



## Not What It Says on the Tin

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Review: Aitken, Ian (2006) *Realist Film Theory and Cinema: The Nineteenth-century Lukácsian and Intuitionist Realist Traditions*.

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'Cinema,' Ian Aitken argues, 'appeared to be the natural medium of expression for [the] critical realist tradition [derived from French nineteenth century painters and authors including Émile Zola], because of film's ability to capture such a quantity of nuanced detail' (197). Yet realism is no longer fashionable in teaching or research, possibly, as Aitken suggests, because critical theory exhausted arguments about the relationship between film and reality, having established consensus that realism is a discursive or rhetorical construct, a 'naturalised ideology' (230). Sharers of these assumptions will be considerably challenged by Aitken's book. That is its achievement and its weakness.

The challenge begins with the innocuous title, *Realist Film Theory and Cinema*, the scope of which is extremely deceptive. The subtitle, 'The Nineteenth-century Lukácsian and Intuitionist Realist Traditions,' indicates the project's actually very specialised nature. Aitken observes that the publishers of his 2001 book, *European Film Theory and Cinema* (after which the present volume comes 'second in a planned trilogy' (1)), changed its subtitle, 'The Intuitionist Realist and Modernist Tradition,' to 'A Critical Introduction.' Such marketing decisions justifiably attempt to render obscure investigations less formidable. However, they do a disservice in repositioning them with other, more general (if no less rigorous) titles such as Terry Lovell's *Pictures of Reality* (1980) or Lapsley and Westlake's also

misleadingly titled *Film Theory: an Introduction* (1988, from the same publisher as *Realist Film Theory and Cinema*). Hardly a textbook, more an extended treatise, Aitken's densely written study will not replace these briefer treatments at undergraduate or even postgraduate levels but is likely to become definitive for researchers and historians of ideas.

According to the introduction, *Realist Film Theory and Cinema* deals with issues for which the earlier volume lacked space – 'nineteenth-century realism and naturalism, the realist cinema of Renoir, Visconti and others; and the work of Lukács' – as well as delving into the relationship between philosophical conceptions of realism and cinematic realism (4). It attempts to 'recover' Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film* 'in terms of a realist, rather than phenomenological, backdrop advocacy' and 'reconnect ... categories such as "realism", "anti-realism" and "modernism"' (3). Early modernist intuitionist film culture, Aitken argues, recognises no useful distinction between realism and modernism.

As its subtitle indicates, the book examines two approaches to realist film theory and cinema generally. It traces these back to nineteenth-century literary realism and naturalism, particularly in France, themselves influenced by determinist philosophy and Darwin's science of evolution. Aitken expounds upon a French nineteenth-century naturalist-realism that he considers critical in its representation of human agency, as opposed to 'more normative forms of realism' (4). This in turn powerfully influenced early French cinema, notably through numerous adaptations (1902-38) of Zola, pictorialist naturalism in the 1920s, and Renoir's critical realism, which Aitken examines in detail through *La Bête humaine* (1938). Aitken argues also that nineteenth-century realism informed Georg Lukács's approach to cinematic realism, especially in relation to the concepts of alienation and intensive totality, and applies Lukácsian theories of both literary and cinematic realism in analyses of Wajda's *Danton* (1990) and Visconti's *Senso* (1954). Lukács's 'relatively scarce' film writing, Aitken concludes, which nevertheless spanned at least 55 years (83, 86), contradicts his position in relation to literary realism, which rejected naturalist/impressionist realism. Intuitionist realism is then traced through central issues in the work of Grierson, Bazin and Kracauer, namely the 'problem of modernity' and 'totality' (the underlying connectedness between humans, their institutions and their physical and spiritual environment). The final chapter, as the introduction promises, 'goes on to establish the central themes and characteristics of an intuitionist realist model of cinematic realism' (5), which for this reviewer seems a little late.

Lukács's influence was crucial to the development of important leftist thinkers, including Antonio Gramsci, Lucian Goldmann, Ernst Bloch and some of the Frankfurt School – but not without criticism, which Aitken surveys. Lukács was closely associated with the

nineteenth century realist novel and rejected Zola's naturalism and much modernism. Aitken uses history and biography to account for Lukács's ambivalent relationship with official communism.

As will be clear, this book is extraordinarily wide-ranging and erudite. Aitken draws extensively on French, Hungarian, Soviet and Italian political, cultural and social history, as well as detailed biography, literary criticism, film theory, media history and Western philosophy. The result is a major piece of research. Carefully contextualised accounts demonstrate nineteenth-century French realism to be anything but a single and uncritical bourgeois movement. Furthermore, Aitken insists, twentieth-century realist cinema has been widely misunderstood because of mistaken conceptions about nineteenth-century realism which itself developed, he shows, from (and not so much in reaction against) neo-classicism – which, although it idealised form and composition, was not averse to depicting a flawed world. Realism rather, along with Romanticism, rejected official standards of academic art and served in both painting and literature to criticise limitations of bourgeois hegemony, whether from Balzac's Catholic monarchist position or the egalitarian democratic left. Balzac's reliance upon working-class stereotypes and conventional plotting and rhetoric nevertheless locate him within social 'Romantic' realism, excluded from the realism that primarily concerns Aitken. Unprecedented social and cultural change coincided with new media technologies (lithography, wood engraving, photography, superior printing) that fed public interest and from the 1830s combined existing rhetorical and representational styles, resulting in a spontaneous and disordered aesthetic in magazines attuned to the complexity, turmoil and social extensiveness of city life. Increasing materialist emphasis on environmental pressures had its philosophical counterpart, which indeed came to directly influence realist practice, in developments from Locke's empiricist theory of knowledge in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), now shorn of any idea of an autonomous faculty of reason, whether associated with Christian agency or humanist free will.

Balzac profoundly influenced Lukács, the twentieth century's most important theorist of literary realism for Aitken. Closer to the realist tradition the book addresses, however, is Zola's contemporaneous 'naturalist' realism, which stressed genetic determination and attempted a scientific method in the arts. Nevertheless, Aitken argues against seeing Zola's naturalism as more deterministic than realism (defined as a detached neutral stance) and identifies in Zola, as in Manet's paintings, a dialectic between freedom and determinism which incorporates both mimetic and expressive elements. Authorial vision was as valued as socially extensive subject matter, imprecision and immediacy were elevated over

institutionalised formulae, and artists and writers were judged partly against willingness to represent the oppressed. Hence – as Aitken demonstrates with reference to Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), French political history and various popular forms of spectacle – realism, far from a single movement, was not necessarily opposed to political radicalism. Indeed, Renoir's adaptation of *La Bête humaine*, which preserved Zola's naturalism, was attacked from both the right for being unpatriotic and by Marxist-Stalinists as decadent, defeatist and pessimistic. Aitken contends, though, that both the novel and the film advocate collective emancipation through democratic reform, based on Zola's embracing of older, Enlightenment principles that considered human change possible. It is with the critical realist nineteenth-century tradition that Aitken's book is most concerned, involving a non-formalist definition (unlike 'photographic realism' that downplayed its own mediation) and its legacy is traced convincingly in the films analysed.

Aitken sees the genesis of Lukácsian thought on alienation and modernity in the ideas of Georg Simmel, Max Weber (Lukács's teacher) and Hegel. Simmel developed Marx's theory of commodification to argue that capitalism estranges workers from the products of their labour and the experience of their own lives. Weber argued that 'disenchantment' and blinkered isolation result from bureaucratic moulding of workers to accept exploitation, thereby marginalising questions of meaning and value. From Hegel, arguably the most important influence in Aitken's view, came the proposition that humanity has evolved a rational consciousness of freedom – an ideal yet unrealised – whereby individual liberty mutually consents to and is guaranteed by an organic community (equivalent to the state) that fulfils genuine human needs. Lukács further developed Marx's concept of reification (an extension of commodity fetishism whereby social relations become fragmented and marginalised), treating it as capitalism's central shortcoming, a dehumanising force that both literature and film potentially could counter. Thus Lukács creates a Romantic opposition between inauthentic 'ordinary life' and 'the soul,' a consciousness that transcends individual resistance by grasping relationships, including social structures, in totality. The soul is exercised through 'culture,' conceived in the broadest sense as, to quote Aitken, a 'ubiquitous existential and social act of struggle against alienation, which can, but will not necessarily, manifest itself only within the creation of works of art' (71). Great art consequently embodies objectively the conditions of alienation but also transcends its historically specific context to 'express the existential and social struggle' against meaningless, mechanical, mundane experience (71).

Such 'greatness' relates to Hegel's concept of 'totality': the Absolute which comprehends everything, including consciousness. For Lukács, then, great art illustrates the

general through the particular. Consequently literature surpasses film in better conveying conceptual problems. Like the classical art Hegel advocated, Lukácsian realism sought concrete description to evoke unity and freedom, not mere imitation. Lukács elevated 'man's totality,' the relationship between individuals and institutions, over 'extensive totality,' between all the external aspects of non-human nature. A third term, 'intensive totality,' refers to limited ways – determined by formal conventions, properties of the medium and the artist's ideologically inflected vision – in which aesthetic objects portray the effectively limitless relationships of the first two as opposed to representing them as a pure simulacrum. Like Marx and Engels, Lukács believed realist representations should undermine bourgeois empiricist modes of experiencing that supported capitalist hegemony; it was necessary to convey underlying processes which regulate appearances rather than merely to replicate them. This was effected by concentration on the 'typical' as a concrete, individuated example of the general. Moreover Lukács's 'critical realism' helped liberate recipients to see both their own situation and the wider condition, unlike the more didactic and directive orthodoxy of 'socialist realism'.

If, as 'classical Marxism's most important aesthete' (83-4), Lukács largely ignored the medium Lenin declared most important of all the arts, this, Aitken observes, was because he considered himself an amateur in a specialist field. In fact Lukács and Bloch founded a film club 'to explore ... latent artistic possibilities' as early as 1910. As Hungarian Education Minister, Lukács proposed a film school. And in 1928 he planned a government information film with cinema theorist Béla Balázs as part of the world's first administration to fully nationalise a film industry. Like Kracauer, Lukács, writing in 1913, believed that film's characteristic fragmentation and ephemerality exemplified modernity; potentially, therefore, it could reveal that condition, even while its commercial nature meant it reproduced the lack of authenticity that was the problem. Fantasy as a means to expose dissatisfaction was central to what Lukács called cinema's 'philosophy': that 'everything is possible' (87). Like others in the avant-garde, Lukács admired Charlie Chaplin, in his case for maintaining the fantasy of triumph, however improbable, over systematic adversity through his humanist resistance.

Aitken's account is not merely synoptic but advances knowledge, as in provisionally generating a taxonomy of 1930s realist French productions. He introduces, problematises and analyses in depth and with rigour issues that can only be touched upon even in this lengthy summary and illuminates equally Lukács's literary theory as well as cinematic realism. Moreover, Aitken goes so far as to claim his exploration 'turns previous understandings of Lukács's ideas on filmic realism on their heads' (91). He insists his slant

differs from film studies' existing appropriation of Lukácsian literary theory, although he lacks space to devise a model to marry Lukács's approach to intensive totality to specifically filmic issues. Aitken hypothesises a "'naturalist" Lukácsian cinematic aesthetic' (91) extrapolated from Lukács's 1970 monograph on Solzhenitsyn, arguing that Lukács's categorisation of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* as a *Novelle* refers not to a literary short story but any artwork that concentrates on concrete particulars to evoke totality. This contrasts with Zola's naturalism, which lists details that remain relatively autonomous instead of contributing to a typical situation that defines an overall thematic project, and which tends more to nihilism than heroic resistance. Nevertheless, Aitken shows, Lukács's treatment of the *Novelle* repeatedly conforms to his 'naturalist' conception of film *and* to symbolism as well as subjectivism (the opposite of totality), all of which he purports to eschew.

Instead of working through these contradictions, Aitken explores Lukácsian cinematic realism through analysis of *Danton* and *Senso*. This is slightly disingenuous as, having himself delineated notionally 'a Lukácsian cinema,' after concluding that 'diverse and conflicting categories of film are potentially equally definable as Lukácsian in some respect,' Aitken applies 'other Lukácsian concepts' to aid categorisation (99) without justifying why these rather than others. That said, the analyses are subtle and careful readings in their own right that serve also to further educe elements of Lukács's thinking, such as his sympathy towards humanism rather than rejection of it as inherently reactionary, as well as to contextualise the films in their respective national traditions and, connected with these, immediate historical and political backgrounds. These analyses lead inexorably to evaluation, whereby *Danton* ultimately is judged a conservative failure because of excessive personalisation of history and metaphorical validation of a version of Polish identity, whereas *Senso*, made with awareness of Lukácsian aesthetics, successfully embodies totality and thereby contests established notions of Italian national identity.

Eventually, the penultimate chapter explains that 'The work of Grierson, Bazin and Kracauer makes up the core of what is here referred to as the intuitionist realist tradition in film theory' (137). A clear summary follows of their philosophies and formative traditions, with particular reference to scientific naturalism and its inherent contradictions in relation to democracy. It seems strange, however, that this is not mentioned earlier. In Grierson's case, Aitken explains how Carlyle, Coleridge and Ruskin influenced his views on industrialisation's social impact; how he studied in a philosophical idealist tradition that included Kant, Hegel and W. H. Bradley; and how this approach, as taught at Oxford and Glasgow Universities, permeated the newly created BBC's Public Service Broadcasting ethos

and fed into Grierson's socially aware conception of documentary, which was concerned with countering self-centred individualism inculcated by capitalism. Aitken effectively critiques Grierson's position by noting its underlying assumption, rooted in Calvinism, of an inherent human nature as fallen and in need of leadership by an enlightened elite who recognised individuals' interdependence within society, an interdependence that the state would facilitate and mediate. In an important passage Aitken argues that Grierson's documentaries portray these structures of interdependency; the formal qualities of *Drifters* (1929), for example, makes apparent (the 'actual') general truths (the 'real') which are too abstract to be rendered directly. He notes that Grierson attempted in America in the 1920s to promulgate an 'epic cinema' to dramatise interpersonal relationships within the context of social and national institutions but soon realised Hollywood's lack of interest. Thus Aitken reaches the fascinating conclusion that Grierson's espousing of documentary was pragmatic, reached within a wider pursuit of cinematic realism (148-9).

Kracauer also believed, like Lukács's early literary criticism, in a lost totality. This condition exacerbated 'disenchantment' whereby immediate concerns, aligned with hegemonic interests, smother more idealistic speculations. For Kracauer, modernity produced 'abstraction': inability to contemplate the immediate environment which was veiled by instrumental rationalities; and 'distraction': failure of cultural products, which he dismissed as 'mass ornamentation,' to engage authentically. The battle between fascism and democracy manifested deeper-rooted ongoing struggle 'for the existential condition of humanity' (155). Kracauer's antidote to disenchantment is 'The Redemption of Physical Reality,' the subtitle of his *Theory of Film*. Cinema, although purveying distraction, can draw attention to mechanization and consequently posit an alternative; indeed distracting spectacle's energetic nature is both a nervous symptom and evidence of desire for vigorous existence. Film form and the spectator alike are produced within, hence damaged by, the same conditions; yet film, Kracauer contended, can frame the world to reveal phenomena 'in all their "poignancy", "preciousness" and "concreteness"' (165). Realism comes, then, not from faithful recording of appearances but through technique which awakens the possibility of connectedness between things, including the spectator. This is achieved neither through conventions (as film theory generally understands realism) nor through internal consistency and autonomy (whereby the film is hermetically sealed from external concerns) but rather through modernist experimentation that transcends empiricism and avoids directing the spectator. The film accordingly should avoid completeness, which would render it an object, and should contain gaps and incongruities to link its diegesis to the wider (also fractured) totality.

Aitken proceeds to compare Bazin, who favours perception more strongly as a mode of access to the totality. In Bazin's formation, the spectator, freed by long takes and deep focus from the organisation and ordering imposed by editing, scrutinises the diegesis as a richness, indeterminacy and density of empirical signifiers that achieve totality within the consciousness: a spatial fragmentation within the unity of the shot unfolding in time, rather than a temporal fragmentation. By framing perception, the film as simulacrum reminds the spectator of the totality of reality.

Aitken's final chapter contextualises cinematic realism within philosophical realism – an enterprise against which, no doubt, many teachers warn their students. Aitken's intention, however, is to establish the ease and value of the exercise, before comparing cinematic realism with what he terms 'pragmatist cognitivist' film theory and lastly assessing realism's importance generally and cinematic realism's specifically. His purpose not least is to bring together realist traditions that have been intellectually isolated. Perhaps surprisingly this involves a trawl through modernism and the avant-garde, motivated by insistence that critical or 'serious realism,' although representational, foregrounds its materiality. Aitken also points out that Lukács's dismissal of modernism as regressive, in line with doctrine inherited from Engels, did not accord with Marx's own writings (197). Here the film scholar will encounter more familiar topics as Aitken utilises well-known work by Raymond Williams, on distinctions between dramatic realism and naturalism and on realism as social extension, and on Linda Nochlin's emphasis on artistic and literary depiction of 'the commonplace.' This precedes a turn to consider philosophical notions of whether realism refers to an objective or subjective entity. This issue, Aitken concedes, is 'extremely opaque, perhaps inherently impenetrable ... also not the central concern of this study of cinematic realism' (202) – although he does not shy away from tackling it at length with verve and vigour. Then, ten pages from the end, comes a superbly concise and incisive analysis of the shortcomings of 1970s grand theory, the high ideals of which Aitken nevertheless respects (214-5). This provides a foil for more recent pragmatist approaches, especially the cognitivism associated with Noel Carroll, David Bordwell and others, which reject political or ideological orientation as a measure of utility or value. These Aitken compares, generally negatively, with the cinematic realist traditions he has discussed. As such debates are the context into which Aitken's book emerges, it seems odd they appear almost as an appendix, although explicable as a consequence of essentially chronological organisation.

The book presents none of the theories uncritically. Its chief problem is the relationship between particular texts examined and the theories they seem to resist exemplifying. Anyone interested in specific readings of *Danton* and *Senso* will find



numerous insights in the scrupulously theorised close readings, but how such a reader would find their way to this book in the first place is unclear. Conversely, students of Lukácsian theory might wonder why these texts in particular are chosen and will find the exposition somewhat abstract unless they already know them well.

The book is suitably organised within its own logic: for example, 'The problem of modernity' and 'Totality' are dealt with sequentially three times over in sections with those headings devoted to Grierson, then Kracauer and finally Bazin. However, it makes few concessions to readers' needs, and here several criticisms need to be raised, without detracting from the project's enormous significance and achievement.

The philosophy remains very abstract. Whether Aiken ever defines intuitionism is unclear, leaving the reader to work hard to infer what is at stake. Arguments appear circular and tautologous: for example, 'what binds early intuitionist modernism and later intuitionist realism together is a shared *intuitionist* theory, or model, of knowledge' (3, emphasis in original). Again, that 'intuitionist cinematic realism is based upon a primarily intuitionist, as opposed to a rationalist or empiricist approach to cinematic signification and spectatorship' (198) is a not very helpful truism.

As such passages indicate, the writing appears rushed. Manchester University Press fail Aitken, the reader and themselves by allowing through breathless, unedited prose and too many errors. It is not nitpicking to object to a surfeit of random commas, solecisms such as 'beurocratic' (13), 'vertibrate' (16), and 'adaption' (31), undefined specialist terms such as 'viridicy' and 'viridical' (75), repeated problems with the possessive 'Lukács's', substitution of 'loose' for 'lose' (156) and inconsistent spellings of an adjectival neologism from Kracauer's name, which becomes 'Kracaurian' (85). The argument is demanding enough without having to struggle to decode it, and significant enough to deserve better respect as a contribution to knowledge. Aside from errors, Aitken's style makes the going heavy. No editor should permit repetitious and soporific passages such as the following bathetic, almost self-parodic listing which could easily be abbreviated or relegated to an appendix – reproduced simply because it exemplifies the book's unnecessary difficulty even when presenting simple information:

In addition to *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal*, a number of other novels by Zola also served as the foundation for films made over this period. *L'Argent* (1891) was the basis of *L'Argent* (Marcel L'Herbier, 1928); whilst *Au bonheur des dames* (1883) provided the source for *Au ravissement des dames* (1913) and *Au bonheur des dames* (Julien Duvivier, 1929). *La Bête humaine* (1889) was the source for *La Bête humaine* (Jean Renoir, 1938), whilst *Fécondité* (1899) was adapted as *Fécondité* (N. Evreinoff and Henry Etievant, 1929). Other adaptations included: *Nana* (Renoir, 1926), which was adapted from *Nana* (1880), *Nantas* (Donatien, 1921), adapted from *Nantas*

(1879); *Pour une nuit d'amour* (Iakov, Protozanoff, 1921), and *Une page d'amour* (Pina Menichelli, 1924), adapted from *Une page d'amour* (1878), *Le Rêve* (Jacques de Baroncelli, 1920), and *Le Rêve* (Baroncelli, 1931), adapted from *Le Rêve* (1888); *La Terre* (André Antoine, 1921), adapted from *La Terre* (1887) *Thérèse Raquin* (Jacques Feyder, 1926), adapted from *Thérèse Raquin* (1887), and *Travail* (Henri Pouctal, 1919), adapted from *Travail* (1901). (30)

There are many inconsistencies. Numerous French and Italian passages lack translation. Some sentences contain two foreign quotations, only one translated. Irritatingly, titles such as *Il gattopardo* (1963), surely to most English speaking film scholars known as *The Leopard*, appear only in the original, as do German philosophical terms, whereas Aitken evinces no scruples in using English translations from Polish.

The structure also needs revision. *Lebenswelt* is referred to twice and discussed for six pages before a definition arrives, by which time I had pulled down Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* for clarification. Aitken is too close to his work. The introduction, for example, signals that in Chapter 4 'it is argued that, while *Danton* is at variance with Lukács's models of "classical" and "democratic-humanist" realism, *Senso* can be considered as a work of "inverse democratic humanist realism", rather than "classical realism".' These may be valid, possibly useful distinctions, but the impression is of an author writing to himself rather than clarifying for an audience. Often, detailed analyses acknowledge failure to apply certain Lukácsian theories satisfactorily; yet this does not preclude continuing regardless, exploring blind alleys and describing wild goose chases. While Aitken no doubt proceeds dialectically, the result is excessive uncertainty, provisionality and self-contradiction. No fewer than six sentences begin 'However' on the page randomly open before me (132), while one paragraph starts, 'However, it nevertheless remains the case that...' (156). Qualifications and redundancies exceed any reasonable structure of thesis-antithesis, point-counterpart; rather than deconstructing itself internally the argument comes perilously close to unravelling, making major points difficult to distinguish from quibbles and asides. Excision of these minute investigations would have resulted in a shorter and more clearly purposeful book.