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Introduction

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Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, Volume 49, Number 1,
Spring 2008, pp. 48-54 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/frm.0.0004>

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Morphing Realities

The Current Status of the Real in Film and Television

Nitzan Ben Shaul, Dossier Editor

Introduction

The long-held presumption that films react by fidelity, to abstraction or manipulation of an existent pre-filmic reality came under attack with the advent of the postmodern episteme. Postmodernists suggested that “reality,” if existent at all, is always-already present in people’s minds as textual fabrication, model, or simulation that in fact precede reality or even generate it. As Jean Baudrillard described it, “the empirical object, to which qualities of shape, color, matter, function and discourse are assigned is a myth . . . it is nothing but the types of relations and different meanings converging and swirling around it.”¹

This conception of reality gradually invaded different disciplines. Hayden White rejected the historians’ pretension to reveal humanity’s elusive past through historical facts, claiming that facts are nothing more than texts that mediate an always-already mediated reality. Rather, historians construct the past to begin with according to the structuring possibilities allowed by language (or film language). Likewise, the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn argued that scientists are mostly driven in their research by a set of conventions and institutional directives, contending that the evolution of scientific research is characterized by the upholding of theories until there is so much contradicting data that it becomes impossible to cling on to them, and yet there is never assurance that the new theory is any better than the one it replaced. The radical questioning of our ability to know the world was fur-

ther complicated by Michel Foucault's position that the search for truth is in itself nothing more than a powerful discourse competing with other discourses within the cultural configurations of power. There is not one truth claimed Foucault, only discursive truisms. For Baudrillard reality is itself an image, a simulacrum. While earlier the simulacrum was discussed in terms of its reproducing or distorting a reality that presumably preceded it, today claimed Baudrillard it seemed clear that this pre-supposition is an untenable mental manipulation aimed at safeguarding the fact that reality does not exist, thereby constituting fake hierarchies among different types of simulations.

Postmodern notions inform many contemporary films. Emblematic is *The Matrix* (Larry and Andy Wachowski, US, 1999), telling the story of Neo, a computer hacker who learns from mysterious rebels that reality is only a huge simulation. The film's stunning digital effects make tangible the idea of reality-as-simulation through Neo's gradual empowerment to manipulate it by floating within it or by slowing, accelerating or elasticizing it. The relation between the digital revolution and the concept of the simulacrum emblemized in *The Matrix* has often been noticed by researchers. Vivian Sobchack has suggested that the digital device of morphing instantiates Baudrillard's simulacrum in that the morph has no origin whatsoever, since that from which it changes does not "cause" or precede that to which it has changed. Morphing implies seamless reversibility, and one image is not more real, original, or essentially different from the other.

The idea that reality is based on the propagation of inter-referring simulations that deny meaningful categorical or hierarchical differentiations pervades many contemporary films whose focus is upon the destabilization of the distinction between reality and fiction. Well-known cases include Ridley Scott's director's-cut version of *Blade Runner* (US, 1982)—where Deckard, a "blade runner" in charge of tracking down and terminating replicants turns out to be a replicant himself—and David Cronenberg's film *eXistenZ* (CA, 1999)—where a game designer creates a virtual-reality game that taps into the players' bodies and minds but ultimately leaves them (and us) with the idea that the "reality" from which the film started is just another virtual option within the game.

Likewise, postmodern documentary filmmakers presume from the outset that while documentary and fiction are cultural categories or kinds of discourse with different styling, their distinction does not stem from their approach to an elusive pre-recorded reality. Inadvertently and seamlessly such documentaries mix documentary and fiction fabricating documentary-styled lies and fictional truisms. Israeli filmmaker Avi Mugrabi's film *How I Learned to Overcome My Fear and Love Arik Sharon* (IL, 1997) mixes a documentary following of Ariel Sharon's election campaign with a deceitful documentation of both his slow transformation into one of Sharon's devotees and the deterioration of his marital relations, ending with his wife's decision to leave him because of his changed political affiliation.

Woody Allen's *Zelig* (US, 1983) offers a good illustration of the blurred postmodern distinction between fact and fiction. The film uses various documentary styles such as the use of voice-over commentary over jumpy edited segments of grainy or scratched old-looking black and white archival film footage inserted within modern-looking interviews in color, to tell the story of Zelig, a human chameleon who adapts his looks and personality to whatever period, place, or circumstances in which he finds himself. *Zelig* comically blurs in both style and content the categorical distinctions between documentary and fiction, film and reality, different historical periods and different identities. The latest morphing of reality can be seen in the widespread Reality TV genre where ordinary people are implanted into fictional gaming situations.

It seems that the conceptual and aesthetic possibilities opened up by the postmodern episteme and the digital revolution erode film's traditional capability to tangibly convey the materiality of the human body and its ensuing desires. On the other hand, films' still prevalent tangibility may be seen to subvert and resist postmodern and digital abstractions that promote a far-fetched all around "evenness" obscuring the real unevenness in the current globalizing capitalist configurations of power.

The essays included in this dossier stem from an international colloquium held in June 2006 at the Film and Television Department of Tel Aviv University. In our call for papers we invited prominent film and television scholars to join us and ponder upon the status of the real in contemporary film and television in light of the widespread postmodern episteme that suggests perceiving the body as a malleable performance given to shaping and reshaping. It bothered us that much of postmodern thought implies that behind films and television there have never been but signs, "vactors" not actors, simulations rather than representations.

We asked ourselves how theory of the medium of moving-images can help reconsider our assumptions on the self and the real. Has the adoption of new technologies led to the forming of a new self? What nonsubjective forms of agency appear on screen? How are we to understand today the emotions, identifications, and comprehension of film viewers? How are our legacies—images of the self, the mind, and the body—understood within cinematic texts and in the interrelations between the screen and its spectators? What new mythologies about humans are being fabricated? What cinematic texts should inspire us to create new concepts of thought? How can a small minority of first-world intellectuals elegantly insist today that everything is mere image and sterile simulacra? Should the real as experienced by the majority of human beings deeply sunk in poverty, famine, and war be eclipsed and condescended as sheer mirage?

The conference participants suggested answers to some of these challenging questions. Some addressed the theoretical distortions and film con-

cerns brought forth by postmodern theory. Contrary to the detrimental implications of Baudrillard's theory of simulacra to issues of objectivity and authenticity, Daniel Dayan offered the notion of *monstration* (rather than *representation*) to sketch a theory of glancing acts while pointing that a performative conception of film and television need not abolish constructs of objectivity or authenticity. Philip Rosen on his part noted that film theory's traditional trope of flatness has gained dominance in current postmodern cultural theory, leading to a distorted emphasis on space on account of temporality, history, and change while Thomas Elsaesser showed how the globalization-determined barrage of contemporary "Mindgame" films (e.g., *The Matrix*) have merely re-aroused quiet traditional epistemological problems (how do we know what we know) and ontological doubts (about other worlds, other minds).

Contrary to such critiques Orly Lubin suggested that a new epistemology is emerging out of the postmodern move to simulacra. Focusing upon the current construction of history as a product of the gaze rather than the word, she discerns a triple movement of historical negotiations—from narrative to gaze, from story to the material, and from the male to the female point of view—that leads to a new understanding of the sources of acknowledgment, responsibility, accountability, and reparations that we supposedly "lost" with the postmodern move.

Two other presentations offered conflicting accounts of the effects that the split nature of postmodern films have on spectators. Hence, while I, in my paper, considered the frustration, distraction, and alienation caused by split attention problems engendered by postmodern split-screen and split-narrative films such as *Timecode* (Mike Figgis, US, 2000) and *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, US, 2002), Odeya Kohen-Raz and Sandra Meiri focused on several contemporary mainstream films such as *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, US, 2005) and *Big* (Penny Marshall, US, 1988) that offer a specular rupture between the body of the actor/actress and their character in the film, a rupture that effectively forces the viewers' imagination to constantly oscillate between all kinds of extreme differences, leading them to re-evaluate basic tenets.

Other presentations, although dealing with very different sets of films, shared an interest in cinematic attempts at constructing different levels of representation within the same film, inadvertently engaging Baudrillard's claim that the real is just another simulation falsely positioned as privileged by different textual strategies. Tony Kaes, focusing upon silent films that emphasize hallucinations and psychic breakdowns, concluded that their foregrounding of imagination as hallucination sheds light on the very nature of film reality, which is always already imagined. Anat Zanger questioned the function performed by the figuration of still photographs within several postmodern films such as *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, US, 1995) and *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, FR/US, 2001), suggesting that it figures as the last remnant of cinema's traditional commitment to pose as index to its pre-

filmic reality, undermining the attempts made by these films at conveying a reality-insulated labyrinth through the use of different modes of addressing reality that cancel each other out.

Only a fraction of the conference presentations found its way into this dossier. Several worthy presentations didn't reach fruition by the time of the dossier's publication while others have already been published elsewhere.

Except for one essay on Reality TV, all the papers included in this dossier focus on Israeli films or on films addressing Jewish-related subjects. Beyond paying tribute to the conference's location, as a cluster of conference papers can do, these choices, out of many heard over those two days, really were mostly happenstance. But the dossier has benefited in one vital respect. These shared issues offer a close, grounded, and particular evaluation of the very realities of cinematic shifts and refractions that we discussed. Such a specific topic enables us to see more clearly how "reality" does "morph" in our perceptions and in our depictions and why we need the mutability as much as we need the substance.

The first three papers offer evaluations of the inscription of the self in contemporary film and television. Michael Renov addresses the very tangible self-inscription and self-discovery process evident in the increasingly prevalent first-person autobiographical film. Focusing upon Alan Berliner's film *Nobody's Business* (US, 1996), he discerns these films' "discovery of self through a scrutiny of its refraction in the mirror of the family," often through interrogation and reworking of home movie footage.

Countering the authentic self-inscription found in autobiographical films, Jérôme Bourdon deals with Reality TV's fabricated self-inscription of individuals through a visual biopolitics (as Foucault termed it) that has participants gain exposure while accepting new ways of learning how to discipline their bodies. He connects this self-disciplining to commercial television, a political agent with a global reach that encroaches on the disciplining monopoly of the nation State.

Yael Munk on her part, shows how the reality portrayed in a television screen that figures in many contemporary Israeli films, becomes a device to challenge and subvert the films' "real world" by inscribing in it the fantastic visions of outcast and nomadic individuals and communities, indexing thus their desire to be elsewhere.

The four papers that follow share a concern with the reality index involved in attempts to figure traumatic images or deal with traumatic events. These papers show how such films render multilayered constructs that through their kaleidoscopic attempts to face and erase the traumas dealt with, transmit to spectators the concrete psychic and historical reality that engendered them, going far beyond Roland Barthes's conception of traumatic images or events as arresting the signifying process and forcing upon the spectator their indexicality.

Elsaesser, though he could not include his conference presentation, offered a paper that we found to be a good substitute, well suited to the dossier's subject and thematic focus. In this paper he analyzes some of the rhetorical tropes used by filmmakers belonging to the New German cinema as echoing the "absent presence" of the Holocaust. He insightfully shows for example how a rape scene in Alexander Kluge's film *Die Macht der Gefühle/The Power of Feelings* (DE, 1983), when read within the inevitable context of the silenced Holocaust events, offers a wished-for historical reversal "nurturing the insanely forlorn hope that in the non-existent, forever deferred and therefore always present trial of the German nation regarding the responsibility for the Holocaust, the victim—typically imaged as a raped woman—might testify on behalf of the guilty party, by claiming not to have seen/noticed/been aware of having been raped."

Across the divide, Raz Yosef addresses the trauma of the Holocaust for second-generation Israeli Jews, suggesting that fantasy and the unconscious play a central role in the forming of their not-personally-experienced yet traumatic Holocaust memories. Analyzing Eytan Fox's film *Walk on Water* (IL/SE, 2004) he shows how it endeavors yet fails to restage and repair the trauma by displacing it to a phantasmatic scene.

Raya Morag addresses in her paper the (mis)representation of the trauma of suicide attacks in the Israeli media, to which she contrasts the tele-cinema project *Moments* (IL, 2000–05) which provides a befitting response to the time-trap of chronic traumatic temporality "by representing its sudden-ness, irreversibility, uncanny presentification, arbitrariness and negative circularity."

Finally, Nurith Gertz and Gal Hermoni show how Amos Gitai in his film *Kedma* (IL/FR, 2002) displaces historical traumatic events and disconnects them from their referents in reality and from the temporal sequence in which they occurred, evoking in viewers by such de-construction alternative modes of emplotment that revive and refract the reality addressed by the films.

For the rewarding Colloquium out of which the papers collected here stemmed I would like to thank Nurith Gertz, Judd Ne'eman, Anat Zanger, Mihal Friedman, Ilan Avisar, and Boaz Hagin, my colleagues in the Film and Television Department at Tel Aviv University who formed together with me the Colloquium's organizing committee. I would also like to thank the colloquium managers, Anat Turisky and Eran Sagi, two of our department students, who made sure that everything ran smoothly. I am particularly thankful to *Framework* editor Drake Stutesman, who not only encouraged the publication of this dossier but also was actively involved in all the aspects pertaining to its production. Finally, I would like to thank the prominent scholars who agreed to offer blind reviews of the papers submitted and whose comprehensive and detailed comments helped the authors better their arguments and film analyses.

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Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos, 1981), 155.