Julia Hallam, Margaret Marshment: Realism and popular cinema

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After reading this book, I am reconsidering the opinion I have held for many years that *Romancing the Stone* (1984) with its use of stuntmen is more realistic, and hence better, than *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) with its reliance on Industrial Light and Magic to produce the thrills – whereas *Vertical Limit* (2000) is total crap because the actors are obviously not up Everest in several key scenes. The word realistic is often used, as I have done, to describe whether a film is any good or not, realism being a positive attribute. According to Hallam and Marshment it is an over-used and misunderstood piece of terminology. In the 19th Century proponents of realism were able to claim correspondence between a particular artistic form and the reality it purported to represent. Today, especially with the use of Computer Generated Images (C.G.I.), we know the relationship between reality and image is much more tenuous. These days realism is considered

to be a matter of form. However, it is the form harnessed to create the transparency between viewer and the text found in classic Hollywood film-making. Realism is the dominant form of representation in our culture, making sense of our reality, albeit through forms of address that support dominant ideologies. Hallam and Marshment seek to deal with the lack of critical interest in how realism is used in popular film, and how and why certain filmmakers use realist strategies.

After a relatively dull first chapter describing the transition from melodrama to a more realist, naturalist style of theatre in 19th century post-enlightenment Europe and the relationship between realism and film style, they illustrate the different codes and conventions claimed as "realist" by looking at five key movements: Soviet cinema in the 1920s, British war-time cinema, Italian neorealism, The British New wave (Kitchen sink dramas of the early 1960s) and black urban cinema of the 1990s. What comes out of this overview is not that these films were more real because they were able to depict contemporary reality with a greater verisimilitude or mimesis, or that realist conventions such as location filming, the use of non-professional actors and shaky camera work (documentary techniques) were first introduced, but that they are „attempts to depict a reality that was absent from other styles at the time.. (p.XI). Even styles of acting such as The Method as practised by Marlon Brando or James Dean, which to many of us today seem exaggerated, were considered revolutionary in their day because of their perceived realism. Allied to the more formal concept of realism as verisimilitude, is the notion that realism is appropriate for, and obliged to, represent reality in the interests of social justice.

In the classical text the (transparent) unity of the work is achieved through a series of „motivations‘, justifications for the narrative's content and presentation of that material. Many narrative elements are justified on the grounds of realism: setting, characterisation, and plausibly motivated character actions. However, intertextual, generic and artistic motivations mediate what we would consider realistic. (Some people would find both *Romancing the Stone* and *Temple of Doom* to be completely unrealistic if they were expecting a Ken Loach film or were not conditioned for the „happy ending‘). These motivations, including realism, can evolve. Hallam and Marshment analyse realism's role in genre and conclude that the intertextual stylistics of „hi-concept‘ film aesthetics has weakened both causal narration and characterisation. (See *Gone in 60 Seconds*, 2000, for details).

Their chapter „The Epic of the Everyday" which identifies, analyses and categorises the realist strategies (expositional, rhetorical and spectacular) employed in films attempting to engage with social or political issues and the following chapter on viewer identification, or alignment the term the authors prefer (interest, concern, moral, aesthetic and emotional alignments) provide us with the most useful tools for understanding how realist elements are used and how the audience perceives a text to be „realistic‘ and is able to „suspends disbelief". The rest of

the book concerns itself with applying these tools to films where a contemporary (re)writing of history takes place, films with political or social points to make situated in specific localities (social realism), and violent films of the ‚new brutalism' cycle. The authors conclude that social realism in the 1990s is „less optimistic about the possibilities of change, but arguably far more confrontational in its presentation of characters who [...] refuse or negate the possibility of solutions through changes in social policy" (p.216).

Although many points raised by Hallam and Marshment are very interesting and they do provide a comprehensive overview on how realist strategies are utilised, it is not an easy book to read. The more important points are not always obvious and some of the ‚academic' language hides rather than clarifies. The ‚in-depth' case studies include reviews and opinions from many different commentators making it difficult to locate the authors' own position in amongst the detail.

An aspect of cinema I found completely ignored was the use of sound. The authors touch on the use of music but there is no mention of the sound effects used in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), for example, which makes the beach scenes so immediate, or the screams one hears over the images of Henry's victims in *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986) which establishes the reality of his crimes .

<div align="right">Drew Bassett (Köln)</div>