

## Truth in Conventional Realism and Naturalism - in the Actor's Art and Craft

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**Abstract:** *The methods in the Actor's Art and Craft have always been and will always be different from one generation to the next, from one period to the next and from one product to the next. Whether we are talking about theatre or film, aesthetic forms, stylistic forms and means of expression have always differed, undergone changes and been put under scrutiny in order to discover, enrich and develop the Actor's Art and Craft. As the main element with which the spectator comes into contact, the one without which no theatre performance or film can exist, analysis invariably requires enhanced attention to turn conventionality into truthfulness, the artificial into reality, and elevate the horizontality of the text to the actor's human verticality.*

**Keywords:** *Realism; Naturalism; Conventional; Actor's Art and Craft; Method; Sanford Meisner; Film; Theatre; Ontology; Truth; Lie; Perspectives; Gheorghe Ceaușu; Formal; Material; Spectator;*

### Introduction

Based on an ontological scale, I have always pondered the differences (both formal and informal) between delivering the truth in a conventional frame and delivering the truth in a natural or artificially natural setting. The questions I would like to discuss in this study – and to which I do not necessarily have an answer – have to do more with the metaphysics of the Actor's Art and Craft, with analytical-level study, and are rooted, I believe, in the ways of approaching a role.

If we were to analyse the Actor's Art and Craft, we should guide ourselves by the “fourth wall”, or the “there is no camera” principle. On the other hand, already in our acting school years we hear “speak up so people in the last row can hear you, they paid for their tickets as well” or “why are you saying that part with your back turned, no one can see you” or “don't make your partner turn their back on the audience” or “find some way to stand so the camera can see what you're doing”.

Again, if we were to rely on what we learn in university, among many other things we would also encounter the principles of “truth” – which forks into “scenic truth” and “the little truth of cinema”.

Fortunately, we know (or we assume to know) that unique truth only exists on the vertical axis of our relating to the Divine, while the rest of truth is mere perspective. Whether personal truth (material, formal, synthetic), scenic truth or cinema truth, they are nothing more than perspectives.

These two ways of relating to the Actor's Art and Craft are completely different and constitute the object of this work.

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## 1. Truth

To begin with, I will reference a conversation I had as a student with Professor Ceașu on the subject of truth. He claimed (rightfully so) that truth is unique when we relate to it on an ontological and axiological scale. Departing from truth, the only coherent (and obviously honest) form of relating we could have is the one that concerns confusions – from personal to professional life (where, of course, the confusion of truth becomes a variable depending on what best serves our purpose): “People mistake success for value, the image for the original, decency and grandeur for prejudice, sincerity for public exposure of personal life, courage for exhibitionism, eroticism for anatomical and physiological sex, gratitude for servility, spiritual purity for naiveté or even stupidity, material poverty for powerlessness, the possessed object for its possessor, nonchalance and confidence for cheek, the interference of subjects for watered-down verbosity, linguistic informality for unbridled slang, religiousness for fundamentalism, optional registry shifts for opportunism, reality and truth for what we can see and hear, personality for forgery, modesty for frivolousness, being for appearing to be, firmness for brutality, collecting information for acts of culture, critical thinking for mockery and slander, dialogue for venomous polemics, self-affirmation for ruthlessly forging ahead, love for Illuminist selfishness and dignity for garish arrogance”<sup>2</sup>.

Based on the affirmation that we mistake “reality and truth for what we can see and hear”, I believe (naturally, considering the Professor’s personal perspective, not the affirmation in itself as a reference to absolute truth) that a debate on scenic and filmic truth is worthwhile. Beliefs, thoughts, opinions, reason, feelings – briefly put, the personal means of telling apart truth and falsity and their qualification as landmarks for analysis – they all distinguish formal truth from material truth, synthetic truth, and analytical truth. In theatre or film, they become complementary through the perspective of realism.

Fortunately, truth (in all its forms and aspects) becomes relative or, to be more accurate, subjective. We can only perceive the truth through the filter of our own morality, our personal experiences, our existential relationship and our personal reality as represented in the subject.

### 1.1. Truth as a metaphysical principle, formal truth, and material truth from the spectator’s perspective (in theatre and film)

As a rule, we can regard truth (I repeat: only if we relate to lay truth, not sacred truth) solely in contrast with falsehood. Though at a first glance they may appear polar opposites, from a certain perspective they become complementary – lying concerns the individual, the personality, while truth concerns reality. Obviously, here we are talking about white lies, harmless to a greater or smaller degree – lies up for debate in the paradigm of the professional art which we practise, as we try to tell apart truth and falsehood – and not moral lies, culpable lies which can cause actual drama or tragedy.

The starting point of lying (here I am referring to children, as the “ground zero” of lie encoding, with their natural predisposition for acting, which can be turned into a skill) is the social lie. “Telling even a white lie is, by its mere form, a crime of a human being against his own person and a worthless that must make him contemptible in his own eyes”<sup>3</sup> – as a

<sup>2</sup> Ceașu, Gheorghe. 2013. *Pe drumul gândirii axilogice*. Bucharest: Editura Paideia, p. 25

<sup>3</sup> Kant, Immanuel. 2014. *Metafizica moravurilor* [The Metaphysics of Morals]. transl. Rodica Croitoru. Bucharest: Editura Antet, p. 85

metaphysical principle included in the sphere of the Actor's Art and Craft, a primordial interpretation of the very definition of the interpreter.

False representation is not necessarily culpable and certainly does not apply to children initially – up to a certain age, they are clothed, taught and presented to the world by their parents. Later, the child acquires (without necessarily meaning to) certain habits of dissimulating the truth – choosing their own clothes to mask extra kilos, tanned or pale skin on the arms, body hair or lack thereof. Thus it is that lies (I repeat: white lies) enter the spectrum of normality, of day-to-day use, of a presentable condition, free from moral repercussions.

In a secondary aspect of the psychology of lying, children have no conceptual understanding of credibility – which is why their statements often tend towards exaggeration, before they develop an adequate understanding on their own.

My question, derived from these aspects, is: What are our chances of relating to truth – in theatre or film – when lying has long become a constant in our lives?

The conclusions – or, in fact, the validity of conclusions in a deductive system – represent a formal truth, but one which does not depend on the content of statements or their correspondence with understanding syntagmas. Formal truth is deduced from the text or deciphered by the director, and it is up to the actor to then find a plausible trajectory for the text units. In other words, the actor need only find the logical justification for their words.

Unlike formal truth, material truth lies in the sphere of subjectivism. Unfortunately, the subjectivism of the character and the subjectivism of the actor are not one and the same, which generates yet another dilemma which I would like to bring to your attention. That is because formal truth is only a correspondence between what the text provides (what it is, in fact) and the judgment that has led to (or condensed into) the exposed utterance (which, again, depends on personal experience – we are not referring to the actor's experience, but to that of the character, as it is found in the text).

My question is: Where does the border between the character's and the actor's experience begin and end? And how much of their personal experience do actors bring on stage or on set?

## 1.2. Truth or perspective – in theatre and in film

Sanford Meisner developed a personal method for the Actor's Art and Craft, which can be summarised as “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances”<sup>4</sup>–and the debate can begin (from my point of view) from this “living truthfully”.

From my perspective, this “living truthfully” departs from a branch of truth defined as “coherent truth” – the truthfulness of a belief or opinion representing the truth of experiences prior to the utterance.

However, practically speaking, from the standpoint of the Actor's Art and Craft, this would lead to a bland tone, a monotony pushed to the limit of the pathological – if it wasn't underscored by experience.

The perspective of truth requires us – in both theatre and film – to resort to conjuncture, to concretely relate to the real environment in which the play or film scene is taking place, while at the same time being the sole real point of reference in a parallel with reality (not with the imaginary).

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<sup>4</sup> Silverberg, Larry. 1994. *The Sanford Meisner Approach: An Actor's Workbook*. New Hampshire: Smith&Kraus, p. 39

Any thought put into speech, any expression of the paraverbal is subject, in real life, to conjuncture. In other words, the real human being undergoes a concrete transformation due to their circumstances.

When at the Cotroceni Palace, during a meeting with the President of Romania, they will express their beliefs or opinions differently – very differently than they would with their neighbour in front of their building.

Thus, my question starts from the expression “one hides what one contains” and heads towards “how truthful can one be in a given conjuncture in which their statute is different from the one in real life?”

And if one’s statute changes – and it obviously does, as is only normal – how much of this is visible to their acting partner and how much to the spectator?

In conventional realism, it is assumed – through the strict definition of conventional realism – that the spectator is “informed” from the beginning about the character’s condition. Otherwise put, if we were to continue our example with the President, the spectator (in a theatre or cinema) is put in a situation in which they learn (whether *a priori* or *post factum*) of the character’s statute, so that in the scene with the President we (as spectators) know that the respective character is acting differently than they normally would. Which leads to “lying” – or, to be precise, to “conjunctural lying”. How should an actor decipher such a scene, based on the premise that the theatrical obligation visibly pushes them towards a deformation of reality? And if they are “lying”, are they lying for the spectator exclusively? Or are they also lying for their scene partner? And if they are also lying for their partner, on what is the latter supposed to base their acting? On the lie – as a change in statute perspective – or on conjunctural truth – which the President is not supposed to be aware of?

Above all, though, the key question is how to make the distinction as an actor – or, in fact, whether you even should. The matter lies between the two directions – partner and spectator. That is why I believe it is better not to make the distinction. Otherwise, you move away from the truth and your acting becomes expositional, first-hand and typical mostly of a different type of theatre or cinema (generally, that in which the convention is declared, to the utmost limit of the aside – leaving theatrical convention and engaging in direct dialogue with the audience).

From Aristotle to the present day<sup>5</sup>, the spectators’ principles have not changed – they remain the same (“I believe” and “I understand”). If the spectator only relates to these two principles, we can assume that what they see (on stage or on screen) is to be deciphered solely through these two codes – emotionally, they are supposed to believe what they see; emotionally, they are supposed to understand what they are watching.

### 1.3. Conventional realism and naturalism

Based on the definition of realism in cinema – narrative reality, meant to be supported by visual reality – through a concrete slice of life, this move relies (through its very definition) on a series of events or facts which do not reach sensational level, do not qualify as exceptional and bring the spectator closer intimately and, above all, introspectively.

Unlike realism, naturalism goes to extremes, touching on more delicate subjects, such as poverty, sex, racism or prostitution. But it is the aesthetic difference that makes the two currents diverge so much, despite their shared starting points (slices of life that do not qualify as sensational).

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotel. 1957. *Poetica* [Poetics]. Bucharest: Editura Științifică, p. 25

In theatre, the naturalist movement appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (the most famous play being Strindberg's *Miss Julie*) and aimed to present narrative playwriting in a form defined by the lack of theatricalness, the simplicity of the dialogue and, above all, the reaction times typical of regular speech.

In conventional realism, the spectator has an easier point of departure – they are supposed to accept the convention from the beginning, knowing that what they are seeing “is fiction”. But if they know this from the beginning, how can they cry, how can they be moved by something which they know for a fact to be a convention, a “fake”? Which brings me to my next question: Is what the spectator sees not related, perhaps, directly with their emotional and indirect experience, and indirectly with their deductions based on what they see?

Conventional realism is much more typical of theatre, being, in a way, something the spectator brings in from the very beginning – they know that they are in a theatre, they know that the walls are not walls, that what they are seeing out a window is not a street and that the water dripping from above is not rain. But all this doesn't equate with a lack of emotion – there are theatre performances where emotion (with its full range, from laughing to crying) is present to the highest degree. Conventional realism helps the actor relate – through this multitude of props – to the concrete. In other words, the props, the acting style, the phrasing all support the actor (and, implicitly, the spectator) in pushing the limit of the conventional a little closer to the real.

In naturalism, things are a little different. First of all, it is much harder to apply to theatre and much easier to accomplish (as a tendency) in film, because it benefits from the direct advantage of the décor (or, to be more exact, of the changes of décor). That does not mean that one cannot film a scene in an artificial set, rather than on location, but simply that the actor has to struggle much more against the décor. The duration of the long take (typical of naturalism) allows the possibility of accrual (emotion through buildup, without the intervention of technical procedures like editing and sound), which brings us closer to the surrounding reality. When we make a coffee, in a film which makes use of editing and compresses time for the spectator. the actor goes to the coffee machine, turns it on and, in the next shot, leaves with their coffee already brewed. We, as spectators, have understood what they have done, filling the space between the cuts, making up for the temporal ellipsis with our thoughts, with the reality we have experienced. In short, we have understood what they have done and we can move on with the film. In naturalism, the long take filled with genuine action, accomplished in real time, leads to an accrual, a presentation of the action which the spectator no longer needs to fill with their personal imaginative resources. The actor will run the water, fill the coffee maker, grind the coffee, take the cup, place it in the machine and wait for the coffee to brew (Chantal Akerman - *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce*).

Unlike conventional realism, naturalism has a very fine balance between the banal and the dramatic. Our daily lives are filled with mundane actions (waking up, stretching, washing, making coffee – to name just a few morning acts and activities), but the essence is the balance between the theatrical essence and the commonplace. In other words, the screenwriter (or playwright) must decide which morning activities deserve to reach the public in the long take, which of them describe the most important moment in the protagonist's psychological journey.

In a realistic film, the screenwriter would only need to choose which of the main moments of each morning activity would convey the essence of this psychological journey, and the director would later use editing to compress time – though everything is real (the table, the coffee maker, the bathroom, the toothbrush etc.).

Theatre also has a naturalist form, the dramatic type in which the spectator is placed in a real context – to continue our morning routine example, they are taken into an apartment, in which the actor carries out all the actions in real time. I give this example because I was a spectator in such a spectacular context, but it is highly limitative and, in general, can only be used in a performance able to support this kind of proposition (generally indoors).

## Conclusions

Personally, I believe that naturalism is the highest form of acting. Or I would, if I knew how to define acting. If it was a mirror of life, that would mean a lot of lying – because we humans lie so much, which is why we get caught, since we tend to be terrible liars. If I might relate to the words of Mr. Pintilie, as expressed through his police officer character in *The Reenactment* („Give me lifelike acting. You don't make it lifelike – you ruin my film”), that would be more or less what would define acting – being “lifelike”. But that is where the questions start to crop up: Does this “lifelike” quality mean that we should subsume Aristotle and have the spectator understand, or that we should keep it completely illogical and at times (utterly) unbelievable, exactly like “real life”? As Tom Clancy said, “The difference between fiction and reality? Fiction has to make sense.”

Acting would probably be one of the options. But I don't yet know whether acting is a profession (and, to some degree, it probably is, because it works with specific parameters and terminology) or only a matter of trust and truth.

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