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Beyond the Reel — Meta-reality in Film

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

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Richard N. Donovan

1994

Abstract: Beyond the Reel — Meta-reality in Film

Richard Donovan, 1994

This thesis examines how a film establishes its own sense of 'reality' which goes beyond the mere representation of 'real life'. It introduces the term *meta-reality* to define this phenomenon, examines how meta-reality comes into being, its characteristics, and what effects it may have on the film viewer. The thesis employs a narratological approach to this issue, suggesting that narrative is the ultimate creative force in film, and that meta-reality is the cooperative product of narrator, narrative and narratee.

Chapter One presents a case for the existence of filmic meta-reality and the usefulness of this term to the film theorist.

Chapter Two examines the essential characteristics of the film medium, comparing some of the major film theories of the twentieth century.

Chapter Three explores the similarities and differences between film and other artforms. It points up an affinity between film and novel which seems to belie their fundamentally different media.

Chapter Four examines film narrative, and determines the four basic principles of narrative: generation, cohesion, revelation and explication. It suggests that a filmmaker's narrative objectives in creating a meta-reality closely mirror these principles.

Chapter Five discusses the narrative acts at work in a film text which effect the filmmaker's narrative objectives.

Chapter Six is a case study of an excerpt of the film *Mosshill*, which identifies the working of narrative acts in the text, and relates these to the filmmaker's narrative objectives.

Chapter Seven summarizes the foregoing discussion, and suggests avenues for further research into filmic meta-reality.

Preface and Acknowledgements

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This thesis comprises two parts:

1. Written section (found herein).
2. Video section. A VHS videotape accompanies the written Case Study in Chapter Six of this thesis.

Richard Donovan, February 1994.

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Introduction

When dinosaurs once again walk the earth in the film *Jurassic Park*, is this somehow less 'real' a film phenomenon than, say, the down-to-earth portrayal of a real-life individual in *My Left Foot*? Equally, when newcomer black writer-director John Singleton releases his portrait of racial issues *Boyz N The Hood*, can we compare the work's spare, unobtrusive storytelling with established black writer-director Spike Lee's overt techniques in the race portrait *Do The Right Thing*? And how can two viewers come away with divergent opinions of such a film? Why is it likely that they may disagree on the 'point' of the story, the issues raised, and the filmmaker's intentions, while still agreeing that the filmmaker is talented?

Here I am identifying three matters which are central to my thesis: the question of the reality which the filmic *text* portrays, the reality which the *author(s)* intend(s),¹ and the reality which the *viewer* perceives. All films are fictions in the sense that someone *makes* them (Latin: *fictio*, a fashioning, from *ingere*, to shape): they never spontaneously come into existence, no matter how natural they may appear. Even a documentary creates its own agenda of priorities and focuses out of lived existence, thereby manufacturing an entity that has never existed before. Nevertheless, 'fiction' does not equate with 'non-reality', no matter how much the mass media may have confounded the distinction. As I will be contending in this thesis, a fiction is no less real than a stone, except in some limited physical terms. In many ways, in fact, a fiction, or, as I prefer to call it, a *text*, exhibits aspects of reality which a stone could never merit: psychological, mental and spiritual dimensions which are ultimately a product of perception, but are no less real for this. As George Bluestone reminds us in quoting the theorist Arnheim, "art is just as much and just as little a part of material life as anything else in this world" (Bluestone, 8).

¹ By *author*, I mean the people who have played a significant role in the conceptualization and development of the story that we see on screen. This could include novelist, script writer, story editor, director and others. For the purposes of this thesis, I will consider script writer and director as the originators of a film narrative.

Hence, *reality* is not a very helpful term to apply to these issues, first because it is such a general concept, and hence encompasses, for my purposes, too wide a gamut of ontological and epistemological questions (that is, questions of the nature of existence and how we interpret it). Second, 'reality' carries with it connotations of absolute truth and unassailable physical fact which would lend a utilitarian air to our discussion. The main focus of my essay is not film techniques and the properties of film and filmed physical objects that underlie these techniques; it is the organizing structures that we find operating when the author originates his or her ideas, when these ideas are realized before a camera and in the cutting room, and when the viewer perceives this manifestation on the screen. For the purposes of this essay, I will be adopting the term *meta-reality* in preference to 'reality', because this term limits our discussion, and also recognizes the special, transcendent place that the text occupies in the wider Reality of our universe. Let us examine what such a term encompasses for the world of film.

First, I believe that a film's essence lies in its ability to construct a reality-in-itself and -for-itself which is both coherent and cogent. In other words, a successful film is both believable and successful in convincing us of its believability. I feel that we should replace the phrase 'suspension of disbelief' in describing this process, because it does not do the text justice. Certainly, the bare requirement of a text is that it induces us to accept its 'world' as a temporary equivalent to the one we occupy 'outside' of the text; but in many cases, a text does much more than that, presenting us with ideas and feelings which seem somehow *heightened*, causing us not only to pause for a look (the product of this suspension of disbelief), but furthermore to *pause for thought*. Sometimes we feel that an author, be it of a book, film or sculpture, has captured the essence of some reality which we rarely 'live' ourselves. Sometimes, a film may cause us to laugh or cry when we are not normally disposed to such actions; it may force us to examine issues that we would normally ignore. Sometimes, indeed, a film may seem *more real to us than our own lives*, in that it distils the 'stuff of life' into a form much more concentrated and potent than that of everyday life. And yet, how closely a given film represents the 'real' world is largely irrelevant, I

feel, to how real an entity we perceive it to be. How a film *reflects* our daily lives is no more important a consideration than how it may *affect* or even *effect* these lives. For the point about all art is that it uses nature — its physical form — to transcend nature. I will contend in this thesis that the only reality that must be respected in film (at least, representational film) is the reality of the *narrative*: if the story does not work, everything else is in vain.

Second, an important aspect of this self-contained reality is the storyteller's intentions for his or her story. He or she may be simply content to tell a good yarn, one which is compelling and memorable simply by virtue of its superficial coherence. Then again, the filmmaker may want to address certain themes or issues in the work, even presenting his or her personal convictions or attitudes. Most filmmakers of course place their works somewhere on the continuum between pure superficiality and a story supersaturated with comment. How the filmmaker 'orientates' his or her work has a direct bearing on the entity which presents itself to the viewer at the end of the process.

Further, film, like all artforms involving the active participation of more than one person at the creation stage, presents special problems in analyzing who the 'author' is to begin with. Unless the director also is writer, cinematographer, actor(s) and editor of a film, he or she cannot be said to be the sole author of a work in the way that a writer could. The celebrated *auteur* theory of Godard and his contemporaries, still very much stock-in-trade for the film critic, has done much to introduce the popular notion that the director 'authors' the film, however logic dictates otherwise. I prefer to say that the director *makes* the film, relying on the talents and ideas of a number of people, but using them in a way that he or she synthesizes. Thus, I am not diminishing the importance of the director: no matter how talented the screenwriter, it is he or she that is the 'bridger of worlds', transforming the verbal script into the audiovisual scenario that we recognize as the film, and often changing the script markedly in the process. However, to maintain the distinction between the *originator* of the film's story and the *realizer* of that story, I will use the term *filmmaker* in place of *author*. And what is important for this discussion is that how the filmmaker attempts to achieve his or her goals for a narrative will naturally help determine the effect the

work will have on its audience: that is, the reality it will convoke in the viewers' minds.

This leads us logically to the third triad of film's essence. The reality which the author induces cannot exist without the willing participation of the viewers themselves, a cooperation which the author must strive to evoke. Thus I will consider how a viewer's preconceptions must influence his or her perceptions of a film as a meta-reality, and how the author of the text could be seen as the 'first viewer' of the text that he envisages.²

To summarize, in this thesis, I am addressing questions central to the nature of film as an artform: what is the status of film reality, how is it created, what forms can this reality take, and what effect can these forms have on our lives (should we allow them to). Just as viewers and readers are no longer being regarded as purely passive consumers in relation to the 'texts' they see and hear, we can no longer regard the text itself as either merely derivative (imitative) of 'reality', or entirely abstracted from it. Nor is the text merely the author's consciousness 'on a plate', delivered to us whole for our consumption. Film in the end is as much potentiality as actuality, and, as theorists have found, it thus defies complete description, despite its phenomenal basis, evidence in itself that the extent of its influence in the world does not end at the movie-theatre doors, let alone at the edge of the screen frame.

² This notion is based on the discussion of the term in Branigan, *passim*.