence.
- Camus, A. 1958. *La Chute* Paris: Gallimard.
- Carney, R. 2000. *The Films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Carroll, N. 1982. The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (And beyond). *October*, 20: 51-81.
- Church, D. 2006. Werner Herzog. [Online]. Available: <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/06/herzog.html>. *Senses of Cinema*. [2008, August 4]
- Colgan, J. 2002. *Looking for Andrew MacCarthy*. London: Harper Collins.
- Conrich, I. and Tincknell, E. 2000. Film Purity, the Neo-Bazinian Ideal, and Humanism in *Dogma 95*. *p.o.v.* [Online]. Available: [http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue\\_10/section\\_4/artc7A.html](http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_10/section_4/artc7A.html). [2007, October 25].
- Conversations: Richard Linklater. 1994. *Idler*, September: 6. [online] Available: <http://idler.co.uk/uncategorized/conversations-richard-linklater/> [2008, August 4]
- Cousins, M. 2004. *The Story of Film*. London: Pavilion Books.
- Coveney, M. 1996. *The World According to Mike Leigh*. London: Harper Collins.
- Coveney, M. 2000 [1993]. In a Class of His Own, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 35-41.
- Crago, M. 2002. Just a spoonful of grainy footage: Creating 'Realism and Authenticity Big Brother Style.' *Metro Magazine*. 133: 108-115.
- Darke, C. 2000. *Light Readings : Film Criticism and Screen Arts*. London: Wallflower.
- De Mezieres, R. 2004. Interview with van der Vliet, E.
- Desire to Shock. 2000. *Screen International*. May 20: 48.
- Diawara, M. 1993. *Black American Cinema*. New York: Routledge.
- Doherty, T. 2003. The sincerest form of flattery: A Brief History of the Mockumentary. *Cineaste*. 28(4): 22-24.

- Dovey, J. 2000. *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*. London: Pluto Press.
- Dowd, J. and Pallotta, N.R. 2000. The End of Romance: The Demystification of Love in the Postmodern Age, *Sociological Perspectives*. 43(4): 549-580.
- Eco, U. 1983. *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*. trans. by Weaver, W. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Janovich.
- Elam, D. 1992. *Romancing the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Ellickson, L. and Porton, R. 2000 [1994]. I Find The Tragicomic Things In Life: An Interview With Mike Leigh, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 59-78.
- Ellis, J. 1992. *Visible Fictions*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Erens, P. 1986. Home movies in commercial narrative film, *Journal of film and video*. 38: 99-101.
- Falcon, R. 1999. Reality is too shocking., *Sight and Sound*. 9(1): 10-13.
- Falcon, R. 2001. The Limits of Sex: Last Tango in Lewisham. *Sight and Sound*. 11(7): 20-24.
- FAQ for Cannibal Holocaust 1980. in: *Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com, Inc)*. Available: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078935/faq#.2.1.6> (nd). [2008, July 15].
- Forbes, J. and Street, S. 2000. *European Cinema: An Introduction*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. trans. by Sheridan, A. New York, Pantheon.
- Francke, L. 1996. Breaking the Waves (review). *Sight and Sound*. 6(10): 36-37.
- Frye, N. 1957. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gilbey, R. 2004. Before Sunset (review), *Sight and Sound*, 14(8): 44.
- Gore-Langton, R. 2000 [1988]. The Leigh Way, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews* Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 13-15.
- Goritsas, H. 2002. Satyajit Ray. *Senses of Cinema*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/ray.html>. [2007, July 19].
- Green Jensen, B. 1998. Celebrating Limitations: Interview with Thomas Vinterberg. *from Weekend Avisen* [Online]. Available: <http://www.dogme95.dk/news/interview/index.htm>. [2008, August 1].

- Greer, D. 2006 [2003]. Prism Business Media Inc. [Online]. Available: [http://digitalcontentproducer.com/fadetoblack/video\\_fade\\_black\\_18/](http://digitalcontentproducer.com/fadetoblack/video_fade_black_18/). [2008, August 8].
- Hallam, J. with Marshment, M. 2000. *Realism and Popular Cinema*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Harding, F. 2003. Africa and the Moving Image: Television, Film and Video, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. 16(1): 69-84.
- Hebert, H. 2000 [1988]. The private hopes of a prophet of gloom, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 9-12.
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Walsh, G., and Wruck, O. 2001. An investigation into the Factors Determining the Success of Service Innovations: The Case of Motion Pictures. *Academy of Marketing Science Review*. [Online]. Available: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3896/is\\_200101/ai\\_n8945617/pg\\_3?tag=ar+Body;col1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3896/is_200101/ai_n8945617/pg_3?tag=ar+Body;col1), [2008, August 1].
- Higbee, W. 2001. Screening the 'other' Paris: cinematic representations of the French urban periphery in *La Haine* and *Ma 6-T Va Craquer*, *Modern and Contemporary France*. 9(2): 197-208.
- Higgins, J. 1991. Critical Cinema & the Reality of Reflection, in Prinsloo, J. and Criticos, C. Eds. *Media Matters in South Africa*.
- Hill, J. 1998. Every fuckin' choice stinks. *Sight and Sound*. 8(11): 18-22.
- Hjort, M. and MacKenzie, S. Eds. 2003. *Purity and Provocation Dogma 95*. London: British Film Institute.
- Hodgson, J. and Richards, E. 1966. *Improvisation: Discovery and Creativity in Drama*. London: Methuen.
- Howe, D. 2000 [1994]. It the Movie of the Decade. No, No, It's Just A Decadent Movie, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 45-50.
- Irsay, S. 2007. New York gets own 'witch' trial: 'Blair Witch' actors sue film's distributor, [http://www.courttv.com/news/feature/blairwitch\\_ctv.html](http://www.courttv.com/news/feature/blairwitch_ctv.html). [2007, 6 July].
- James, N. 2001. Digital Deluge. *Sight and Sound*. 11(10): 20-24.
- James, N. 2004. Debrief Encounter. *Sight and Sound*. 14(8): 12-15.
- Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Jeffers McDonald, T. 2007. *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. London and New York: Wallflower.
- Jensen, J. a. Nielsen, J. 2000. The Ultimate Dogme Film. *p.o.v* 10. [Online]. Available: [http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue\\_10/POV\\_10cnt.html](http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_10/POV_10cnt.html). [2008, August 4].
- Jerslev, A. 2002. *Realism and 'Reality' in the Media*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen.
- King, G. 2005. *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond* Bristol, UK, Portland OR, USA: Intellect.
- Knudsen, P. Ø. (n.d.) The Man Who Would Give Up Control. Available: [http://www.dogme95.dk/news/interview/trier\\_interview.htm](http://www.dogme95.dk/news/interview/trier_interview.htm). [2008: August 4].
- Kracauer, 1960. *Theory of Film*. London Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Krutnik, F. 2002. Conforming Passions?: Contemporary Romantic Comedy, in: S. Neale. Ed. *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*. London: British Film Institute. 130-146.
- Krzywinska, T. 2005. The Enigma of the Real: The Qualifications for Real Sex in Contemporary Art Cinema in G. King. Ed. *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond*. Bristol, UK and Portland, OR, USA: Intellect. 223-234
- Krzywinska, T. 2006. *Sex and the Cinema*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Lankjær, B. 2002. Realism and Danish Cinema, in: A. Jerslev (Ed) *Realism and 'Reality' in Film and Media*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen). 15-40
- Lay, S. 2002. *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit*. London and New York: Wallflower.
- Lee, K. 2004. Finding Freedom the Second Time Around: The Politics of *Before Sunset*. *Senses of Cinema*. [Online]. Available: [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/33before\\_sunset.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/33before_sunset.html) [2008, 12 February].
- Levieux, M. 1995, Le noir et blanc draine plus de réalisme. *L'Humanité*, 29 May. [Online]. Available: [http://www.humanite.fr/1995-05-29\\_Articles\\_-Mathieu-Kassovitz-le-noir-et-blanc-draine-plus-de-realisme](http://www.humanite.fr/1995-05-29_Articles_-Mathieu-Kassovitz-le-noir-et-blanc-draine-plus-de-realisme). [2007, July 19].
- Lumholdt, J. 2003. *Lars Von Trier: Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Lytard, J.-F. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. by Bennington, G. and Massumi, B. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

- Lyotard, J.-F. 1992. Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism? in: C. Jencks. Ed. *The Post-Modern Reader*. trans. by Durand, R. London and New York: Academy Editions and St Martin's Press. 138-150.
- MacCabe, C. 1986. Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure, in Rosen, Philip. Ed. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press. 179-197.
- Mackenzie, S. 2004. The stuff of life, *M&G Leisure* UK Edn. October: 43-44.
- MacNab, G. 1998. The Natural. *Sight and Sound*. 8(3): 14-16.
- Marie, M. 1990. 'It really makes you sick!' Jean Luc Godard's A Bout de Souffle. trans by Tarr, C. in: Hayward, S. and Vincendeau, G. Eds. *French Film Texts and Contexts*. London and New York: Routledge. 201-215.
- Marie, M. 2003. *The French New Wave. An Artistic School*. trans. by Neupert, R. J. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Marx, L. 1996. Underworld RSA. *South African Theatre Journal*. 10(2): 11-30.
- McDonald, P. 1999. Secrets and Lies: Acting for Mike Leigh, in: A. a. K. Lovell. Ed. *Screen Acting*. London and New York: Routledge. 138-151.
- Michelson, A. 1984. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley, California, University of California Press.
- Miller, P. 2000 [1996]. An Interview With Mike Leigh, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 79-83.
- Monnier, G. 2002. The Reception of Modernism by Users: Practical Value and Symbolic Value, in: Henket, H-J and Heynen, H. Eds. *Back from Utopia: The Challenge of the Modern Movement*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. 358-367.
- Moore, S. 1991. *Stanislavski Revealed: The Actor's Guide to Spontaneity on Stage* New York: Applause Theatre Books.
- Morley, S. 2000 [1977]. Mike Leigh: Anything but anarchy, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 3-5.
- Morris, P. 2003. *Realism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Movshovitz, H. 2000 [1994]. Mike Leigh's Grim Optimism, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 51-54.
- Movshovitz, H. 2000 [1996]. Rehearsals Hold Key To Mike Leigh Films, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 105-107.

- Mulvey, L. 1986 [1975]. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, in: Rosen, P ed. A Film Theory Reader. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Naremore, J. 1988. *Acting in the Cinema*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, California University Press.
- Naughton, J. 2000 [1997]. There's No Face Like Gnome, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 124-130.
- Nelmes, J. 2003. *An Introduction to Film Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Nichols, B. 1991. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Norton, G. 2000. The Seductive Slack of *Before Sunrise*. *Post Script*, Winter-Spring: 62-72.
- The Official Dogme 95 website. 1995. Available: [www.dogme95.dk](http://www.dogme95.dk). Nimbus Film & Zentropa Entertainment. [2008, August 11].
- Oxford English Dictionary Online*. 2008. Available: <http://dictionary.oed.com/> [2008, August 4].
- Pape, E. 2006. More Watchful Eyes On the Continent. *Newsweek*, February 20: 8.
- Paul, W. 2002. The Impossibility of Romance: Hollywood Comedy, 1978-1999, in: S. Neale. Ed. *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*. London, British Film Institute. 117-129.
- Petley, J. 2005. Cannibal Holocaust and the Pornography of Death, in: G. King (Ed) *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond*. Bristol, UK, Portland OR, USA: Intellect. 173-186
- Petrie, D. 2000. *Screening Scotland*. London: British Film Institute.
- Price, B. 2003, June. Richard Linklater. *Senses Of Cinema*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/linklater.html>. [2008, February 12].
- Pride, R. 2000 [1996]. The Leigh Way, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 108-112.
- Quart, L. 2000 [1997]. Raising Questions and Positing Possibilities: An Interview With Mike Leigh, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 131-134.
- Rabiger, M. 2003. *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Amsterdam: Focal Press.
- Raphael, A. 2008. *Mike Leigh on Mike Leigh*. London, Faber and Faber.

- Raskin, R. 2000. An interview with Daniel Kothenschulte on Dogma 95. *p.o.v* 10. [Online]. Available: [http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue\\_10/POV\\_10cnt.html](http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_10/POV_10cnt.html), [2007, October 25].
- Reader, K. 1995. After the riot. *Sight and Sound*. 5(11): 12-14.
- Rhys, T. 1997. Hanging Out with Richard Linklater. *Moviemaker*. [Online]. Available: [www.moviemaker.com/directing/article/hanging\\_out\\_with\\_richard\\_linklater\\_3169](http://www.moviemaker.com/directing/article/hanging_out_with_richard_linklater_3169). [2008, February 12].
- Riding, A. 2000 [1996]. An Original Who Plumbs the Ordinary, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 98-104.
- Rockwell, J. 2003. *The Idiots*. London: British Film Institute.
- Roscoe, J. and Hight, C. 2001. *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Rosen, P. 2001. *Change Mummified: cinema, historicity, theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Rouch, J. 1995. The Camera and the Man. trans. by Hockings, P. in: Hockings, P. Ed. *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 79-98
- Sesonske, A. 1980. *Jean Renoir, The French Films 1924-1939*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Sobchack, V. 1984. Inscribing Ethical Space: ten Propositions On Death, Representation, and Documentary. *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*. Fall: 283-300.
- Sobchak, V. 2000. What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject or Vision in the Flesh. *Senses of cinema*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/5/fingers.html> [2008, July 14].
- Sobchak, V. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stam, R. 1992. Reflexivity in film and literature: from Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Stam, R. 2000. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell.
- Stam, R. and Stam, L. 1983. Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction. *Screen*. 24(2): 3-20.
- Stevenson, J. 2002. *Lars Von Trier*. London, British Film Institute.

- Stone, J. 2000 [1991]. Mike Leigh, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 26-29.
- Taubin, A. 2000. Primal Screen. *Village Voice*, 1 August. [Online]. Available: <http://www.villagevoice.com/2000-08-01/film/primal-screen/>. [2008, July 22].
- Thompson, B. 1995. The First Kiss Takes So Long. *Sight and Sound*. 5(5): 20-22.
- Tredell, N. 2002. *Cinemas of the Mind*. Cambridge: Icon Books.
- Trivia for Marathon Man (1976. *Internet Movie Database*. Available: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074860/trivia>. [2008, August 4].
- Turan, K. 2000 [1996]. The Case For Mike Leigh, in: Movshovitz, H. Ed. *Mike Leigh Interviews*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 84-97.
- Turner, G. 1988. *Film as Social Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Van der Vliet, E. 2007. Shooting bokkie and the ethics of faking it. *Critical Arts*. 21(2): 250-260
- Vincendeau, G. 2005. *La Haine*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Vincendeau, G. 2007. Visions of Provence: Cézanne and Pagnol. Available: <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/what/film/essays/ginettevincendeau.htm#note14>. [2007, October 26].
- Vogel, A. 1974. *Film as a Subversive Art*. New York, Random House.
- Walsh, D. 1998. You can't hold back the human spirit. *World Socialist Web Site*. [Online]. <http://www.wsws.org/arts/1998/mar1998/link-m27.shtml>, [2008, February 12].
- Walters, T. 2004. Reconsidering *The Idiots*: Dogme95, Lars von Trier; and the Cinema of Subversion? *The Velvet Light Trap* (53): 40-54.
- Watson, G. 2004. *The Cinema of Mike Leigh: A Sense of the Real*. London and New York: Wallflower Press.
- Wax, E. 2003. The TV Clubhouse - article title An African 'Big Brother' Unites and Delights: Voyeuristic Show is Buzz of Far-Flung Nations, Washington Post Foreign Service article, July 14. [Online]. Available: [www.tvclubhouse.com/forum/messages/10972/1081553.html](http://www.tvclubhouse.com/forum/messages/10972/1081553.html). [2008, July 7].
- Wiebe, C. 2006. Form, function, and change in the romantic comedy film, diss. Steinhardt School of Education, New York University.
- Williams, C. Ed.1980. *Realism and the Cinema*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

- Williams, L. 2001. Cinema and the Sex Act. *Cineaste*, Winter: 20-25.
- Williams, P. 2003. Improvising the perfect script. *Moviemaker*, Summer: 51. [Online]. Available: <http://www.moviemaker.com/magazine/editorial.php?id=123>. [2006, November 23].
- Wollen, P. 1972. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. London: Secker and Warburg, British Film Institute.
- Wood, R. 1998. *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wright Wexman, V. 1980. The Rhetoric of Cinematic Improvisation, *Cinema Journal*, 20(1): 29-41.
- Yakir, D. 1978. *Ciné-transe: The Vision of Jean Rouch: An Interview*. *Film Quarterly*. 31(3): 2-11.
- Zavattini, C. 2007. Some Ideas On the Cinema, in: *Bicycle Thieves: The Criterion Collection*. Criterion. 20-37.
- Žižek, S. 2001. *The Fright of Real Tears*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press

## Filmography

### Primary texts

*Before Sunrise* dir. Richard Linklater. USA. 1995

*Before Sunset* dir. Richard Linklater. USA. 2004

*La Haine* dir. Mathieu Kassovitz. France. 1995

*Secrets and Lies* dir. Mike Leigh. France/UK. 1996

*Shooting Bokkie* dir. Rob de Mezieres. South Africa: 2003

*The Idiots* dir. Lars von Trier. Denmark, Sweden, France, Netherlands, Italy. 1998

### Additional texts cited

*24* dir. Robert Cochran and Joel Surnow. USA. 2001- 2009 (ongoing)

*8½* dir. Federico Fellini. Italy. 1963

*Abigail's Party* dir. Mike Leigh. UK. 1977

*Adaptation* dir. Spike Jonze. USA. 2002

*Ae Fond Kiss* dir. Ken Loach. UK, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain. 2004

*Annie Hall* dir. Woody Allen. USA. 1977.

*Alien Abduction: Incident in Lake County* dir. Dean Alioto. USA. 1998

*Behind the scenes of La Haine* no director credited. France. 1995

*Beyond Rangoon* dir. John Boorman. UK, USA.1995

*Big Brother* dir. Various. USA. 2000-2008

*Big Brother Africa* no director credited. South Africa. 2003

*Blood Diamond* dir. Edward Zwick. USA, Germany. 2006

*Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* dir. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. USA. 2000

*Boys 'N the Hood* dir. John Singleton. USA. 1991

*Breaking the Waves* dir. Lars von Trier. Denmark, Sweden, France, Netherlands, Norway, Iceland. 1996

*Breathless* dir. Jean-Luc Godard. France. 1960

*Cannibal Holocaust* dir. Ruggero Deodato. Italy. 1980

*Chinatown* dir. Roman Polanski. USA. 1974

*Citizen Kane* dir. Orson Welles. USA. 1941

*Cry Freedom* dir. Richard Attenborough. UK. 1987

*Dangerous Minds* dir. John N. Smith. USA. 1995  
*Dazed and Confused* dir. Richard Linklater. USA. 1993  
*Element of Crime* dir. Lars von Trier. Denmark. 1984  
*Epidemic* dir. Lars von Trier. Denmark. 1986  
*Europa* dir. Lars von Trier. Denmark. 1991  
*Faces* dir. John Cassavetes. USA. 1968  
*Fat Girl* dir. Catherine Breillat. France Italy. 2001  
*Fierrot le Pou* dir. Mathieu Kassovitz. France. 1990  
*Forgotten Silver* dir. Costa Botes and Peter Jackson. New Zealand. 1995  
*Four Weddings and a Funeral* dir. Mike Newell. UK. 1993  
*Hannah and Her Sisters* dir. Woody Allen. USA. 1986  
*Hard Labour* dir. Mike Leigh. UK. 1973  
*Heart of Glass* dir. Werner Herzog. West Germany. 1976  
*High Hopes* dir. Mike Leigh. UK. 1988  
*Hijack Stories* dir. Oliver Schmitz. Germany, UK, South Africa, France. 2001  
*Home Sweet Home* dir. Mike Leigh. UK. 1982  
*Independence Day* dir. Roland Emmerich. USA. 1996  
*Intimacy* dir. Patrice Chéreau. France, UK, Germany, Spain. 2001  
*It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* dir. Richard Linklater. USA. 1988  
*Italian for Beginners* dir. Lone Scherfig. Denmark, Sweden. 2000  
*Jerusalema* dir. Ralph Ziman. South Africa. 2008  
*Killing Fields, The* dir. Roland Joffé. UK. 1984  
*Kira's Reason: A Love Story* dir. Ole Christian Madsen. Denmark. 2001  
*La Grande Illusion* dir. Jean Renoir. France. 1937  
*Last Tango in Paris* dir. Bernardo Bertolucci. Italy, France. 1973  
*Letter from an Unkown Woman* dir. Max Ophüls. USA. 1948  
*Ma 6-T Va Craquer* dir. Jean-François Richet. France. 1997  
*Man Bites Dog* dir. Rémy Belvaux and André Bonzel, Belgium. 1992  
*Man with a Movie Camera* dir. Dziga Vertov. Soviet Union. 1929  
*Mapantsula* dir. Oliver Schmitz. South Africa. 1988  
*Métisse* dir. Mathieu Kassovitz. France, Belgium. 1993  
*Mifune's Sad Song* dir. Anders Thomas Jensen and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen. Denmark, Sweden. 1999  
*Moonstruck* dir. Norman Jewison. USA. 1987

*Naked* dir. Mike Leigh. UK. 1993  
*Nil By Mouth* dir. Gary Oldman. UK/France 1997  
*Nine Songs* dir. Michael Winterbottom. UK. 2004  
*On the Set of Before Sunrise* dir Sam Hurwitz Productions. USA. 2004  
*On the Waterfront* dir. Elia Kazan. USA. 1954  
*Pather Panchali* dir. Satyajit Ray. India. 1955  
*Persona* dir. Ingmar Bergman. Sweden. 1966  
*Pretty Woman* dir. Garry Marshall. USA. 1990  
*Raging Bull* dir. Martin Scorsese. USA. 1980  
*Red Road* dir. Andrea Arnold. UK, Denmark. 2006  
*Reservoir Dogs* dir. Quentin Tarantino. USA. 1992  
*Romance* dir. Catherine Breillat. France. 1999  
*Rules of the Game* dir. Jean Renoir. France. 1939  
*Series 7: The Contenders* dir. Daniel Minahan. USA. 2001  
*Shadows* dir John Cassavetes. USA. 1959  
*Shortbus* dir. John Cameron Mitchell. USA. 2006  
*Singin' in the Rain* dir. Stanley Donen. USA. 1952  
*Slacker* dir. Richard Linklater. USA. 1991  
*Strictly Ballroom* dir. Baz Luhrman. Australia. 1992  
*SubUrbia* dir. Richard Linklater. USA. 1996  
*Taxi Driver* dir. Martin Scorsese. USA. 1976  
*The Bicycle Thieves* dir. Vittorio de Sica. Italy. 1948  
*The Blair Witch Project* dir. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. USA. 1999  
*The Blood of the Beasts* dir. George Franju. France. 1949  
*The Five Obstructions* dir. Lars von Trier. Denmark, Switzerland, Belgium, France. 2003  
*The Humiliated* dir. Jesper Jørgen. Denmark. 1998  
*The King is Alive* dir. Kristian Levring. Sweden, Denmark, USA. 2000  
*The Piano Teacher* dir. Michael Hanneke. Germany, Poland, France, Austria. 2001  
*There's Something About Mary* dir. Bob Farrelly and Peter Farrelly. USA. 1998  
*The Searchers* dir. John Ford. USA. 1956  
*This is Spinal Tap*, dir. Rob Reiner. USA. 1982  
*Timecode* dir. Mike Figgis. USA. 2001  
*Titanic* dir. James Cameron. USA. 1997

*Tsotsi* dir. Gavin Hood. South Africa. 2005

*TwentyFourSeven* dir. Shane Meadows. UK. 1997

*Two Days in Paris* dir. Julie Delpy. France, Germany. 2007

*Vertigo* dir. Alfred Hitchcock. USA. 1958

*Wheels and Deals* dir. Michael Hammon. Germany, South Africa. 1991

*When Harry Met Sally* dir. Rob Reiner. USA 1989

*Year of Living Dangerously, The* dir. Peter Weir. Australia. 1982

University of Cape Town