Physical reality: the role of the empirical in the film theory of Siegfried Kracauer, John Grierson, André Bazin and Georg Lukács

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Abstract

The article explores conceptions of empirical filmic representation in the film theories of Grierson, Bazin, Kracauer and Lukács. The article begins by exploring the concept of ‘intuitionist cinematic realism’, then turns to Kracauer’s analysis of Grierson’s documentary films by Paul Rotha, and Ruttmann’s Berlin: Symphony of a Great City. Following this, the article looks at Bazin’s analysis of Dreyer’s the Passion of Joan of Arc, and Heyerdahl’s Kon Tiki. The article closes with an exploration of the thought of Georg Lukács in relation to questions of empirical representation and filmic realism.

Keywords

cinematic realism
Bazin
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intuitionist realism

Questions concerning the nature of the relationship between empirical representation, the various strategies of filmic organization, and semantic content are often debated within documentary film studies. This article will seek to contribute to that debate through an exploration of the differing conceptions of the role and significance of empirical representation to be found within the ‘intuitionist realist’ film theory of André Bazin, John Grierson, Siegfried Kracauer and Georg Lukács.

The term ‘intuitionist cinematic realism’ is employed here to refer to a body of film theory that is based upon a primarily intuitionist, as opposed to rationalist, or empiricist approach to cinematic signification and spectatorship. In opposition to such rationalist or empiricist inclinations, Lukács’s concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘soul’, Grierson’s notion of the ‘real’, Kracauer’s concept of ‘redemption’ and Bazin’s models of ‘grace’ and ‘love’, all imply that knowledge (of both experience and ideal categories) is to be reached through a process of mainly intuitive insight, rather than abstract rationalization or methodical empirical inference. For example, all these theorists adopt a largely sceptical position over claims for the redemptive powers of science, reason and rationality, and the work of Lukács, Bazin, Kracauer and Grierson emerged in response to what was perceived to be the overarching hegemony of what Weber had earlier referred to as ‘instrumental rationality’ (Held 1980: 65–6). Similarly, these theorists are also sceptical about the ultimate worth of overly empiricist approaches, because they believe such approaches to be inherently incapable of encompassing the abstract categories and sense of totality which an intuitionist approach seeks to accommodate. Nevertheless, intuitionist cinematic realism also
engages with principles derived from both rationalist and empiricist propensities. Whilst, for example, the intuitionist realist theorists believe that greater boundaries should be placed upon the dominion of rationality, so that it becomes a part of, rather than a force which governs human existence, these theorists also believe that enlightened reason still has an imperative role to play in addressing the problems of modernity. Similarly, whilst the intuitionist realists believe that forms of empiricist methodology, which lead only to a fragmented understanding of the world, should be abandoned, they nonetheless regard empirical experience per se, and as depicted within film, as the essential foundation upon which a more advantageous synthesis of rational, empirical and intuitionist modes of comprehending reality must be established.

Such a foundation can, for example, be found in Kracauer’s notion that modernity is characterized by an ‘abstractness’ which is ‘not regulated according to man’s needs’ (Kracauer 1995: 81) and that such abstraction can be ‘redeemed’ if the modern subject is able to situate a consequential engagement with empirical experience within a perspective encompassing enlightened reason: a perspective which would then encompass ‘man’s needs’. In developing his notion of ‘redemption’, Kracauer adopts a manifestly empirical, sensual and phenomenological orientation in arguing that a qualitative reformation occurs within the subject-spectator when the immersion of consciousness within physical reality reaches the point that an intuition is reached concerning the providential bond which exists between a free, active consciousness and an immediate sensual experience of physical reality. However, such an intuition, though important in itself, is only the first stage in a process that should ideally conclude with the enlightening comprehension of a qualitatively enhanced synthesis of the empirical, reason and intuition. Here, empirical experience provides the necessary condition for the emergence of a form of transcendent understanding that is able to overcome both instrumental abstraction and empiricist fragmentation.

Kracauer models his conceptualization of such transcendent understanding on two related concepts, which he derives from Kant: those of the ‘harmony of the faculties’ within aesthetic experience, and ‘Naturschöne’ (‘natural beauty’). Kant argues that the existential ‘faculties’ of ‘understanding’ and ‘imagination’ are brought into propitious harmony within aesthetic experience when a benevolent rational understanding seeks to channel the imagination in such a way that the latter seeks meaningful formations and a sense of wholeness within the object of contemplation (Aitken 2006: 171). Taking up this view, Kracauer presses forward, in accordance with his overall position on the anomalous condition of contemporary experience, to argue that the ability to experience such a harmony of the faculties has diminished within modernity, because reason has become deprived of its critical, enlightening capacity and, as a consequence, a ‘lawless freedom’ is now only capable of seeking fragmentary, superficial stimulation (Aitken 1998b: 126). Such shallow stimulation is, however, both compellingly provoked and readily fulfilled within a dominant form of modern mass culture which Kracauer refers to as the ‘mass ornament’, and which he regards as an influential ‘aesthetic reflex’ of the dominant social order (Elsaesser 1987: 79). Kracauer also provides this
fateful model of the state of the harmony of the faculties within modernity with a decidedly empirical point of reference, based upon his appropriation of the concept of Naturschöne. Here, contemplation of the natural, physical world provides the best hope for achieving a reformed harmony of the faculties, as the concrete richness of a natural environment latent with potential 'correspondences' forces the faculties of imagination and understanding to derive meaningful patterns, and a sense of totality, from the rich empirical fabric of physical reality (Kracauer 1997: 68). It is, therefore, contemplation of the empirical landscape that, Kracauer believes, ultimately makes it possible for both enlightened reason and authentically creative imagination to appear; and which also provides the foundation for the materialization of a qualitatively enhanced synthesis of empirical experience, reason and intuition.

As with Kracauer, a strong emphasis upon the importance of contemplation of the empirical in providing the foundation for the emergence of an enhanced synthesis of reason and intuition is also central to the ideas of Bazin, and particularly to his key notion of the 'dialectic of concrete and abstract': a notion that he applies to his own analysis of Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 film La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc/The Passion of Joan of Arc. Bazin believes that such a dialectic is realized in La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc through ensuring that the physiology of the human face which features in the film invokes an abstract 'seismic' 'nature', one incarnated through Joan's agony and her torturers' brutality (Bazin 1967: 110). For Bazin, the 'aesthetic secret' of La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc lies in the film's success in enabling a free contemplation of the abstract intangible to emerge from scrutiny of empirical bodily characteristics. La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc mobilizes a 'documentary of faces', a richly textured empirical fabric of facial physiology, in which 'seismic' nature 'palpitates beneath every pore' (Bazin 1967: 109). Bazin argues that the 'pores' and 'movements of wrinkles' that make up this 'documentary of faces' constitute the film's 'secondary details', which form the 'concrete' basis of the 'dialectic of concrete and abstract' (Bazin 1967: 109). Underlying Bazin's position here is an idea similar to that encapsulated within Kracauer's notion of 'redemption'. Kracauer had argued that the empirical basis of film possesses the ability to represent a crucial form of existential experience: one in which the spectator/observer becomes able to both comprehend his or her relationship to immediate experience and nature in a free and sensual way, and also relate such comprehension to more abstract categories. For both Kracauer and Bazin, therefore, the function of the empirical factor, of what Bazin calls 'secondary detail', is to rein in the influence of 'primary' detail – that is, assertive and persuasive theme, concept and ideology – as it is embodied in plot mise-en-scène and narrative, so that the spectator is both able to reexperience this core existential experience in an immediate way and also relate that experience to more general and social modes of existence.

In discussing Robert Bresson's Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne/The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne (1945), Bazin also refers to these 'secondary details' as 'noises', and provides an example from a scene in the film in which the two principal characters are seated inside a car, and in which the 'sound of a windshield wiper' takes on an acoustic presence which transcends its diegetic function (Bazin 1967: 110). Bazin argues that such secondary
‘noises’ are ‘indifferent to the action’, and that it is this ‘indifference’ that ‘guarantees’ the film’s realism (Bazin 1967: 110). By ‘indifference’ here, Bazin means that such secondary details retain a degree of relative autonomy which transcends their functional role within the filmic narrative, and that it is this transcendence, or ‘indifference’, which establishes the basis for a return to an important form of existential experience of the concrete. Here, the ‘indifference’ afforded by relatively autonomous secondary details makes available regions of disinterested stasis within the film: quiescent areas which can be used by consciousness as a catalyst for suspending customary ensnarement by the intentional and premeditated logic of the narrative. As will be discussed later in more depth, these notions of ‘secondary detail’ and ‘noise’ also suggest a particular type of documentary film: one in which the empirical force of the naturalistic image creates fissures within the ongoing flow of the narrative.

Within classical German philosophy the concept of ‘indifference’, or ‘disinterestedness’ within aesthetic experience, is derived from the notion that aesthetic judgement, and also the object of contemplation at which such judgement is directed, should stand outside instrumental purpose to constitute an autonomous realm of freedom and self-realization. In addition, such a realm is best constituted when the object of contemplation in question is the natural, physical world because that world is devoid of human intentionality and, as a consequence, free of the shaping constraints necessarily implicated by the encounter with an object that is the product of human intention. Bazin’s notion of ‘secondary detail’ appears to draw upon this school of thought, though it does so through a decidedly Bergsonian inflection which distinguishes it from Kracauer’s more directly Kantian-inspired conception of the film image as displaying a sensual ‘moment of physical reality’ (Kracauer 1997: 308). The difference here lies in the fact that, for Bergson, engagement with the empirical should, ideally, be marked by a considerable degree of intentional reflexive activity. This is what Bergson refers to as ‘self-conscious instinct’ (Russell 1965: 763), which is superior to mere perception itself: ‘the lowest degree of mind’ (Russell 1965: 761).

For Bergson, therefore, the return to physical reality should also bring to bear ‘self-conscious instinct’ and, in terms of memory, ‘independent recollection’ upon the world of experience; and this also means that, in Bazin, Kracauer’s more corporeal ‘moment of physical reality’ becomes endowed with an additional, and intrinsic, existential propensity (Russell 1965: 763). For Bazin, the encounter with secondary detail should provide a platform for the precipitate contemplation of more broad-spectrum modes of experience by the spectator: a form of contemplation embodied in Bazin’s conception of the ideal spectator as one who attempts to grasp reality intuitively, in a ‘global’ manner (Andrew 1990: 21). Thus, secondary detail should not only be an empirical constituent devoid of purpose but one which, whilst placing impediments in the way of the enlarging dominion of those purposeful projects that flow through the film, is also able to facilitate contemplation of the relationship between such empirical constituents and the general. The role of secondary detail is, therefore, to combat purposefulness in general, whilst also carrying through the specific purpose of linking the particular to the general; and the excessive ‘sound of a
windscreen-wiper' in Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne displays this latter, precipitate process, as well as an interruptive purpose, in suspending the diegetic surge of the narrative. Whilst, therefore, it can be argued that the capacity of the film image to link the particular to the general is afforded great importance by both Bazin and Kracauer, it can also be argued that Bazin places greater weight upon such a capacity than does Kracauer who, in contrast, places the greater stress on the ability of the film image to render the particular in all its corporeal physicality.

Given the degree to which Bazin highlights the consequence of the presence of empirical secondary detail within film, and also given the extent of his effusive praise for a film such as Robert Flaherty's Man of Aran (1934), it is understandable that he should also address the issue of the significance of such detail within the documentary film more generally. However, when he does so, Bazin appears to come to the conclusion that secondary detail may sometimes take on a dissimilar character and role within the documentary film to that which it does within feature films such as La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc and Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne because the documentary film is, generally speaking, less ordered than such feature films. For example, when discussing Thor Heyerdahl's Kon Tiki (1950), Bazin centres upon the 'unfinished' quality of the film: a quality which, he believes, endows the film with munificent 'faults' that arc, ultimately, of pivotal importance in enabling the film to evoke emblematic connotation (Bazin 1967: 162). Bazin argues that Kon Tiki is necessarily incomplete because the primitive conditions affecting its filming could only ever allow a work of such rudimentary character to materialize, and he goes on to argue that it is this undeveloped level of finish that prevents the film from generating the quantity and quality of secondary 'noises' that play such a positively interruptive role within La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc and Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne. In addition, were such secondary noises to be forced into the narrative of such an undeveloped film as Kon Tiki they would unavoidably become unduly foregrounded, thereby altering the film's general bearing. In films such as La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc and Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne secondary 'noises' are thoroughly integrated into complex and sophisticated narrative structures, and it is this degree of integration which ensures that they do not become unduly prominent, and so challenge the overall realist orientation of the films. However, in a case such as is presented by Kon Tiki, where the narrative is not so intricate, or developed or sophisticated, the use of such secondary detail, with its necessarily foregrounded formal aspect, inevitably runs the risk of turning the film into something of a formalist, anti-realist work.

However, Bazin does not argue that Kon Tiki lacks the sort of interruptive secondary detail evident within La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc and Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne, but that such detail takes on an entirely different character within Kon Tiki, because, in Heyerdahl's film, empirical detail does not so much work to constitute interruptive presence, as interruptive 'absence', or what Bazin refers to as 'missing documents' (Bazin 1967: 162). Bazin argues that the film images within Kon Tiki have an emergent, or half-formed, rather than fully realized quality and are, as a consequence, intrinsically unable to take full hold of the extensiveness and fecundity of the natural world displayed before the camera. As a consequence, these
semi-realized images have the effect of creating fissures within the diegesis, openings through which a spectator is impelled to intuit the external existence of such natural richness and opulence. These insufficient images are therefore, according to Bazin, the visible, empirical, present fragments of an absent greater whole: 'like those moss-covered stones that, surviving, allow us to reconstruct buildings and statues that no longer exist, the pictures that are here presented are the remains of an unfinished creation about which one hardly dares to dream' (Bazin 1967: 160).

Far from repudiating Kon Tiki for its lack of interruptive secondary detail, therefore, Bazin argues that the film's 'unfinished' and 'faulty' character makes it both 'admirable and overwhelming' on three related counts (Bazin 1967: 161). First, Bazin believes the presence of so many 'faults' within the film is greatly preferable to the 'faultless and complete [and, therefore, shallow and instrumental] report which would have been offered by an organised film' (Bazin 1967: 162). Second, Bazin contends that only a rudimentary film, of necessity full of such 'faults', and lacking in overall complexity, could have achieved the degree of authentic depiction which he believes Kon Tiki attains. As Bazin puts it, it is because the primitive raft of the Kon Tiki had the appearance of 'flotsam' for the wildlife of the ocean that the 'fauna of the Pacific' chose to approach it so intimately (Bazin 1967: 162). Third, and perhaps most importantly, the interruptive absences within Kon Tiki carry through a crucial synthesizing role in relating the particular to the universal, through conjuring up a panoply of 'missing documents': 'it remains true that this film is not made up of only what we see - its faults are equally witness to its authenticity. The missing documents are the negative imprints of the expedition – its inscription chiselled deep' (Bazin 1967: 162).

Following Bazin, it can be tentatively and figuratively argued that Kon Tiki is made up of two kinds of substance: 'matter' and 'non-matter'. The 'matter' of the film consists of those 'fluid and trembling images [...] the objectivised memory of the actors in the drama' (Bazin 1967: 161); whilst the 'non-matter' in the film consists of those 'missing documents': the interruptive absences which 'chisel deep' into the extensive and fecund world, which expands out from the source point of material images, driven on by the perceptive activity of the spectator. Bazin's reference to 'objectivised memory' here does of course also indicate the presence of yet another important theme within Bazin's thought, though one which can only be dealt with here synoptically. In his essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', Bazin refers to the ability of the photographic image to wrench a fleeting moment of experience from the corrupting 'flow of time' in order to hold that moment up for critical and spiritual contemplation (Bazin 1967: 9); and Bazin also appears to suggest the presence of a similar practice of the enlightening 'embalm[ing] of time' (Bazin 1967: 14) in Kon Tiki, when he asserts that the 'fluid and trembling images' in Heyerdahl's film constitute an 'objectivised memory', which confers an 'eternal substance' upon those images (Bazin 1967: 163).

If Bazin's assessment of secondary detail as 'indifferent' betrays the influence of Kant and Bergson, his assertion that such detail also guarantees filmic 'realism' betrays the influence of yet another intellectual tradition, that of phenomenology. For Bazin, 'realism' occurs when empirical
diegetic autonomy, deployed in conjunction with theme and action within the totality of the film, replicates the way that consciousness should, used to, but in fact actually still does (although in a troubled way) interact with reality, or 'nature'. When, therefore, Bazin argues that the presence of secondary details with relative autonomy, in proper interaction with theme and concept, guarantees filmic 'realism', what he means is that such a process replicates our actual experience of reality. Bazin's position here stems from the phenomenological concept of the Lebenswelt, or 'lifeworld'. In our experience of the Lebenswelt, the world of immediate perceptual experience, we encounter instrumental ideologies, and 'purposive projects': undertakings that have a 'purpose', aims and objectives, and which seek to enclose consciousness within restricted, instrumental horizons (Bernet and Marbach 1993: 221-22). However, our encounters with these rational/cognitive phenomena also occur in combination with our experience of objects, emotions, feelings, desires and other non-rational phenomena. The Lebenswelt of our immediate experience of the world is a system in indeterminate flux, in which consciousness interacts with the world in an unorganized or, as Lukács (see later) puts it, 'even-handed' manner. Our experience of reality is, therefore, one in which purposive projects are encountered alongside more intuitive modes of being and activity, and, far from dominating such experiences, purposive projects actually constitute the lesser part of our overall experience because the general structure of the Lebenswelt is founded upon indeterminacy rather than purposiveness. As Husserl puts it, the Lebenswelt is an essentially non-conceptual and non-cognitive 'world': 'the world in which we live intuitively' (Husserl 1970: 139).

However, according to both Kracauer and Bazin, the normal segregation between purposiveness and indeterminacy that ought to hold within our existential experience, one in which indeterminacy should hold the greater sway, has become distorted within modernity, and it is now purposive, instrumental rationality that wields the greater, and therefore abnormal, influence. This also leads, inevitably, to a related predicament, in which the 'normal', more equivalent intersection of human concerns and the world, which should predominate within experience, becomes distorted, and in which such concerns come to dominate a physical world perpetually withdrawing from sight. For a film to be 'realistic', in Bazin's manifold sense of the term, therefore, it must reconstitute the opposite division between purposiveness and indeterminacy which ought to prevail within experience, and also counter the excessive and unbalanced fixation with the human sphere that characterizes modernity by bringing the physical world of nature back into the sphere of representation. In carrying through this process of reconstitution, resistance and resumption, the realistic film will necessarily replicate the actual structure of our experience of the Lebenswelt, and will be 'realistic' in that sense.

In the essay entitled 'Cinema and Exploration' which appears in What is Cinema? Volume I, Bazin argues that such a process of reconstitution, resistance and resumption can be identified within a number of canonical documentary films. For example, in comparing the lavishly produced feature film, Scott of the Antarctic (Charles Frend, 1948) with Herbert Ponting's earlier With Scott to the South Pole, Bazin argues that the latter
It is not totally clear which film Bazin is referring to here, but, in all probability, it is a French-language dubbed version of The Story of Captain Scott (1936), the shortened version of the earlier The Great White Silence (1924) and 90° South (1933). All three films were based on footage shot by Ponting during Scott's failed and fatal 1910-12 expedition to the South Pole.

Bazin's central point in relation to the two films he mentions here is that, whereas the ideological discourses within Scott of the Antarctic are far too present and overwhelming within a film which contains too many 'unfortunately heavily didactic scenes' (Bazin 1967: 158), such discourses are more integrated within the extensive 'polar landscapes' which both predominate and are 'revealed' within the Ponting film (Bazin 1967: 154). Bazin adopts a similar position to this in relation to Kon Tiki, La Croisière noire (Leon Poirier, 1926), Annapurna (Marcel Ichac, 1933) and Flaherty's Nanook, Man of Aran and Louisiana Story (1948); and his essential claim in respect of these films is that they achieve a more appropriate balance between direction and indeterminacy, whilst also placing greater emphasis upon portrayal of the natural, as opposed to the human world.

A similar position to that adopted by Bazin, on the balance to be achieved between the employment of directive and ambivalent elements, and portrayal of the human and natural spheres within the documentary film, is also adopted by Kracauer. For example, Kracauer characterizes Paul Rotha’s World of Plenty (1943) in negative terms as a ‘propaganda film steeped in physical reality’ (as opposed to a ‘realist’ film steeped in physical reality), over-reliant on directive language (Kracauer 1997: 211). On the other hand, Kracauer is more positive about Rotha’s later World Without End (1953), on the grounds that, although, like the earlier film, World Without End also contains a clear ‘ideological theme’, this directive element is ‘counterbalanced’ by, first, an apparently unsystematic ‘cutting on resemblances’, in which images of diverse cultural mannerisms are set adjacent to each other; and, second, a use of ‘actual sounds’ (Bazin’s ‘secondary noises’) which frequently ‘occur in the absence of purposeful speech’ (Kracauer 1997: 205). It is the ‘cutting on resemblances’ within World without End, and the manner in which the purposive elements within the film are securely entrenched within a more overlying body of ‘purposeless’ filmed visual material, which ensure that the narrative and mise-en-scène of the later Rotha film follow a tangential and indicative course: one which echoes our experience of the Lebenswelt.

The model of film-making which Kracauer endorses here is also comprised of two related imperatives. First, and as previously argued, Kracauer demands that the suggestive or evocative content of the film should take precedence over other, more directive compositional elements, including those of story, plot and formative editing, all of which must cede primacy to what Kracauer refers to as the ‘substance of the images’ themselves (Kracauer 1997: 207) and the ‘continuum of physical reality’ which that substance exhibits (Kracauer 1997: 212). However, second, and in accordance with an approach which is fundamentally characteristic of all the intuitionist realist film theorists, Kracauer demands that both the organized aesthetic structure of the film, and its affective semantic content, should emerge out of, and be determined by, aspects and elements which are intrinsic to those portions of physical reality which are filmed. Here, the meanings generated by the film are the outcome of what Kracauer, quoting Grierson, calls the film-maker’s ‘penetrations of the “wide world”’ (Kracauer 1997: 204); and Grierson also makes the same point elsewhere, when he argues that
the plot of the documentary film must be derived from dramatic principles inherent to the subject matter of the film itself, rather than be imposed upon such subject matter (Aitken 1990: 105-06). This was one of Grierson’s chief concerns in his *Drifters* (1929), and a feature which he particularly admired in films such as *North Sea* (Harry Watt, 1938) and *Turksib* (Viktor Turin, 1929) (Aitken 2006: 153).

Kracauer also makes a distinction between documentary films that cut on resemblances and more ‘formal’, ‘ornamental’ documentary films that cut on ‘analogies’ (Kracauer 1997: 207). The film that cuts on analogy is inspired by a convergent, rather than divergent principle and, because of this, is also classed by Kracauer as a type of ‘propaganda’, though of a different order to that evident within the ideologically ‘perfect screen propaganda’ of a film such as Rothe’s *World of Plenty* (Kracauer 1997: 210). The film cut on analogy is propagandistic not only, or always, when such a film mobilizes ‘ideological themes’, but also, and always, when it ‘superimposes’ purposive, structuring formal and ‘ornamental relationships’ upon the ‘substance of the images’ and the ‘qualities of the objects’ portrayed in those images (Kracauer 1997: 207). Kracauer takes as an example of such superimposed, formal ‘ornamentalism’ Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: die Symphonie der Grossstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*) (1929), hereafter referred to as *Berlin*, a film which is a particular *bête noir* of both Kracauer and Grierson.

Although Kracauer admires *Berlin* for its ‘candid shots of streets and their extensions’ and ‘transient impressions’, he also believes such *Lebenswelt*-like ingredients are overwhelmed by the film’s overall formative inclinations (Kracauer 1997: 207). According to Kracauer, even the ‘cutting on resemblances’ evident within *Berlin* remain predominantly analogical in character because each resemblance is simultaneously comprised of other, contrasting elements (for example, two adjacent shapes may be similar but the objects that they are shapes of may be radically dissimilar). In addition, the cutting on analogy, which predominates within Ruttmann’s film, is of necessity conceptual in character and therefore unavoidably formalist.

Above all, the aesthetic qualities of *Berlin* do not directly emerge out of the substance of the objects that the film contains, but are sited upon such objects, as a veneer of foreign, formative aesthetic schemata. For Kracauer, an aesthetic quality such as, for example, ‘tempo’, remains only a mere ‘formal conception, if it is not defined with reference to the qualities of the objects through which it materializes’, and is used to construct an artificial form of order. *Berlin* can, therefore, be contrasted with a thoroughly ‘realist’ film such as *Man of Aran*, in which tempo is fully ‘defined with reference to the phenomena being filmed’; and even with a film such as René Clair’s *Entr’acte* (1926), which employs the same sort of ‘resemblances and contrasts of phenomena’ found in *Berlin* in order to deconstruct forms of order (Kracauer does not speculate on whether *Entr’acte* also respects the ‘substance of the images’ which the film contains, or the ‘qualities of the objects’ portrayed within those images) (Kracauer 1997: 207).

As with *Berlin*, Kracauer also castigates the excessively purposive approach adopted by John Grierson in his Canadian *World in Action* (1939-45) series as the product of an ‘uncinematic documentary idea’ (Kracauer 1997: 211). However, as has been argued elsewhere, Grierson’s
2. The original edition of *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* was published in German in 1963 by Luchterhand publishers, Neuwied, as *Ästhetik, Teil 1, 2: Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*. A further Hungarian edition: *Az esztetikuni sajátosság*, Közö I, II, was published by Akadémiai Kiadó Press, Budapest in 1965. However, the edition consulted here: *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*, Band 1, 2, was published in German by Aufbau-Verlag, Berlin and Weimar in 1981, and it is this latter date which will be used for purposes of reference within this article.

Aesthetic system can be divided into two distinct historical periods (Aitken 1998a: 41–42). From around 1942 onwards, and beginning most markedly with an essay entitled ‘The Documentary Idea: 1942’, Grierson’s approach did indeed display the sort of ‘uncinematic documentary idea’ which Kracauer beards him for (Grierson, in Aitken 1998a: 41–43). However, and in contrast, Grierson’s earlier writings and film-making, from around 1916 to 1940, display a marked concern for the expressive richness of the actuality image which is fully consonant with Bazin and Kracauer’s insistence on the need to enmesh purposeful projects within an overarching, indeterminate, visual expressionism (Aitken 2001: 167–68). There is, therefore, a long remove between the instrumental imperatives of the *World in Action* series and a film such as *Drifters* (Grierson, 1929), which is influenced by the neo-Hegelian and neo-Kantian philosophical idealism that informed all Grierson’s early thought.

The concerns expressed by Kracauer and Bazin over the ability of film to achieve an enhanced representation of the balance between the natural and human spheres through the empirical qualities of the film image, and to replicate our experience of the *Lebenswelt*, are also of central importance to Georg Lukács, that is, Lukács the film, rather than the literary, theorist; and this article will conclude with an analysis of Lukács’s theorization of the role of the empirical within film as set out in his *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen (The Specificity of the Aesthetic)* ([1963] 1981), hereafter referred to as *Die Eigenart*.² *Die Eigenart* marks a return to the questions of abstract philosophy Lukács had more or less set aside following the publication of *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein (History and Class Consciousness)* (1923). Apart from *Der junge Hegel (The Young Hegel)* (1948) and *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft (The Destruction of Reason)* (1953), the rest of Lukács’s major writings over the 1947–63 period were concerned with questions of literary realism. *Die Eigenart*, therefore, marks a return to some of the issues that Lukács had explored in early works such as *Die Seele und die Formen (Soul and Form)* (1911). At the same time, Lukács’s return to general questions of high aesthetic theory in *Die Eigenart* also accompanied his re-engagement with issues relating to film. In 1913 he produced a short essay on film, entitled ‘Gedanken zu einer Aesthetik des Kino’ (‘Thoughts on an Aesthetic for the Cinema’), hereafter referred to as ‘Gedanken’. However, it was not until much later in his career that he once again turned to the cinema, in a series of interviews and short essays published between 1961 and 1971, in the journals *Cinema Nuovo* and *Filmkultúra*, and in the chapter in *Die Eigenart* entitled ‘Film’.

In emphasizing both the emancipatory and disadvantageous potential of film form, ‘Gedanken’ both predates and prefigures Kracauer’s later essay, ‘Kult der Zerstreuung’ (‘Cult of Distraction’) (1926), which, like ‘Gedanken’, was also originally published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. For example, in ‘Gedanken’, Lukács argues that, in lacking ‘perspectives’ (Perspektive), the film image reinforces the conditions of fragmentation which characterize modernity (Lukács 1913: 144). Here, the photographic image is conceived of as a self-enclosed element, torn out of social context and reference. On the other hand, however, Lukács (like Kracauer) also argues that, because film, as a medium, is inherently fragmented at
the level of the shot, it is also able to illustrate, through analogy, the fragmentation that characterizes the modern experience, and this, in turn, can lead to an enhanced understanding of such experience. Nevertheless, Lukács believes that the potential for such enlightening disclosure is inevitably constrained by the character of the film image as a concrete micro-totality, in which the singular is given in such concentration that the shot comes ultimately to reinforce the prevailing reification. If, therefore, the modern condition is characterized by ruinous fragmentation, what Lukács refers to as the 'photographic basis' of the film medium can also be regarded as an additional and unwelcome expression of such fragmentation (Lukács 1981: 493); and, in *Die Eigenart*, Lukács draws upon this idea of the particularism, or 'singularity' (Einzeltät) of the film image, to argue that the photographic basis stands counter to any latent capacity the medium may possess to link the particular to the general so as to portray totality (Lukács 1981: 493).

As has been argued, intuitionist cinematic realism is centrally concerned with the need to link the particular to the general, both in terms of the utopian mission of film and the existential requirements of humankind; and Lukács also holds fast to this tradition when he claims both that the particularity of the photographic image has a 'disanthropomorphising' effect and that the medium as a whole must, in the face of such an intrinsic Achilles' heel, endeavour as much as possible to surmount this tendency, through drawing upon another important quality of the film shot: its privileged correspondence with our perceptual experience of external reality (Lukács 1981: 468). As a philosophical realist and Marxist, Lukács is committed a priori to the conviction that both our perceptual experience and aesthetic representations of reality are, in principle, able to converge with reality and are not merely symbolic constructions. Consequently, in *Die Eigenart*, he argues that, because the photographic basis of film was developed in order to meet an existential need to replicate perceptual experience and, because our perceptual experience converges with reality, if the photographic basis corresponds to a significant extent with perceptual experience, then it also, in a sense, can be said to 'converge' with reality. When, for example, Lukács discusses the relationship of perception to external reality, he argues that the 'colour green appears in consciousness, as a physiologically necessary reaction, to a determinate frequency of vibrations' (Parkinson 1970: 117). Lukács does not argue that there is a viridical identity between copy (psychological appearance/physiological reaction) and original (frequency of vibrations), as such a stance would rest upon naïve realist assumptions incompatible with his Marxist philosophical realism. Instead, Lukács argues that the condition of necessity that figures the particular representation in consciousness of that which we label 'green' also endows that representation with an advantaged status that stems from such necessity: a necessity which must inevitably entail an extensive degree of correspondence with reality (Parkinson 1970: 117). It also follows from this, that, if film is able to generate a simulacrum of this representation, that simulacrum will also be similarly endowed with a privileged status, one which is derived from the close relationship between the film image and a perceptual representation which is of necessity related to reality.
In *Die Eigenart*, Lukács appears to theorize the relationship between film, perceptual experience and external reality in terms of four distinct provinces that flank each other. First, there is the external province of a material world, which we encounter through our sensory apparatus as frequencies of vibrations. Second, there is the external province of material physiological reactions, which arise from our sensory apparatus in response to the encounter between that apparatus and those vibrations. Third, there is the truly ‘internal’ province of consciousness, or perceptual experience, within which those physiological reactions assume a certain ‘appearance’. Fourth, and finally, there is the external province of the material, photographic film image, which, although external and material, and thus fundamentally dissimilar to consciousness, is developed in response to a need to portray the appearances that physiological reactions take on within consciousness. Although these four provinces are fundamentally different from each other, and each is composed of a different substance, provinces 2 (physiological reactions), 3 (consciousness) and 4 (the film image) are fundamentally determined by the need to realize correspondence with province 1 (external reality). This means that the empirical basis of the film image can be conceived of as a concrete structure whose material constitution is fundamentally driven both by the imperative to correspond to external reality as that reality ‘appears’ within consciousness and by the need to hold such a correspondence to ‘appearance’ up for contemplative reflection. For the first time, as both Bazin and Lukács put it, human perceptual experience, which essentially consists of a consciousness that seeks to know reality, can be both portrayed and preserved.

Lukács also believes that film’s ability to generate a simulacrum of the appearance which perceptual experience takes on within consciousness endows the medium, and particularly the photographic basis of the medium, with a privileged status and elemental ‘authority’ (Lukács 1981: 473). Such status and authority also inexorably entails that, in order to remain faithful to the aesthetic specificity of the medium, film must remain visually realistic in disposition and, in fact, the tenor of Lukács’s perspective here appears to suggest advocacy of a decidedly naturalist model of film form. Such a model would also, of necessity, inevitably renounce the category of formalist preference that Lukács finds so troublingly manifest within the ‘technologically-centred-positivistic metaphysics’ of the Soviet montage cinema of the 1920s (Lukács 1981: 495). According to Lukács, that cinema was founded upon an exceedingly formalist (Kracauer would say ‘ornamental’) manipulation of the photographic foundation, and Lukács believes that such a measure of manipulation establishes the conditions that make it ultimately greatly probable that any film founded upon such a ‘technologically-centred-positivistic metaphysics’ will ‘transform the photographed truth into a direct untruth – into a lie’ (Lukács 1981: 496). Lukács is, for example, apprehensive about the incidence of ‘reassembling’ manifest within *Bronenosets “Potemkin”* (Battleship Potemkin) (Eisenstein, 1925), and, although he acknowledges that even the most realistic of films may still ‘exhibit the same problem of truth and untruth that is inherent to any use of language in human life’ (Lukács 1981: 496), he nevertheless believes that such a predicament is
more liable to materialize the further the medium transports itself away from the naturalism of the photographic basis, in order to pursue the 'purely formal' 'creative-organising principle' which underlies formalist montage cinema (Lukács 1981: 494).

For Lukács, therefore, any film, including the most 'realist', is capable of mobilizing manipulative ideology. However, although Lukács's acknowledgement of the existence of such a capability again reinforces the claim that his ideas cannot be considered to be naïve realist, this is not the central point that Lukács wishes to make when he claims that a formalist film may 'transform the photographed truth into an untruth - into a lie'. For Lukács, a film image that embodies a high degree of technical artifice effectively, and unfortunately, breaks the link that exists between image and the determinate 'appearance', which external reality assumes within human consciousness of perceptual experience. As already argued, a relationship of necessity exists between such an 'appearance' and that which it is an appearance of within external reality, and that relationship of necessity implies both the existence of a condition of correspondence between appearance and external reality, and that such correspondence is 'true'. When, therefore, Lukács argues that a formalist film is likely to 'transform the photographed truth into a direct untruth - into a lie', he means, first, that such a film is liable to be pervaded by ideology and, second, that such a film would also shatter the crucial existential link - the 'true' link - that should hold between film image, the determined appearance which external reality takes up within human consciousness, and external reality itself. Finally, if the 'authority' and aesthetic specificity of film resides in an imperative and facility to engender a simulacrum of the appearance which perceptual experience takes on within consciousness, films that turn their back on such an imperative and facility must, inevitably, cede such 'authority'.

In addition to his conviction that the aesthetic 'authority' and specificity of film can be located within the ability of the medium to create a simulacrum of the manifestation which perceptual experience takes on within consciousness, Lukács also argues that such authority and specificity is also established by the medium's capacity to render yet another, and equally vital aspect of human experience: the interaction between 'being' (Wesen) and 'appearance' (Erscheinung) (Lukács 1981: 481). Here, the term 'being' refers to both consciousness and those aspects of the material world that have a resonance with a human need to experience freedom and totality. For example, 'being' would reside in aspects of the world, such as nature, care, love, creativity, aesthetic experience, moral judgement or self-reflective thought; all of which are likely to lead to an enhanced knowledge of freedom and totality. 'Appearance', on the other hand, refers to those aspects of the material world that have their origins in instrumental rationales, or which are merely material objects, irreconcilable with values such as freedom and totality, and so more disadvantageous to the realization of human 'species essence' (Gattungswesen) (Heller 1983: 177).  

What we find here, at one level, is a rearticulation of a familiar existentialist trope: one which posits the existence of a fundamental opposition between consciousness and the material world, an opposition first articulated by Lukács himself some fifty years earlier, in Die Seele und die Formen.
In the experienced world of everyday life, ‘being’ and ‘appearance’ coexist uncomfortably, in the sense that the world we encounter contains material phenomena, some of which are meaningful for us and some of which are not. Wesen, as the need to experience freedom and totality within consciousness, both pervades aspects of the object world, and is also distinct from other aspects of that world, but is always resident within consciousness as an underlying imperative. What we are faced with, therefore, as we move through the Lebenswelt, is an interlaced flux of being and appearance, meaningfulness and non-meaningfulness, freedom/totality and constraint/dissolution.

However, although Lukács reiterates a premise common within existential philosophy when adopting the stance he does on the interwoven character of being and appearance within the Lebenswelt, it is important to recognize that, when he comes to discuss the relationship between being, appearance and film, he endows that premise with a markedly more innovative inflection. When, for example, Lukács asserts that film has a close affinity to ‘everyday life’ (Altag), he refers to the medium’s ability to transpose both perceptual experience, and the interaction of being and appearance into aesthetic form (Lukács 1981: 481) in an even-handed way, without prioritization, so linking being and appearance together in the way that these categories are actually linked within experience (Lukács 1981: 481–82). Here, the ‘reciprocal relationship between man and his environment is re-established’ within the film image, and the ‘outside world’ (Aussenwelt) takes on the same importance as the world of human concerns (Lukács 1981: 478). As this reciprocal relationship is re-established through the catalyst of film, the actual make-up of the existential interaction between meaningfulness and non-meaningfulness within experience is portrayed, the interaction between consciousness and the ‘outside world’ is represented, and the empirical basis of film holds up the world for attention, in the face of an abstract rationality and fixation with human concerns that had previously consigned it to the periphery of consideration. Here, the empirical basis of film endows the medium with a kind of cinematic egalitarianism, based on a reciprocal portrayal of nature and the human; a portrayal that forces back the rampant, abstract humanism unleashed by the forces of capitalist modernity.

Lukács's stance on the role of the photographic basis of film, and on the part played by the empirical film image in reconstituting the indefinite interaction that exists between being and appearance, can only be described as ‘naturalist’, because of the emphasis which Lukács places upon unstructured, empirical filmic representation. In his literary criticism, Lukács constantly inveighs against naturalism, which he regards as the aesthetic equivalent of fragmented ‘ordinary life’, and as a form of art constitutionally incapable of portraying totality (Márkus 1983: 6). However, in considering film in Die Eigenart, Lukács effectively adopts a contrary position, and his assertion that the position he advocates ‘must not be referred to as naturalism’ (als Naturalismus bezeichnet werden) is unconvincing (Lukács 1981: 481). One of the key objections that Lukács raises in relation to literary naturalism is that the large amount of descriptive detail employed within a novel by Émile Zola or Franz Kafka has the effect of obstructing the creation of an adequate delineation of the relationship
between the particular and the general (Lukács 1977: 282). However, in *Die Eigenart*, Lukács draws on Hegelian distinctions between the plastic arts and propositional forms of expression to argue that, because a work of plastic art is a concrete sensuous 'objectivation', rather than an abstract, non-material form of conceptual signification, the unity of the particular and the general within such forms of art can only be invoked through the particular (Taylor 1975: 472). It follows from this that, in a primarily plastic medium such as film, the particular must predominate, and so a naturalist approach, which relies upon the concrete to engender suggestive evocation, actually facilitates the establishment of totality because such an approach links the particular to the general in a way compatible with the rightfully predominant role of the empirical, the specificity of the medium and the nature of the plastic arts themselves.

As a consequence of this position on the foundational naturalism of the plastic arts, Lukács imagines a type of film that would portray totality, not through the depiction of all the 'mediations' which comprise that totality (as, for example, in the literary realism of Honoré de Balzac, Leo Tolstoy, Sir Walter Scott or Thomas Mann), but through the portrayal of a concrete exemplar which evokes totality. Such a film would present the 'totality of a limited slice of life' through the deployment of 'non-interpretative descriptive methods' and 'suggestive description', and a film of Lukácsian cinematic realism would, therefore, condense the mediated totality into a portrayal of a dense network of concrete relationships, focused upon a symbolic exemplar (Lukács 1971: 26). Such a film would also portray the material world, and the intersection between nature and human affairs. Narrative structure would also be open and, to a degree, non-linear, echoing the interconnected structure of the *Lebenswelt*, whilst the idea of human essence would be both embedded within a filmic naturalism and endowed with historical/cultural specificity.4

Conclusions

This article focuses on the role and importance of the empirical film image within theories of intuitionist cinematic realism. That role and importance is seen to consist in (1) an 'authority' that is founded upon the ability of the film image to replicate and fix perceptual experience, and to generate a simulacrum of the 'appearance', which perceptual experience of external reality takes on within consciousness; (2) an ability to reconstitute the necessary and, therefore (in Lukács's terms) 'true' relationship that exists between representation, perceptual experience and external reality; (3) an ability to combat and neutralize ideological discourse; (4) an ability to combat some of the more negative aspects of modernity, and the condition of subjectivity within modernity; (5) an ability to even-handedly represent the interaction of 'being' and 'appearance'; (6) an ability to allow nature, or 'physical reality', or the 'outside world', back into a field of representation overly occupied with human matters; (7) an ability to bring the world of human concerns into closer relation with this 'physical reality', and thus reconstitute a more authentic form of interaction between consciousness and nature; and (8) an ability to provide a foundation for critical forms of spectatorship. More research is needed on the role and importance that Bazin, Grierson, Kracauer, Lukács, and intuitionist realist

4. In *Die Eigenart*, Lukács often reiterates the point that film must represent its subject in relation to historically specific contexts, as well as in relation to both a model of human essence and the imperatives demanded by the aesthetic specificity of the medium. For example, in reiterating Marx's criticism that Feuerbach comprehended human 'being' [Wesen] only as a generic species [Gattung], Lukács argues that art must portray notions of 'humankind' in relation to the interplay between concrete individuality and respective social formations' (Lukács 1981: 480).
thought generally, attribute to the empirically based film image. However, it appears reasonable to argue that this aspect of intuitionist realist thought provides a promising foundation for further consideration of the role of empirically based representation in film, and in the documentary film in particular.

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