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AESTHETIC AUTHENTICITY IN CINEMA

**EDITED BY
FILIPE MARTINS**

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INTRODUCTION TO AESTHETIC AUTHENTICITY IN CINEMA

FILIPPE MARTINS

From very early on, realism has been one of the great guiding pillars of cinematographic theory, alongside with formalism. The realistic character of cinema is a commonplace that is based, from the outset, on the very technical nature of the device. However, beyond this basic premise, we can identify very different approaches to realism in cinema – or, if we prefer, different realisms. The same cinematographic work can be read in the light of the epistemological or testimonial accuracy of its content, the mimetic fidelity (verisimilitude), the correspondence with the sensitive and immanent truth of its images (for instance in the Deleuzian sense), the semantic literality, the ethical relevance, the ability to produce poetic or performative effects of authenticity, etc. There are more naive versions of realism – which relate directly to the literal, the natural or the factual – and there are less naive realisms that accept the inevitability of performance and artifice, even though, at the same time, they also seek to preserve, or even intensify, some form of truth or authenticity. For instance, this is what Werner Herzog proposes when he highlights the subjectivity and poetic effort involved in cinema, including documentary cinema. In his words: “There are deeper layers of truth in cinema and there is a

poetic and ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive and can only be achieved through fabrication, imagination and stylization.”¹

All art seeks some kind of authenticity or “truth”. We can recognize it in fiction or documentary, in painting or photography, in the abstract or the figurative. Authenticity can be pointed out in the immediacy of the senses or in the honesty of a purely conceptual proposal; it can emanate from the aura of the singular object or prevail in the multiple and the ephemeral; it can relate to objective exteriority or appeal to a phenomenological interiority (or even install itself on the perceptive threshold between exterior and interior, as in Impressionism); It can be mimetic, the result of a technical effort of meticulous recreation, or, on the contrary, it can invest in the opposite of technique and structuring, praising the artist’s chaos, randomness or passivity, so that the raw virginity of the real is not corrupted.

Authenticity appears to be involved in aesthetic fruition in different ways, forming one of the axiological pillars of the artistic field, regardless of the historical regime in which one addresses it. But art’s implicit contract with authenticity is in stark contrast to the polysemy of the latter concept. How to describe this authenticity in its transversality to the most diverse forms of artistic expression? How does it operate in the process of validating the different poetics? How does it manifest itself throughout different historical regimes and what resists over the successive paradigmatic revolutions in the art world? What is the properly aesthetic authenticity?

The problem of authenticity is inseparable from the very history of the concept, and the awareness of this historicity cannot fail to sentence a certain relativism. As David LaRocca points out: “we travel from Rousseau’s sensibility for ‘authenticity’ (and hence its inverse, inauthenticity) to Heidegger’s take on the ‘authentic Self’ to Adorno’s counterprogramming that claims such talk as not just mere ‘jargon,’ but revealing a ‘mendacity’ in its ‘vulgar’ renderings

¹ Quoted in Branco, P. C. (2022). The Quest for an Ecstatic Truth. *Film-Philosophy*, 26(2), 149-170 (p. 165).

(thereby proving false, misleading, damaging—slipping from ‘culture’ to ‘cult’), and at last, emerging in our present predicament in which few have a command of the concept, and fewer still have strident commitments to a single meaning of the term” (p. 42). And yet, the concept always returns, even if readjusted to new historical contexts and respective epistemological, ontological, aesthetic binders. Perhaps this recurrence is fundamentally driven by what Nietzsche described, in LaRocca words, as a “‘truth drive’ in humans, something that, ironically, [also] gives rise to a passion for dissimulation” (p. 37).

In art, the use of the term authenticity seems to remain transversal even to the distinction between realism and formalism. LaRocca notes: “If we turn to ask about formalism, especially in experimental and avant-garde cinematic traditions, its celebrated standard bearers may seem very far from “realistic”—and yet may still derive from an artist’s ‘authentic’ vision” (p. 35). Ultimately, despite the ever-renewed attractiveness of the concept, perhaps we may be condemned to verify its theoretical indomitability, its resistance to watertight and transhistorical boundaries: “Authenticity is a buzz word—that is, a word with a charge (and occasionally a sting) but also without any fixed or formal or agreed upon definition. The word makes an impact—we feel its power when applied—but also cannot account for what it entails” (p. 39). However, this assumption should not deter us from realizing new uses or interpretations of the concept, namely from the perspective of the present time in which we live and from which we direct our questioning. According to LaRocca: “We’re not so much in an age of post-authenticity as one whose parameters and definitions change continuously to suit new conditions” (p. 42).

That is, authenticity still stands, even if it is an everchanging concept. Thus, in order to restore a more stable and transversal definition, LaRocca proposes a variation on the concept: “We might temper our thinking about (and ongoing obsession with) authenticity by means of a spelling change that invites and inaugurates a conceptual shift. From authenticity to authentication” (p. 42). The question then arises: what kind of authentication is in question in contemporaneity, particularly when addressing cinema and its images?

Nearly three decades ago, Lev Manovich pointed to a profound paradigm shift regarding the modes of production and relationship with images²: the transition from *analogue* (committed to “lens-based recordings of reality” (p. 40)) towards the *digital* (which enabled new – more autonomous – ways of grasping the realistic purposes of cinema, especially blatant in the increasing photorealism of CGI or, more recently, in the so-called deepfake). Currently, as LaRocca notes, we are once again facing a profound paradigm shift, perhaps much more radical and disturbing than the previous one: the advent of artificial intelligence and its capability to produce textual, imagery and audiovisual discourses seemingly indistinguishable from human discourses. That is: no longer the passage from analogue to digital, but the passage from *human* to non-human or *synthetic*. In addition to the obvious implications that such new discourses might add to the wider problematic about truthfulness (a concern announced since the beginnings of the internet and the subsequent deluge of information that would culminate in a so-called post-truth era), it is now imposed, more profoundly, the questioning about the (human or non-human) source of those discourses. According to LaRocca, it is precisely in this context that the concept of *authentication* – which is to apply to discourses in general, including cinema – gets its ultimate significance today. In his words: “‘Authenticated cinema’ would be ‘AI-free’ – human created, even if by digital means. The desire, or demand, for such authentication might stem from an anxiety about taking ownership or authorship of content” (p. 43).

In the chapter “From Authenticity to Authentication: cinaesthetics and auteurship in the age of AI”, David LaRocca explores the epistemological and aesthetic implications of artificial intelligence in the future of cinema, both in terms of production and reception. A future in which authenticity (or authentication) should be upheld above all by the notions of authorship and humanity. Concludes LaRocca: “Where we have lived for centuries in a contest between the categories of authentic and inauthentic – respectively marking a kind of mortal and moral success

² Manovich, L. (1995). “What is Digital Cinema?”. (Retrieved from manovich.net/index.php/projects/what-is-digital-cinema).

(or failure), deployed as assignments of genuineness or falsity—the application of ‘authentic’ to all human endeavor, as set in opposition to that of AI, dissolves the inherited distinction. Authentication—deciphering human from nonhuman artifacts—will supersede aesthetic judgment of the work itself as the first order of business” (p. 57).

The authentication of the discourses granted with human authorship (as opposed to AI discourses, which are denied such authenticity) is, essentially, an epistemological certificate. A bit like authenticating a Picasso proven to have been painted by Picasso himself (Picasso being the authorial entity that here bears the attribute – the signature – of authenticity). Both in the case of the human/synthetic pair and the case of the Picasso/Picasso–forger pair, authentication ultimately refers to objective criteria related to the factual origin of the artistic object: the human authorship in one case (and not AI), the authorship by Picasso himself on the other (and not by a forger). What is at stake in both cases is, above all, the empirical nature of the source, which can be, in principle, investigated: for example, through an infrared spectroscopy of the painting, or through the analysis of discursive patterns that may reveal algorithmic automatisms characteristic of (current) AI limitations. These are matters of fact, perhaps within reach of a rigorous laboratorial analysis, in order to distinguish the original from the imitation. The epistemological dimension here depends on the premise that Picasso (the individual) is a reliable anchor that serves as a criterion of authentication against falsification, in the same way that the human (humanity) constitutes a reliable anchor against the imitation of AI.

But authorship can also be understood in a phenomenological sense, as an attribute that is granted to the object (converted into a work of art) in the act of reception, more than in the act of its production. Modern art understood this very early: the urinal that is no longer a mere urinal because it has been granted an authorship, a performative value that is only truly realized in the (appropriate) context of reception. In these terms, authorship becomes the foundational condition of the work of art, even when the artist is essentially passive, or even when he is nothing more than an illusion or mistake on the part of the interpreter.

However, authorship, understood in these terms, collides with the concept of authenticity. If, on the one hand, authorship enables the performative dimension of the work of art, on the other hand it does not take part in its authenticity, first of all because the traces of authorship tend to denounce the artifice of the artistic work itself, as opposed to the natural, contingent, etc.

This does not mean that one shouldn't continue to speak of authenticity in the context of art. Such attribute remains undoubtedly one of the core values that influence artists' poetic choices as well as public and critics sensibilities. Authenticity can coexist with authorship. Besides, we must assume from the start that aesthetic authenticity does not exhaust the artistic value of the work. There is more to art, to its purpose, than the mere challenge of authenticity. The phenomenology of the work implies authorship (which refers to a certain type of aesthetic or pro-aesthetic figures³) and implies co-authorship (which refers to another type of figures⁴), but it also admits a movement contrary to authorship: a return to the contingency of the real. At this point, the problem of aesthetic authenticity reconciles with realism, although no longer an *epistemological realism* (like the one that, for example, allows to establish the authenticity of a Picasso), but an *aesthetic realism*. It is in the light of this latter form of realism that the notion of aesthetic authenticity may perhaps escape both naivety and relativism. However, the specificity of this aesthetic realism is not obtained by mere opposition to epistemological realism. There are several forms of realism that can coexist in the same work without opposing each other, although they do not necessarily contribute to its aesthetic authenticity.

Cinema's aesthetic complicity with realism largely transcends the realistic nature of the technical device or its ability to capture images and sounds. Nor is this complicity limited to the efforts to improve verisimilitude, understood in terms of the cinematographic

³ See Martins, F. (2020). Persistence and Arbitrariness: considerations about repetition and duration in cinema. In F. Martins (org.), *Memory and Aesthetic Experience* (pp. 49-80). Porto: FLUP.

⁴ See Martins, F. (2023). Imersividade e Diferença no Cinema e nas Artes. *Aniki* vol. 10, n. 1 (2023): 138-155.

classicism and its naturalist principles of narrative transparency. In modernity – or in the so-called “aesthetic regime”, according to Rancière –, the search for an aesthetic authenticity through cinema has historically gone through the readmission of chance and the deconstruction of narratives, in a sort of autophagy within the very compositional processes of cinematographic art. However, this appeal towards the contingency of the real, which extends to the arts in general, should not be reduced to a *naive realism*, such as the one that is expressed in the scientific piece, in the news report or in the mere recording of information through images and sounds. In the case of cinema, which is innately realistic, the kind of authorial exemption associated with aesthetic authenticity is not to be mistaken even with the absence of style, the anti-narrative or the artist’s indifference. The contingency effect is not obtained directly by negating art, nor by adopting watertight realistic techniques or formulas, but is achieved through the poetic effort itself, that is, through an *indirect realism*.

The aesthetic realism of cinema is constructed not so much by its ability to directly register reality, but mainly by refining the self-concealment capacity of the poetic work. In its drive for aesthetic authenticity, cinematographic art sustains its realism against the traces of *authorship*. In this type of authenticity, it is the author who must somehow remain hidden, giving way to the *real* itself, where the contents no longer seem artificial or clotted, but orphaned and *contingent*. In cinematographic art, this reorientation towards the real – which precisely allows to speak of aesthetic authenticity – is expressed through a set of trends or poetic figures that can be recognized and described from a phenomenological perspective. Such figures are analyzed in the chapter “The Construction of Chance in Cinema: contingency figures”.

Although there is always an implied distance, it is that very distance that allows to speak of authenticity. The distance can be narrowed (but not abolished) through art, especially when the artist deliberately seeks to deconstruct the duality between passivity and activity, between truth and falsehood or between chance and narrative, leading to an indiscernibility of opposites.

Perhaps it is possible, using cinema as a barometer, to point out a historical progression towards a refinement of aesthetic awareness. In other words, cinema may offer a privileged landscape for the study of the notion of aesthetic authenticity. Thanks to the very paradoxical nature of the device, which can combine a “perceptive, non-human automatism” with the interventional and poetic drive of its images, cinema seems to offer new possibilities for reconciling objectivity and subjectivity, the real and the fictional, the contingent and the artificial. In the words of Susana Nascimento Duarte: “This relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, the particular way in which the combination of passive and active elements of creation is constitutive of and inscribed inescapably in the cinematograph from its origin on, interferes with the notion of authenticity in cinema, or with the possibility of defining what makes the images in cinema authentic” (p. 102). Duarte speaks here, once again, of a particular type of authenticity. For instance, it is no longer about measuring the realism of the cinematographic image in terms of its “spontaneous mechanical reproduction of the real”, nor in terms of the potential of its “narrative-representative dimension” through discursive methodologies of “transparency”. It is a properly aesthetic authenticity, where neither objectivity nor subjectivity should be neglected. An “aesthetic regime”, according to Rancière, which involves the very indiscernibility between objectivity and subjectivity. As Duarte notes: “This is why Jacques Rancière can see cinema as the representative par excellence of the aesthetic age, drawing attention to a new identity of the passive and the active” (p. 99).

Cinema, like photography before it, added to the problem of reproduction the question of reproducibility (in Benjamin’s terms). But, according to Duarte, although the auratic effect of the work of art can find “its fugitive photographic equivalent in this capacity of the portrayed person to reflect, in the contingency of their appearance, the material conditions of their here and now” (p. 104), this presence or auratic force of photography and cinema, which is also a source of authenticity, tends to transform itself dialectically “into its negative counterpart, i.e., into facticity, mere objectivity” (p. 104). To avoid this summary reduction to the

mere objectivity or scientificity of images, it is the *reproducibility* itself that must become the focus. According to Duarte, “the nature of reproduction has changed with reproducibility, altering the relationship between the copy and the original: not only does the latter suffer in its uniqueness and integrity, but the entire experience now has its own reproduction as reference and justification. In other words, the real, any act, becomes inconceivable without its being recorded” (p. 105). This widening of the focus to the very reproductive (and transforming) character of the cinematographic device is essentially equivalent to the one pointed out very early in the history of cinema by Jean Epstein when he referred to the “excess of reality that the intelligent machine, i.e., cinema (...), registers as the feature of a thought that shows us, reveals to us, what we were unaware of about reality and ourselves” (p. 106). It is, according to Duarte, a “reflexive awareness of the medium and the new mode of non-human perception it introduces, turning the constitution of the image into a process that translates not only the duplication of the world through its mechanical and stenographic recording, the trace of an experience or situation, but also a new objectivity of the image as an image” (p. 106).

Although this self-reflexive nature of cinema cuts across all genres, it is in documentary and non-fiction cinema that we perhaps find the most suitable ground for deepening the questioning about aesthetic authenticity, considering the way in which different types of realism tend to converge and dialogue in these cinematographic trends. In any case, as Duarte emphasizes, we must always assume that, even in the documentary, the “authenticity is always a construction, a staging, a careful choice of what to show and what to hide” (p. 107).

Duarte considers that “there seem to be essentially two ways of approaching authenticity in cinema. The first is the discourse on the potential of the cinematograph to portray reality authentically, in the sense of being factual and objective. The second concerns how filmmakers and viewers work with authenticity within the fabric of filmic signs, so to speak, in the sense of making what depends on the artifice of cinema manifest” (p. 107).

In the documentary, these two aspects maintain a constant dialectical relationship: “documentary authenticity thrives on the

tension between the recording of the historical, objective trace of reality and the 'subjective' elements of its construction as an image. From this tension, it is possible to approach each period of documentary filmmaking based on an emphasis of one or the other pole of this dialectical relationship" (p. 109).

From this framework, Duarte, in her chapter, goes through some of the main historical moments of documentary and non-fiction cinema, from the realistic approaches of pioneers such as Robert Flaherty, John Grierson, Joris Ivens and Dziga Vertov, passing through the *cinéma-vérité* introduced by Jean Rouch, to the more reflective and performative manifestations by contemporary authors such as Ben Russell. As we follow this historical alignment, some trends tend to become more evident: for example, in *cinéma-vérité*, "the issue is not exactly to evoke staging and reenactment procedures with the aim of providing a documentary representation of reality [as in Flaherty], but to reflexively integrate into the film the provocative [and participative] dimension of cinema" (p. 113). And in Ben Russell there is an "exercise of subjective or reflexive ethnography" which requires us "to reposition ourselves not only in relation to the world but also to the image or *mise-en-scène* itself" (p. 125).

At the same time, there is also a projection towards the "other", the kind of intersubjective communion that Jean Rouch described as "shared anthropology", which is about "discovering a common and transversal ambition in the way the world is experienced, which is shared by all cultures" (p. 127). As noted by Duarte: "Rouch combines two approaches or methods in order to simultaneously guard against the trap of reproducing the colonial point of view and falling into a strictly observational perspective, supposedly legitimizing the use of cinema as a scientific tool for authenticating recorded reality" (p. 122).

From this comprehensive movement of convergence between subjectivity and objectivity, between activity and passivity, between the self and the other, Duarte concludes that "the authentication of the pre-filmic material, which is the foundation of documentary, takes place not only observationally but also experimentally and performatively: what is captured is not only the real but also the event of its perception" (p. 120). Aesthetic authenticity depends

on this readmission of subjectivity, performance and artifice: “The idea is that one must go through a moment of artifice in order to reach (similar to what happens in the possession ritual) another truth in cinema” (p. 117).

The aesthetic regime of cinema is characterized by this ambiguity or by this collapse of the dualities that classically separated the object from the subject and the contingent from the artificial. But the phenomenology of aesthetic authenticity goes beyond, preceding the material and cultural conditions of the aesthetic regime (associated, in the case of cinema, mostly with the post-World War II period). In all the historical stages of cinema, argues Duarte, there is always an “ever-changing agreement between reality, technical automatism(s), conventions of the image, and the poetic and expressive gestures that intersect with it, without the possibility of anticipating the form that reality will take or reveal from this encounter” (p.103).

Peter Freund points out that realism in cinema always implies a double facet that at the same time confirms and, in a way, debunks the realist project itself. In his words: “The ‘suspension of disbelief’ shows that, in a compromise formation, one takes the image at the same time as a reality and as a substitute for reality. As such, realism seems to have it both ways” (pp. 142-143). To speak of double sidedness in these terms can be misleading. Ultimately, it is not a question of opting for one or the other side, but of considering them in their absolute superimposition, beyond the “choice between seeming and being, between mediation and the unmediated, between the subjective and the objective” (p. 143). This overlap extends to the duality between the material (or mechanical) dimension of cinema and its content or diegetic dimension: cinema “presents us with fictional and documentary scenes and simultaneously a projection of recorded light (...): diegetic and mechanical time. We obviously know better but, on a good day, we instrumentalize the mechanical and get sucked into the story. In fact, (...) the experience of art offers nothing singular without the sucker” (p. 143). This sucker is not necessarily naive, on the contrary. According to Peter Freund, the experience of aesthetic authenticity before the cinematographic

image demands both sides simultaneously – for example “the aspects of content and empty instrument” (p. 144) –, superimposed on the same surface, like a Moebius band. The passage from one face to the other is imperceptible, without any inversion of the surface, and it is precisely in this flip that Freund locates the core of realism, which also corresponds to a moment of estrangement. In his words: “Realism at its conceptual core turns out to be a single continuous non-orientable surface. When it unexpectedly flips from veil to void, in an instant of utter contingency, the surface does so without registering any inversion. One suddenly finds oneself inexplicably on the other side. The shock of this illogical flip interjects the moment of the uncanny. (...) Realism realizes itself in this confounding instant” (pp. 144-145). This estrangement, although fleeting, can be sustained in art through a “structural distance” that relates with emblematic concepts such as the *alienation effect* (Brecht) or the *aura* (Benjamin). It is a distance that is at the same time proximity, or, as Freund calls it, an “unmediation”, not to be confused with immediacy or non-mediation. Above all, in these terms, realism escapes naivety: “What is in question is not simply the pure ‘self-presence’ of spatio-temporal experience. (...) What is at stake is the palpable and productive function of realism” (p. 142). Understood as such, realism establishes a paradoxical relationship with authenticity: “Precisely by promising special access to reality, realism is capable of producing a glimpse of the authentic but only, paradoxically, by means of the failure of its promise” (p. 147). This failure does not correspond to an insufficiency of realism or realistic cinema, but, on the contrary, it refers to the profound ontology of cinematographic images, of images in general, and their relationship with absence. Freund speaks of a hole within the image, or the “experience of the image as hole” (p. 148). The image, as such, is always fundamentally differed from itself, or from what it shows. It is the case of the photographic act (and its context) that immediately falls behind the crystallized image that persists in time. An escape or vertigo from the context. This would be precisely the ultimate focus of realism in art, especially since modernity. In Freund’s words: “The first lesson we have to learn from contemporary art is that every image is already

appropriated. That is, the image is intrinsically taken out of context. (...) Context is nothing more than the name for the structural hole in the image” (p. 139). And he continues: “The art of appropriation is best precisely where it fails to recontextualize. The past does not need to be reinterpreted” (p. 139).

Perhaps, after all, what is at stake in the realism of art is a kind of convergence between poetic effort and its practical materiality, a cross between *poiesis* and *praxis*. In a sense, a “culinary”. Paula Rabinowitz asks herself: “what if the culinary is the aesthetic process that best captures not the ‘spiritual processes’, or not just the spiritual processes, but also the dynamic of material and labor?” (p. 152). Opposing Adorno’s standpoint, which “repeatedly differentiates the artwork and its achievements of thought, feeling and critique—its aesthetic—from what he refers to as its ‘practical appetitive behavior’” (p. 151), Rabinowitz considers, on the contrary, that culinary constitutes “the reigning metaphor” (p. 159) to describe the aesthetic dimension, not in the sense of advocating the downgrading of the artistic work and its purpose to mere craftsmanship or a prosaic activity, but of recognizing the highest elevation of art in its ability to penetrate the mundane.

From this theoretical standpoint, Rabinowitz focuses on the analysis of the Chantal Akerman’s 1975 film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles*, which was recently named the greatest film of all time, according to the *Sight and Sound* ranking. It is a film that, notes Rabinowitz, concentrates influences of the greatest names of world cinema, both its contemporaries and those who preceded it: “Michael Snow, Robert Bresson, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Agnes Varda, Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Hullet, Carl Dreyer, Jean-Luc Godard” (p. 161), but also Marcel Ophuls, Joseph Losey, Bernardo Bertolucci, Jean-Pierre Melville, Andrei Tarkovsky, among others. Throughout her chapter dedicated to the Akerman’s film, Rabinowitz points out various layers of this unique work: its autobiographical dimension (which reflects the director’s condition as a “woman, Jew, first generation daughter of Holocaust survivors, restless inhabitant of our postwar world” (p. 162); its political, feminist, metaphorical character, as “Akerman’s desire to show the mundane work of women in methodical detail subverts its oppressive repetitiveness; she makes

clear that the impossible act of keeping things the same is a form of resistance” (p. 166); but also the almost paradoxical overlap between the film’s formalist dimension (visible in the methodical and repetitive behavior of the characters, in the dialogues, in the framing) and the realism of the integral situations of everyday domestic life, which are shown in “real time”. As Rabinowitz says, using a culinary metaphor: “It’s like watching a pot of potatoes boil; when will it be done?” (p. 155). This was precisely Akerman’s intention: “I want to show time passing” (p. 157). Through its use of duration and repetition, the film acquires a disconcerting ambiguity, like a suspended dialectic, ambiguity being understood here in Benjamin’s sense: “Ambiguity is the manifest imaging of dialectic, the law of dialects at a standstill” (p. 169). The result is a “hyperrealist everyday” effect (p. 158), a portrait whose authenticity combines cinematographic formalism (essential to its ambiguity and its paradoxicality as a “moving image that refuses motion” (p. 165) with the concreteness of integral situations (which largely take place in the kitchen), in such a way that Rabinowitz confesses, with a certain humorous irony: “I learned how to make meatloaf from watching the film” (p. 155).

Another film that explores and subverts the dimensions of repetition and temporality is *Os Verdes Anos* (Paulo Rocha, 1963), an essential film of the so-called New Portuguese Cinema. The film narrates the love relationship between two young people who meet in Lisbon, a shoemaker’s apprentice and a maid. However, this background disperses as the film adopts a tone of narrative rarefaction. In the words of Maria Augusta Babo: “Routine is installed in the characters and in the temporality that is manufactured before the spectator’s eyes: routine weeks of work for the young nephew as a shoemaker’s apprentice; domestic affairs for the young maid. And, at certain intervals, the day off, Sunday” (p. 181). Babo points out that this particular way of treating time and repetition collides head-on with the classic principles of narrative construction: “The repetition of Sunday scenes takes the viewer to this routine where, apparently, that is, visually, ‘nothing happens’, to the point that it is possible to define the film as one where there is no story: an absence

or refusal of the narrative” (p. 181). There are several elements that, according to Babo, dictate the narrative subversion in *Os Verdes Anos*, allowing the film to be fully framed in the cinematographic modernity, heir to Italian neorealism and the French *nouvelle vague*: for example, the use of a homodiegetic narrator, or the way the key moments of the plot are silenced or devalued, in particular the *fait-divers* of the final plot sequence, which is left hanging, with no clear resolution or story morality.

But, above all, what cinematographic works like *Os Verdes Anos* seem to highlight is the mismatch between classic narrativity (based on the principle of causality) and the pure event (based on contingency). As Babo explains: “The principle of causality, like its symmetric one, the consequence, removes from the disruptive event, which is the core of the knot of intrigue, its character of pure contingency, in order to, in a certain way, explain it in the articulation of cause and effect” (p. 178). And she proceeds: “By linking the before and after through a logic of causality, the narrative ascribes reasons, consequences, and resolutions to events, thereby removing their pure contingency. The Latin aphoristic formulation *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* – “after this, then because of this” – sums up the narrative closure and its explanatory character” (p. 178).

In her chapter “*Os Verdes Anos*: cinema between the visible and the legible”, Babo reflects on the subversion of this narrative classicism and on how this subversion relates to the problem of aesthetic authenticity. This reflection is carried out in two stages: Babo begins by noting that “there is a game here, a fusion between the narrative and the descriptive, between the dramatic and the documentary, between story – temporality – and exposure – spatiality. The failure of the narrative plot is due to, and through the emergence and prevalence of the spatial over the temporal” (p. 185). This observation should not, however, be read as a simple overcoming of the temporal dimension by the spatial one, on the contrary. When temporality comes to the fore, when it becomes more direct, it tends in a sense to become its very opposite, that is, a perverted form of spatiality. It is precisely this extreme implication of temporality that leads to filmic approaches that are more situational and less dependent on the chain of events,

more descriptive and less narrative, more related to *mise-en-scène* and less to *mise-en-intrigue*, more related to time-image than to the movement-image (to refer here the Deleuzian main distinction of cinematographic images). It is also in these terms that we should read the “two regimes of production of meaning” (p. 186) referred by Babo, namely “the narrative as a regime of time and the image as a regime of space” (p. 186).

Be that as it may, it is in this “spatial regime” that the narrative stands back, giving primacy to the visible: “It would then be said that, although the narrative plot is still there as a background (it is the plot and not the décor which constitutes the filmic backdrop), the cinematographic perspective adopted is descriptive, close to the documentary image” (p.186). It is also in this visual regime that Babo fits the aesthetic authenticity acknowledged in the cinematographic shots of *Os Verdes Anos*: “Authenticity is in the frames themselves, in these landscapes whose mark impregnates the characters” (p. 186). And she adds: “The truth of this imaginary is therefore inscribed in the authenticity of its images” (p. 186).

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However – and this is the second key moment of Babo’s reflection – the regime of the “spatial” or the “visible” does not constitute a mere direct realism, it does not just dictate a simple or immediate relationship with images: “The regime of the visible is not absolutely transparent since it still refers to the regime of the legible” (p. 188). According to Babo, films like *Le Notti di Cabiria* (Frederico Fellini, 1957) or *Os Verdes Anos* not only transcend the “traditional narrative” but also transcend “‘realism’ itself in the strict sense” (p. 190). Relying on a distinction proposed by Deleuze, Babo states that, in neorealism, contrary to conventional realism, it is no longer about making the object autonomous, but about creating a kind of indiscernibility between the real and the fictional.

This implies the readmission of poetry within the visible, through the visible. That is, it leads us “to understand how the legible is veiled by the visible and how the legible emerges through the visible” (p. 188). It is, in short, about reading, “under the documental realism of the image, the poetics of its relationships of meaning. Poetics emerges from the deepest layers of the image, either where it meets

other imagery textualities, or where legibility becomes possible” (p. 191). Thus, we are once again faced with an *indirect realism*, a realism that makes its authenticity depend on a poetic dimension that keeps a distance from (or a tension with) the real. In Babo’s words: “The images gradually detach themselves from the captured real into a properly poetic plane, not due to any melodramatic trait, but due to the raw rigor from which the camera does not shy away” (p. 192).

The complicity between the visible and the legible – as complementary components of the poetic dimension – invites us to question other dichotomous pairs whose rigid borders also tend to blur. In the chapter “Genuine Poetics: expressive authenticity in film”, Sérgio Dias Branco analyzes some of these dichotomies recurrent in the aesthetic discussion, noting how they tend to privilege one or the other side of the respective dichotomous separation, ignoring the overall “double character of art”. Dichotomous pairs such as form/content, autonomy/heteronomy, timelessness/temporality, production/thought and entertainment/art tend, according to Branco, to perpetuate radicalized and unilateral ways of understanding artistic work and the aesthetic phenomenon. For example, valuing form over content can lead to radical aestheticism or formalism, i.e., reflects the “popular misconception [...] that aesthetics is equivalent to Formalism: an adherence to form at the expense of content” (Klevan quoted by Branco, p. 207). In a similar way, the proclamation of the absolute autonomy of art seems to ignore that the *artistic value* is not just *aesthetic value* (assuming here the strictest etymological sense of the term *Aisthesis*), but, as Branco refers, “artistic value includes cognitive, historical, moral, interpretative aspects” (p.205) which have “much to do with the context in which the work emerges” (p. 205). Other dichotomous separations suggest, for example, an appreciation of the universal or timeless character of the cinematographic work (ignoring the material and historical conditions of its emergence) or they value the act of production to the detriment of the act of reception, or they defend the purism of the *avant-garde* art (associated with engagement and critical positioning) against mere entertainment (associated with ludic

escapism), even though this engagement of the “serious” art, in turn, can also be associated (pejoratively) with the instrumentalization of art, as opposed to the disinterested or “purposeless” character of the “art for art’s sake” (*Ars Gratia Artis*).

Against the dysfunctional rigidity of these dichotomous oppositions, Branco points to a dialectical approach based on a greater permeability of the different spheres involved in art, in order to appease the theoretical extremes and reconcile them with each other, thus contributing to a more inclusive understanding of the “*integral whole* that is a cinematic work” (p. 207). “In his words: “In each case, leaning only to one side or only to the other is a reduction of the complexity of the artistic phenomenon. These dichotomies can be contrasted with a dialectical relationship. In concrete terms, art is always situated between the need to isolate itself from other dimensions of reality and the need to fully insert itself into it” (p. 206).

Through the analysis of three different films – *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953), *Harlan County USA* (Barbara Kopple, 1976) and *Valse Triste* (Bruce Conner, 1977) – Branco proposes that overcoming dichotomous thinking can favor the path to an understanding of aesthetic authenticity in cinema, an authenticity no longer enclosed on one side of any dichotomy – for example an “objective” authenticity – but rather an “expressive authenticity”, a term that Branco borrows from Denis Dutton to describe the cinema’ permeability to the most diverse spheres that take part in its complexity. Quoting Branco: “My analysis of the three films sought to overcome these dichotomies very precisely through their expressive authenticity, based on a kind of poetics that genuinely uses, deepens, and expands the potential effects and meanings of cinema. Each of the films is expressively authentic in its own way” (p. 207).

The close interplay between proximity and distance – between the passive gaze that is linked to presence and contingency and the active gaze that is linked to deferral, reflexivity or fiction – seems to be, in general, implied in aesthetic authenticity. Fernando José Pereira uses a Portuguese term to describe this merge: “In

Portuguese, there is a word to signify stopping, *paragem* [let's consider 'stoppage' so as to approach this word in English], which contains within its core a paradoxical condition: two verbs which antagonize each other: *parar* [to stop] and *agir* [to act]" (pp. 219-220).

The bivalence of this state, which consists of being "still and at the same time in absolute reflexive activity" (p. 220), is especially suitable for describing the way in which art operates with the temporal dimension, whether as a "contemplation" or as "temporal distance". On the one hand, it is necessary to give time to time, it is necessary to respect the full duration of the events, so that the spectator has the opportunity to contemplate: "art is made from the reflection that it potentiates in the spectator, a reflection which may only exist if the time required for it also exists" (p. 220). On the other hand, there is also the potency of extemporaneousness, a seduction of the events distanced in time, as well as the drive to rescue them – what Hal Foster called "archival impulse"; not in the sense of an organization of memory from the perspective of the present, but above all as a movement of "counter-memory", another concept used by Foster, which Pereira describes as "a direct relationship with the past and, however, distant from History's generic and globalizing tendency" (p. 218).

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Opposing both the tendency to gentrification of History (based on the hegemony of the present) and the tendency to "machinic instantaneity" characteristic of our time, Pereira speaks of "archives that resist the compression of contemporary temporalities that are interested only in instantaneity" (p. 222). It is, in effect, a resistance movement: "That cinema and art may embody a possibility of resistance is a very precious idea, albeit ambitious, that has to be put forward" (p. 221). This attitude of resistance on the part of the artist does not consist of a moral stand, remaining "outside from the bipolar condition of being moral or immoral, as it intends to be a-moral" (p. 213). What is at stake is, on the contrary, the construction of "anti-monuments" or objects of counter-memory that do not fit into the organizational structure of History. Such objects, according to Pereira, carry an aesthetic authenticity. In his words: "aesthetic authenticity appears as a kind of significant redoubt and resistance, absolutely a minority and yet decisive" (p. 222).

This authenticity, however, is not to be confused with the simple mechanical depiction of the real, on the contrary. In an apparently paradoxical way, the artist is more interested in “unrealizing”, in assuming the passage through fiction, for a deeper penetration into the real. Referring to his film *permafrost (barentsburg)* – a black and white portray of a Soviet-era mining town located in the Arctic, currently almost abandoned and devoted almost exclusively to tourism – Pereira describes his approach to the subject as follows: “de-realized to be more realistic: authenticity is present on the black and white images of the fiction, not on the thousands of true bright color images made by tourists with their smartphones” (p. 219).

From an anthropological point of view – that is, in a wider context of epistemological and ontological questioning of the human dimension – we can further question the role of cinema, as an art form, in the faithful representation of cultural and social reality. More specifically, the challenge of objectively (or authentically) representing ourselves and others through cinema is imposed. In this context, as noted by the anthropologist Humberto Martins, the game between truth and falsehood (in the straightest sense of these words), essentially takes place in two opposite ways: “with a lie I can tell truths and with truths I can tell lies” (p. 242).

On the one hand, we intend to tell the truth through lies. Beyond the mere “indexicality of the technologically registered image” (p. 225), filmmakers manipulate images and sounds in order to bring out the truthiness of audiovisual contents. H. Martins gives the example of the opening scene in his film *Making Time* (2003), in which he documented Tourém, a rural location in Portugal. In his words: “In post-production, (...) I added a cleaner and clearer sound of the bell ringing, which had been recorded at another time. For what and why? To lie? To deceive? No. Indeed, it is a sound that was heard (I think it still is) every hour; a sound that echoed throughout the village. The local time signal. That artificial amplification in relation to that concrete image register was aimed precisely at giving the spectator a more credible access to the soundscape of the village” (p. 226). This example intends to show how the audiovisual refinement effort (which is often considered a veiled form of

inauthenticity), can contribute to greater authenticity by disguising the very inauthenticity of the film construction processes and its technical limitations, including in documentaries and ethnographic films. As summarized by H. Martins: “the inauthentic allows forms of knowing the authentic as it hides various inauthenticities” (p. 226).

On the other hand, we also lie through the truth: “Telling the truth, we lie about substantive aspects of a certain observed reality, because the selection of what is shown or what is told conditions the reading or integral vision of it (...). How many films have we seen that, with the pretense of extreme realism, deceive us or do not let us see other parallel or coexisting truths? A film always provides us with a (...) view determined not only by the author’s more or less assumed options, but also by the scopic regime in which we are inserted, this communicational-cultural ecosystem where we exist as people” (pp. 226-227).

Anthropological questioning is, above all, faced with the challenge of faithfully representing the “Other”, an epistemological challenge that becomes even trickier as we realize that even the very authenticity of the “Self” cannot be rigorously determined, first of all because it too is constructed through otherness, that is, under the primacy of intersubjectivity. As H. Martins says: “We are never alone” (p. 230). Therefore, the question arises of “how to (re)conciliate the search for difference and the cultural specificity of societies, groups and individuals with a necessary process of understanding this alterity, which always implies a process of translation or re-presentation of the Other” (p. 225).

Perhaps the solution comprises the refusal of “radical ethnocentrism” and the assimilation of “cultural relativism” within the filmmakers’ own methodologies, thus enabling renewed paths of sincerity and authenticity, as in the emblematic case of the so-called “shared anthropology” by Jean Rouch, who, instead of pursuing an “instrumental authenticity that serves political and social purposes that legitimize certain truths” (p. 231), seeks, on the contrary, to achieve “a realism resulting from a new authenticity, provoked by the presence of a camera that acts as a catalyst for new actions and reactions by those with whom the director/anthropologist interacts” (p. 238).

Such “methodological sincerity” transcends the strict domain of documentary realism, also passing through the acceptance of performance and fiction, “understood in its original etymological sense, precisely, as an invention or creation and not a falsehood” (p. 229). H. Martins mentions, for example, the “*Essay-Cinema* of Agn s Varda or Trinh T. Minh-ha, although their creative and transformative solutions may be considered anti-realist from a formal and narrative point of view” (p. 242). And the same can be said of the most diverse movements and trends in the history of cinema, “from Italian *Neo-Realism* (by Vittorio de Sica, for example) to the more recent *British Social Realism* (by Mike Leigh, for instance), passing through the intensely raw recordings of the cinematography of Portuguese director Pedro Costa” (p. 241). Referring to these examples, H. Martins points out that “they are not proposals that fit, for example, in ethnographic film, but they are always present in lectures and in visual anthropology courses” (p. 241).

Aesthetic authenticity is also measured by the awareness that cinema acquires and expresses about its own spatial and temporal context – material, historical, ethical –, as well as by its self-awareness as a social instrument that influences the regimes of visibility. In these terms, cinema claims authenticity through its ethical seriousness (for example, through the choice of relevant social themes), and also through the self-denunciation of the audiovisual device (for example, as a mean for propaganda, surveillance, virtualization, etc.). These two dimensions have a certain “documentarist” character, given their proximity to material and socio-cultural reality, but their purpose is not merely epistemological, becoming aesthetic from the moment we position ourselves in the domain of art. It is not a question, for instance, of recording images and sounds for cartographic or statistical purposes, but of proposing an (artistic) metadiscourse aware of the potential of the audiovisual medium for statistical and cartographic uses. In this form of metadiscursivity, the audiovisual work simultaneously points to its own materiality, its historical circumstance and its comprehensive role in shaping the regimes of the visible, in a kind of triple relevance. However, in the field of

art, as we were saying, this relevance or commitment to the real transcends the epistemological scope and aspires to the aesthetic, to a properly aesthetic authenticity. In short, in this perspective, the epistemological and aesthetic planes, although not confused with each other, remain aligned in a kind of mutual resonance, and this complicity constitutes yet another form of aesthetic authenticity. To a certain extent, it is what Christa Blümlinger refers to as a “dual ambition [that]allows us to identify in certain films both a documentary dimension and the effects of figuration producing gestures that are properly filmic” (p. 248).

Let’s consider, for example, the complexity of a gesture or the collective behavior of a crowd (examples that Blümlinger discusses in her chapter). How are these manifestations of human behavior portrayed by the cinematic machine over time? On the other hand, how does the audiovisual medium itself dictate or influence the gestures or behavior of the masses in each historical moment, from silent cinema to the so-called post-cinema in the digital age? It is a bidirectional process, a reciprocal interference. On the one hand, as Blümlinger reminds us, “as a leading visual medium and as art, film has accompanied the transformation of social experience throughout the 20th century” (p. 250). On the other hand, continues Blümlinger, based on the thesis of G. Simondon, “the human sensorium has always been connected to technical extensions” (p. 246), which means that the evolution of the “techniques of visibility”, which has been largely dictated by the evolution of cinema, profoundly influences experience itself (sensory, social or otherwise). Since its inception, cinema has been, in fact, one of the main influencing agents of the modes of visibility, and its technological evolution interferes in the articulation of concepts such as “body, gesture, machine and image” (p. 248).

The influence of the audiovisual on the modes of human visibility perhaps became even more evident in the current digital or “post-optical” era, characterized by the “convergence of information technologies (computer, audiovisual, telecommunications)” (p. 249), where the production of images “does no longer require a physical lens” (p. 252). In this civilizational and technological context, it is once again up to art – and audiovisual art in particular – to

reflect on the impact of the audiovisual itself on the ways of being and seeing (and seeing oneself) in contemporary societies. Such metadiscursive works – which use the audiovisual to reflect on the very audiovisual dimension, as well as its impact on human self-reflexivity – are described by Blümlinger as “devices for the visualization, indeed the visibility, of the human body in the Foucauldian sense of the term: the point here is not so much to show things seen with the eye, but the system of thought that makes things visible.” (pp. 258-259).

Focusing on the analysis of works by contemporary artists such as Manu Luksch, Clemens von Wedemeyer and Julien Prévieux, Blümlinger reflects on the ways in which art can contribute to “an archeology of the techniques of visibility” (p. 256) from a “dimension that is both epistemological and aesthetic” (p. 262). For the artists here referred by Blümlinger, it is important to denounce the “film-machine [as a] matrix that brings out certain uses of the moving image as an instrument of psychosocial control of the human body” (p. 253). And, through this denouncement, cinema (in all its historical scope, from pre-cinema to post-cinema) ends up being reappropriated and acknowledged as a “kind of technique of techniques” (p. 264) of visibility.

All the chapters in this book resulted from an invitation addressed to international researchers in the fields of film studies, aesthetics and anthropology, who were challenged to take part in a comprehensive discussion on the notion of aesthetic authenticity applied to cinema. The resulting contributions, as expected, are eclectic, but at the same time quite consensual in their lines of research, as well as in the pointed conclusions.

Through the set of original texts gathered in this book, the aim is to highlight and measure the weight that the notion of aesthetic authenticity continues to have in the realm of cinema and in the arts in general, influencing the poetic orientations involved in artistic creation, as well as the demands of the audiences, critics, programmers, and other decision-makers concerned with the aesthetic value of cinema.

As the editor of this publication, I would like to thank all the authors for having accepted the invitation and for their important contributions, which are especially relevant at this historical moment in which the notion of authenticity – and not just aesthetic authenticity – seems more compromised than ever.

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Filipe Martins (July 2023)