Afterword: Truth Approaches, Reality Affects

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Figure 1. still image from Wim Wenders, Kings of the Road (1976)

Like Milcho Manchevski — but more from the angle of being a critic or a teacher, rather than a highly accomplished filmmaker — I have frequently been stunned, bemused, or frankly puzzled at what people take or experience to be real in any given film. This is not, in any simple or primary way, a matter of the conventional distinction in cinema between documentary
and fiction; nor is it confined to any particular filmic genre. The moment of truth — to use the title of Francesco Rosi’s 1965 documentary on bullfighting, made (as its DVD distributor Criterion proudly boasts) by a “great Italian truth seeker” — can impress itself upon viewers in the least likely contexts.

I tried to test this business once, on and with my students at university. I devised a course that was called, somewhat cryptically and open-endedly, “Truth, Fiction, Belief.” From week to week, the movies shown as part of the curriculum were a surprise, an improvisation: there was no guiding thread beyond the multiple paradoxes generated by these three terms when brought into collision. Is truth in cinema just what we believe or feel to be true — something, therefore, not objective but subjective? Can fiction deliver forth a truth and, if so, what kind? Where do the various modes and schools of documentary — not to mention all the various realist or neo-realist movements in fictional film — sit on the continuum between ideal transparency and total fabrication? And what’s naturalism? Manchevski sifts through a number of these issues, from his point of view, in the provocative essay you have just read.

For my part, I discovered that the class on truth, fiction, and belief kept turning up the most bizarre responses in participants. On the one hand, the American cinéma-vérité, or ‘direct
cinema,’ exemplars of the early 1960s — about elections, electrocutions, or pop stars on tour — impressed my students as real (even hyperreal), but only when the screen dissolved in a frenzy of bodies shoving and screaming, uncontainable within the camera lens. On the other hand, they came away from a screening of Wim Wenders’s almost three-hour long Kings of the Road (1976) with a single, indelible memory: when, in the midst of a banal, plotless stretch, one of the uncommunicative male heroes dropped his jeans, crouched down in the sand, and took a shit right before the camera, that was definitely real! No cutaways or special effects there; we all saw it with our own eyes! (Ah, the innocence of those analog days . . . .)

Figure 2. still image from Wim Wenders, Kings of the Road (1976)

Some students were disconcerted when I voiced my analytic conclusion: the real, for them,
obviously happens in only two screen registers, at two stark extremes: either total catastrophe, or absolute mundanity. Everything else in the middle was mere fiction.

![Figure 3. still image from Milcho Manchevski, Dust (2001)](image_url)

Manchevski, like the experimentalist James Benning, likes to point at the rectangular movie screen and assert, in any public situation, that it’s all, in some sense, a fiction, all constructed: at every point and every level, there is art and craft, contrivance and manipulation. There should be, in an ideal world, no shame in that; it’s just a fact, it’s what happens when you assemble anything with a mind to its structure, its point, and its impact. This is certainly what Manchevski elaborates when he reminds us of the powers of framing, of montage, of sound design, of even the least seemingly rehearsed or staged effusion of human behaviour that, before a camera, can become, almost magically,
telling or emblematic. As the teacher-filmmaker-essayist Jean-Pierre Gorin once formulated it (in his specific case, in relation to the fiction films of Maurice Pialat, but it works for all cinema), every director does three basic things with his or her material.¹

In the first place, there is the effort to catalyse or create some kind of interesting or meaningful situation in the real space in front of the camera, a process that may have started long before filming begins. In the second place, and still as the camera rolls, there is some manner of maneuvering: a particular, decisive choice of angle or style of shooting, some distance or perspective chosen in relation to what is occurring. In the third place, as the film goes

into postproduction (editing, sound design, etc.), there is the necessary *working of* and on the material gathered: finding or inventing a form for it, creating the global, aesthetic context in which it will be received by audiences.

What Manchevski and Gorin are saying, each in their own ways, makes me think that what is crucially missing from a lot of discussion of documentary (no matter how “dramatically reconstructed” or essayistic it may be) is a simple but flexible application of the famous Lacanian triad of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. You capture something on camera and place it in your film. Is it automatically the Real? No, because the Real is going to be something essentially fleeting, elusive, hard to grasp and even harder to take in. But, Real or not (and whether you, as a filmmaker, like it or not), the footage is going to inevitably come freighted with two other layers: Symbolic and Imaginary. It’s going to reflect, and be embedded in, a whole range of social codings you can only fitfully control — that’s the Symbolic realm. And it’s going to be completely shaped, even warped, by the dreams and drives, the projections and phantasmic scenarios that impel you to pick up a camera and keep it trained on someone or something in the first place. That’s your Imaginary at work, but bear in mind what Serge Daney once said: “Fantasies are the least personal thing in the
world. They are collective. A dream is only a montage of coded elements, obeying precise, impersonal rules.”

As someone involved with theory and critique, I came to a position not unlike Manchevski’s via the powerful arguments, which initially circulated throughout the 1960s and 1970s, concerning reality-effects (Roland Barthes) and truth-effects (Michel Foucault). There’s no such absolute, universal thing as Reality or Truth; there are only instances, effects, performances (in the widest sense) that strike us as such. A whole machinery of social persuasion, of contextual discourse, is needed to deliver us to

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these precisely coded moments, which are (as it turns out) pitifully time-bound: the reality-effects of yesterday are, in most cases, the comedic clichés of today, easily seen for the constructions they are. Today, we are more likely to grasp these effects that once fooled us as also affects: the heart’s complicity, stealthily engineered, is never far way from the clever techniques that, for a moment, conjured an illusion of immediacy, transparency, and authenticity.

There is a wonderful phrase in English: truth approaches. It can mean a few different things, depending on whether you take approach (just like affect) as noun or verb. It could be referring to diverse approaches to truth itself, or to something happening: look out, the plot thickens, the truth is approaching. Either way, the phrase underlines something dramatic, theatrical and performative about Truth when it is in the process of hitting us: there is always going to be something rhetorical about those moments when the truth is finally revealed, and just as dramatically withdraws itself. In fact, I recall a clever, Warholian video art piece made almost three decades ago in Melbourne by Ralph Traviato, based exactly on this theme. It was titled The Truth Approaches (1983): in it, a series of performers, filmed in simple, static mid-shots, went through the motions of certain, banal actions (checking their watch, straightening their tie, stirring a cup of tea,
etc.). Every time, a certain cumulative effect of waiting, of suspense, was produced in those who watched the video: what’s up, what’s about to slip out from hiding here? Of course, the video was, ultimately, nothing but the demonstration of this seductive rhetoric in the artful process of enacting itself. And every kind of time-based media is going about its business of producing such an audiovisual rhetoric, each moment of the day.

Figure 6. still image from Monte Hellman, Road to Nowhere (E1 Films, 2010)

Manchevski alights upon the most puzzling of all the tricks associated with this kind of rhetoric: the crazy phrase, usually solemnly declared in writing at the start of a film or TV programme ‘this is a true story,’ or ‘based on a true story,’ or ‘these events really happened,’ or some such suitably dramatic variation. Jerry Lewis was already sending this one up rotten in 1962, when he began his The Ladies’ Man with
the print-out: “The picture you are about to see is NOT TRUE, only the names have been changed, because the lawyers worry a lot.” And, almost forty years on from that, Monte Hellman ends his labyrinthine, Robbe-Grillet-style, Chinese-box noir head-scratcher *Road to Nowhere* with the obviously risible boast of “This is a true story,” clearly meant to indicate the exact opposite of what it says. But to no avail: as double-whammy truth/reality-effects go, this true-story business has proven staying power.

I was once involved, at script stage, with a big-budget production and I was given a chance to see how this True Story process really works itself out. People begin with what is, indeed, a true story: something that has been in all the newspapers, TV shows, and online. Something immediately known and recognised by a vast audience. Then, for twenty different reasons (from ‘dramatic license’ to legal complications), the filmmaking team, in the planning phase, begin departing from “just the facts, ma’am.” First, the names are changed. Then, certain “characters” are combined. Maybe genders and races are switched. Then the events themselves are tinkered with, usually in order to fit one or other of the preordained “story arcs” beloved of the Hollywood screenwriting manuals. The initial set-up, the complicating factors, even the ultimate outcome, can be tampered with, often arriving at something with precious little
resemblance to the so-called true story. (I am sure we can all think of numerous examples.) At several points in this process, I feebly protested to the producers: we have by now ventured so far away from the true-life premise, in every particular, so why don’t we just wipe the slate clean and write a fiction that pleases us? Oh no, what heresy! After all, it’s a true story! . . . And, above all, it is the market-lure of that declaration, emblazoned on-screen at the start, which is going to secure some sort of effect/affect that is deemed absolutely necessary to both the dramatic and commercial performance of the piece. (I didn’t last long on that project.)

Manchevski wisely separates the commotion around reality-effects from the deeper issue about truth. Reality, realism, the reality-effect, whether comically obvious or deviously surreptitious: ultimately, these are neither here nor
there for him. Truth is what matters — but not as a mere, performative effect/affect.

To provisionally resolve the paradoxes that so bedevilled my students and myself once upon a time, Milcho Manchevski adds a necessary and enabling fourth term: Truth, Fiction, Belief . . . and Faith. Indeed, he refers to an exceptional faith, not just some run-of-the-mill, obligatory, routinized practice of faith (or worship). Exceptional faith not in an ideology, a cause, or a cultural movement, but in Art itself. And, as we know, faith demands a leap — a leap into what is not yet known or felt, seen, or heard.