

Theorizing film realism empirically

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Abstract

In this article I argue that theories of fictional film realism are epistemologically and methodologically flawed because they reason in the abstract about empirically investigable phenomena, particularly spectatorship. Through the investigation of so-called realist, commercial Tamil film, the article explores what a theory of realism would look like if approached through work with viewers, filmmakers and film form.

Keywords

realism
film theory
spectatorship
Tamil cinema
anthropology of the media

Realism has been a long-standing topic of discussion in the literature of film theory. To my mind, however, theorizing realism has largely suffered from some crucial problems: its narrow focus on cinema from Europe and the United States; its overly textual analysis; its neglect of actual audiences; and its reliance on deduction from unreflected-upon premises about the audience. Part of the trouble, as I discuss in Part I below, is that the analysis of realism has taken film cultures highly familiar to the analyst, and thus the above problems do not seem to be issues. They become glaring, however, when one comes up against other cinemas whose conventions and aesthetics differ from one's own filmic common sense, as I found while trying to understand the commercial cinema of Tamil Nadu, India. The initial impulse, by both audiences and theoreticians socialized to cinema from Europe and the United States, as I am, is to typify such films as *not* realistic, as escapist and fantastical. But what happens when films which would *not* be typified as realist by a Western sensibility like mine *are* so typified by their Tamil audiences and producers? Are existing film theories of realism adequate to account for such films and their reception? And if we find that, indeed, they are not, how might we theorize realism differently? I address the issue from two sides: first, from inside film theory itself, and second, in Part II, through empirical work with film viewers and producers of a so-typified realist, Tamil commercial film. I conclude with remarks on what an empirically motivated theory of realism would add to understanding realism.

Part I. Critique of theories of film realism

Below I show that major accounts of film realism are (1) based on a theory of the spectator that is grounded in, and often deduced from, a borrowed transcendental framework even while (2) such accounts are based on empirically investigable claims about actual viewers *qua* spectators.¹ This is true whether such accounts have theorized realism as: (1) representing reality via the indexicality of film to a unconstructed spectator (Bazin

1 The reluctance to confront actual viewers in theorizing realism has been lamented by some (Prince 1996a; Williams 1980). However, it has not resulted in any fundamental changes in how realism is theorized in the literature at large. And while there are some exceptions (Abercrombie et al. 1992; Gledhill 1992; Liechty 2003; Staiger 1992; R. Williams [1977]1991) none of these approaches has, to my mind, successfully formulated how to theorize realism empirically.

2 While by and large Kracauer reasons this point as following from film's essence, he briefly discusses actual viewers' discourse from Wilhem's dissertation (Kracauer 1960: 168–69).

2004a, 2004b; Kracauer 1960; also Margulies 2003; Walton 1984); (2) an effect of the cinematic apparatus in constructing the spectator (Baudry [1970]1986, [1975]1986; Comolli [1971]1986; MacCabe 1985; Metz 1986; Mulvey 1975); (3) a result of universal psychological motivations (Allen 1995; Baudry [1975]1986; Bazin 2004a: 10; Kracauer 1960; Metz 1986; Mulvey 1975) or (4) an iconism of the spectator's cognitive experience of reality and image (Carroll 1996: Chapter 5, 15; Currie 1996; Prince 1996a). For all these theories, the general form of argumentation is deduction from a set of premises, more often than not, taken as self-evidently true. However, as with any deductive argument, the conclusions only hold to the extent that the premises hold. The problem arises when such premises and conclusions are empirically investigable and yet such potential data are ignored.

Bazin and Kracauer. Bazin takes the metaphysical humanist stance that the individual is unconstructed and free to act in the world and create meaning (2004a: 14, 97). Thus, realist techniques like depth-of-focus, the long-take and 'invisible editing' are normatively valued because they allow freedom and individuality to be actualized by the spectator against the alienating forces of modernity (Bazin 2004b: 64, 99). Similarly for Kracauer (1960: 296), realist film – as a way to allow man to 'experience of things in their concreteness', which mass society disallows – is ultimately a route to actualizing man's freedom from anomie, alienation and loneliness. Here humanism and phenomenology as transcendental frameworks provide a set of axioms to deduce the *value* of realism, and thus shape its investigation (e.g. in terms of *formal* characteristics that emancipate the spectator).

For Bazin and Kracauer, the normative injunction that a film should increase the reality on the screen follows from the indexical quality of film. This is founded upon a set of empirically investigable claims about spectators.² Bazin's (2004a: 10) theorization of the spectator based on man's trans-historic desire to arrest time and death through realist representation that is fulfilled by film, as well as Kracauer's (1960: 159) spectator 'shocked' but redeemed by the realist filmic image, is based on the proposition that filmic images inspire awe not by resemblance but through their indexical nature. Yet, this only holds to the extent that spectators know that filmic images are produced through the causal mechanisms inherent in image capture and development (Paech 1989; Rosen 2003). This, in turn, assumes the socialization of audiences to this fact, indicating that such knowledge is not pre-given but contingent, and thus not guaranteed *a priori* by the intrinsic properties of the filmmaking process. Ultimately realism must be defined with respect to *actual* spectators' prior knowledge and expectations and not deducible from some transcendental framework (cf. Carroll 1995).

Implicit in this position, then, is that spectators take filmic images as 'slices of reality' (Carroll 1988b: 94). Indeed, it is this assumption that justifies Bazin and Kracauer's realism. That is, 'our obsession for realism', 'our appetite for illusion' (Bazin 2004a: 12), the 'irrational power' of photography and film 'to bear away our faith' (Bazin 2004a: 14) mean that film 'induces a loss of awareness of the ["authentic"] reality itself, which

becomes identified in the mind of the spectator with its cinematographic representation' (Bazin 2004b: 27). This is the fear of the audience made passive through film, something which realism can help to combat (Bazin 2004a: 112–13). The normative injunction, then, reveals itself: film should adhere to a 'true realism' (i.e. maximize the 'reality co-efficient'); film should allow spectators to actively create meaning through the reality on screen, to actualize their freedom, to lessen their alienation³ instead of creating atomized automata in the audience. This makes an additional assumption about spectators: they are active and free in making meaning in their film viewing all or most of the time, and that this behaviour is maximized in films that are realist.

Screen theory. So-called Screen theory, in critiquing 'classical' theory, argues via a theory of ideology (borrowed from Althusserian Marxism) and/or transcendent principles of the human psyche (borrowed from Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis) that the 'impression of reality' is based on the text's 'positioning' of the spectator as a kind of (philosophical) Subject (Baudry [1970]1986, [1975]1986; Comolli [1971]1986; Fargier [1969]1980; MacCabe 1985; see Allen 1995; Carroll 1988a, for discussion). Feminist scholarship of the 1970s launched similar arguments focused on the articulation of patriarchy in the classic realist text (Johnston [1970]1985; Mulvey 1975), thereby forging an alternative to both 'classical' theory and 'corrective' realism (Erens 1990; Hallam 2000; Mayne 1985). In such theories, a borrowed transcendental framework licenses a set of deductions about realism and spectatorship.

The assumptions and claims of such theory – that the spectator is passive, that viewers interpret and watch films as described by theorists, that viewers take realist images as such all or most of the time (Baudry [1970]1986: 287; Comolli [1971]1986: 434; MacCabe 1985: 35; Nowell-Smith 1977) – are all empirically investigable. However, such work does not do any work with actual spectators (minus the analysts *qua* spectators, of course). It is true that a late MacCabe seems to move towards the actual spectator by arguing that realism is a discursively constructed iconism between the dyads text–reader and reader–experience, and thus is mediated by the social conditions of production and reception (MacCabe 1985: 78). This nod to production and reception, however, does not substantively change his theorizing of realism epistemologically or methodologically. Rather it is a shift in political stance, following Lenin and Engels' belief that art can encourage critical thought only by taking audiences into account. Indeed, MacCabe's essay proceeds as it would have otherwise: *more text-analysis*. The audience is invoked in bad faith and only figures in his analysis nominally (see C. Williams 1980: 163, 1994).

It might be pointed out that for Screen theory the supposed theoretical question of interest is 'the spectator-in-the-text' or -in-the-apparatus (Browne 1986). However, such accounts are *not* satisfied with simply leaving the spectator there. As Elsaesser (1995: 13) has pointed out, they tend 'to conflate the textually constructed subject with "the spectator"', confusing analyst-intuited, text-internal models of viewing with actual events of viewing by individuals other than the analyst. A late Metz ([1987]1995) directly confronts this problem in his critique of Cassetti

3 Bazin's argument for this alleviation of alienation also turns on the assumption that spectators view realist images as similar to their own experience of reality (Bazin 2003: 30, 2004a: 35, 108). It is this iconism of image with extratextual reality that creates a familiarity for the spectator and thus acts to lessen his alienation from the world of dead objects that surround him, allowing him to identify with film (see Aitken 2006: 178–79). This fact is less relevant for Kracauer whose realism does not turn on any kind of iconism between film and reality.

4 As such, this paradigm suffers from a narrow focus on the (sub-)individual, largely focusing on low-level perceptual tasks (Hochenberg and Brooks 1996), reconstructable inference patterns and hypothesis making and testing (Bordwell 1996, 1989; Colin 1995; Holland 1992). See Aitken (2006: 221–23) for a similar criticism.

(1995). Metz ([1987]1995: 151–52) writes that ‘the two “real” poles, sender and receiver, are in themselves imaginary, and, . . . this ‘real’ is nothing but *the imagination of the analyst*’ (emphasis added). He continues: ‘Textual analysis, even when enunciative, remains textual analysis. If you want information about audience and filmmakers, you have to go and get them on the spot’ (Metz [1987]1995: 152–53). Yet all this is an elaborate way to argue that enunciation is not text-external but text-internal (and that Casetti is wrong). Thus, analysis is not forced outside of the text *but hermetically sealed within it*. For Metz, analysis produces ‘a *generic truth*’ that concerns ‘THE spectator’. ‘Anyone can find it within himself’ (and thus presumably it is also a fact of actual spectators out there in the world) (Metz [1987]1995: 157). There are, of course, ‘fluctuations’ from such truth and if you wanted to chart them, *only then* would you need to do empirical work with ‘real spectators’. Yet, how do we check that the ‘generic truth’ is in any way related to the normative centre from which we chart such ‘fluctuations’? (Note that ‘normative centre’ and ‘fluctuations’ are fundamentally sociological notions, though Metz presciently has access to them through introspection.) Should not the ‘fluctuations’ be the point of departure from which the normative centre is calculated? And once we have done so, why privilege the analyst’s singular view?

Allen’s ‘projective illusion’. Along similar lines to Screen theory, Allen (1995) has more recently used a psychoanalytic framework to explain spectators’ willing participation in the ‘projective illusion’ of reality in film. While Allen begins with the correct observation that neither text nor medium can guarantee an experience of reality for viewers, to answer this lack Allen turns to another universalist ‘just so’ story based on a set of deductions from first principles: our ability and desire to project the illusion of reality results from the separation from the mother that leads to wish fulfilment and thus iconic imagination and ‘projective illusion,’ which the cinema actualizes. Allen believes that he can argue from psychoanalytic first principles *to* the empirical audience, and thus he eschews any historical, cultural or contextual explanation. The empirical spectator becomes a virtual character in his argument, not to be actually investigated, but used as a theoretical foil against other equally empirically vacuous theories.

Cognitive science. A more current trend in film theory is the turn to cognitive science as a model for how to think about film and the spectator (Bordwell and Carroll 1996; Carroll 1988a, 1996; Currie 1996; Holland 1992; Prince 1996a). Rather than taking the spectator as inherently irrational and (passively) subject to his desires and the filmic apparatus that fulfils them, this works posits the Subject as rational, rule following, and problem solving. It focuses not on the universal properties of the medium, but on the universal properties of the individual spectator’s perceptual and cognitive apparatus (Carroll 1996: Chapter 15).⁴ Here realism is theorized as an iconism between images and (spectators’ experience of) reality, through isomorphy of image to ‘real-world displays’ (Prince 1996b: 31) (i.e. sensory experience) and symbolic processes used in reasoning about the world (i.e. schemata, scripts, rule-based inferences) (Prince 1996a). Spectators understand realist images in the same way that they ‘look at ordi-

nary objects in the world under normal conditions' (Currie 1996: 325; cf. Bazin 2004a: 35). Such a view is underwritten by universal theory of ('normal' and 'ordinary') human cognition (that ironically recapitulates our Western folk–Newtonian/Kantian cosmology) as biological 'hard-wiring' selected for by evolution (Carroll 1996: Chapter 5, 2003: Chapter 2).

Again, cognitive accounts of realism suffer from the same problem, programmatic assertions notwithstanding: they are content with *deducing* a theory of the spectator based on *analogy* with empirical findings (in cognitive science) insofar as they *seem* plausible to the analyst (cf. earlier theory's satisfaction with analogizing *empirically* motivated insights of psychoanalysis, also plausible at the time).⁵ Again, such plausibilities and deductions are empirically investigable. For example, Carroll (1996: 78) argues against Screen theory because of the lack of 'plausibility' and 'coherence' of its arguments. And yet his argument is founded on 'our characteristic forms of response to . . . cinema', something that although empirically investigable is instead intuited introspectively by the analyst himself (and elided into indexical terms like 'our' and 'characteristic'). Similarly, Bordwell's ([1985]1986: 32) attempts to reconstruct spectators' capabilities involve a mix of induction from film form and deduction from *plausible* propositions to arrive at nom(othet)ic truths about spectators like 'the spectator constructs form and meaning according to a process of knowledge, memory, and inference'. Ultimately, cognitive science is used as a transcendent framework for deducing the spectator/Subject from first principles, not as an empirical framework for the analysis of actual spectators. We are left not with the actual spectator, but with another ideal spectator: the spectator's 'competence'.

Other problems remain: the proposition that images are real to the extent that they conform to the 'ordinary' experience of reality simply defers the question of realism to another ontology: how is our experience of reality itself mediated? Further, the notion of 'ordinary' experience under 'normal' conditions is vague at best. Whose ordinary/normal experience? Ordinary and normal compared to what? These issues cannot be addressed by a theory of the (sub)individual as posited by cognitive science, for while it is conceivable that (non-universal) phenomena that are super-individual (i.e. culture) may be captured by the language of schemata and scripts, this is *not* what such constructs are designed to do. It is no surprise, then, that cross-cultural variation in spectatorship is absent from this research project. Finally, by this account, and precisely for the reasons discussed above, many kinds of film, which are called 'realist' in the West, do not fill its perceptual criterion – for example, 'psychological' realism in art cinema (Armstrong 2005; DeGreef 1989).

Despite the many differences between the above accounts, they share a common error: attempting to reason in the abstract about empirically investigable phenomena, substituting edicts of the 'spectator' or 'Subject' (couched within transcendental accounts of human nature: humanism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, cognitive psychology) for actual work with audiences such that the Subject can stand in for actual viewers in the communicative process. At the same time, film theory fills this empirical void through a covert empiricism: methodological individualism. While the Subject is grounded metaphysically, the analysis of texts

5 Prince's (1996b) use of empirical work in cognitive studies of film in theorizing realism is an exception.

6 There are reasons to be dubious (see Carroll 1988b: 135).

and apparatus design-features which verify such metaphysics proceeds via introspection. In doing so, film theory generalizes from the analyst's imagination while effacing his particularity through universalizing pretensions. As Comolli ([1971]1986: 425) wrote in a different context: 'This serves to *authenticate* the moment of a practice in which he himself is implicated, that is, to *legitimize* a particular *experience*.' This erases the work of the analyst through putting the burden of semiosis *in* the text or apparatus. Film theory on realism, unsurprisingly, is highly focused on text or medium design-features and thus treats realism as a property of films themselves, as inherent to them. This would not be problematic if theories of realism were only concerned with the simple fact of film's recording ability (and if we believe that this ability guarantees realism).⁶ But, as I have shown, theories of realism are *not* only concerned with such indexicality in that they presume facts about spectators outside the text in order to ground themselves.

Yet, how reliable is this methodological individualism? It *seems* to work on two conditions. First, it seems to work insofar as exegesis or 'deep' interpretation (by critics, scholars, pundits, etc.) is regarded as authoritative. Second, it seems to work to the extent that the analyst shares membership with audiences: he/she is a native speaker of the language; he/she is familiar with genre conventions of the film culture, the history of the medium, its canonical texts, etc. Under such conditions, the analyst becomes the keystone for the suspect argument: there is a subject position (because *I* can see it), therefore it must be inhabit-able to/-ed by *others* (because it exists).

Yet to delineate spectator positions that are plausibly inhabitable by viewers, and even intelligible to them, requires a degree of calibration between analysts and viewers; that is, a common frame for isolating what aspects of film form are relevant and in what way. (This is why even if 'Screen' theory was only concerned with the 'spectator-in-the-text' it would still be problematic.) Assuming this calibration makes it seem possible that film form taken alone could function as a window to the audience (ideal or actual). However, cultures of viewership are not necessarily, or even commonly, homogeneous or coherent. How the theorist would ever be able to determine group boundaries or makeup without empirical work with spectators is itself unclear. What happens when not all viewers assimilate to the supposed ideal spectator, or to the range of subject positions isolated by the analyst? The only recourse is to fall back on normative accounts.

Within feminist film theory this issue has been raised in critiques of early totalizing accounts of the spectator, arguing that alternative modes of spectatorship have to be allowed for (Bergstrom and Doane 1989; Citron et al. 1978; Doane 1990; Erens 1990; Gaines [1986]1990; Kuhn 1990; Mayne 1985; Montgomery 1984; Mulvey 1989; Rich 1990). The issue, however, is not just the multiplicity of modes of spectatorship, but that delimiting socially meaningful modes of spectatorship can only be done through work with actual viewers (cf. Brundson 1989), lest it lead to de-contextualized essentialisms – the female spectator, the black spectator, etc. (Bergstrom and Doane 1989: 11).

These problems are compounded when the analyst does not belong to the culture of viewership. What happens when we cannot ground our interpretations of texts and our assumptions about viewers in the authority of the analyst? Further, what is to be done when what counts as reality for spectators is different from the analyst's cosmology? Michaels' (1994) work with Australian aborigines and Kulick and Willson's ([1994]2002) work with Papua New Guineans and how they use and interpret film with respect to reality are telling here. This problem has not arisen for much film theory on realism, of course, because such theory is ethnocentric. And yet, once we pose the question of cinemas to which analysts are not socialized, it quickly becomes apparent that we must do empirical work or else our accounts are 'just so' stories, radically a-contextual, and thus irrelevant to the social realities at hand. We can extend and paraphrase Brecht ([1967]1980) to say that what the *theory* of cinema really needs is external action, not introspective psychology. We need to ask what becomes of realism when we treat it as an empirically investigable socio-cultural form that includes film form, filmmakers and audiences. This is precisely the problem posed by the so-called realist, Tamil films that I mentioned at the beginning of the article.

7 For a more in-depth and slightly different treatment of the materials see Nakassis and Dean 2007. The argument regarding the historical uniqueness of this moment of realism was overstated in that article. In this article, I have presented things more in a more balanced way.

Part II. Realism in the field

In this section I summarize research Melanie Dean and I conducted when we were in Tamil Nadu, India in 2004–5, with follow-up that I did in 2007–9. I briefly outline this research for the purpose of introducing what an empirical theory of realism would look like (Part III).⁷

The commercial Tamil film context. India has a diversity of vibrant and popular film cultures that overlap and diverge in a number of ways (e.g. in personnel, story-lines, film conventions). While the Hindi commercial cinema (or 'Bollywood') is the most visible in terms of number of viewers and geographical scope, there are a number of independent regional cinemas. One of these is the Tamil cinema which dominates the state of Tamil Nadu. Below I concentrate my comments on Tamil cinema, though to be sure a number of the arguments come from and are applicable to other Indian cinemas. Here I am less interested in comparing Indian cinemas than using the Tamil case to mobilize a larger argument of how to best theorize realism in general. Further, I am bracketing the issue of Indian, realist 'art' films, focusing instead on commercially oriented cinema.

Tamil commercial cinema is dominated by the so-called *masala* film in terms of numbers of films made, historical stability as a film genre and captivation of popular consciousness and academic attention. The *masala* film can be characterized by its mix of family sentiment and melodrama, action and heroism, reliance on big-name stars, separate comedy tracks, song-and-dance sequences (often with a racy 'item' number), moral/political allegory and indirect representation (politically, sexually) and not-always-strictly logical, linear or coherent plots.

In the academic literature it has been pointed out that film form and spectatorship in such cinema substantially differs from cinemas from the West (Prasad 1998). In particular, spectatorship is not based on the 'shame-face voyeurism' (Metz [1975]1986) supposedly inherent to film. Instead, it is

based on the assumption that films are to be evaluated based on their adherence to norms of (moral) public behaviour. An explicit complicity between screen image and audience, absent in the 'scopic regime' of Western cinemas, is present in Indian cinemas. For example, just as desire should not be explicitly stated by women in public, explicit representations of women's desire should not be shown on screen. Further, according to work done before the mid-1990s, Tamil viewers explicitly reject realism in their films and consistently prefer the 'escapism,' fantasy, and over-the-top heroism of the *masala* (Dickey 1993, 1995). And yet, not all commercial films or their audiences fit this description. Indeed, there have long been popular films in commercial Tamil cinema that have attempted in one way or another to vie for box-office success by bucking this hegemonic filmic form, the *masala*, through what Tamil filmmakers and audiences perceive as realism (e.g. films by C.V. Sridhar, K. Balachander and K. Bharathiraja).

Below I look at a relatively recent hit movie – *7G Rainbow Colony: Based on a True Story* (October 2004; Director: K. Selvaraghavan) – which has done just that. *7G* was noteworthy for its popularity (among male youth in particular), its explicit and non-normative representation of female desire (as compared to other commercial films) and for how its viewers, filmmakers and the press talked about it (as realist). In particular, talk about *7G* and films similar to it was organized by the assumption that filmic representations can and indeed should be evaluated as acceptable or unacceptable, good or bad, based on whether or not tokens of them can be found in 'reality', and *not* on whether or not filmic representations abide by norms of public morality.

Note on Research. We saw the movie six times in theatres and twice with groups of college students on DVD, observing audience reactions to the film in real-time. We conducted one-on-one and group interviews with viewers (formally with over 50 viewers and informally with many more). Interviews were conducted in Madurai (a city of over a million, though often described as a large village), Chennai (the state's largest city and capital) and Vizhuppuram (a regional town). Interviewees were both men and women, from the lower, lower-middle and middle classes, ranging from teenage to middle age. All cited interviews with viewers were conducted in Tamil and translated by Melanie Dean and myself. Interviews with producers and directors were conducted in English. Other materials (print, radio, posters, lyric books, internet reviews, web-board postings), Tamil and English, were collected and analysed.

The main assumption of this research was that it was only with respect to the discourses of producers and viewers that the film's realism could become intelligible to us. Indeed, without such work, inquiry into these so-called realist films and the mode of spectatorship associated with them, or even knowing they were considered realist in the first place, would not even be possible. The methodological and epistemological lesson is that relying exclusively on introspection, deduction from first principles, and text analysis is no substitute for actual fieldwork with viewers and producers.

Plot synopsis. An upper-class, North Indian family, down on their financial luck, moves into a middle-class housing colony in Chennai (apt. *7G*). The father has recently taken out a loan and has arranged a marriage between

his college-going daughter Anitha and Kishore, the son of the loan giver. On the next floor is a middle-class, Tamil family whose son Kathir is a typical aimless youth. He drinks, smokes, loiters, fights and does poorly in college. She is properly demure. At first, she very much dislikes him. However, he takes a liking to her and begins aggressively pursuing her. The peak of her hate occurs when, due to a sudden stop on a crowded bus, he accidentally gropes her. This results in his public beating and being taken into police custody. In a moment of mercy she does not press charges. After this, the reformation of his character begins. His rowdy spirit broken, he avoids her respectfully. Slowly he begins to initiate a friendship with her. Still in love with her, he begs her to give him a chance. She, seemingly out of pity and due to his constant prodding, does on the condition that he better himself. She forces him to study, and eventually after realizing his unique talent as a mechanic, gets him an interview at a motorcycle plant. Later, having been found out by her mother, the lovers are separated. Because of this separation and her impending marriage to Kishore, the lovers arrange for a secret rendezvous in a lodge. In this lodge scene, the most controversial in the movie, Anitha explicitly argues to a shocked and baffled Kathir why she has decided to bring him to the lodge and give herself to him. While acknowledging the mistake in her actions, she explains that she desires to be a 'real wife' to Kathir, both in mind and body. Kathir interprets her statements as expressing her desire to force her family to allow them to marry. Anitha clarifies and explains that if she is forced to marry another man (Kishore), at least she can give this pleasure and happiness to Kathir now. This difference of interpretation of the sexual act continues after a song-and-dance sequence – a conventional means of representing sexual relations – when Kathir and Anitha fight on the street. After being slapped by Kathir, Anitha begins to walk away. He begins to follow her, to reconcile. She is hit by a truck and he by a car. She dies. He lives. Unable to bear her loss, he goes into a semi-psychotic state believing her still to be alive. Yet he has become the man she wanted: responsible, family oriented, employed.

Talk about 7G. The film was a big hit with youth viewers, especially young men. While women did reproduce a lot of the same discourse, I focus on young men's reception of the film for reasons that will be clear below. The reality of the film was the most common reason for why the viewers we spoke with and the press said they liked 7G (see Nakassis and Dean 2007, n. 9 for press references). Viewers used terms like *unmai* ('truth', 'reality'), *sagajam* ('naturalness', 'reality'), *iyalpu* ('naturalness'), *ethartham* ('that which is realistic'), *real story*, and *natural life* when lauding depictions in the film of everyday life, the characters, their family relationships (father-son) and the love story.

The film's mirroring of the 'real life' of youth, 'without covering anything up' as one viewer stated, makes the film both 'new' and 'different'. 7G does not hide anything when it depicts youth life, even if it is unpleasant. Realism here means that the representations in the film can be found in viewers' own lives. This is 'new' to Tamil films, which typically hide reality. Further, the hero was central to what reality meant for most viewers. It is the hero's ordinariness that forms the precondition for an emotional engagement with the movie.

Notice that this realist spectatorship – the assumption that films are to be evaluated as good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable based on their correspondence with ‘reality’ – requires classifications of what is real and unreal, even if the contents of such classifications are up for contention. One issue where there was outright ambivalence was the heroine’s explicit desire. Are her actions realistic or not? The answer to this question conditioned the acceptance of the representation of her desire. For some viewers, it is because aspects of the film – in particular, the transgressive representation of female desire – are unreal that they should not be shown. For other viewers, however, it is precisely because the movie is realistic – women like Anitha can be found in reality – that such images can and should be shown. Such positions are voiced with respect to the reality of ‘Tamil culture’ itself. That is, for viewers who embraced the film as thoroughly real, the film exposes contradictions between the normativity of ‘Tamil culture’ and its reality. For such viewers, an appeal to reality trumps normativity. The important point here is that all such discourse is organized by an appeal to reality.

Another component of this realist spectatorship is its definition of films like *7G* against ‘ordinary,’ ‘fantastical’ films, older and contemporary. The unreality of mainstream, commercial movies was most often linked to the stereotyped, formulaic, larger-than-life Tamil superstar hero of yesteryear’s commercial films. Such films and their heroes are fantastical, in contrast to films like *7G* that depict the ‘real love’ and ‘real situations’ of ‘our life’. This brings happiness to young viewers who see themselves on the screen, as one young man explained. Newness and difference are valorized insofar as they are operationalized as real *against* a denaturalized type of film, the older *masala* film, which is laughably dated when watched today.

In sum, the way that viewers talked about the movie was based on reality as the foundation for reasoning about a film and its worth and acceptability. Whether or not viewers believed that the representations in *7G* were realistic or not – aligning either to a normative moral discourse or its denaturalization – viewers took up a mode of realist spectatorship in launching their positions. Further, viewers defined films like *7G* as realistic with respect to unrealistic, commercial, *masala* films.

Filmmakers, film form and spectatorship. Viewers’ realist spectatorship and its ambivalences are embedded and virtually projected in both the film text and filmmakers’ discourse about the film. Like audiences, the heroine and the hero of *7G* are both highly ambivalent about the heroine’s expression of desire in the lodge scene. While Selvaraghavan, the director of *7G*, would have preferred to have represented the scene differently, he had to ‘cover it up with some nice dialogues [explicitly expressing their ambivalence]’, because he has ‘to see [i.e. adhere to] the society here and the movie has to run [in theatres]’ (Selvaraghavan 2005). Here the director indicates that he had to incorporate (his perception of) viewers’ beliefs about what constitutes acceptable characters and expression. Indeed, viewers in the theatres literally applauded *both* the depiction of the hero’s shock and ambivalence – which many viewers found realistic – and the heroine’s subsequent justification – which many viewers found persuasive.

This ambivalence and justification also diagrams the director's position regarding the Tamil cultural politics of female sexuality, a politics where the chastity of Tamil women is taken as *the* emblem of Tamil culture (Anandhi 2005) and thus explicit discourse on female sexuality (by women) is against Tamil culture.⁸ Reacting against this Selvaraghavan (2005) emphasizes that the heroine he presents resembles the 'females we have today,' unlike 'the people from that period' who 'want to put a mask [on] and pretend everything is fine', who think that 'every female is a virgin'. As with viewers' discourse, the director's position presupposes realism as its foundation for articulation. This quote figures opposition to 7G's realistic depictions as older, hypocritical, out of touch and backwards. Like viewers, the director decouples the normative aspect of culture from its reality. Rather than covering anything up, the imperative for him is to show what is real (which viewers praised), even if, or rather because, the cultural politics of the representation of women's sexuality require its (partial) disavowal. The in-/articulation of reality and desire is projected as a 'gap' between/progression from 'that period' and/to 'today'. Here realism exposes what is otherwise covered, presenting the hitherto unrepresentable.

And as with viewers, the filmmaker's discourse is also organized by a contrastive framing. Speaking to the relative successes of 'experimental movies' (i.e. non-formulaic, non-*masala* films) in popular cinema and their viewership, the director emphasizes that there have been changes in people's tastes. 'Nobody wants to see a hero flying. . . . We [filmmakers] also, we also want a change. . . . Otherwise you can't think of making this movie [7G] ten years before or 25 years before. It won't run. But today people will accept these kinds of films only' (Selvaraghavan 2005).

Here the director distinguishes between *masala* films (dominant in *that* era) and 'experimental' films (dominant in *this* era). A number of differences are assumed regarding the popularity of commercial films (it is due to star attraction) and their narrative tropes (they are marked by the fantastical), in contrast to films such as 7G. Further, this corresponds to changes in viewers and directors: people do not want to see or make unrealistic films anymore.

This contrastive realism is similarly linked to particular features of the film. New movies like 7G are not based on the star's cult of personality. Many of the newer heroes are 'new faces' who have no acting experience and are relatively young (the 'anti-hero trend') (*Chennaionline* 2003; Kathir 2005). Such 'new faces' bring anonymity and ordinariness, and hence authenticity, to the characters they play. Such new heroes are less muscular and darker skinned, not like the beefy, light-skinned heroes of yesteryear. Their characters dress in everyday clothing and live in everyday locations. They speak terse dialogue in spoken, colloquial Tamil sprinkled with English, and not, as in the past, in extended monologues functioning as thinly veiled political speeches in 'chaste,' literary Tamil. The new hero is the average young man (*Rediff* 2004). This is a way to foster identification and film popularity in an era where the superstar no longer guarantees a movie's success (Ratnam 2005).

'New faces' in realistic stories that are coherent and linear in their narrative, as compared to multi-plot, superstar-based escapist *masala* films, are

8 The public outcry following remarks made by Khushboo, an actress in the Tamil film industry, in 2005 shows this. Khushboo advised that if engaging in premarital sex, condoms should be used and that men should not expect virgin brides. She was publicly denounced, almost physically attacked during a public appearance, and charged for defamation (of Tamil women and culture), causing public disorder, and advocating immorality (see Das 2005; Krishnan 2006).

seen by many producers today as one avenue to commercial success. While this has always been a potentiality in Tamil cinema that has been actualized in various ways, what seems novel in films like 7G is their focusing on (male) youth across a class spectrum (cf. K. Balachander's films from before the advent of television that are oriented to a middle-class family audience via the depiction of strong female characters). In short, this mode of realist spectatorship is incorporated in film texts insofar as filmmakers see this realism as aesthetically and economically viable, and insofar as both viewers and filmmakers are oriented to common discourses (e.g. the politics of female sexuality, the past history of Tamil cinema). Film form, filmmakers' discourse and viewers' spectatorship are calibrated with respect to each other.

Age, gender and the calibration of film form and spectatorship. As seen above, 'new,' realist movies like 7G presuppose a particular social group and its reality: male, Tamil youth. The realism of 7G is a realism to male youth, both with respect to film form (young male protagonists) and the inhabiting of modes of realist spectatorship (predominantly by young male viewers). Why should this be? I suggest two reasons: socialization to film by generation and gender, and changes in Tamil mass media in recent history.

Through socialization to a field of films (the mythological, the social, the *masala*, Hollywood film, realist film, etc.) and discourses about such films, Tamil viewers have become well acquainted with a variety of film conventions and viewing practices. Such socialization varies across generation for both viewers and filmmakers. To this extent ways of viewing and talking about film vary across generations and are similar within generations. For example, in the Tamil case, young viewers tended to talk about such newer films like 7G based on an appeal to reality, while older film viewers tended to judge such films based on the morality of filmic content. When older film viewers did evaluate such films based on an appeal to reality, they tended to deem films like 7G to be unrealistic because such newer films dealt with social worlds unfamiliar and opposed to their sensibilities.

And generational differences in viewing patterns, insofar as they are regularized, may become stable modes of spectatorship, which in turn may come to be presupposed in particular kinds of films. This provides the conditions for the reanalysis of such differences as generational emblems through the denaturalizing of 'other' (older) films. In the Tamil case, 'ordinary' films are described by Tamil youth viewers as outdated, unconvincing, laughable and unreal: those films are older, fantastical and for them, while these films are newer, realistic and for us. Viewers who inhabit a mode of realist spectatorship laminate film-internal contrasts (fantastical-real, superhero-ordinary hero) onto temporal contrasts (older-newer movies) and demographic contrasts (older-younger audiences) when differentiating realistic films like 7G from older and contemporary 'commercial,' 'fantasy' films. These contrasts are also deployed by young filmmakers both in positioning their films as *for* youth, and in positioning themselves as youth (*Cinema in India* 2004a: 35; Kathir 2005; Selvaraghavan 2005). Note that this is an argument not necessarily of historical change, but of *age set*. I do not exclude the possibility that some movies of yesteryear may have been similarly engaged with by viewers (e.g. Sridhar's 1960s films).

A second reason is that the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1980s and 1990s has made this mode of youth-oriented, realist spectatorship increasingly economically viable. The penetration of (satellite) television in particular has had profound effects on film-going. With a large increase in time for programming without an equal increase in original content, films and film-related shows have crowded the air alongside imported programming and films (Agrawal 1998; Page and Crawley 2001). This has resulted in older viewers going to the theatre less and less (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Kathir 2005; Ratnam 2005). In addition, because of piracy filmmakers' profits must be collected in the theatre, or at least it is so perceived (Ananthakrishnan 2005; *The Hindu* 2007). This means that youth viewers in the theatre are seen as the primary target audience of commercial film. Further, such an increasingly diverse mass media field presupposes and entails the discriminating powers and fickle tastes of viewers, especially that of youth. Given this fact, as well as the audience's increased choice in media content, 'ordinariness' has become a major liability to which 'new' and 'different' youth-oriented realism is, at least today, one economically viable alternative.

This is itself crosscut by differential socialization by gender. Cinema attendance is highly problematic for young, Tamil women. While male youth are assumed to be avid consumers of film and are given license to move freely about public space, norms of propriety regarding women's presence in public limit their consumption of film in the theatre largely, though not exclusively, to watching with the family. (Thus there is no women's film genre, only the *kudumba padam*, 'family film'.) Further, identification with heroines by (female) viewers, and hence appellation of females to film, is complicated by the perceived immorality of what female characters do on screen and negative stereotypes about what kinds of people actresses are (Mishra 1999; Seizer 2005). Thus, because addressivity is connected with (perceived) theatre attendance and women are unwilling to wholeheartedly identify with female characters, women are less likely to be the primary addressee in movies marketed for mass consumption, and heroines less likely to be seen as similar to female viewers. This is reflected in the frequency with which the heroines and actresses in Tamil films are not ethnically Tamil.

In short, because the family *qua* cinema-watching unit has receded and cinema going is problematic for women, peer groups of young men have become (understood as) the major audience and, given the economics of film revenue collection, major deciders of the economic success of films (Ratnam 2005; cf. Derne 2000). This has had the effect that a large number of movies today are tailored to young men, a fact reflected in the narrative structure of 7G and its popular songs, as well as in the framing of the movie and its director by its makers, movie reviewers, those involved in the film's publicity and viewers. Young characters, young actors, youth concerns (premarital love) and youth settings (colleges) dominate much of recent popular cinema.

Taken together, we see how a mode of spectatorship that valorizes realism as 'new' and 'different' and that typifies the *masala* movie as standard and 'ordinary' can be age- and gender specified for male youth. Hence

the possibility for the success of movies such as 7G which, on the one hand, facilitate young male viewers' identification with the average young hero and, on the other, buck 'typical' movie conventions by not 'covering anything up'.

As we have seen, then, there is a calibration between viewer types (male youth), spectatorship (realist spectatorship) and film texts and film-makers' discourse held together by popularity *qua* film-profits, a principle of viewer-text-producer linkage, which itself is made possible given the differential socialization of viewers by generation and gender. I have argued, in effect, that the social life of genres and modes of spectatorship are shaped by the very fact of changing cultural (con)texts that viewers and producers are differentially socialized to, and that such facts of spectatorship are incorporated into film texts to the extent that the social distribution of spectatorship, its 'social domain'(Agha 2007), is linked to film production.

Part III. An empirical approach to theorizing realism in film

Below I outline what an empirically motivated theory of realism would look like based on discussion in Parts I and II. In doing so, I use observations from the film theory literature that highlight the issues that I have raised but which, for whatever reason, have not been centrally integrated into the major theories of realism.

We have seen at least three aspects of realism at play in this article. First, 'realism' is deployed by viewers and producers of 7G as a truth-functional correspondence relationship between representations and the 'real' world: a representation is real to the extent that tokens of it can be found in reality. Second, 'realism' is largely operationalized in the film theory literature in terms of formal features of texts or the cinematic 'apparatus'. Finally, as per the opening move of the article, 'realism' can be taken as socioculturally relative to what some community – viewers, filmmakers, other cultural authorities – says it is. All of these views are problematic when taken on their own.

The first view in its most extreme version refuses any theory of representation as mediation, seeing realist representations as directly accessing reality. Weaker versions may qualify such claims (e.g. the realisms of Bazin and Kracauer), but inevitably are concerned with restoring the correspondences between representations and reality, either in actuality (e.g. the notion of asymptotic realism) or as an ideal principle (realist aesthetics). The problematic for the first view is how to deal with higher-order semi-otic principles (e.g. genre, discourse, culture, biology; see Section 3 below) that form the conditions of possibility for similarity at all. The second view is equally problematic, as discussed in Part I. Finally, if we take realism as purely relative (the third aspect of realism noted above), we run into the problem that the relations between evaluative stances, film features and their correspondence to inter-subjectively observable features of the world may all vary independently across groups. As analysts we are stuck. We have no way of relating claims of realism to text features, or to the extra-textual, except by correlation to evaluators. This view becomes a descriptive inventory of *sui generis* claims by various evaluators and lacks

explanatory power. As I argue below, an adequate theory of realism requires, minimally, all three views and an account for how they are articulated to each other.

(1) *Realism as culturally mediated classifications of real/unreal.* Realism is understood (at some level) by those who deploy its rhetoric as a truth-functional correspondence relationship. Realist texts *feel* realistic and are judged thusly, although this is not to say that viewers mistake text for reality. Films, as C. Williams points out, 'make reference to the real world or to an idea of the real world, and the understanding that they do make such reference is a part of the way in which spectators themselves understand them' (Williams 1980: 10).

This felt truth-function is always applied through culturally mediated classifications of real and unreal in events of evaluation. The principles of such classifications are, of course, internally complex. One task in the study of realisms is to document the logic of such classifications and put them in their sociohistorical contexts. Outlining the logic of realism in *Western* cinema – as undergirded by a particular philosophical epistemology and model of subjectivity (Allen 1995; Baudry [1970]1986; MacCabe 1985); as secular, contemporary, socially extended and consciously politicized (Abercrombie et al. 1992; Levin [1957]1963; R. Williams 1977, [1977]1991); as gendered and diagrammatic of patriarchal relations (Johnston [1970]1985; Mulvey 1975); as having an affective component (Ang [1982]1985 on television; cf. Smith 1995) – is one of the most useful contributions of work on realism in the film studies literature.

(2) *Realism as definable only with respect to a social domain.* The logics and contents of such classifications vary across and within film cultures. That is, realism is always realism *to someone*; it has a social domain which can be specified sociologically (e.g. by age, gender, ethnicity, class, nation/region, etc.). For example, the realism of 7G relates to male, Tamil youth. Collins' work on American cinema of the 1960–70s also notes the youth orientation of such 'new' films and their 'reality' (Collins 1993). Historical work on the emergence of realism in Europe documents the bourgeois social domain of early realism, and the later expansion of this social domain to the working classes (Abercrombie et al. 1992; R. Williams 1977, [1977]1991; cf. Fargier [1969]1980).

Note that most film theory takes for granted that such classifications have particular social domains, and thus tends to homogenize film audiences (as the analyst writ large) and then over-generalize from them. Any theory of realism must be able to specify *for whom* such realisms count as real, for as we have seen, the *logic* of such realisms – what counts as 'real' – and for *whom* they are a reality are dialectically related.

(3) *Realism as interdiscursive.* Realism, then, as stated in (1) and (2) involves the (regular) *mapping* of one set of representations – classifications of real and unreal – to another – a film or set of films – with respect to some social domain; that is, films 'fit' with other models of social reality available to viewers, and it is to this extent that films (and 'reality') are felt to be real or not. As Gledhill asks, how do various representations, which attempt to define the 'real', of which films are one, mutually reinforce each other, or not? (Gledhill 1992: 132).

One mapping that cognitive theorists have touched on are low-level visual correspondences between vision in 'everyday' life and in film (Carroll 1996: Chapter 5; Currie 1996; Prince 1996a, 1996b; cf. Bazin 2004a: 108; Aitken 2006: 178). Yet as Perkins notes, we also 'make sense of the movie image by *relating* it to our common knowledge and experience of the visible world. The relationship cannot be one of single correspondence' (Perkins [1972]1980: 70; also Neale 1983). Perkins' insight here is that films invoke multiple (and hierarchically ordered) classificatory principles of reality, and that the plausibility of fictional reality is motivated by the congruence of these multiple invocations. I noted the role of higher-order mappings in the Tamil case such as ideologies of gender and what counts as the 'ordinary'. In short, realisms are always constituted through the confluence of multiple representations (and representational orders) of reality, as MacCabe (1985: 62) and Staiger (1992: 108) have also noted.

This means that realism is always interdiscursive. Realism is always realism *with respect* to other representations, both as converging descriptions of the 'real' and as contrastive representations of the 'unreal'. Carroll (1988b: 143) writes:

Realism is at least a three-term relation among *a film or group of films* and *a contrasting group of films*, some of whose differences are interpreted in terms of the first group of films supplying a greater range of analogies to *reality*.

We can add to that by noting that such differentiation can also be motivated through contrasts *within* films. For example, because realism has been highly naturalized in genres like the documentary and news (reel), such genres can be used within nonfiction films to motivate realism (Carroll 1996: Chapter 15; Collins 1993; Hallam 2000: 103; Jost 1989; Paech 1989; Staiger 1992).

Finally, while there are as many realisms as there are discourses which aim to regiment the mapping in question, such mappings are not only one-way. Realist texts can also serve as grounds for (re)analyzing known, as well as yet unexperienced but imagined, realities (Appadurai 1991). MacCabe writes that 'the realist text allows the possibility of a new sense, a new route to the object, and with this new route to it the object is changed, transformed' (MacCabe 1985: 144; see also Hallam 2000). The realist text changes reality and our experience of it both through its interventions into the world of its filming and exhibition (by changing the objects recorded through the act of recording; by changing our perceptions of such objects through moments of viewing) – as pointed out by Margulies (2003: 3)⁹ – and through its ability to change how we experience physical reality (by providing us a clarity or perspective that we normally lack) – as Kracauer (1960: 297–300, 305) and Bazin (2004a: 15–16) have argued.

(4) *Realism as reflexive activity*. The interdiscursivity discussed in (3), however, is not simply a property of texts, but is an aspect of spectators' activities (implying that realism is at least a *four-term* relation). This is precisely what we saw with Tamil youth viewers who defined realism *against* unreal, ordinary *masala* films. Staiger makes this point when she writes

about realism's intertextuality as 'not simply a moment in a text or some relation between two texts, but rather a fundamental and unceasing spectatorial activity, the semiotic action of processing a filmic narrative by repeated referencing and referring to other texts' (Staiger 1992: 113). This means that realism is always undergirded by the reflexive activity of spectators and their capacity to reanalyse films, or elements of films (e.g. editing techniques, shots, dialogue registers, types of actors, etc.), as tokens of some type: for example, as tokens of film types (real vs. unreal films), or of social types (younger vs. older viewers).

(5) *Reflexivity and the emergence of realisms*. This reflexive quality is one reason for the emergence of new realisms. In the Tamil case, it is through the ability to presuppose a fantastical standard, the *masala*, that this film type can be denaturalized and other films foregrounded as realist(ic), 'new' and 'different' (thematically and aesthetically). Historical work similarly shows that the emergence of realism to the bourgeoisie in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe was possible only given the denaturalization of the aristocratic melodrama (Abercrombie et al. 1992; Aitken 2006: Chapter 6; Levin [1957]1963; R. Williams 1977, [1977]1991). Gledhill (1992: 133) argues that by the second half of the nineteenth century, the standard melodramatic text was challenged by a new group of writers *and* audiences, resulting in the 'new drama'. This entailed the formal separation of melodrama and realism, and the reanalysis of such forms as indexicals of social personhood: for example, melodrama as 'low(er)-class,' 'childish,' 'effeminate'. Hallam (2000) similarly emphasizes the linkage between realisms and the denaturalization of familiar forms through introducing some hitherto unexamined reality to audiences, for example, in the 'hood' films in 1990s US popular cinema.

Carroll's (1988b: 102, also 1996: 243–44) discussion of Bazin's account of the evolution of film form from montage to depth-of-focus indicates that formal techniques can also come to be seen as better fit to represent reality to the extent that older techniques are denaturalized by events of reflexive discourse (in this case, by critics) (cf. Allen 1995: 89–90 on changing thresholds for 'projective illusion' over time). That is, realism is a denaturalization of something else, and this 'something else' is simply that aspect of the film which the evaluator is able to typify as (un)real, be it formal, thematic or narratological. (This is precisely why realism can partake both as a style – at the formal level – and as a genre, and why different realisms can differ vastly in how they confer an experience of the 'real'. As we saw, Tamil viewers talk about realism in a much different way than Western film theorists.) In short, as Metz (1974: 247) writes:

The truths of today can become the plausibilities of tomorrow: The impression of truth, of a sudden liberation, corresponds to those privileged moments when the Plausible is burst open by some new point, or when a new possibility makes its appearance in the film; but once established, this possibility in turn becomes a fact of discourse . . . and hence the germ at least of a new Plausibility.

And again, this process of (de)naturalization is always with respect to some social domain. This means that realism is ultimately dependent upon

10 See Elsaesser (1986) for an account of some of these processes.

processes of group formation and differentiation (of audience, filmmaker); in short, the production of sociocultural difference – by class (Liechty 2003), generation (Collins 1993) or age-set, gender (Jacobowitz and Spring 1990; Lesage 1990), ethnicity, nation (Hallam 2000: 34), etc. – and modes of (realist) spectatorship are in dialectic tension.

(6) *Realism as a regularized relation between film texts, their production and their reception.* A final element is the recognition that recurring modes of realist spectatorship become regular parts of film texts. As noted, modes of spectatorship can actually entail film form. And if such modes of spectatorship are regular and hold over time (e.g. forming a stable community or market), film form may itself become highly regularized, presupposing such modes of spectatorship.¹⁰ Ogle (1980) implicitly notes this process in discussing the change towards depth-of-focus in cinema from Europe and the United States as due to the increasing popularity of miniature photography and ‘big picture magazines’. This resulted in the change in public taste for a particular cinematic style (the tendency towards crisper definition) and the subsequent proliferation of this style in films.

Further, given such regular presupposition (i.e. the naturalization of film form) films can actually entail an experience of ‘reality’ (and thereby also sediment the mode of spectatorship the film presupposes). When seeing a ‘realistic’ film one gets the feeling that such a thing actually happened. When such presupposition–entailment relationships between texts and modes of spectatorship become highly regularized we can begin to talk about the generic or stylistic features of realist movies.

The irony here is that the naturalization of the presupposition–entailment relationship between film form and spectatorship fetishizes film form, making it seem as if ‘realism’ is somehow *in* the film. It therefore mystifies the larger semiotic processes that make it possible for film form and spectatorship to mutually entail/presuppose each other at all. Indeed, the highly calibrated and regular presupposition–entailment of film form and spectatorship is the condition of possibility for most academic work on realism. The stability of this relationship, however, can be assumed only at the analyst’s peril.

A corollary to this mutual presupposition–entailment is that insofar as the fit between modes of spectatorship and film texts/production is never exact, the (re)production of genres/styles and modes of spectatorship are continually oscillating between change (and discalibration) and regularization (and calibration). That is, film form and modes of spectatorship are in dialectical tension.

The ways in which presupposition–entailment relations are regularized may be multiple. Further, we would expect that various realisms have various modes of linkage between spectatorship and film form. For example, commercial realism and art realism differ not only in their social domain, their content and their techniques, but also in the presence or absence of the market as a mediator of producers and audiences (via the socio-economic life of films). The question arises, therefore, how and to what extent are film texts, filmmakers’ discourse and viewers’ discourse mutually calibrated with respect to each other? How are they interlinked such that films may entail particular spectatorial experiences (or not)?

And how and to what extent do viewers' practices feed back into film form? In the Tamil case, I pointed to the film market and socialization to mass media by generation and gender as two such principles of linkage. Normative discourse is another common way through which film texts and audience practices are calibrated (e.g. Bazin's contribution to the spread of neorealism).

Notice that here film is seen as a communicative event between viewers and producers (*contra* Metz [1987]1995), stretched over time and mediated by multiple agents and semiotic processes.¹¹ The point is that if we want to understand the coherence and intelligibility of film, we must be able to see film as connecting particular groups together in meaningful social action.

In sum, *realism* is a term for the dynamic semiotic process whereby film form and spectatorship are calibrated in the following way: some set of filmic representations are evaluated by viewers and filmmakers through culturally mediated classifications of real and unreal which are operationalized truth-functionally in events of evaluation; such representations presuppose these classifications and by virtue of regular presupposition (via some feedback mechanism) can entail an experience of 'reality' for viewers. Such a tripartite relation is often reflexively reanalysed by viewers and filmmakers (as 'realism' or some equivalent term), and hence can serve as the grounds of further metasemiotic work: extending existing classifications of realisms or denaturalizing them and resetting the parameters of the real, thus feeding back into the emergence of new (realist) film forms and modes of spectatorship.

This account does not answer all the issues broached by previous theories of film realism. It gives no explicit account of 'external' reality *per se* (or the indexical relation of image to said reality); it gives no account of the cognitive processes involved in processing (realist) images; it does not provide a theory of realist aesthetics *per se*; it does not ground realism with respect to large-scale socio-economic/political organizations and historical epochs (capitalism, modernity, etc.). However, what it does do is create a framework for how to integrate facts of actual audience reception, spectatorship, filmmakers' discourse, film form and their regularization in genres and styles so as to work out such lacunae. It also provides a framework for how to compare various realisms across time, cultures and media. Finally, it grounds film theory on realism more securely, both epistemologically and methodologically.

Note: Realism, aesthetics of newness, and (Western) modernity

Given that realism is linked to the denaturalization of other forms, it is hardly surprising that many different realisms have been linked to aesthetics of newness and revolutionary or political uses. This is especially true at moments of the emergence and typification of some set of films as 'realist'. However, while historically common, I do not see it as necessary or definitional. Though realism is caught up in distancing itself from other forms, this need not be reanalysed as 'new' (or progressive) to viewers or critics. That is, 'new' forms need not be seen as realist(ic), nor do realist(ic) forms need to be seen as 'new'. This is all the more so given that realisms can always be reanalysed as older, outdated or ordinary (but still realistic); or even as unrealistic.

11 This view of communication is one that Sapir ([1931]1985) long ago propounded.

Similarly, it is not surprising that various realisms, invoking temporal notions of newness and change (and often emerging out of ‘fantastical’ aesthetic contexts associated with the premodern), are linked with modernity, either as about modernity (or some aspect thereof) or as a product/sign of modernity. Indeed, many realisms are so inflected.

Some have even argued that realism is a cultural form particular to modern, Western Europe (Abercrombie et al. 1992; Hallam 2000; R. Williams [1977]1991; see Aitken 2006: Chapter 6 for discussion). However, there is a mistake in confusing the historical emergence of a form, or what is often linked to a form given its historical emergence, with the form in general. The temporal and geographical circumscription of realism as done by the authors cited above is ultimately paralyzing for it rejects *a priori* an approach to realism that, on the one hand, can accommodate changes in realisms and, on the other, can recognize the cosmological and functional equivalences of various realisms. As Gledhill (1992: 132) writes, ‘[t]he real is a site of contest, of change and redefinition. Realism names a goal, a polemic, a set of continually changing strategies, rather than a fixed aesthetic. What counts as realism is always open to contestation.’ Observing that ‘[w]hat constitutes realism, both in terms of technique and content, changes over the course of history,’ Carroll writes that ‘[r]ealism is a useful comparative concept’ though this ‘makes the extension of the concept very context and period dependent’ (Carroll 1988b: 142; also see Bazin 1980: 41; Levin [1957]1963). The point is that if realism *as an analytic construct* is defined relativistically – to a social domain (viewers, producers), to other texts and discourses – we can neither enumerate its aesthetics (as a set of statements about film form) nor circumscribe it sociohistorically (as Western, modern, bourgeois, etc.) definitively for all time. Investigating some particular realism, enumerating its aesthetics and circumscribing it sociohistorically are absolutely necessary. This does not imply, however, that the connection of realism with newness or modernity is definitional.

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The journal explores the nature of writing for the screen image; this includes not only writing for film and television but also computer games and animation. The journal highlights current academic and professional thinking about the screenplay and intends to promote, stimulate and bring together current research and contemporary debates around the screenplay whilst encouraging groundbreaking research in an international arena.

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