

Drew Bassett

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Carl Plantinga: Alternative Realities

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If a book could have a soundtrack, then *Alternative Realities* by Carl Plantinga would have *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen: „Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, No escape from reality.“ Plantinga's premise is that even the most fantastical of films must be grounded in quotidian reality to ensure the spectator accepts its verisimilitude, verisimilitude being „the subjective impression that a movie, scene, setting, character or story is real or believable“ (p.21). The world created must be consistent and believable. He says that all films including documentaries are dependent on the expressive vision of the film-maker, that all films create „worlds, that they are products of the human imagination and that film is a composite medium not only photographic“ (ibid.).

In his first chapter, Plantinga gives an overview of film theory as it relates to realism. Movies in the beginning, as they recorded everyday events, were associated with realism and authenticity but there was doubt that this new medium could create art. The Formalists believed that only the departure from the duplication of reality allowed the creative expression of the film-maker. That each technological development, for instance, colour or the advent of sound, which brought the movies closer to the recording of reality, moved the medium further away from art, but they ignored the expres-

sive possibilities of these advances for example, the use of different film stock in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). The Realists, on the other hand, believed that what is special and important about movies is their relationship to the real world. The Revelationists drew elements from both theories, believing stylist techniques, which depart from everyday sight, can reveal reality as it truly is.

Plantinga goes on to discuss different types of realism. Objective realism provides a plausible rendition of some aspect of the real world, whereas subjective realism provides a plausibly accurate rendition of the way a character experiences that world. Psychological, scenic, narrative, and perceptual realism are what makes something seem real to us, which may, however, not seem real to others. Realism is also used to designate movies with social concerns or those that use certain stylistic or formal techniques like hand-held cameras.

His next chapter deals with how even effects-heavy superhero and fantasy/science fiction movies remain firmly rooted in quotidian reality. If the Hulk lands from a great height without a loud thud and a momentary shaking of the camera, we simply do not believe he can do it. „We bring our real-world perceptual, cognitive and social skills to bear on the experience of fictional worlds“ (p.42). Fictional characters

such as in *The Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) must also be depicted as having a recognisable internal life with feelings, goals, and desires to ground the fantasy in reality.

Plantinga then looks at how movies can approximate someone else's subjective reality. He does this by focussing on subjective narration, which is not intersubjective and does not follow the conventional notions of verisimilitude, specifically in dreams (*Inception* [2010]) and memories (*Wild Strawberries* [1957]). These worlds are portrayed as experienced by an individual through the use of particular framing devices, close-ups distorting lenses, distorted sound among others. Psychoanalytical film theorists argue that films, in any case, can be analysed the same way dreams can.

The next chapter, „Ruptured Realities“, looks at how film creates narrative worlds „in which the viewers' assumptions can be subtly or decisively undermined“ (p.89). The author covers the gradual disclosure that all is not

what it seems in *Shutter Island* (2010), the existence of alternative worlds in *The Matrix* (1999) and the twist ending that demands a wholesale reinterpretation of what has come before in *Planet of the Apes* (1968).

Finally, by looking at documentaries as diverse as *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976), which is traditional in its use of photographic images to record meetings relating to a strike at a coal mine, to *The Act of Killing* (2012) where Indonesian murderers re-enact their crimes, Plantinga concludes that no film, including documentaries, can produce a transparent, unmediated recording of reality and that all documentary filmmaking involves the work of the human imagination.

I can whole-heartedly recommend this concise, informative and well-written book. It's part of Rutgers University Press' Quick Takes series on movies and popular culture and I look forward to reading more of them.

Drew Bassett (Köln)