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Stubborn Realism

What Kind of Fiction is Reality?

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Abstract. The essay surveys the problem of pictorial realism. More accurately it focuses on the conceptual conditions and acquired circumstances of vision which influences the perception of reality, as well as the perception of the reality qualities of pictures. The author also tries to show the significant difference between filmic realism theories (those of Bazin, Barthes, Kracauer) and the opinions which argue that the realistic representation does not depend on simple imitation but on inculcation (Goodman, Nietzsche).

According to the well-known story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, the two Greek painters started a contest in order to decide who could paint a more realistic picture. The painting of the first depicting grapes looked so natural that birds flew over the canvas and wanted to eat the grapes. Zeuxis, feeling superior because of the judgment of the birds, asked Parrhasius to draw the curtains on his painting so that they could take a look. Parrhasius, however, told Zeuxis that this would be impossible as the curtains were the painting itself. The story recorded by Pliny raises several interesting questions in terms of what reality is and how it can be represented.

This painting contest can be understood as an ageless allegory of how the senses can be deceived. Nevertheless, if one takes into account that the participants of the contest lived in the 5^{th} century B.C. then we can very well suppose that none of the paintings would have been able to charm 21^{st} century audience because the painters' technical inventory must have lacked certain techniques, like that of central perspective for example, developed and invented in the last two millennia. This can lead us to see how the criteria of genuineness or the illusion of reality of a picture can be connected to certain ages and to the familiarity with the technology of representation.

The story of the painters' contest also highlights that one of the fundamental functions and aesthetic criteria of the painting of that age was how faithfully it could imitate reality. According to Bazin, this was true up until the point photography was invented because after this point the new artistic branch, photography, and a couple of decades later cinema, took over the responsibility for developing the methods of capturing reality. When photography was born, it was for the first time in history that nothing got intercalated between the object of representation and the representation. As Bazin puts it, "for the first time the picture of the external world is being formed automatically without creative human intervention in terms of strict determinism" because "every art is based on human presence, the only exception being photography" (Bazin 2002, 22).[1] The French film theoretician interprets as a new, novel and precise tool of knowing the world both the moving image and its predecessor, photography, which even in its weakest form is "rooted in the ontology of the model, it is the same as the model," or, in other words, "the existence of the object being in the photograph is just as much part of the existence of the model as that of a fingerprint. This way it is in a direct connection with nature and does not substitute it with another creation" (Bazin 2002, 21–22). Roland Barthes also hypothesizes the existence of a certain component belonging to really good photographs called *punctum*, which can render photographs "mad images chafed by reality" (Barthes 1981, 115). However, if we try to fathom these realist aesthetic assumptions, we cannot disregard the seemingly contradictory idea that, through photography and cinema through their fundamental quality (and ontological status) represent reality as mediums, at the same time, they obliterate their own mediator quality. The two theoreticians see the main advantage of photographic representation in the self-destruction of the medium: as Barthes writes it, a good photograph can exceed its own photograph quality and "becomes artistic when it destructs itself as a medium and ceases to be a sign and becomes the thing" (1981, 55). Bazin's previously quoted thought states a similar idea according to which nothing is intercalated between the object of representation and the representation in case of photographs, and the image of the external world is formed automatically without human intervention.

Going back a century in time takes us to similar interpretations. In the second half of the 19th century photographic images, created by nature without humans became the symbol for scientific objectivity. The development of

[1] All throughout the paper, when the source of the quotation is a Hungarian translation, if the original was not available, I am using my own "re-translation."

microscopic photography suggested the possibility of "replacing the observer with the self-representation of the object though the photograph" (Bredekamp and Brons 2006, 155). What is more, as Robert Koch, a pioneer of scientific photography, wrote in 1882 "the photograph of a microscopic object can be more important than the object itself under certain circumstances" (Bredekamp and Brons 2006, 156). According to this approach photography beats the eyes, the controlling organs because, as Koch puts it, "the photographic sheet can reflect better or more plainly the microscopic image [...] than the retina could perceive it" (Bredekamp and Brons 2006, 158). Such scientific approach to photography can yield an understanding that proposes that "the technical gaze" of the machine is superior to the human eye and considers the first more apt for the task of glimpsing behind the surface of the phenomenal world and providing information for scientific discoveries.

The possibility of separating the camera from the human eye and the superior quality of the image created and mediated by the camera are fundamental presuppositions lying behind the realist vision of photography. Or, in other words, the camera operates as an absolute, objective eye excluding all subjectivity which looks upon the human world from the outside human perception. This presupposition, however, encloses implicitly other theoretical fundaments. Namely the idea that reality can be separated from perception, and humans endowed with perception are standing face to face with the real world as if it was existing as an unchanging and completely independent presence. Or, in other words, the world in its completeness is always there even before man's turning his head towards it. Moreover, it is exactly the camera that is capable of recording or *catching in the act* the world with no human eyes on it. Also, the idea of absolute vision (pre)supposes that the perceiver can keep a distance from the real world, that is, there must be an innocent moment of perception *followed* by interpretation and that these two acts (perception and interpretation) can be separated from each other. Photography can catch and record on photosensitive paper the first of these acts, the moment of neutral, innocent perception before the deforming work of interpretation would start.

Jean Mitry in his *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* (1963) presents a criticism of the realist approach – of Bazin, among others – as it supposes the existence of a camera that discovers the world, the world of essences, "beyond the world," a camera that "discovers the divine." Referring to scientific photography, it can also be anticipated to move beyond the phenomenal world where the really important events for objective research take place. According to Mitry, the source of the mistake lies in Bazin's assumption

that regards the image as an objective faculty that is independent of the human vision. If we consider the film image as a statement of the real world, if we consider its objectivity absolute, than "it is to posit the world as "in-itself" and to posit this "in-itself" as a necessarily identical (and yet "purer") thing to the object as we know it, without realizing that the object is the way it is only by virtue of our perception. This is to dabble in "transcendental realism" – a position condemned by the whole of modern physics" (Mitry 1999, 45).

Again, Mitry says it is also impossible for the camera to have a transcendental position independent or beyond of perception because the operational system of the camera was created by men. Consequently the "thing-without-me" would only be perceptible if "the vision of the camera transcend[ed] human vision. However, not only is this vision "directed" but it is dependent on an optical system designed by man so that its "reproduction" is effectively the same as human vision" (1999, 45). Mitry obviously places the camera back to the scope of human perception and subjects it to the instability and the interpretative activity of the human body. Accordingly (and in a blatantly simplifying wording), the realist image is what the eyes consider to be one. An image can only be considered real to the extent to which my visual experience of it is similar to real perception. According to Mitry, this similarity is the basis of the perception of the film image: "the world before my eyes appears to them as a two-dimensional image (though it is the image of a three-dimensional reality). To put it in another way: I might place a window between myself and the world – the world would then appear to me through the window as though projected onto a screen" (1999, 32). Likewise, citing the example of those who gained their sight surgically, Mitry also suggests that psychological plasticity or binocular vision enabling the perception of relief is acquired, it is thus not an anatomically given trait. The same experience can be achieved by film images through the use of movement as "the image immediately appears to stand out from its base (and actually does so). I am no longer perceiving a photograph projected onto a flat surface but a "space." The film image is presented to my eyes as a "spatial image," in exactly the same way as real space before my eyes" (1999, 33). Mitry linked the perception of reality of film image to qualities of sense organs that determine real perception, at the same time he shifted the emphasis from the objectivity of the camera to the physiology and acquisitional nature of perception, concluding that "in the cinema I perceive the image of the object in exactly the same way that I view the object itself" (1999, 31). Not beyond senses as Bazin presumed, we

may add, but as subjectively as determined by the physiological and acquired circumstances of vision.[2]

Even though Vilém Flusser expressed more radical views than Mitry, two points can be found where their works connect. On the one hand, both consider the catching in the act of the reality of photographs possible in the technical realization of optical notions, not in reference to reality; and, on the other hand, they both consider the (photographic) camera to be the result of historical processes that prescribe and develop the *program* of the reproduction of reality. In *Towards a philosophy of photography* Flusser elaborates in detail on the latter idea and sets out to prove that the illusion of reality is not rooted in real referentiality but is prescribed in the "program" of the camera. According to him, the camera as an apparatus generates symbols or symbolic surfaces in a way that have "been prescribed for it. The camera is programmed to produce photographs, and every photograph is a realization of one of the possibilities contained within the program of the camera. The number of such possibilities is large but it is nevertheless finite: it is the sum of all those photographs that can be taken by the camera" (Flusser 2000, 26). In this respect, Flusser compares the camera to a chess board saying that it is neither the chess board, nor the pieces that make the game possible but it is the chess program, the rules. "What one pays for when buying a camera is not so much the metal or the plastic but the program that makes the camera capable of creating images in the first place" (2000, 30). For the user, however, it is neither possible to get an overview of this program, nor is it visible. It is more like a "black box" that reigns over its user through the obscurity of the program. The latter quality results in the deception of the user by the machine: it displays the pictures generated by the preset and pre-programmed operation as if they were real even though the program in the camera translates optical notions like "black" or "white" into states of things. In the world, however, there "cannot be black-and-white states of things [...] because black-and-white cases are borderline, 'ideal cases': black is the total absence of all oscillations contained in light, white the total presence of all elements of oscillation. [...] As black-and-white states of things are theoretical, they can never actually exist in the world. But black-and-white photographs do actually exist because they are images of concepts belonging to the theory of optics, i.e. they arise out of

[2]We should also note that in the last example Mitry studies exclusively the *moving* image and regards pictures as reproductions of "less intense feeling of reality" because the lack of movement renders the pictures lifeless, and despite the perspective that is supposed to give relief "it does not stand out against the background; it is stuck to the screen" (Mitry 1999, 33).

this theory" (2000, 42). The central perspective can essentially be regarded as a theoretical concept or program that changes the psycho-physical space into mathematical space because the homogeneous space it creates is not real but an artificially generated construct. Technical images generated by the program are, therefore, not windows to the objective world but "images, i.e. surfaces that translate everything into states of things" (2000, 16).

As it has been already mentioned, when refuting realism, Flusser expresses much more radical and overarching critical views than Mitry. At the same time, when assessing the works of Mitry, we cannot disregard the historical fact in film theory that his book in 1963 was published only a year after *What is Cinema?* by Bazin. From a 21st century point of view, it is a commonplace to say that visual representations, quoting W. J. Thomas Mitchell, "are no longer perfect transparent media through which reality may be presented to the understanding"; and that "the commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world" (Mitchell 1986, 8). It is, however, important to underline that, in spite of theoretical critical commonplaces, in the 20th century there are two distinct fundamental interpretative approaches to the photograph-based moving image: one (still) presupposes that films complement the goals of objective and unbiased representation that has been present in painting and that led to the birth of photography. What is more, theorists of this trend expected the deeper and more correct illustration of reality due to the possibilities of close-up and freezing. As for the other approach, the underlying idea behind it is summarized in the following way by Anna Eifert in her *The Image in the Aesthetics of Disappearance*: "we first experienced the loss of our trust in our senses in visual perception with the spread of photography. This technology was developed as a result of the need to record reality as realistically as we actually see it. It turned out, however, that reality is not at all as we see it. Photographs thus shook our faith vested in ourselves. This feeling grew because of telepresence: we cannot even believe our eyes any more" (Eifert 1997, 395). Using the metaphor of "medium as the transparent glass" to shed light on the approach in the quote from Eifert one can say that for her the focus is not on the "unobstructed view" but on the "window," or, in other words, the illusion of the self-destruction of the medium and its deceptive quality is in the centre of the interpretation.

One of the two interpretations of the moving image sketched above emphasized its ability to grasp reality or how realistic it can be. In the debates for the theories adhering to this approach we can usually see that they argue using references to film as an analogue imaging technology, as a

process that burns the *real* light effects of its *real* model on the photosensitive paper. Using Peirceian terminology we can say that the representation is in an indexical (signifying) relationship with the signified, that is the real object as illustrated by the picture. The appearance of new electronic and digital media questions, however, the analogical or indexical relationship, and, even though these imaging methods do not bring forth radically new problems in terms of fiction and reality, they still highlight those questions that were always there to answer since the birth of technical images but were placed outside the interest fields of theoreticians.

It seems superfluous to cite names when quoting another media theory commonplace which says that in the end of the 20$^{\text{th}}$ century and in the beginning of the 21$^{\text{st}}$ in the case of most visual media, the borders of fiction and reality are radically blurred. Using the relevant terms from Jean Baudrillard we can say that the essence of the hyperreality of digital and electronic tools is the merging of real and fictional or the creation of the eternal present tense of simulation. To cite an example, the essence of television culture is to blot out the boundaries of real and fictional and to wipe away the notion of realism (cf. György 1991). The double discourse according to which this medium works as the first-class tool to represent reality and that this very same medium unveils all such goals at the same time seems to become a single discourse by the 21$^{\text{st}}$ century since no one expects the moving image to grasp the reality (either in terms of facts or the truth of reality) in the sense Bazin or Kracauer meant it. No one does so because the theoretical lesson to be learned as a result of studying the new visual media makes it impossible whereas "the difference between reality and fiction is of a fictional nature itself that has gained some solidity in the foundations of modernity," but, in the end, it has been uncovered in the ruins of the foundations (Kamper 2006, 68).

Taking all these into account how can we speak about the categories of reality that are fictional themselves? Or, in other words, if it is not possible any more to determine the notion of realism in terms of the relationship of signifier and signified, then how can it be described at all?

If we go back to the age-old contest of Zeuxis and Parrhasius and associate with it the contemporary Greek painting technique, then we can say that judging how realistic something is, is a matter of conventions. Looking at these pieces today, they wouldn't seem to be as deceivingly realistic as the story by Pliny describes the situation. The spectators of the time did not have the conceptional knowledge that is available today and which influences to a great degree the perception of pictures. The realism of a picture, therefore, does not depend on the constant or absolute relationship between the picture

and its model but rather on the relationship between the representational system applied in the picture and the conventional representational system understood to be realistic. Consequently, the fidelity of a representation does not depend on imitation but on inculcation. Or, as Nelson Goodman puts it, "that a picture looks like nature often means only that it looks the way nature is usually painted. Again, what will deceive me into supposing that an object of a given kind is before me depends upon what I have noticed about such objects, and this in turn is affected by the way I am used to seeing them depicted" (Goodman 1976, 39). By linking a realistic representation to a conventional representational operation, Goodman claims at the same time that the dominant representational operation influences my perception of reality, that is I don't see the picture separately from its (real) model or object with a possibility to compare them systematically, but rather I see reality through its representational methods (too). Namely the look of an object does not only depend on our perspective, "its orientation, distance, and lighting, but upon all we know of it and upon our training, habits and concerns" (1976, 20).

If we accept the presumption that realism is relative and that it is controlled by a representational system that is considered conventional or habitual in a given culture or for a person at a particular moment, we can ask why and to what end people would agree on a dominant and all-domineering representational system in the first place.

The role of being natural and realistic is also essential in questions of controllability and, therefore, in judging the truth value of representations. The truth value of a linguistic item is decided and then accepted or rejected on the basis of a comparison with the facts of reality. Representations accepted as realistic (or conventional using Goodman's term) can become the tool for controlling truth due to their role of being substitutes for reality. (Take for example the role photographic representations play in court cases or scientific photographs mentioned earlier that take the place of reality not readily perceptible for the naked eye and that can be used to prove of falsify the truth value of scientific statements.) As a consequence of marking the representational process as realistic or in other words, making it conventional, results in the (apparent) solidifying of human truths. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, people earmark the first truths regulating social existence through the legislation of language by inventing uniformly valid and binding designations for things (Nietzsche 2006, 115). So what is it that counts as truth? – Nietzsche asks. His answer is that it is a "movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human

relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions." Or, in other words, being truthful means using the usual metaphors. Or, morally speaking, it is the duty of everybody to lie "according to a fixed convention" and to lie in "a manner binding upon everyone" (Nietzsche 2006, 117). This latter thought is very close to what Goodman claims about realistic and real visual representation (laying grounds for the truth). According to his conception quoted earlier, realism is often used as the name "for a particular style or system of representation" (Goodman 1976, 37). In Nietzsche' time, language was more influential but by the end of the 20th century the role of visual media had grown to be decisive. In both cases, however, truth based on reference to reality depends (highly) on the particular and arbitrarily selected medium of representation. Parallel with the medial/visual turn, technical images took over the formative force of language to lay the groundworks for truth and reality. These media demonstrate for people in our times the honourable, trustworthy and useful nature of truth as opposed to lies, since no one trusts the liar but "everyone excludes [him]. As a "rational" being, he now places his behaviour under the control of abstractions. He will no longer tolerate being carried away by sudden impressions, by intuitions. First he universalizes all these impressions into less colourful, cooler concepts, so that he can entrust the guidance of his life and conduct to them" (Nietzsche 2006, 118).

Those explanations of image theory that try to answer the question what is behind the spread and widespread mushrooming of pictures that tend to substitute reality aiming at a high degree of reality can be partially associated with Nietzscheian ideas on the function of language. According to Susan Sontag, "'our era' does not prefer images to real things out of perversity but partly in response to the ways in which the notion of what is real has been progressively complicated and weakened" (Sontag 1999, 84). Barthes names similar reasons for the popularity of 20th century (popular) myths including the mythic stories in films. According to these stories, the state of the world can be seen as aligning and manageable and it can offer the joy of the possibility of the world's perfect comprehension "in which signs, unimpeded, and with no contradiction or loss of meaning can eventually be in a harmonious relationship with reasons" (Barthes 1983, 25). Instead of the equivocal and multi-value (concept of) reality, technical images, as substitutes for reality canvass such a conception of the world in which the truth-laws of social existence can find their referential basis. Consequently, as Barthes writes they make reality perfectly comprehensible. At the same time, the peace and joy of understanding reality

can only be accomplished through a certain "blindness" that does not take into account the problematic nature of the traditional causal view, that is the substitution of cause with consequence or the model with the original, nor the idea that the difference between real and fictional is a fictitious act that is dependent on the selection of a conventional representations system of the given time period. It is hence important to keep in mind as Nietzsche, quoting Pascal, reminds us that "if the same dream came to us every night we would be just as occupied with it as we are with the things that we see every day" (Nietzsche 2006, 121). And, we can add, in this case the *representation of the dream* would mean the conventional model of realistic mapping.

In the era of digital pictures it can be claimed as a summary that the illusory nature of the differentiation between real and fictional is becoming more and more conspicuous. The newest imaging media are interested in the blurring of the boundaries of reality, seemingly obliterating the notion itself. However well the terrifying prophecy sounds, reality is a stubborn notion that cannot be obliterated, rather it transforms in a similar way that the conditions of the representation and recognition of the "real" transform as a result of the activity of visual media. The major question in such a situation may not be what the difference *is* between real and fictional but why we need these notions in the first place. It is important to ask why we feel the need to define what the *qualities of pictures* are, and to study what role the transformation of the notion of reality and its stubborn return play in terms of social existence and human culture.

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