Rites of Realism
For Mark Cohen
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Acknowledgments

Along the way in this anthology many deserve thanks.

Mark Cohen, my closest reader, asked the right questions, pointed out the missing links, and made me sure of the project’s worth. His love, warmth, and support are, as always, essential. Talks with Noa Steimatsky often got me closer to my own interests, even when the grand ambitions of a topic such as realism and cinema threatened to scatter the more pointed focus of this anthology. Catherine Russell’s readings of the introduction and the essay on reenactment helped me enormously, with a last push to finish. Tim Corrigan was, as usual, a sharp reader, and his comments were especially helpful in shaping the book’s introduction. My thanks also to Michael Gitlin, who was incredibly helpful in the preparation of illustrations for the book.

I would like to thank Elaine Charnov, David James, David Desser, Bill Nichols, Steve Fagin, Tom Gunning, Paul Arthur, and Richard Porton, who suggested contributors for this anthology’s many shifting guises. I am also thankful for Ella Shohat’s friendship and advice over so many years. She has made me feel at home in New York.

Richard Peña at the Film Society of Lincoln Center facilitated my con-
tact with Abbas Kiarostami, and Godfrey Cheshire generously lent me his Kiarostami videos.

A grant from Hunter College (Shuster Award) paid for foreign copyright fees, translations, and stills. My thanks to Ana Lo Biondo at Hunter College for her help. Grants from the Research foundation of the City University of New York in 1999 and 2000 were invaluable in my research on reenactment films. In tracking films and related materials, I was aided at the UCLA Archive by Maria Rosa de Castro; at the Library of Congress by David Parker, Acting Head of the Curatorial Section; at the Pacific Film Archives by Kathy Geritz and Steve Seid; in Paris at the Centre National de Cinematographie Film Archives by M. Eric Leroy and Mme. Michelle Aubert; and at the Cinématèque Française by Mme. Danielle Kenzey.

My thanks also to Bernardo Carvalho, Joe McElhaney, Elaine Charnov, Bruni Burrest, and Jean-Paul Colleyn, who led me to wonderful examples of reenactment films. Candice Johnson, my assistant, helped with copyright and permission procedures. Thanks to Sudhir Mahadevan for his wonderful index.

Last, I want to acknowledge Ken Wissoker, my editor at Duke University Press, for his initial excitement about the project and support and friendship over the course of its various changes. The readers for the press gave expert advice on how to make my arguments more cogent, and I felt truly encouraged by their support. At the press, Leigh Ann Couch in the early stages and Fiona Morgan in the later stages of the book’s production made me feel the work was worth it.
Under the general rubric of realism, *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* subscribes to the epistemological promise of referential images: that what we see refers to an existing reality and we can thus “know” a certain landscape, a suburb, a room, or a farming method. This anthology articulates, however, a more pointed intervention in the discourse on realism and film. The essays focus on issues that had become taboo in the 1970s theoretical equation of realism and essentialism. How can one recall an event’s concrete peculiarity or reproduce its original urgency through a medium that so clearly defers? One way to invite such hard questions is to represent those events that most stubbornly resist the notion of duplication because of their close association with the carnality of the body and decay, to represent realities such as possession ritual, animal sacrifice, torture, or physical disability.\(^1\) How is one to grant a corporeal weight to faces, places, and events through a medium that can imply but lacks depth? Where the body appears as theater, as third dimensional, it highlights cinema’s constitutive hybridity.\(^2\)

The title word *rites* is meant to invoke the ritual connotation of representations that have actual effects on reality and in particular the reality of
profilmic bodies. When in Sons (1996) Zhang Yuan directs an actual Beijing family to reenact the last ten days before the sons commit their alcoholic father to a mental asylum, this restaging, two years after the fact, poses a number of questions having to do with the significance of retracing an original event in film. What is the status and purpose of this second time around? When Kazuo Hara follows his ex-wife, a feminist militant, in Extreme Private Eros: Love Song, 1974 (1974), what exactly do we witness? How does the film performance of her private life differ from her public, politicized provocations in real life?

The essays in the book discuss makers who have, either in their subject choice or approach, engaged with the problem of originals. Literal representation may be, for instance, at the service of a faithful retracing of documents, places, and biographical events. And yet literal reenactment is shown to have little to do with accessing an original, pure past, working instead as an example offered to the audience with the aim of public betterment. The importance of these retracings lies in their present, performative efficacy. They may be forms of psychodrama, provoked instances of acting out that produce a catharsis of a personal (Sons) or a historical nature (in Hara Kazuo’s The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On, 1987); they may create a mutual contamination between a displaced text and its contemporary setting (in Pasolini’s The Gospel according to St. Matthew, 1964); or they may mimic a host of discourses on a people ironically commenting on ethnography and its pseudo-objectivity (in Buñuel’s Land without Bread, 1932). In each case, the film’s reference to a preexisting event or text produces a form of provocative mimesis.

In an attempt to delineate a problematic of cinematic realism that bypasses questions of verisimilitude, this anthology is inspired by, and pays tribute to, André Bazin’s thoughts on the dilemmas of performance (the once-only profilmic event) and filmic reproducibility.

Bazin was always wary of the ways in which conventions dull realism, and his choice of the terms reality and the real have a strategic rather than a descriptive function. He says: “the cinema has come a long way since the heroic days when crowds were satisfied with the rough rendition of a branch quivering in the wind!” Or, commenting on Farrebique’s impact, he asks why Rouquier has offended so many. “He has understood that verisimilitude has slowly taken the place of truth, that reality had slowly dissolved into realism. So he painfully undertook to rediscover reality.”

Bazin’s own “rediscovery of reality” involves instead a heightened sense
of the eclectic materiality of film. Images that bear the marks of two heterogeneous realities, the filmmaking process and the filmed event, perfectly illuminate his search for visceral signifiers for the real. And the registered clash of different material orders best defines for him, in turn, that which is specifically cinematic. In *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), the bridge, which “really spans the River Kwai,” could not survive the film: “the absurdity either had to be in the film or it had, finally, to be the film *itself.*”\(^5\) In *Kontiki* (1950), it is the missing and not the existing footage—“the negative imprints of the expedition”—that best represents the danger faced by the explorers.\(^6\) It is the ellipsis in the last episode of *Païsa* (1946) that best tells us about the terror of being at war in one place instead of another. As Philip Rosen points out in his essay in this volume, such “markers of indexicality” attest to Bazin’s continuous interest in contingency as the principal measure of the humanity (and reality) of cinema.

Bazin’s images for the incidental and the contingent have usually served to exemplify the achievement of a surface realism through the putative inclusion of the marginal, nondramatic element. His description of the episode in *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) is exemplary: “in the middle of the chase the little boy suddenly needs to piss. So he does.”\(^7\) Siegfried Kracauer, another reputed defender of a realist ontology for cinema, finds similar examples for an inverted relation between those images that further the story and those that can do so precisely because they “retain a degree of independence of the intrigue and thus succeed in summoning a physical existence.”\(^8\) Within a different critical agenda, Roland Barthes has characterized literary references to objects that have no discernible narrative function except to give a material, worldly weight to the description as “reality effects.”\(^9\) While Bazin and Kracauer seem to note and celebrate these little escapes from narrative determinism, Barthes’s functional analyses actually cast a shadow over those descriptive images that seem to be there merely to confirm an overall effect of naturalness. These formulations imply the potential co-optation of such irrelevant details for a realistic notation. But they may also define a critical impasse both in literature (with descriptions) and in cinema

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1. The actual bridge explosion in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, David Lean, 1957 (frame enlargement of video)
(with the contingent events): the category of verisimilitude is inadequate to define what modern realist films do beyond differing from classical realist representations.

Bazin’s impatience with verisimilitude can suggest ways for theoretical speculation to account more adequately for modern realist films. His dismissal of verisimilitude is made clear in his frequent comments on the felicity of (mis)cast actors or the irrelevance of likeness for reenactment’s moral projects.10 He delves instead into the problematic of profilmic performances, taking special interest in production and reception contingencies. It is this interest that overlaps in an illuminating manner with materialist analyses of filmic images.

At the end of his reading of Jean Renoir’s La Marseillaise, Bazin states: “An admirable touch, as he reviews the troops in the Tuilleries, Louis the XVI is hindered by the fact that his wig is askew.” Bazin adds a physical embarrassment to Louis’s social predicament, and this material detail disturbs at once two forms of spectacle: Louis’s and Pierre Renoir’s royal attire and film costume. Bazin’s admirable touch has to do with the seeming casualness with which he juxtaposes fictions, defining each through their shared physicality. In Jean-Louis Comolli’s analysis of the same film, historical determinism uncovers the shakiness of appearances and lays bare the naked king: “The wig . . . is this part which first detaches itself from the disintegrating royal body. Never has this body stopped falling apart as it was constructed before our eyes . . . something undecidable floats around him [Pierre Renoir], a blur in the image, duplication: there is a ghost in this body. At any rate there is some historical knowledge, some referent constituting a screen for the image and preventing the actor and mise-en-scène from playing on self-evidence.”

Comolli’s critical narrative is one of many materialist readings of film indebted to Bazin’s insights into profilmic contingency.13 His comments on the difficult referentiality of historical film indicate, however, where Bazin’s thoughts about incidents of production and performance most productively lead—toward an understanding of the complex layering of referential modes.

What interests Bazin are precisely the rough edges of representation, the moment of encounter and productive maladjustment between representation and the actuality of filmmaking. The social and cultural resonances of this mis-fit are never lost in his criticism, and in the essays that follow one finds a similar attentiveness to the density of profilmic reality.
This anthology addresses referential genres and topics particularly prone to bodily discomfort. Historical film, but also portraiture, adaptation, and reenactment, create representations beset by competition with prior images (from portraits to filmic roles) and descriptive regimens (biographies, histories, and ethnographies) that vie to adequately represent a given reality. Because they refer to existing titles, events, and people, such films can eventually claim that they provide viable references for a critical understanding of one’s culture and society. At the same time, since they are often perceived as parasitic of original sources, they also have an interesting aesthetic potential to betray a totalized or idealized version of reality.

Just as this anthology does away with verisimilitude as a working category appropriate to considering modern realist film, it also distances itself from the generalized indictment of realist aesthetics as a form of deception. The bodies brilliantly uncovered in Comolli’s historical-materialist undressing are no longer “too much” or an excess worthy of ideological alarm. This excess is the question that moves several of the essays to rethink, not to condemn, realism.

The essays in this book look at films that make apparent use of straightforward recording, only to magnify how distant realism can be from a mere reproduction of appearances. The filming of possession rituals in Maya Deren’s trance films and the infamous shot of the goat falling in *Las Hurdes* (*Land without Bread*) raise the prospect that what seems like a transparent record is not always a naive or deceptive form of representation. Even more forcefully than a reflexive comment on film language, a fully visible framing of reality may pose difficult questions about the relations between the clarity of vision and that of meaning.

This volume is divided into three parts: “Bazinian Contingencies,” “Cultural Indices,” and “Retracings.” The essays resonate across sections, and their joint attention to the contingencies of reality and the film image will hopefully flesh out the changeable nature of realism and provide categories in which to consider new emerging representational aesthetics.

Bazinian Contingencies

For Bazin, nothing better illustrates the radical breach between the transience of existence and mechanical reproduction, which transcends it so obliviously, than a never to be repeated spectacle in flesh and blood.14 *Rites of Realism* opens with one such image from Pierre Braubenger’s documen-
tary *The Bullfight* (*La Course de Taureaux*, 1949) and André Bazin’s plaintive comment: “I cannot repeat a single moment of my life, but any one of those moments cinema may repeat indefinitely before me. . . . on the screen the toreador dies every afternoon.”

Mournful references to the unique moment are often cast as a theoretical throwback to an era before the structural-semiotic divide. Stephen Heath’s text “Film Performance” is one example of the ways in which 1970s theoretical discourse talked about “performance.” This discourse showed an obtuseness toward what was in front of the camera. Heath deploys Bazin’s insight that cinema’s fundamental obscenity is never as vivid as in its unique ability to reanimate dead bodies, that its remorse (in Bazin’s pun re-mords / re-mort) lies in projecting on-screen the singular moment of a change to inert matter again and again. But Heath only falsifies the thrust of Bazin’s sensibility to the singularity of the recorded event. He opts for quite a different image of death to talk about the cinema, one that is from the start imbricated with capitalist commodification, an image that associates document, sensationalism, and profit. He rehearses Apollinaire’s snuff film parable *Un beau film*. The narrator of “A Good Film,” recounts how, after founding the International Cinematographic Company (*cic*), the producers procured “films of great interest.” The *cic* had a “well-rounded program,” but one subject was missing, the record of a crime. . . . giving up the possibility of licitly coming upon the spectacle of a crime, the producers decided to organize one.” “It is not by chance,” notes Heath, “that Apollinaire’s fascination with the new medium is immediately, in 1907 the story of a murder, the relation of cinema and crime.” For the “crime of the good film is the film itself, its time and its performance . . . made of a series of stops in time, the timed stops of the discrete frames.” Film depends, for its reconstitution of a moving reality, on “the *artifice* of its continuity and coherence.”

I paraphrase Heath’s version of the inherent guilt of the “good film,” frequently equated with classical Hollywood cinema (and in a further semantic/ideological slippage with realism *tout court*), in order to draw attention to a different crime scene. For in fact Heath has diverted us from the crime we are supposed to be seeing, from the murder actually perpetrated in front of the camera in this snuff film, to the presumed masked area of aesthetic production (editing) and reception. In this haste to indict a suspect ideology, we may have been inadvertently sidetracked.

The repudiation of realist cinema as a worthy object of analysis repre-
sented, in 1970s theoretical writing, an unquestioned allegiance to a po-
litical modernist agenda. As David Rodowick suggests in his analysis of
the political modernist discourse, the dominant opposition at work here
is that of realism versus modernism. This discourse polarized classical and
countercinema practices, constantly pitching Hollywood cinema’s decep-
tiveness and illusionism against an avant-garde cinema whose task was the
promotion of the critical awareness of the materiality of the medium.  

This polarity has framed realist cinema as needing demystification rather
than explanation.

Ideological accounts of the camera have obscured important historical
distinctions in ways of perceiving reality. Their explanatory power has been
pervasive enough to create, in Jonathan Crary’s words, “a confusing bifur-
cated model of vision in the nineteenth century.” “On the one level,” he
says “there is a relatively small number of advanced artists who generated a
radically new kind of seeing and signification, while on a more quotidian
level vision remains embedded within the same general ‘realist’ strictures
that had organized it since the fifteenth century.”

At least in part, the impetus for the detailed historicization of media and
reception has been a reaction to the technological determinism of appara-
tus theories. In Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Rep-
resentation, Modernity, James Lastra carefully dismantles the ahistorical claim
that the camera’s production of spatially coherent images (from the Renais-
sance’s camera obscura to cinema) produces a transcendental subject and
that the re-creation of the movement of objective reality could have the
same effect “by each and every use of the cinema.”

Lastra, Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen, Vanessa Schwartz, and Ben
Singer, among others, have shown how broadly conceived historical ana-
lyses can clear up well-worn cliches on cinematic practice and reception.
Most significant studies that align cinema with other popular media and
forms of entertainment from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have
allowed a number of important questions to frame anew the issue of real-
ism. What is cinema’s response to the search for sensations apparent in turn
of the century forms of spectacle such as the cabaret, the morgue visit, the
wax museum, and the panorama? How is the spectator’s body redefined
by cinematic shock, and how does the reception of cinema compare with
other physical and sensorial thrills of modern life? Such considerations have
opened up the debate on realism to include other models not necessarily
associated with film’s lifelike qualities.

BODIES TOO MUCH