

FICHA TÉCNICA

Title: Unframing Archives. Essays on cinema and visual arts.

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Publishing: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

Collection: Estética, Política e Artes

Coordinators of the collection: Eugénia Vilela e Né Barros

Design: Fernando Brito

UNFRAMING ARCHIVES

ESSAYS ON CINEMA AND VISUAL ARTS

This book is the result of a joint research project carried out by Balleateatro and the Aesthetics, Politics and Knowledge Research Group of the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Porto. Some papers in this book were originally presented in the context of the Family Film Project – International Film Festival on Archive, Memory and Ethnography. Unframing Archives (2017) and Marginal Forms (2016) were the conferences that took place during the festival at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto. Other texts were commissioned for this book.

This publication is funded with National Funds through the FCT/MCTES - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia/ Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Ensino Superior (Foundation for Science and Technology / Ministry for Science, Technology and Higher Education), in the framework of the Project of the Institute of Philosophy with the reference FIL/00502 and supported by Balleateatro (institution financed by the Ministry of Culture/Dgartes and City Council of Porto).



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BETWEEN FORMALISM AND REALISM: THE CASE OF CINEMA

FILIPE MARTINS

1. Form and content

When Amédée Ayfre, referring to Italian neorealism, points to the “rejection of style”, being this rejection “inherent in phenomenological realism” (Ayfre 1952: 185), “style” is assumed here as content, that is, as everything that manipulates the filmic perception disambiguating it, directing it to the message. If the filmmaker succeeds in purging such content, the result will be “a fundamental ambiguity. The condition, of course, is that the event has been allowed to conserve its completeness. The slightest intrusion of any treatment whereby the author tends to make his personal interpretation (...) compromises the whole operation. We are back with the message” (*idem*: 188). This fundamental ambiguity therefore demands an absence of meaning – and therefore of interpretation. As Susan Sontag argues: “To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings” (Sontag 2009: 7). In this tension between form and content, the content – the “style”, as Ayfre calls it – is suppressed by artistic realism so that only remains the “form in itself”, uninterpretable: “Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all” (*idem*: 14). In short, style, understood as content, positions itself directly against aesthetic authenticity: “Contemporary writers and other artists with a style that is intricate, hermetic, demanding – not to speak of ‘beautiful’ – get their ration of unstinting praise. Still, it is clear that such a style is often felt to be a form of insincerity: evidence of the artist’s intrusion

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upon his materials, which should be allowed to deliver themselves in a pure state” (*idem*: 16).

But style can also be identified with form. Together with the refusal of content and interpretation, Sontag (2009: 32) adds that “what is inevitable in the work of art is the style”. In her perspective, style should not be associated with content – as an ornament, message or symbolic layer –, but should be installed on the very formal surface of the work. This implies a refusal of the mediating role of form: “In almost every case, our manner of appearing is our manner of being. The mask is the face” (*idem*: 18).

In a first approach, one could say that this reversal of the notion of ‘style’ is just another way of valuing form over content¹. But what is criticized here is the very distinction between form and content in the context of art. For Sontag, this distinction is based on a misconception that goes back to the platonic understanding of art as *mimesis*, as an imitation of reality. In her words: “All Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as *mimesis* or representation. It is through this theory that art as such – above and beyond given works of art – becomes problematic, in need of defense. And it is the defense of art which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call ‘form’ is separated off from something we have learned to call ‘content’, and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory. Even in modern times, when most artists and critics have discarded the theory of art as representation of an outer reality in favor of the theory of art as subjective expression, the main feature of the mimetic theory persists.

¹ Or maybe it is about valuing matter rather than form. In her critique of the thesis that style would be merely an accessory, such as an adornment or decoration, Sontag rejects the realistic conception (well evident in Ayfre) according to which style, understood as content, must be suppressed, “made transparent”, so that the matter can reveal itself. And she proposes instead that the style should be matched with the matter: “Practically all metaphors for style amount to placing matter on the inside, style on the outside. It would be more to the point to reverse the metaphor (...). As Cocteau writes: ‘Style is the soul’” (*Idem*: 17). It is interesting to note how matter here occupies the place of form, whether in its opposition to style (understood as content, as ‘decoration’), or by the transposition of matter to the surface, to blend with style (henceforth understood as form).

Whether we conceive of the work of art on the model of a picture (art as a picture of reality) or on the model of a statement (art as the statement of the artist), content still comes first” (*idem*: 4). Rather than devalue content, Sontag intends to challenge the very distinction between form and content on which the content theories of art are based. Sontag questions: “What haunts all contemporary use of the notion of style is the putative opposition between form and content. How is one to exorcise the feeling that ‘style’, which functions like the notion of form, subverts content?” (*idem*: 20). It is precisely the insistence on this opposition that confuses the concept of style, stretching it now to form, and now to content. Sontag concludes: “When the metaphor of the work of art as a statement loses its authority, the ambivalence toward ‘style’ should dissolve; for this ambivalence mirrors the presumed tension between the statement and the manner in which it is stated” (*idem*: 22). In other words, when the distinction between form and content is finally abolished, “to speak of style [becomes] one way of speaking about the totality of the work of art” (*idem*: 17). In this regard, Rancière points out that “a style, as we have known since Flaubert, is not the ornamentation of a discourse, but a way of seeing things: an ‘absolute way’, says the novelist, a way of absolutizing the act of seeing and the transcription of perception against the tradition of narrative” (Rancière 2012: 42–43). Such is also Sontag’s position: “The knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgment) in itself. This explains the preeminence of the value of expressiveness in works of art; and how the value of expressiveness – that is, of style – rightly takes precedence over content (when content is, falsely, isolated from style)” (Sontag 2009: 22).

Sontag rejects the label of formalist in her approach to interpretation, arguing that the separation between form (or ‘style’) and content is illusory. But she assumes, at the same time, that this separation only becomes illusory or equivocal in the context of art. Searching content beyond form in a work of art implies, according to Sontag, contradicting the very principle of aesthetic fruition. But the division between form and content continues to make sense outside

the artistic framework, so that it will be up to the esthete to refuse the content or the interpretative stance of such content (as Sontag defends). In these terms, it can be said that Sontag continues to be essentially formalistic in valuing form over content, even though she does so by assimilating content into form through art. Why, then, does she manifestly demarcate herself from formalism? Certainly because she senses there the very regime that she is trying to fight: the regime of interpretation. On the one hand, she defends form as form; on the other hand, she refuses to adhere to formalism. In her words: “The objection that this approach reduces art to mere ‘formalism’ must not be allowed to stand. (That word should be reserved for those works of art which mechanically perpetuate outmoded or depleted aesthetic formulas)” (*idem*: 27).

Content is something that comes up intertwined with interpretation. Denying the interpretation is denying the content. “Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use” (*idem*: 8). According to Sontag, in order to make justice to a work of art, we must, first of all, refuse to interpret it. Sometimes the content itself, if it is explicit, may also impose interpretation; but it is certainly not that kind of content that matters to art: “A work of art, so far as it is a work of art, cannot – whatever the artist’s personal intentions – advocate anything at all. The greatest artists attain a sublime neutrality” (*idem*: 26). Art refuses content, whether in principle (as Sontag claims), or through the intrinsically neutral appeal of works that, in some way, do not call for an interpretive reading. Sontag speaks of a “liberating anti-symbolic quality” (*idem*: 11), considering that “in good films, there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret” (*ibidem*).

But this quality, as such, can only be described in its generality, as a vague intuition, unless the absence of symbolism does not intend to terminate the possibility of analysis. It is true that Sontag admits the possibility of describing works of art: “I’m not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased. They can be” (*idem*: 12). But this possibility of describing the works is not equivalent to being able to interpret them. In the words of

Sontag: “In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art” (*idem*: 14). However, even excluding the content, there remains a focus of analysis: not only the description of the work as a formal composition, but the analysis of the poetic game itself – which is reflected in the form – through which the content is held in suspense. This suspension of content can only be investigated in the composition itself, in the game of forces proposed by the artist, even when poetics (of form) seems to act as an antipoetic (of content).

To a large extent, consent or refusal of content depends of the form itself: there are forms more partial and insinuating than others, just as there is good and bad art. Thus, it will be the artist’s task to sculpt the form until it interrupts the insinuation of content. But doesn’t this mean that the content of art is within the form itself, confused with it, implied in the way the form seems to neutralize it or in the way it disguises itself as form? Doesn’t content reside on the very aesthetic dimension of form, making it therefore analytically and aesthetically relevant? The arrangement or organization of form is not always evident, it has to be sought, studied – as expected also from content. We can recognize this organization in the way by which form refers to content, or even to itself, or against itself. Ultimately, the aesthete’s or the art critic’s appreciation of the form exhibited by a work of art is hardly distinguishable from the analysis of the content of that same work, even when they refuse to interpret it. Content is implied in the very possibility of fruition. At the limit, for a work of art to have no aesthetic content at all, it would be necessary to withdraw any poetic organization, any hint of composition. Not in the sense of a random execution of the elements of performance according to the prior intentions of a subversive artist, but in the sense of subtracting from the work of art the performative dimension that defines it as such. An obliteration of the authorship, of the conglomeration, of the authorization (and authority) of the work.

Without this performative and organizational principle, how to read the artistic form, how to describe it as a work of art? How can the form escape from a poetic organization and, at the same time, allow itself to aesthetic description and judgment by the artist, the audience or the art critic? The reduction of a work to the

absolute fluke of an object without authorship, literally reduced to itself, is still very far from the ambiguity defended by the realists of cinema. In the realm of art, it is not enough to invoke the fortuitous or the chaotic to access the real; it is necessary to integrate those into some kind of performative device: “The very realism of [the work of art] can only come through the use of devices much more subtle and conscious than anything attributed to the fullest kind of spontaneity” (Ayfre 1952 : 186).

By devaluing content and by locating style in form, Sontag intends to fit more into realism than formalism. In her view, any suggestion about art should focus on making it “more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means” (Sontag 2009: 14). There is a direct link between the real and the absence of meaning, in line with what is defended by Bazin or Ayfre. But this lack of significance does not necessarily match with an absence of formalization. The various characteristics that the realists identify in the films of Italian neorealism, precisely because they are identifiable, end up also joining some kind of systematicity, like the one expected of a cinematographic formalism. When Bazin theorizes about the ontological realism of cinema, he inevitably selects one type of cinema (elevated to the status of art) over another. And he justifies this valuation of realistic cinema describing its specific characteristics, which he reports to the ontological characteristics of the real itself. How can we not understand this correspondence as a kind of *mimesis*, representationalism or, at least, formalization? In what sense does the ambiguity in cinema, advocated by Bazin and Ayfre by means of procedures such as the use of the sequence-shot, distinguish themselves from authors such as Arnheim, who supported the antirealist nature of cinema also enumerating some of its formal characteristics, such as the selective imposition of the framing, the lightning, the absence of space-time continuity, etc.

In fact, both realism and formalism are often accused of the same kind of criticism: that of being too restrictive in what they consider to be cinematic art. According to J. Andrew, “the formative theory of cinema is dangerous because of the very reason that makes it

attractive: it is entirely centered on the technique of cinema” (Andrew 2002: 73). Arnheim’s formalism, for instance, became too prescriptive to the point of refusing the advent of sound in the cinema. But isn’t realism equally permeable to technique from the moment it defines lines of action for reproduction of the ambiguity of the real or for the attainment of aesthetic neutrality? Ayfre says that “ambiguity itself is in a sense a criterion of authenticity” (Ayfre 1952: 190). But to what extent does this ambiguity, which is linked to the real, distinguish itself from other formal characteristics such as those which the naturalist reproduces (technically) to achieve verisimilitude? In the aesthetic context, doesn’t the absence of style depend of an operation as complex as the one found in the most extravagant stylization? As Susan Sontag notes: “There is no neutral, absolutely transparent style. (...) What Roland Barthes calls “the zero degree of writing” is, precisely by being anti-metaphorical and dehumanized, as selective and artificial as any traditional style of writing. Nevertheless, the notion of a style-less, transparent art is one of the most tenacious fantasies of modern culture” (Sontag 2009: 16-17). This denial of form neutrality illustrates quite well the strange affinity of the realistic perspective with the purposes of formalism, starting on the very way in which realism focuses on form at the expense of content. To what extent can one say that the cinematographic features described by the phenomenological realism of cinema are less formalizable than the cinematographic features described by formalist theories? On the other hand, to what extent is the formalist departing from the real by promoting “deviance”, “defamiliarization”, “shock”? Arnheim said: “No representation of an object will ever be valid visually and artistically unless the eyes can directly understand it as a deviation from the basic visual conception of the object” (Arnheim 1967: 92). But this refusal of the “basic conception of the object” is not a refusal of the real, but of a certain naturalistic or literalistic formula of representation. According to Hans Richter: “The main aesthetic problem of cinema, which was invented to reproduce, is, paradoxically, to surpass reproduction” (Jacobs 1960: 98). In these terms, formalism also seems to stand against *mimesis*, as does the phenomenological realism described by Ayfre. Pascal Bonitzer concludes, in the words of

Susana Viegas, that “the separation between realism and formalism is based on a misunderstanding, since both are opposed to naturalism. It would be a mistake to oppose Bazin’s theories (of interdiction of montage and depth of field), to Eisenstein’s theory of an intellectual montage, since both actually fight against what they consider to be a ‘naturalistic’ montage” (Viegas 2013: 261).

2. The duality of form

The theoretical and methodological opposition between realism and formalism tends to imply and integrate a whole panoply of dualistic tensions: the sensible against the intelligible, the immanent against the transcendent, the immediate against the mediate, the experience against signification, the essence against the appearance (or the existence against the essence), the particular *versus* the universal, etc. By inviting the general attunement of all these dichotomous pairs, the theoretical opposition between realism and formalism ends up proposing a common polarity. But one quickly realizes that such a reduction would not be feasible. The various poles on the same side of this dichotomous opposition are not easily interchangeable, and, above all, resist dichotomization. Neither do they allow themselves to be clearly defined in realistic or formalistic terms.

The problem can be summed up as follows: both realism and formalism claim such overarching theoretical areas that they overlap with each other, entering the very territory they are struggling to avoid. This theoretical dispersion becomes even more evident as we see different orientations within the realm of formalism and realism. We can distinguish, for example, two conflicting ways of understanding formalism: as a regime of formal structures and surfaces (that is, the regime of things in themselves), or as a semiological regime (that is, the regime of things which refer to other than themselves). A structural formalism in the first case, a referential or content formalism in the second case. Realism, on the other hand, can also be understood in two apparently contradictory ways: in a representational sense, as *mimesis* or naturalistic approach to the real; or in an anti-representational sense,

while refusing human intervention, or the subjective appropriation, or the phenomenology itself, in order to safeguard the immanence or objective integrity of “things in themselves”.

Of course, the internal complexity of realism and formalism also complicates the very possibility of theoretical opposition between these two strands, which, in the end, are mixed: for example, mimetic (or representationalist) realism, which seeks the real through of naturalistic poetics, tends to be confused, in its purpose, with semiotic formalism, where form refers to content (even if it does so by means of resemblance relations, as in the cinema seen in the light of Metz²).

On the other hand, we may wonder whether the neutrality of the neo-realist approach won’t recall the Eisensteinian method of ‘neutralization’, by which all elements (attractions) would become equally relevant. It is true that, in Eisenstein, neutralization is obtained through style: “The stylization of the gesture of murder eliminates its primacy and puts it on an equal footing with other gestures with which it cooperates” (Andrew 2002: 49). But this refusal of the hierarchy of cinematographic elements aims, as it happens in realism, to avoid the conditioning imposed by the narrative contents, which are focused primarily on the action: “The scenographic elements shouldn’t be a background of the dialogue, argued the constructivists, but they should work in equality of conditions with the dialogue, almost in dialogue with the dialogue. The same about lighting, costume design and so on (...). The process of decomposing reality into usable blocks or units can be called neutralization” (*idem*: 48-49). He concludes: “Eisenstein wanted to create a system for cinema in which all elements would be equally commensurable: cinematography, composition, acting, script, even subtitles should be interrelated, so that the film can escape the crude realism that only tells a story accompanied by supporting elements” (*idem*: 50).

2 In the words of Metz: “The analogue and the codified do not oppose in a simple way. The analogue is, among other things, a way of transferring codes: to say that an image resembles its ‘real’ object is to say that, thanks to this similarity, the deciphering of the image may benefit from the codes that intervened in the decoding of the object (...). The resemblance itself is something encoded, for it asks for the judgment of resemblance” (Metz 1970: 3).

The affinity of realism with formalism becomes even more evident if we consider artistic manifestations committed with formal simplicity, such as the American minimalism of the 1960s, which sought to reduce the work to the mere “formality of form”, without content. The minimalistic works of Donald Judd illustrate this radical position: “specific”, “non-relational” and non-representational objects, “without games of meaning, that is, without equivocation” (Didi-Huberman 1992: 37). In this type of formalism, formal simplicity seems to pursue, by its own means, something very similar to the phenomenological realism described by Ayfref: totality without parts, such as the integrity of the realistic image. Didi-Huberman observes that, in Donald Judd’s minimalism, “the result of such a removal of detail – or even of any compositional or relational part – has been to propose objects with excessively simple shapes, generally symmetrical, objects reduced to the ‘minimal’ form of an instantaneous and perfectly recognizable Gestalt. Objects reduced to the mere formality of their form” (*idem*: 34). In fact, it isn’t just the simplicity of minimal art that refers to this formal concretism or this lack of meaning. The same can be said, for example, of abstract art or pop art. Sontag considers that “the flight from interpretation seems particularly a feature of modern painting. Abstract painting is the attempt to have, in the ordinary sense, no content; since there is no content, there can be no interpretation. Pop art works by the opposite means to the same result; using a content so blatant, so ‘what it is’, it, too, ends by being uninterpretable” (Sontag 2009: 10).

If realism is opposed to formalism, how can we explain this convergence of such different artistic proposals? The explanation may lie in the very concept of “form” and its strange duplicity: form opposes content (in the form-content duality), but it also opposes matter (in the matter-form duality). The form-content duality usually refers to a symbolic context and can be described in terms of the relationship between a (formal) syntax and a semantics (content). Here the formalist attitude tends to minimize content (referential, intentional, moral, allegorical, etc.), focusing on the structural skeleton. For its part, the matter-form duality refers, more generally, to the problem of representation, placing matter in the sensible plane and

associating form with the *logos* operation. In this last perspective, forms (or formal systems) hover above the sensible world, outlining it, framing it into an abstract matrix of relationships that allow it to be accessed and decoded. The formalist attitude here gains a formative, gestaltist orientation, focusing on the plane of representation and its rules, against the sensible, the “being”, the “soil”, the “figural”, the “immediate”, among other designations of matter. In short, when form opposes matter, it appears as the point of arrival, a formatting coverage; when it opposes content, acts as a starting point, a formal foundation³.

The relation between matter and form shouldn’t therefore be confused with the relation between form and content. But we also shouldn’t elect just one of these ways. Both participate together in the dual nature of form, determining its complex character, irreducible to sensible or intelligible immediacy. Historically, immediacy has always been connoted with some kind of authenticity. In Plato, the criticism of representation was intended to give primacy to the intelligible plane, and this was so because the representation was associated with the sensitive (particular), responsible for the mediation of form (universal). On the contrary, in much of modern aesthetic theory, representation has come to be accused in the conceptual layer that covers matter; and the criticism of this representation – namely, the criticism of the *logos* – aims to purify the sensitive and restore its immediacy. In both cases, what is criticized is the mediating vehicle: the sensitive in one case, the intelligible in the other. Immediate presence can be pointed out in two opposing places: the pure sensitive (through aesthetic materialism) or the pure intelligible (via the transcendental phenomenology that extends from Plato to Husserl). In any case, purism aims to nullify one or another pole of the classical opposition between sensible and intelligible (in favor of the *logos* in the Platonic

³ It is true that matter and content, as vanishing points of form, tend towards a common space: the *substance*. In this sense, the extremes seem to be touching. But while matter points to the virgin, untainted, seminal substance, content tends to refer to the symbolic construction, the message as substance.

tradition, or in favor of *Aisthesis* in the tradition that flourished mainly since Baumgarten)⁴.

It is these immediacy that are compromised by the duality of form, this entity capable of simultaneously occupying the role of matter (while opposing content) and the role of content (while opposing matter). This also explains the difficulty of a rigid demarcation between realism and formalism, as well as the limitations common to antirealist and anti-formalist theses, which hardly fit the concrete panorama of cinematographic art and the arts in general.

It is through the form that realism and formalism meet. The form is what is seen, it is the focus. But it has two angles. If one assumes the form in its dual condition, the translatability between realism and formalism becomes evident. Ultimately, any artistic manifesto can be accommodated in one or other of these theoretical viewpoints, choosing each of them depending of the angle by which the form is being approached. There is a kind of artistic formalism that tends to focus on the thing itself, on what is given concretely; but this reduction of the thing to itself also resembles a kind of realism. Changes only the theoretical attitude towards the idea of form. Abstract art and minimalism are aesthetic formalisms based on the form-content duality (where the content is minimized); Italian neorealism or direct-cinema are anti-formalisms based on the matter-form duality (where the form is minorized). But the first path (formalist) and the second (realist) are merged. At the limit, we could even propose a radical inversion in the description of these examples: minimalism – with its orientation to the absolute concretism of the work – would then be assumed as a kind of realism based on the matter-form duality; and neorealism – with its emphasis on the neutralization of content and the preservation of the integrity of form – would act, for all intents and purposes, as a formalism based on the form-content duality.

In any case, none of this weakens the commitment of art towards an authenticity that remains, unquestionably, linked to the real. Regardless of the realist or formalist approach, it will still be

⁴ And, in both cases, this purism also perpetuates the classical dichotomy itself, which, since the Greeks, opposes the sensible to the intelligible.

necessary to investigate how this authenticity is garnered in concrete works of art and in their poetics. In other words, it will still be necessary to ascertain how the work is emancipated from the content (or the propensity to signify, refer, etc.), and how it resists formalization (or the tendency to organize itself according to a normativity or a regime of interpretation). Talking about resistance to content is not exactly the same as talking about resistance to formalization. But the authenticity effect is essentially the same in both cases.

Perhaps one of the great misconceptions of the art theory is to pursue this aesthetic authenticity unilaterally, that is, to assume an exclusively realistic or formalist stance. By these classic approaches, artistic studies always prove insufficient and partial: in phenomenological realism inspired by Italian neorealism, art should continue to depart from expressionism and fable; for semiotic formalism, it should avoid immersiveness, triviality and the illusionism of *mimesis*. But none of these regimes of art make justice to the effective richness of the landscape of the arts. In order for this aesthetic landscape to be understood in all its diversity, it might be convenient to propose a phenomenological synthesis between realism and formalism. This is suggested, from the start, by the conceptual complexity of aesthetic form and its complicity with the real.

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