

Looking for the Truth in Lies – With What Cost?

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Abstract: *At the core of the New Romanian Cinema lies an apparently simple contradiction: mise-en-scène promises access to truth, to life, to reality, to an unembellished fragment of the world, and yet this promise is constructed through profoundly artificial means. From here emerges the paradox and contradiction that this study seeks to examine. The actor is not the person being portrayed, the set is not the “real” place, light is controlled, dialogue is written in advance, editing reorganizes time, and sound completes or corrects what the image alone cannot convey. Even so, the spectator must be persuaded to believe that the New Romanian Cinema can reach a truth that other arts, and implicitly other cinematic movements, attain far more difficultly. From this emerges the central question of the present study: “If film tells the truth through lies, what is the cost of this operation?”*

Keywords: *Film; Acting; Truth; Lies; Technique; Focus; Film set; Procedure; Analysis; Phonetics; Character; Composition; Emploi; Director; Actor; Interpretation; New Romanian Cinema; New Romanian Wave;*

Introduction

Cinema inherits, to a considerable extent, part of the history of art, from the warmth of the Renaissance, through the dramatic intensity of the Baroque, to the harshness of Expressionism or the imprint of Realism. Even so, it benefits from a particularly privileged relation to the real, because “*the objectivity of the image gives it a power of credibility absent from any pictorial work*”², from this derives the special status of the newest art form - it offers the spectator the sensation that they are not witnessing a mere representation of an object or a person, but a living trace, in actual movement, imprinted upon a technical medium.

Precisely this sensation also gives rise to suspicion regarding reality itself, generating two distinct directions - that which falsifies and that which may reveal. Suspicion of falsehood comes from the concrete imitation of reality, altered nevertheless through certain artificial elements specific to the means by which cinema operates, such as editing, lighting, or sound. Thus, cinema may appear improperly distanced from truth, presenting not necessarily the event itself, in a narrative sense, but rather a message, one which, preferably, should avoid becoming doctrinaire.

The other direction, that of revelation, derives precisely from the immediate relation between human beings and life itself. Hence the constant distinction we hear so often: “life surpasses film.”

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² Bazin, Andre. 2022. *What is Cinema?*. Bucharest: Polirom Publishing/ Unate Press, pp. 38–39.

1. The promise of reality

The question from which this study begins “How can film seek truth through means that are evidently artificial?” concerns not only the aesthetic side of the dilemma. In my view, it also extends into a specific area of moral anthropology, since a deeply ambiguous climate exists between truth and convention within social space.

Few people say exactly what they think, which is understandable given the rules and norms governing society, whether public, personal, or intimate. One rarely encounters individuals who reveal themselves completely. Everyday forms of masking possess multiple layers and motivations, from politeness to diplomacy, from self-protection to the desire to be accepted.

The spectator’s distance from truth also has several dimensions. The first is concrete, in the literal sense of the word “distance,” in which the degradation or deformation of real distances becomes observable, and the spectator thus becomes a witness, whether involved or merely observant, to an action to which they would normally have no access.

This status of observer translates into a material relation that the spectator develops with reality. Yet, from the standpoint of truth, the problem remains unresolved - the mere fact that an object or a person stands before a camera does not guarantee truth.

Here lies the distance between classical cinematic movements and the New Romanian Cinema. Where editing accelerates or intensifies in classical forms, in the New Romanian Cinema things acquire naturalistic duration. Where music underlines emotion elsewhere, here sonic perception emerges from the ambient environment. Where the actor may become visible through technique, here sensations arise from micro-expressions marked by naturalism.

And yet, despite these evident advantages, the relation to truth remains fragile, simply from a metaphysical standpoint - artistically speaking, the passage from realism to naturalism facilitates the spectator’s perception toward *cinéma vérité*.

The fragility of cinematic truth comes from a back-and-forth trajectory, a fragmented route that the actor traverses with great difficulty and often with considerable pain - hence the high emotional costs involved. As long as the mask remains present, as long as form dominates, living matter is suffocated, it cannot be discovered through the mere existence of the image.

Living matter can emerge only through a shared co-presence, through a convergence of factors in which the actor’s psychological comfort may take the form of total exposure - something exceedingly difficult within a social context.

The paradox of real life, compared with the demand that something “be like life,” lies precisely in the harmless lie, often motivated by protection or benevolence, which we offer society through the different masks we wear in public and in various contexts - social, familial, or personal.

Therefore, in film, things cannot simply be “as in life”, the process cannot revert to circumstantial negotiation. Here appears the price of seeking truth - a truth that neither the director nor the actor possesses before the film exists. The search for truth is the sum of the power of exposure, of rehearsal, and of the construction of a collective experience that may ultimately become the revelation of something original, although it is only a reproduction.

Born from the radicalization of certain production strategies - those of space and time, whether we speak of studio-built sets or real locations, through the visual embodiment of a pre-existing screenplay, the search for truth can only be translated, regardless of convention, through emotional authenticity, through that sense of naturalness which film offers the spectator.

On the other hand, the convention of the cinematic work cannot be considered the opposite of artistic truth. On the contrary, it is the assumption of a preparation that transforms convention into

truth, masking the artificial through calculated emotional, geometrical, or artistic compositions - combinations of light, camera movement, revelations without anticipation, or “incidents” that do not appear repeated.

What is truly dangerous on both sides, author and spectator alike, is the unacknowledged lie within the fictional product, the lie declared innocent, which conceals the artificial while pretending transparency of execution, or which violently fragments reproduction while invoking a perspective similar to documentary.

“Bazin states that the myth of total cinema is the idea and desire that the world be recreated in its own image”³, yet a film may be truthful even if entirely fictional, while a documentary may be profoundly deceptive even if it uses real materials.

This leads us to the decisive criterion in the debate of this article - who establishes reality, the raw material imprinted by the work, or the ethical and emotional relation accumulated by the work in a form as close as possible to reality?

It depends. “If art is a place where truth is set into work, in the sense of bringing something out of concealment”⁴, then the process can be fertile only if used prudently, as a process of disclosure, in which film does not lift, doesn’t uncover a filter from reality, but composes a situation in which something apparently banal becomes sensitive or extraordinary. Then the artificial is not merely a necessary evil, but the very condition of execution in the form of reality.

If, however, the cinematic work abusively simplifies, if it uses mechanics merely to sentimentalize, if it exploits suffering for effect, then it falls into a cheap lie, even when it begins from authentic facts.

2. Paid price

I am not certain whether the price the author pays throughout this process, in the making of a film, is a single and unified one. I am inclined to believe, rather, that it is a cumulative price, a price with multiple dimensions, which, whether one is an actor or a director, must inevitably be paid. Evidently, the price paid by the director is far greater, yet the actor, too, has a price to bear.

First of all, both must pay a formal price. In order to achieve truth, both must do so by falsifying the means. The director searches for a set, rehearses, compresses space and time, uses lighting. The actor, in turn, must somehow remain himself while using another person’s words. In a simple equation, then, the attainment of the objective is inseparable from the formal loss of the self. Precisely because it is a reproduction of life, because it is not life itself, this construction, formal by definition, must also bear the burden of public perception.

The ethical price also deserves discussion, especially through the lens of responsibility toward the subject being approached. The author may exploit, within a fictional product, the real suffering of a real past. Aesthetic means may transform misery into spectacle - the human being may be turned into expressive material. Examples are numerous, from the Gulag to the Holocaust, from natural disasters to the underground tunnels near Gara de Nord, from communist prisons to retirement homes.

The aestheticization of suffering is a price one must be prepared to pay consciously. One must know how ethical or noble it is to portray realities that may still exist vividly within collective memory, and one must find a way to draw attention to past wrongs so that they are not repeated, without using suffering merely to extract emotion.

³ Stanley, Cavell. 1979. *The world viewed*. London: Harvard University Press, p. 59.

⁴ Arendt, Hannah. 2010. *The promise of politics*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing, p. 97.

The greater the desire for truth, the greater the responsibility toward the one who is filmed, represented, or evoked.

The highest price paid by those who make films, I believe, is the inner price, the intimate one. For the actor, this price consists in the lack of self-importance, in the minimization of ego within the work that must be done, in the labor of confronting oneself. It means knowing that what one does is not about oneself, but about the film.

It means accepting that one does not matter absolutely, that one can be replaced by another actor and the film will still exist, perhaps even in a better version. It also means understanding that the result does not depend solely on oneself or on one's performance – a multitude of factors contribute to it, therefore, expectations should be as small as possible, while the work invested should be as great as possible.

For the director, the inner price is immense. First, there is the acceptance that if the film turns out well, the merit belongs to the team, and if it turns out badly, the fault is yours. Second, there is the ability to renounce ideas cultivated for years throughout the creative process, making room for accident, for the uncontrollable, for working with nature and living beings, and receiving new meanings with openness rather than clinging stubbornly to one's original concepts. When one has spent years with certain convictions, that something must be this way, that another thing belongs elsewhere, that one element is green and another blue, it is costly to discover that an unforeseen event requires accepting that it is, in fact, red or orange. Managing the emotions of the crew is another burden the director must pay for, and here negotiation becomes extremely delicate. One may have a huge budget and, even if behaving tyrannically, people may remain because they are directly interested in financial gain. Yet the question arises - do you sleep well with yourself knowing that the only reason people stay beside you is money?

If there is low or no budget, then one must carefully navigate egos, demands, needs, and countless matters that should not require the director's attention, because they consume energy, already limited, which ought to be directed entirely toward the film.

There is yet another price, but this one can only be fully considered under totalitarian regimes, such as communist Romania, or as in North Korea or Iran - the political price. Sometimes this price is paid with one's life, in the worst case. At other times, with freedom, in a moderate case and most often, it is paid with one's career. In totalitarian societies, truth is disturbing, it reveals practices or realities that the system wishes to cover up, to erase, or to distort in public perception.

Propaganda substitutes itself for truth. It does not reject the identity cliché, but rather supports it. In such a context, the controversy of a fictional work that points directly at reality becomes something that compels the public toward reflection, recognition, or introspection. The comfortable refuge imposed by propaganda upon artistic creation, through alteration or distortion, whether in themes, subjects, or characters, produces commercially safe films, easy films designed to please audiences, or historical films built upon falsified pasts. In any case, films that disturb, provoke, or seek to expose truth will be subjected to censorship, and their authors will bear the consequences.

The problem of falsehood in film is not one that invites a therapeutic form of debate. We are not speaking of pathology, nor of the harsh, deliberate lie that seeks to distort truth for a precise purpose, as a deviation from reality. It is rather a metaphysical search. We are dealing with a stylistic and aesthetic control of expression, not with a moral defect. On the other hand, it acquires a moral meaning through analysis, through the means employed in order to examine another morality already present in the theme or subject of the film.

From the actor's point of view, the cosmetically altered identity that must be portrayed describes, in a sense, another individual, part of a society that is itself fictional, who must manage the impressions left upon others, who are themselves fictional characters as well. Hence the problem of fictional construction - how does one make the ordinary life of a character, whose moral choices are formally predetermined because they are written in the screenplay, appear not to be an artificial situation?

Paradoxically, even while functioning within falsehood, set design, costumes, lighting, the actor still experiences fragments of truth. Even when seated at the table, the actor truly eats. Even when on the beach, the actor's feet are genuinely in the water. Even when at the skating rink, the actor truly skates. In an equation that would require an answer, that answer would be the following - film lies in convention and tells the truth in presence.

3. Truth through constraint

Very often, truth, or its revelation, passes through allegory, parable, or ambiguity. A world that does not concretely exist, but is reproduced, inspired by the times the author lives through and seeks to reflect, not in a documentary style but through sociological transparency, becomes a stylized world that only apparently resembles reality, resembling merely what is similar to it. Whether we speak of atmosphere, habits, objects, or human relationships, these are artificially constructed with the compositional rigor of a moral laboratory. Actors do not fall in love, yet characters are in love within the film. Actors do not die, yet characters die. The house is not truly sold, except within the screenplay.

On the other hand, the rigor of a character's inner degradation competes, unfortunately for the actor, with the set itself, which in film is often real: trees are trees, the forest is a forest, the city is a city. Thus, the actor faces an extremely difficult struggle in relation to surrounding reality, because once filmed in a real exterior space, authenticity can no longer remain an interior choreography, a visible construction, it must be assumed inwardly, layered in ways that are not visible, sheltered from the direct observation of the director's instructions. This can no longer mean a tacit reconciliation with the artificial elements of compositional construction. It becomes emotional discomfort, one that may bring personal pain, moral fractures, or vulgarity to the surface. Combined with the sum of all the "not like that" corrections received from the director, these tensions ultimately lead to a concrete nervousness, in which fictional reality can no longer be delivered through calm naturalism, precisely because the material of the situation is intrinsically convulsive.

Even so, the actor must retain everything, absorb and digest all these real experiences, and then deliver according to the fictional situation, according to a screenplay or a direction, normalizing concrete reality into artificial reality, which paradoxically is the one that must appear concrete on screen.

For the director, matters are far worse. Unlike the actor, who has the fictional safety valve through which excessive, grotesque, caricatural, or violent emotions may be expressed, the director remains at all times present within the reality of the film set, reality unsoftened by artifice, in an emotional fragility that permits no helplessness and leaves no room for refuge. The director must manage the risk to which the work is exposed, the risk of human relations, the risk of professional marginalization, the pressure of the moment, and the pressure of expectations.

There shame may intervene, or demonstration may intervene, born from a precarious overlap between the composition of reality through artificiality and falsehood, and the concrete

tension of execution itself. The small society of a film crew becomes deformed. The fiction imposed by the work struggles between fidelity to reproduction and emotional truth, the only place where this imposture may be dismantled. Thus, the director's temptation is no longer to respect the balance of reality, but to exaggerate through direction, so that something which ordinary life tends to normalize or soften may become legible to the spectator.

Yet the director's struggle cannot cease or be suspended, regardless of circumstance, for otherwise the labor of all involved is placed at risk. The stakes for the director are far greater than those of the actor, who bears only his own role, because the exposure of the truth sought by the director does not arise merely from the costs already paid. It comes through respect for the crew and for the work itself, through respect for the general opacity of the concrete human being, who in real life conceals what he contains, or for a concrete situation that cannot be forced merely through fictional transposition into a character who acts or provokes simply because the screenplay demands it.

Directorial declarations delivered as sermons reduce fictional truth to thesis, to a dramatic sketch with social overtones, to a detectable mechanism, and they tend to sell a weak copy of a powerful ambiguity - the very ambiguity that real life offers us at every step. There nevertheless exists a necessity of the artificial, something without which good fiction cannot exist. This necessity begins from a difference between fiction and reality itself - fiction must be logical. This is precisely what real life often is not. Real life pulses in hesitation, in pauses, in silences. It possesses no dramatic construction, but rather laws that belong to the divine, without rehearsals or *mise-en-scène*.

Cinematic truth may therefore be attained precisely by following the way life produces events or normality, so that *"everything once regarded as true acquires the aspect of a perspective, in relation to which there must exist the possibility of many other perspectives, equally legitimate and equally useful"*⁵.

In life, most people lie under social conditions, not because they are constantly malicious, but because real life places pressure upon the image of the self, often requiring a negotiation of appearances. At times one must confirm or preserve one's position; at others one does not wish to be hurt or excluded; at others one does not wish to appear weak or ridiculous.

On the other hand, truth in real life comes with costs. Sometimes it destabilizes. At other times it compels decisions, breaks relationships, or produces shame and guilt. Thus, most people prefer a tolerable lie, whether they are the sender or the receiver.

*"The truths people live daily are, in fact, conventions that have become cemented, strengthened until they appear natural"*⁶ because society functions not only through facts, but through stabilized fictions, through a series of languages that simplify reality while concealing its fractures. Superimposed upon the path of seeking truth in film, the director becomes a kind of administrator between the consequences of everyday untrue truths and the actor, an individual already trained in social techniques of dissimulation, who does not necessarily wish to lie to the director, but rather wishes to avoid the loss of self-image.

The principal problem emerges once more from an extremely strange and complex mixture, from different worlds that encompass professions and emotions alike. The director brings the craft of directing, combined with the burden of responsibility for the project, and must navigate through egos, personal searches, and personal falsehoods. This collides with the actor, who arrives with

⁵ Heidegger, Martin. 1995. *The origin of the Work of Art*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing, p. 47.

⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2000. *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense, in Complete Works, vol. II*. Timisoara: Hestia Publishing, p. 6.

the craft of acting, yet who at the most basic level is also a human being, standing before the camera with his own inner human direction of defense.

What happens on the film set, then, is not the beginning of an enormous lie, but the organic reorganization of that lie. Sometimes it is reorganized well, and the work succeeds. Sometimes it is reorganized badly, and the work becomes vulnerable to failure.

4. Conclusions

This perpetual dilemma of “truth” is, I believe, often confused with perspective. Any author can possess only his own “truth,” yet optical truth is, to a large extent, artificially ordered.

The confusion within the triad of “truth – perspective – credibility” inevitably contains, just as real life does, a formal falsehood, often highly sophisticated, which forces its own author to choose between two evils. In life, the mask of falsehood often protects; in the artistic product, however, the mask of falsehood prevents the final step from being taken, preventing the unique moment from emerging. For this reason, the relationship between film and truth, between the work and life, cannot be conceived through a simple opposition between the authentic and the artificial. Film reaches truth with difficulty precisely because it lies within a vicious circle, constantly traversing a constitutive lie, an existential lie. Yet this very “truth” may be one that life, although it often pronounces it, renders false or unbelievable the moment it is immortalized.

In film, all artificial elements, when well executed, acquire meaning because the spectator completes what lies beyond the edges of the frame or fills the temporal ellipsis. A set may concentrate a state of being far better than a place found accidentally. Editing may reveal invisible connections that, in real life, we cannot perceive because we cannot leap through time.

Artificial form is precisely the form that renders tension and emotion visible. It does not necessarily seek to be the faithful copy of reality. It is not a tribunal of truth. Yet it may become the form through which truth spoken through lies reveals the ugly face of the world. Without the price paid by the author, the price of convention, exposure, risk, conflict, or the renunciation of comfort, film remains a consumer product, a product for amusement or relaxation, without the possibility of attempting knowledge, human development, or spiritual evolution.

The exercise of clarification requires introspection. Sometimes it requires the power of emotional self-destruction, an acceptance of the deformation of reality in order to be absorbed into another possible reality, another perspective upon truth, another representation. The loss of comfort, and here I refer to the spectator, may result in an emotional debate with oneself which, although it occurs in the real world, begins from fiction, from the illusion of an event that took place within a society that might have existed somewhere, sometime.

Precisely because of these perspectives, film does not invent falsehood - it concentrates it and makes it visible. It does not begin from a transparent world only to falsify it afterward, but from a world full of silences, cosmetic alterations, and self-presentations through which, paradoxically, although the equation suggests that it appears as a copy of a copy, film sometimes succeeds in revealing a pure truth, an authentic search. It can move beyond the status of correspondence between subject and image through simple contemplative recording, transforming itself into an imprint of existence, a relation to concrete time, endowed with a moral force that neither suffocates reality nor claims uniqueness.

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