

“Realism and Film”

Rom 2:14-15: Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

II Kings 6:15-17: When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked. "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

I. A Too Narrow Realism

We count as real that which we find to be plausible, yet our approach to reality is as shaped by what we desire and what we wish could be true. The strength of that desire is in part shaped by how possible we believe something to be. Plausibility structures are the reigning, commonly received notions about reality in our various cultures. They are what the majority of people believe to be so true as not to be generally questioned, and as a result, they tend to be reinforced by large-scale political, scientific, and academic communities and play a large part in the worldview of mass media. They determine (or at least highly influence) what we consider reasonable and responsible action. For example, Leslie Newbigin points out that in the modern West, naturalism, the belief that all that is existed is material and evolved, is the reigning plausibility structure. It is simply not questioned by most people. Such a structure assumes the absence of a large-scale, divine *telos*, end, purpose, or direction for human life and culture. It also assumes that ethics are functional; they are not dogma and canon. Instead, codes of behavior are created to achieve certain ends, but those codes have no basis in anything other than widespread consensus and convenience. As a result, what we count as real is not only what we count as plausible but also what we make as a set of investments, namely, that our reigning worldviews and social structures shape the way we live and what we count as valuable. Realism and naturalism believe the world to be an essentially closed system. Both approaches take their direction from the success of the modern scientific movement, and both attempt to describe the world as they believe it actually exists. Naturalism tends to be the more extreme of the two, for it posits a world of evolutionary determinism where humans are but products of biological and social forces and where the world is essentially in a state of competition. But both stress that the actual world is the physical, tangible world only. As a result, realism and naturalism can be deeply reductive ways of seeing and describing reality.

This is true for films. Cinema offers to us various visions of what can be counted as real or treated as fantasy. (More on this below.) For example, the genres of science fiction and fantasy are assumed to take two different stances toward the fantastic. In the former, the fantastic elements are considered to be possible, if only in a far future world, while the later are only possible in a world operating according to different rules than ours, a world where dragons exist and magic actually works. Of course, both of these are making certain assumptions—that in the future, technology could lead to such worlds or that magic and mythical beasts really are falsehoods. This isn't to say we might not respond to an environment that bends these assumptions. While the Star Trek movies are clearly science fiction and the Narnia movies are clearly fantasy, the Star Wars movies share some elements of fantasy. Likewise, we may knowingly play along even if we are not convinced at any real level that such things would be,

whether that be *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*, *The Matrix* or the Harry Potter series. Behind these various playful assessments are the ever present attitudes of Western realism and naturalism.

The Christian view of reality admits the metaphysical and spiritual. Equally, the Christian view of nature suggests that "nature" is more than just the physical and biological realms; it is also the ethical and metaphysical. When Paul in his epistle to the Romans wrote that the Gentiles "by nature" practiced the business or work of the law, he was invoking both Jewish and Greco-Roman notions of the world. He had in mind the Jewish idea that God has designed and constructed the world via his own wisdom and that such wisdom is present in the creation for humans to learn from and abide by. The Greek word for nature, *physei*, used by Paul also touches on Stoic notions that humanity and the world are uniquely fitted for each other. In both cases, "nature" includes the physical and biological worlds, the human and social worlds, and the metaphysical realm that gives structure to the rest. In the naturalist worldview, the social is simply a deterministic product of the physical. For the Christian, it is the exact opposite. This would seem to suggest that Christians should be wary of descriptions of the world, even cinematic ones, which tend to overlook such essential elements of the picture as God and his divine being.

It would be a mistake, however, for Christians not to learn from naturalism. Different predispositions to belief shape the way we ask questions of the world, as well as the evidence we tend to notice. Thus, a naturalist might pick up on socio-psychological stresses on a person, while a theist might tend to look more closely at the moral and spiritual crises behind those stresses. Realist film makers tend to hone sharp portraits of the human individual's psychology. Kenji Mizoguchi's films about the plight of women in pre-war Japanese society are realistic, perhaps even naturalistic, but they offer keen insights into the dilemmas that women faced (and perhaps still face) in a society in which men take advantage of women's lower social station. *Osaka Elegy*, for example, follows the shameful situations a young telephone operator is subjected to when she gives in to being a kept mistress in order to protect her own family from financial ruin. *Sisters of the Gion* follows the plight of two sisters who are geisha, one who accepts her life, naively trusting that her now penniless patron will not abandon her; the other who hates and rebels against the environment, wondering why there must be such things as geisha and hating men as a result. Neither film attempts to make us aware of a spiritual reality behind the inequality in gender roles in the culture nor in the possibilities of a higher spiritual state, past, present, or future, yet such films still have much to offer us in the way of moral and humanistic insight.

While the theist should be wary of some of the naturalist's assumptions, he or she can also learn from such a one's particular insights. George Marsden has argued that, instead of accepting this sort of reductive "methodical atheism" that requires us to act as if the world were only a product of natural forces, we can choose a functional version of it, a "methodological secularization" that allows us to borrow from the strengths of such a model without abandoning the larger insights our faith also offers: "Methodological secularization means only that for limited ad hoc purposes we will focus on natural phenomena accessible to all, while not denying their spiritual dimensions as created and ordered by God or forgetting that there is much more to the picture" (91). A Christian can learn to ask questions as a naturalist might for the sake of highlighting part of the picture. A film such as Mikhail Kalatozov's *Letter Never Sent* operates from the naturalistic perspective that humans are evolved and that they exist in a material and biological world that threatens their very existence, yet the film also places a high-level of trust in human science and its ability to tame the Siberian wilderness. While, as a Christian, I hold this worldview to be extremely short-sighted, the film nonetheless is a window into the sublime and terrible power of wilderness and the extreme commitments a geological crew must make to survive and when down to only one remaining figure, the extreme sacrifice that must be made to return with valuable knowledge for the community.

II. Multiple Cinematic Realisms

The nature of realism in cinema (indeed, in all the arts) is somewhat more complicated than the way I described it above, for cinematic techniques are well-suited to explore the numerous ways humans interact with their definitions of the real. French poetic realism, for example in the films of Jean Vigo, Jean Renoir, and Marcel Carné, brought into French cinema an attention to the lives of the lower classes, a willingness to portray lives complexly, neither good nor evil, and relationships as unresolved, and often ending in death. Their cinematic language often used traditional cinematography that the world learned from Hollywood, though they also found ways to use tracking shots to offer a complex, ever moving set of values and people, Renoir (perhaps learning from Mizoguchi) most famously in *The Rules of the Game*. Their rejection of the happy ending was not necessarily new (Russian films since the silent era had preferred tragic endings), but they found a way to make their social pessimism “poetic,” that is evocative and empathetic, rather than simply fatalistic, in part by using expressionist lightning and *misé-en-scène*. A film such as *The Human Condition* is ultimately pessimistic about human potential, but it is beautiful shot and emotionally involved.

Italian neo-realism, on the other hand, often associated with the films of Roberto Rosellini and Vittorio de Sica, borrowed certain thematic elements—lives of the poor, class struggle, social pessimism—from French poetic realism, but they also used amateur actors, filmed in actual street scenes, and often included non-scripted or random moments. Films such as *Bicycle Thieves* opened up the world of the unemployed and the desperation that could result from something simple as having a bicycle stolen that was necessary to a job. *Paisan*, to cite another example, revealed the ways that Italians and Americans interacted in the chaos and desperation of post-war Italy. Italian neo-realism became a much contested term, for many Italian socialists, neo-realism had to have as its subject the poor as a proletariat class and be concerned with social forces and evils, while for others, the movement had to do with the way its approach to filmmaking challenged viewer consciousness. What struck all sides was an approach to filmmaking that seemed more genuine because it seemed to reject varying degrees of polish and refused to play by typical expectations of characterization and narrative development and resolution.

Notice that both approaches chose specific content elements to approximate the real, but they also made decisions cinematically that mediated forms of fictional involvement, and these decisions were in conversation with at that time half-century old traditions of cinema. They achieved their realism by both accepting and rejecting certain conventions of plausibility. This is true of any form of filmmaking. Even cinema vérité, the movement influenced by Jean Rouch that sought an objective and purely direct recording of events and people, had to make choices about where to place a camera, how long to shoot, and how to interact honestly with those being filmed. The documentary tradition in general has to face questions of the real continually. Early pioneers, such as Robert Flaherty, had to make choices about the reality as they observed it. Flaherty’s famous *Nanook of the North* (1922) documents the story of the Inuit hunter Nanook and his family, but to do so Flaherty has to constantly make decisions about film shots, cutting, what information to include and exclude, and so on. History films, too, face these kinds of questions—what to include and exclude, what contextual information to explain, how exact to the period’s costumes, buildings, and mores. These are also questions for docudramas and historical fictional films.

Even cinematic styles that at first blush may seem to disregard our normative pictures of reality, such as German Expressionism, Surrealism, or Soviet montage and agitprop, are actually making claims about the nature of the real and human blindness to it. The exaggerations and distortions of expressionist filmmaking have at their heart an assertion that human psychology is more visceral and well, weird, than

traditional conventions of story-telling and filmmaking. German Expressionist films, such as F.W. Murnau's *The Haunted Castle* or *Nosferatu*, were often drawn to visions of decadence and horror. Ironically, these approaches meant to eviscerate the human subconscious, also brought in spiritual themes, albeit of a dark and satanic nature, and warned that our images of reality were as much, if not more, subjective, than simply objective. Surrealism as a film movement also shared the claim that the irrational and aleatory was at the heart of actual human existence, and its films sought to break through into modes of existence that were otherworldly. Soviet-style montage and agitprop held that human consciousness is guilty of bad faith, of ideological blindness, and that people to have a sense of reality had to have their normal expectations disrupted. The montage style, pioneered by filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein, Aleksandr Dovzhenko, and Vsevolod Pudovkin, sought to agitate our human comfort in order to awaken us to class consciousness. Ironically, of course, such ideological driven approaches also insisted upon an official picture of society and of people designed to suppress any dissent.

III. A Magical, Mediated Realism?

Magical realism is a term from literature, in particular Latin American literature, which has been applied intermittently to film. I bring up the term in this context for us to consider what a Christian vision of the real might look like in film. Alejo Carpentier defined magical realism as "an unexpected alteration of reality . . . an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality." More specifically, magical realism achieves its particular power by weaving together elements we tend to associate with European realism and elements we associate with the fabulous, and these two worlds undergo a "closeness or near merging." Magical realism can achieve its effects by either making marvelous a certain character's perceptions and/or by making the setting itself marvelous. An "irreducible" magic, which cannot be explained by typical notions of natural law, merges with a realist description that stresses normal, common, every-day phenomena. Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba* has been described as magical realist because while ostensibly about the Cuban Revolution, it is as much an evocative exploration of peasant sensibilities and life. (Incidentally, as a result, it was banned by both the Soviet Union and Cuba.) More recent films such as *Amélie* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* have been called magical realist in spirit, too.

There are certainly other ways to go about imparting a sense of the supernatural to the world. Supernatural thrillers, horror films, and the afore mentioned fantasy genre do this, but there are ways one may maintain some measure of realist film while implying something beyond the material. The films of Andrey Tarkovsky do this, as do the recent films of Terence Mallick. They make choices about cinematography, the length of shots, the attention to lightning and color in nature, and so on that incarnate a deeper reality, even when it remains unnamed. (We will explore this question more latter in the semester.) Perhaps part of the reason that we can learn so much from realist, even naturalist cinema, is because Christians hold to a sacramental picture of the world. The spiritual is mediated by the material stuff of the world, so it does not surprise us that the moral and aesthetic dimensions of film often also carry deeply spiritual insights. I certainly think this is the case for a film such as *Babette's Feast*. If we cannot afford to avoid learning from the naturalist's view of the world, neither can we adopt it wholeheartedly. In fact, from a Christian perspective, realist characterizations, plots, and themes may reveal as much about the spiritual repression of the author as they do about what is actually there. At some point we must pray like Elisha to see the hills full of horses and chariots of fire.