

## *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* by Lúcia Nagib

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In film studies, ‘realism’ refers not only to one of its central concepts, but also to a number of film-making movements, styles, sensibilities and genres (e.g., Italian Neo-Realism or British social realism). Its use extends beyond academia into popular criticism and elsewhere; conversational discussion of cinema will often turn to how ‘realistic’ or not a scene or plot might have seemed. The term’s ubiquity is proportionate to its sheer slipperiness. The mediated ‘real’ is never real, merely a representation of the real. So despite realism’s centrality to film theory, it is not a unified concept, and refers to different aspects of cinema in different critical and theoretical contexts. Put simply: ‘there is no realism, but there are realisms’ (Ellis, 1992, p. 8).

No matter how ‘realistic’ or not a film might be perceived, at the level of production, constructions and interventions always take place. Seemingly, this would render the notion of realism meaningless, placing all films on the same footing as mediated, constructed representations of reality. It is in to this theoretically confusing terrain that Lúcia Nagib, Centenary Professor of World Cinemas at the University of Leeds, sets forth her central argument, navigating a path through a diverse set of geographically distinct films which share the ‘ethics of realism’ of the title. These are films which, she argues, share a ‘commitment to the truth of the unpredictable

event’ (p.11), and ‘a fidelity to the contingent character of the “event of truth”, that is, to realism’ (p.12). In other words, the very act of making a film entails making something (a reality, a change) happen in the lives of those involved, cast and crew. For Nagib, realism is more about *producing* reality, bestowing the film with a ‘material realism’, rather than merely representing reality mimetically. Indeed, in the introduction, in which she provides a succinct review of past prominent debates and theories of cinematic realism, she contextualizes her notion of an ‘ethics of realism’ as an effort to escape what she regards as the judgmental tendencies of representational approaches to film analysis and criticism.

One of the main strengths of this work, which gives it a unique freshness, is Nagib’s choice of films. Her perspective as a Brazilian reorients the reader away from Eurocentric or Anglocentric conceptions of world cinema. So, while Chapter 1 might deal with such a well-known classic of the French New Wave as Francois Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959), it sits side-by-side with the analysis of the lesser-known *Yaaba* (1989) from Burkina Faso and *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), the world’s first Inuit film. Nagib stakes out this geographical variety from the very beginning as a willful yet positive disregard for such polarizing notions as ‘centre’ versus ‘periphery’. Despite their geographical and historical diversity, Nagib persuasively argues that what the films share is a particular relationship to material reality, epitomized by scenes showing the human figure running on foot, outdoors. This, she explains, captures cinematically what was a direct experience of the physical environment during the filmmaking process, collapsing the distinction between actor and character, as they inhabit unmistakable locations and extreme environments.

Chapter 2 explores work by the contradictory figure of Werner Herzog, with Nagib as conscious of the film director's ethical failures as much as his ethical successes. The destruction of forest and the death of native Indians during the filming of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) contrasts with what Nagib argues is the highly ethical approach to difference of *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970), with its all-dwarf cast highlighting both material difference as well as the impossibility of difference. Particularly significant is her demonstration of the influence of Brazilian Cinema Nova on the New German Cinema with which Herzog was associated, which overturns the typically Eurocentric framing of art cinema movements.

It is in chapters 3 to 7 that Nagib extends her positive and inclusive disregard for pervasive polarities in film theory in a most intriguing yet convincing way. Chapter 3 on the 'conceptual realism' of *I am Cuba* (1964) and the Brazilian film *Land in Trance* (1967) demonstrates how both films synthesise the Bazinian realism of the long take and deep focus with Soviet montage. Long, mobile, and apparently uninterrupted shots visually incorporate Eisensteinian 'horizontal montage' in *I am Cuba*, showing history as geographical co-existence (p.134), and reconciling formal approaches typically presented in film studies as almost irreconcilably divergent. Similarly, Chapter 4 takes on the 1970s apparatus theory of Metz, Mulvey et al. as a means of exposing its limits. Analyzing the Brazilian film *Delicate Crime* (2006) (of which I was hitherto unaware), Nagib explores the filmmaker's use of Brechtian techniques of distanciation. Her analysis culminates with a key scene in which one of the actors paints a picture of the unfolding contingent action which she argues 'goes beyond its documentary and indexical value to change fiction into

the production of reality' (p.168). This is an innovative reconceptualization of realism, as it is not placed in opposition to Brechtian devices often associated with Godardian anti-realism.

Chapter five considers *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976), which Nagib argues is the apex or 'full fruition' of the ideal of realism, and the notion of cinema's indexical relationship with reality, with its filming of live sex – an inherently contingent event. Chapters 6 and 7 explore additional provocative work – the radical realism of Japanese documentary-maker Kazuo Hara, and the controversial, difficult to classify work of Portuguese auteur João César Monteiro. She further breaks down boundaries and artificial polarities set by dominant (European) theories, in particular intellectual-engagement-versus-pleasure, or 'thinking'-versus-'feeling', that permeate Brechtian notions of representation and apparatus theory, which Nagib attributes to a Western, 'Catholic' body-mind dualism.

As a whole, the chapters work as layers that build up and reinforce Nagib's core thesis. Her approach combines incisive textual analysis of scenes, moments and motifs from the films in question, alongside illuminating accounts of the films' production circumstances and artistic genesis. Her tone is infectiously celebratory of these works, and she communicates the enthusiasm of a genuine cinephile. Each chapter is fairly self-contained and could be read as a standalone work on each of the films or filmmakers. It is both a significant contribution to film theory overall, as well as a thought-provoking exploration and analysis of key works of cinema, either previously overlooked 'minor cinema' works, or well-known 'arthouse' classics which continue to fascinate.

## **Bibliography**

Ellis, John. 1992. *Visible Fictions: cinema, television, video*. London: Routledge.

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