

Realism in film (and other representations)

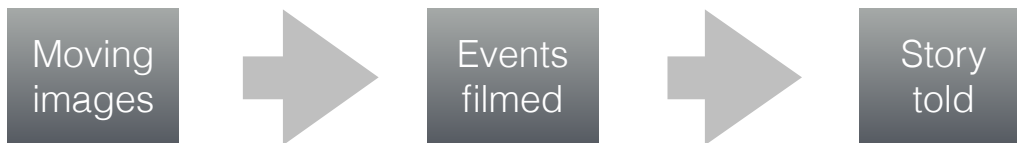
Is film distinctively realistic, is it realistic to a specially high degree, or in some unique way? The thought that it is has appealed to many, and realism has been found in various aspects of cinema. However, the phenomena offered are bewilderingly diverse, so much so that they push us towards the deeper question of what in general realism might be, if these are all to count. This is a question not only about film, but about representations of any kind, be they moving pictures, still photographs, paintings and drawings, theatrical performances, sculptures, novels, poems or other. It is relatively abstract, and answering may seem to take us far from the concerns of critics and many film theorists. Rather than discussing particular cinematic techniques, such as the long take or deep focus, I will be talking about more abstract features such as how much information is conveyed, or how far the movie sustains certain kinds of illusory experience. And when I attempt to find the underlying idea that renders those already abstract phenomena realist, things will get more abstract still. Nonetheless, my goal is to make out the idea of realism in such a way that it helps makes sense of talk of realism at every level, right down to the most concrete. There won't be space here to connect what I say to the way critics and film theorists have used the term, but it is part of my ambition that such connections can be made.

I begin (§1) by saying a little about what is meant by 'film' here, and exploring its structure. I then (§2) present five kinds of realism that have been found in film, so understood. These are not in direct competition: film might be realistic in all five ways. But what is realism, such that it can take these various forms? I answer by outlining (§3) a basic conception of realism, which I then (§4) use to test the claims of the five candidates.

1. The structure of photographic fiction film

In what follows, I concentrate only on a particular, rather common, kind of movie: photographic fiction film. Such film is made by coupling two kinds of representation. The finished product involves pictures brought up on a screen. I'll call these the *Moving Images*. Those images are the photographic record of various arrangements and events on set (the actors and their gestures, the props, scenery, etc.). I'll call those the *Events Filmed*. And the Events Filmed are themselves representations of whatever objects, people, scenes and events the movie ultimately seeks to put before its audience. I'll call these last the *Story Told*.¹ Thus cinema (of the kind that interests us) involves two tiers of representation:

¹ Note this names the events the story relates, not the telling of them. That last is as much a matter of the Events Filmed and (given editing etc.) the Moving Images.



The first tier, representation of the Events Filmed by the Moving Images, is photographic. What of the second? Without begging too many questions, I think we can see it as at least very like representation in a play. Movie actors represent somewhat as actors on the stage do, movie sets represent somewhat as sets in the theatre do, and so forth. This second tier is, then, more or less, theatrical representation.

In concentrating on film that has this structure, I set aside various other forms of cinema: animation, computer generated imagery and documentary. The justification for focussing so narrowly is that it is photographic fiction film that has been the focus of discussions of realism in cinema, and for which the widest range of claims for realism has been made. Since my hope is to use the diversity of realisms to motivate and guide the search for the nature of realism *per se*, this is the form of film that holds most promise.

Given this structure, it's tempting to wonder whether film's realism derives from that of its constituents. This is certainly true of some cases. Some film is unrealistic because it involves unrealistic theatrical representations. For example, the German expressionist classic *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* shows the actors walking through streets represented by sharply angled and angular sets. The film doesn't represent a world all akimbo. The movie is an unrealistic rendering of normal streets, not a realistic rendering of strange ones. Its unrealism stems from the unrealism of its theatrical representation: the Events Filmed do not share the appearance of the Story Told. Other movies achieve unrealism by involving unrealistic Moving Images. Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*, for instance, records realistic theatrical representations of characters and their actions, but in Moving Images that have been doctored to look like less than fully realistic drawings.

However, even in those cases in which we can attribute the (un)realism of the whole to that of its parts, doing so tells us where realism lies, but not what it is. When film is (un)realistic because the photographic and theatrical representations that compose it are, what does *their* (un)realism consist in? To say, we must examine some of the forms of realism that movies (as wholes) have been thought to exhibit. To that, our main business, I now turn.

2. Five kinds of realism

I'm going to take you on a whirlwind tour of five kinds of realism that, it has been claimed, are found in film. I begin with forms of realism that are found in representations of any kind. Later, I describe

realisms that apply to ever narrower ranges of representations. Only the last kind of realism has any prospect for being unique to cinema. Film might be specially connected to the others too, but only by displaying them to a specially high degree.

Ask a philosopher what it is for a representation to be realistic, and you'll probably be offered this:

ACCURACY & PRECISION: a representation is realistic to the extent that it represents its objects accurately, and to the extent that it represents them precisely.

Accuracy and precision are distinct. I speak precisely but inaccurately if I say this section discusses seven kinds of realism, and accurately but imprecisely if I say it discusses a handful. Very roughly, precision concerns the amount of information conveyed about the represented item and accuracy concerns whether that information is correct. (For a more precise definition of precision, see Schier 1986: 176-7.) However, although the two are distinct, it's convenient here to treat them as strands in a single kind of realism.² A painted portrait of Oliver Cromwell might fail to show him 'warts and all' in either of two ways. It might depict his skin as unblemished, and so be inaccurate; or it might depict his skin imprecisely (perhaps the image is rather blurry), so that the portrait sits on the fence about whether or not there are warts. Either way, the idea goes, the picture is less realistic (other things equal) than one showing the warts. Similar points hold for representations in language. While an academic history book might aim to be both accurate and precise about Cromwell's character and actions, a children's history might leave out the gory details (imprecision), and a satire might exaggerate them (inaccuracy). The first will be realistic as the other two are not. As with books, so with movies.

It is all very well taking as an example representations of something real, such as Cromwell, but what should we say about pure fictions? Representations of made-up people, things and events can be more or less realistic. A drawing of Eddard Stark may, for instance, be less realistic than a still image of him taken from the *Game of Thrones* TV series. Precision presents no difficulty here: the television image may simply tell us more about the fictional lord than does the drawing. Accuracy, however, is more problematic. Since there is no Lord Stark, if we want to compare the TV picture and the drawing for accuracy, to what should we take them to be true? (We could, of course, measure them against the descriptions given in the original *Thrones* novels, but that only postpones the evil hour: against what is the accuracy of the novel itself to be measured?) Now, perhaps the answer is simply that such comparisons cannot be made. Perhaps accuracy is part of realism only for representations of the real, and realism in fictional representations reduces to precision (along, perhaps, with other forms of

² There are, of course, questions about how to trade one off against the other in assessing how realistic (in this sense) any representation is. I'm going to ignore those. It is also not compulsory to see accuracy and precision as on a par: John Kulvicki (2014: 119 ff.) explores views on which the two play distinct roles in a definition of (a single kind of) realism. My purposes license ignoring these (and other) important issues, since I am interested in the pair only so as to contrast them with the quite different realisms I go on to discuss.

realism described below). Even if that's not right, there may be ways to make sense of accuracy when nothing real is represented.³ The issue is worth flagging, however, since it (or something like it) returns below.

The first kind of realism is all about content, how things are represented to be. Precision concerns the content the representation has, and accuracy concerns the relation between that content and the world (Kulvicki 2014: 128-9). However, there's more to representations than content. Any representation must also have other features, features we might for convenience bundle up as 'form'. Our second kind of realism focusses on those:

RECESSIVE FORM: a representation is realistic to the extent that its formal properties are recessive.

What are the formal features of a representation? For present purposes, they are any features meeting two conditions: (i) they can be detected, in whatever form of engagement the representation is designed to support (e.g. watching a film, reading a novel, listening to a radio play); and (ii) they are not simply a matter of content, of what the representation represents. While form must be detectable, it might be more or less prominent to the representation's 'audience'. The less prominent it is, the more realistic the representation.⁴

The formal properties of painting include the brush strokes, the thickness of the paint and the facts about what color paint lies where. This last is a formal property that *determines* content: if the distribution of colors on the canvas had been otherwise, the painting would have depicted a different scene. Nonetheless, the distribution is not itself depicted by the picture, which represents a scene in 3D, not its own flat surface. Such features can be more or less obvious to the viewer, depending on the picture. In some paintings, the brushwork is very prominent; in others it is far harder to see. Other things equal, the former will be less realistic than the latter, or so RECESSIVE FORM claims.⁵ Similarly in literature. Words have formal properties: their sound, syntax and arrangement. (Again, some of these may determine what the words describe, but they are not themselves a matter of meaning.) A linguistic representation can highlight these properties, as poetry does through rhyme, alliteration and distinctive word order; or it can let them drop into the background. These choices affect its realism. For a

³ For instance, we might try to make sense of accuracy by reference to *kinds* of thing, rather than particular objects. There are no particulars that pure fictions represent, but there are kinds of thing, with real instances, that those non-existent particulars are represented as belonging to. Perhaps it is these real kinds to which the representation is accurate (Hyman 2005: 40-1; Gaut 2010: 61).

⁴ A broadly similar view is defended in Lopes 2006: ch.1. For a rather different way to use form to define a kind of realism, see Wollheim 1987: 72-5.

⁵ Throughout I use capitalized names (e.g. 'RECESSIVE FORM') for claims about realism, uncapitalized versions (e.g. 'recessive form') for the phenomenon each concerns.)

cinematic example, consider the point of view from which the action is shown. There are various ways to make this prominent. The movie might shift in rapid staccato between different angles on the same scene (the gunfight at the close of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*). It might hold a single viewpoint for unusually long (*Rope*). It might split the screen, showing the scene simultaneously from several angles (the polo match in the original *Thomas Crown Affair*). Or it might move smoothly and very quickly around the action in surprising ways, as in the ‘fly-arounds’ developed for the *Matrix* movies, and used widely since. (This last effect is achieved in part via CGI, and so strictly speaking takes us beyond our remit of purely photographic fiction film. Even so, it illustrates how form in cinema can be more or less prominent.) The suggestion is that the more prominent are this and other formal features, the less realistic the film.⁶

What, though, if every formal feature were completely recessive, so that the viewer no longer saw them at all? (This need not contradict the definition of form - what is completely recessive at one time might, with a shift in viewpoint or attention, be readily detected at another.) Then she would be aware *only* of the representation’s content. And, at least if the representation in question is visual (e.g. a picture, sculpture or film) that, we might think, would leave her having the impression that what she is looking at is, not the representation, but the represented scene itself. She would be under the illusion of seeing that scene. This points to a third kind of realism:

ILLUSION: a (visual) representation is realistic to the extent that it sustains the illusion of seeing what it represents.

No doubt illusion is rarely, if ever, complete. Even the most realistic trompe l’oeil painting does not completely fool the eye. We may see the dome of the church as far deeper than it really is, but we nonetheless see clearly enough that the cherubs floating through it are painted, not real. Nor, at least in general, do we succumb completely to illusion in the movie theatre. We see the border of the screen, the size of the projected images, and that what is before us is light shone onto a flat screen (though for disagreement see Allen 1995: ch.III). Even so, the thought goes, our experience can mislead us in certain respects. When, for instance, 3D cinema is most effective, we really do seem to see things before us arranged in depth. And this is true even if those things don’t appear to be the characters and events in the story, but only projected images of them. Even partial illusion such as this makes for greater realism, according to ILLUSION.

⁶ Of course, what is prominent to an audience will in key part depend on their expectations. Realism as recessive form thus has two features that realism as accuracy and precision lacks. It is relative to an audience - what is prominent for one group of viewers might not be so for another. And it is dependent on context, including conventions governing the relevant representations. To take a cinematic example, what is prominent for someone used to long-take work may be very different from what is prominent to someone brought up in a different filmic tradition.

While the first two kinds of realism apply to any representation, the third holds only for some: those that are in some way ‘visual’.⁷ Our fourth kind of realism holds for a narrower range still. Kendall Walton claims that photographs are *transparent* - they allow us to see, quite literally, the objects they depict (Walton 1984). Of course, we see only the photograph directly. Walton’s view is that seeing the marked surface directly allows us to see what it represents by indirect means, just as in a mirror we see someone indirectly by directly seeing his reflection. Indeed, one way to motivate this view is to construe photographs as fixed reflections: an image is formed inside the camera, just as it might be in a mirror or a camera obscura; and photography’s achievement is to have found a way to cement that image, so that it can still be seen long after the things whose image it is have gone. Walton claims that transparency is a kind of realism:

TRANSPARENCY: a (visual, photographic) representation is realistic when (directly) seeing the representation is (indirectly) seeing what it represents.

According to Walton, photographs are transparent because they depend in a special way on their objects. They are counterfactually dependent on them (had the object been different in various ways, the photograph would have been), and that dependence is ‘natural’: the way the photo would vary with the object does not depend on what anyone believes about the latter. (Contrast pictures drawn from life: they too may vary counterfactually with the nature of the objects being drawn. If they do so, however, it is because changes in the objects would be noticed by the artist and thereby incorporated into the picture.) But natural counterfactual dependence is not sufficient for transparency. If we connect a TV camera to visual recognition software, and get a computer to generate descriptions of the scenes before the lens, the resulting verbal representations exhibit natural counterfactual dependence on their objects, but reading them is not a way to see those scenes. What is missing is what we might think of as a *visuality condition*: reading the descriptions is not enough like looking at the described objects in the flesh. To fill the gap, Walton also requires that our interactions with transparent representations model in particular ways our interactions with objects seen directly. For instance, there must be parallels in terms of the order in which we are liable to notice things in representation and scene, and in the sorts of mistakes we might easily make (Walton 1984: 270-3).

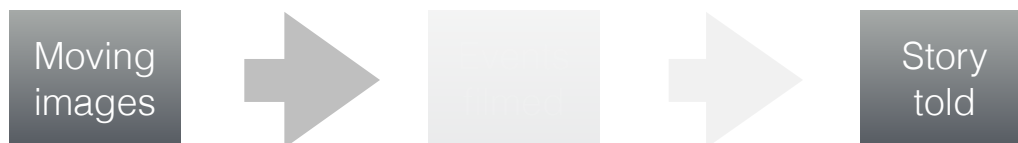
It is important to be clear about how transparency relates to illusion. In illusion we seem to see directly the represented object. In transparency we really see, indirectly, that thing. Walton is not claiming that photographs are hard to see as photographs, or that they give us the illusion that what is before us is the represented object. On the contrary, he insists that photographs are seen for what they are, marks on flat surfaces. So transparency doesn’t involve illusion. And nor does illusion involve transparency: seeming to see a heavenly vault before me is not a way really to see one, not even when the effect is achieved by

⁷ There may be analogues in other sense modalities - perhaps the sound track in cinema induces auditory illusions; but some representations, such as written descriptions, seem ill-suited to illusion of any kind.

really seeing a clever trompe l'oeil. For a trompe l'oeil can be (and usually is) painted, but only photographic pictures are transparent. Thus the third and fourth kinds of realism are distinct.

Since film, at least the film we are concentrating on, involves (moving) photographic images, Walton's view will apply as readily to cinema as to still photographs. Film will be realistic in his sense. However, it will be so only with respect to one of the elements identified above. When we visit the cinema, what is before us is the moving photographic record only of the Events Filmed: the Story Told is represented by non-photographic means. Since transparency depends on photographic representation, film will be transparent to the Events Filmed, but not to the Story Told. However, while this kind of realism only reaches so far, what it reaches at all, it reaches completely. Unlike the first three kinds of realism, transparency is an all or nothing affair. Seeing the representation is either a way to see the object, or it is not. Transparency admits of no degree.⁸

Our final kind of realism finds something to agree with in each of the two preceding views. Like Walton, it rejects idea at the heart of ILLUSION, that in the cinema we ever cease to be aware of the moving images before us. Like ILLUSION, and unlike TRANSPARENCY, however, the realism it describes reaches to the Story Told. The idea is that, although film has the complex structure described in section 1, we do not always see matters that way. One level of representation drops out of our visual experience:



We see the moving images, but in them we no longer see the actors, sets, scenery etc. All we see in the pictures before us is the Story Told.

What does it mean to say that we 'see' these events 'in' the pictures? The idea is not that those events seem to be before us - rather, we are visually aware of what is before us as a mere pattern on a surface. (There is no return here to ILLUSION.) But nor is the idea that seeing that pattern is a way of really, albeit indirectly, seeing the events composing the Story Told. Only what exists can really be seen, even indirectly, but these events may well be fictional. (Thus the proposal here really does differ from TRANSPARENCY.) But if not these options, what?

⁸ A representation might be transparent with respect to some objects, but not others. (It might be a doctored photograph, with some items added by hand.) That gives a sense in which transparency comes in degrees. The point above is that for a given represented object, transparency is all or nothing, while the preceding forms of realism are not.

Consider an ambiguous picture, such as the famous duck-rabbit. When you shift between seeing the marks one way and seeing them the other, you always see the marks: at no point does a duck or a rabbit appear to be before you. Nor is looking at this line drawing really a way of seeing - not even indirectly - a duck or rabbit. Nonetheless, switching between interpretations does alter your experience in radical ways. Seen one way, the marks are organized rabbit-wise, seen another they are organized duck-ly. In each case, you are visually presented with two things at once (marks and duck, marks and rabbit), even if only one of those things (the marks) looks really to be there. And, while ambiguous pictures are special in that we can see either of two things in them, in other respects they are quite ordinary. Every representational picture allows for something similar. Every such picture - be it moving or still, photographic or not - allows us to see the pattern that composes it as organised in such a way that we are thereby visually presented with something else. To say someone is seeing X in Y is just to say that that her visual experience has this complex structure. (See Wollheim 1987 ch.2, Hopkins 1998, Kulvicki 2014: ch.1).

Sometimes seeing-in is complex. If you show me a drawing of a statue of a man, then in the drawing I'll see the statue, and in the statue I'll see the man. Often our experience before traditional film has a similar complexity: in the Moving Images before us we see the Events Filmed (actors, sets, etc.) and in those in turn we see the Story Told (the events that are acted out). The idea behind the current proposal, however, is that things need not be this way. Sometimes we cease to see the middle term, and simply see in the Moving Images before us the Story Told.

Since one of the two tiers of representation here has disappeared from our experience, we might think of the result as a kind of collapsing of levels. The level that remains is made up of moving photographic images. We now see those as images of the events in the story being told. We may well continue to see them as photographic (Hopkins 2008: 156-8). If we do, we see what is in fact a photographic record of the Events Filmed as a photographic record of the Story Told. And this, even though the events that make up the latter may well be entirely fictional. So we experience the film, in this respect at least, as if it were a documentary of those fictional events (cf. Perkins 1972: 121; Allen 1995: 90-97). (Of course, there are many differences in the conventions governing documentary and fiction film. I'm not claiming we are blind to those.) Since documentary is one of our touchstones for contact with the real, the result might plausibly be thought a kind of realism:

COLLAPSE: a film is realistic when we see it as the photographic record, not of the Events Filmed, but of the events that make up the Story Told.

It's instructive to compare this view with some of the claims of my fellow contributor, George Wilson. In a series of rich and important writings, Wilson has explored a position similar in spirit to COLLAPSE. The point of closest contact in his present contribution lies here:

QUASI-TRANSPARENCY: if viewers 'see' a motion picture image of a fictional item F and the image is photorealistic in appearance, then they imagine themselves as thereby seeing the fiction F. (p.16)

That is, when viewers see Moving Images that look photographic, they imagine their seeing them to be their indirectly seeing the Story Told. They imagine the images to be transparent to the events in that story.

Despite the similarity in spirit, there are several important differences between Wilson's position and COLLAPSE. First, while transparency lies at the heart of QUASI-TRANSPARENCY, it plays no part in COLLAPSE. For, though COLLAPSE says we sometimes seem to be watching a moving photographic record of the Story Told, it does not say anything about seeing photographs being (or being imagined to be) a way of really seeing things. COLLAPSE simply uses the notion of photography. QUASI-TRANSPARENCY, in contrast, involves a theory of what photography involves, a theory it borrows from TRANSPARENCY.

Second, the two views rest on different central notions: for COLLAPSE, seeing-in; for QUASI-TRANSPARENCY, imagining seeing. To some extent, these offer two ways to conceive of the same phenomenon, i.e. our experience of pictures when we understand them. We might describe the switch between the two readings of the ambiguous picture in terms of our seeing in it first, duck, then rabbit; or in terms of our alternating between imagining seeing those things. Both notions are intended to capture a familiar phenomenon, but both do so in terms that are themselves theoretical. (Consider in this respect Wilson's attempts to specify exactly what imagining seeing is supposed to be (p.9)). We might try to use one set of terms to analyze the other, and in particular to analyze seeing-in in terms of imagining seeing (Walton 1990: ch.8.) However, Wilson doesn't do that, and there are reasons to be skeptical about the attempt (Kulvicki 2014: 84-6). So it seems best to treat the two claims as framed in independent terms.

Provided seeing-in is not analyzed as imagining seeing, a third difference opens up: many of the questions that QUASI-TRANSPARENCY generates simply do not arise for COLLAPSE. If we imagine that the Moving Images are transparent to the events in the Story Told, then what do we imagine about how those events came to be recorded photographically? This is a question which Wilson's theoretical framework forces him to confront, and on which he expends considerable energy. In contrast, COLLAPSE faces no such issue. Sometimes we see Moving Images before us, but in them we see only

the Story Told, not also the Events Filmed. What more needs to be said? There are questions we *could* ask about how the images were made, but none that press simply in virtue of our seeing the film this way, and none that threatens to require us to start fleshing out the fictional world of the Story Told with some account of how we have access to it.

Fourth, and finally, there are differences over the source of any realism hereabouts. While QUASI-TRANSPARENCY doesn't say this, Wilson does take it to describe a kind of realism in film. In explaining why, he says it counts as realism because of its intimate connections to transparency, which, he accepts, is itself a kind of realism (p.17). Since COLLAPSE makes no appeal to transparency, if the phenomenon it describes counts as realistic, it must do so on other grounds. But is collapse a kind of realism?⁹ For that matter, is transparency? (And if not, where does that leave its derivative, quasi-transparency?) To say, we must raise the deeper question of what realism in general might be.

§3 What is Realism?

We have reviewed five claims about realism in film: ACCURACY & PRECISION, RECESSIVE FORM, ILLUSION, TRANSPARENCY and COLLAPSE. The five are not in direct competition. It is true that some are mutually incompatible. For instance, if a film generates the illusion that the events in the Story Told are before us, it cannot simultaneously support collapse. (The latter requires, while the former precludes, our being visually aware of the Moving Images.) But the five do not offer competing accounts of a single phenomenon called 'realism'. Rather, each aims to describe a particular form that realism takes. Realism in cinema might involve them all.

Still, it is striking how diverse the five are. Some are a matter of degree, others not. Some can be found in representations of all kinds, others are restricted to representations of a certain type. Some are about content, others about form; some concern our experience, others do not; some concern how things seem in that experience, others whether it really relates us to objects in a particular way. Given this diversity, it's natural to ask what realism must be, if these all count as varieties of it. What do they have in common? What is the genus of which these are the species?

This question appears to have received little attention. There are certainly other reviews of the varieties of realism exhibited by film (Thomson-Jones 2006 ch.2, Kania 2009, Gaut 2010 ch.2) or by pictures in general (Kulvicki 2014 ch.6). (These include helpful discussions of forms of realism I have not the space to consider and more nuanced treatments of some of those I have explored.) Some of those reviews attempt to explain how different forms of realism relate to one another. For instance, John Kulvicki and Berys Gaut distinguish between realisms of content (roughly, what is represented) and

⁹ In my former work on collapse, I make no mention of realism.

realisms of manner (roughly, how it is represented). But exploring how various kinds of realism stand to one another is quite different from asking what makes them count as forms of realism at all.

Now, it may be that others have not asked the question because they doubt it can be answered. There are certainly issues about how ambitious any answer can reasonably hope to be. However, abandoning the attempt before even starting is surely defeatist. So let us see if we can make some progress.

How are we to find the core of realism, to give an account of realism *per se*? In giving accounts of each of the five kinds of realism, we described features a representation must exhibit to count as realistic in the relevant way. Now we are asking a question at a higher level: what makes exhibiting those features (a kind of) realism? Thus while in effect we earlier sought to fill out the following schema: R exhibits realism of kind K iff....; the task now is NOT to complete a similar schema for realism in general: R exhibits realism *per se* iff.... To look for that would be to treat the genus as just another, particularly widespread, species. That would be confused: representations exhibit realism in general in virtue of exhibiting some species of it, not in virtue of meeting some more general condition. Rather, the question now is what makes the species count as species of realism. I don't think it reasonable to expect the answer to this question to take the form of a theory or definition, at least not one with even the relatively modest rigor of those theories and definitions offered at the lower level. Rather, we should look for an answer in some conception or image, some Ur-picture, that captures our deepest sense of what realism amounts to. The phenomena above will be vindicated as realisms provided they can be related in some suitably perspicuous way to that conception or image.

I propose that what lies at the heart of our thinking is a conception of the ideal case, the maximally realistic representation. Wherever there is representation, of any type, there must be content (what is represented) and there must be something like form (other features of the thing that bears that content). Moreover, representations do not spring from nothing, but must somehow be made. We can think of particular representations as products of the interaction between ways of making representations and elements in the world. When some such element - a thing, scene, fact, state of affairs, an existing representation or even an experience or a thought - is fed into some such source of representations, a representation results. The products of this interaction are realistic to the extent that their nature aligns with that of the element in question. What does 'aligned' mean here? Well, certainly not that the representation itself shares the nature of the represented element. We've said nothing about the type of representation involved and, while some types (such as pictures) do generally share some of the properties of their objects, others (such as words) do not. Rather, alignment is a matter partly of content and partly of form: content, in that no aspect of the element is misrepresented, and no aspect is missed (remember, we are describing an ideal); and form, in that the representation's other features reduce to those necessary for it to have the content just described. The ideally realistic representation is, as it were, completely consumed in capturing whatever it represents.

It helps to distinguish two strands in this conception. The first is the idea of perfect alignment between a representation R and what it represents O. This first strand is, broadly speaking, semantic: it is a matter of the content of R, how that content relates to the nature of O, and the other features of R necessary for it to have that content. But this strand cannot exhaust our conception of realistic representation. For to say that R and O are aligned in this way is not yet to assign priority to either. For all we've said, they might align because O has no nature independently of its being represented by R: it might be a mere shadow cast by R, an 'object' only in the sense in which every representation has an object, be it real or otherwise. The semantic strand in our conception of realism is thus supplemented by a second, explanatory strand: the alignment occurs because R conforms to how O is, and not vice versa. (Indeed, the nature of ideally realistic representations admits of explanation of a special kind. The more realistic R is, the more we are able to explain its features by a particular kind of appeal to O's features. Every aspect of its content can be explained as a result of O's being the way it is represented as being.¹⁰ And every aspect of its form can be explained as necessary to that content, and thus also due to the way O is. The nature of O thus dictates, in a particularly straightforward way, the nature of R.)

Since our conception of realism contains two strands, we have a decision to make. Is it enough for some phenomenon to count as a kind of realism that we can intelligibly relate it to just one strand, or must we relate it to both? I propose we take the liberal line: an intelligible connection to either strand will do. Adopting this line will make it easier to give sympathetic treatments of the claims of various phenomena to count as realisms. As we will see, the game will remain sufficiently difficult to be worth the candle.

On this conception of realism, the primitive case is one in which there is something independent of the representation that provides its object. This might seem to reintroduce the Game of Thrones problem. Representations of the purely fictional can certainly be realistic. How can this be, if realism *per se* involves capturing how something is, the nature of which causes the representation to be a particular way?

However, remember that our basic conception of realism is not supposed to define just another species of it, one that is particularly widespread; and that in stating that conception we are not laying down conditions that must somehow be met by anything that is to exhibit realism of any form. Rather, the conception makes intelligible how various phenomena might count as kinds of realism, by their relating to the elements in that conception in some perspicuous way. If a given phenomenon - say, precision -

¹⁰ Note this covers precision as well as accuracy. If R fails to be precise, it represents O as merely F: i.e. as bearing some determinable F, without there being some determinate f that R also ascribes to O, in virtue of which it is F. Unless O is in fact merely F (i.e. it is F, but not in virtue of exhibiting any determinate of F), then the way R's represents O as being (i.e. merely F) cannot be explained by appeal to O's being that way. So imprecision involves loss of realism - except in the cases (if there are any) where O is in fact merely F.

can be intelligibly related to the conception, then precision's claims to be a form of realism will have been vindicated. Precision will be a form of realism wherever it occurs: in representations of the real, and in representations the 'objects' of which are purely internal to them.

§4 Five Kinds of Realism?

Does this conception of realism allow us to legitimate the realist pretensions of the five phenomena described above? The easiest cases are ACCURACY & PRECISION, and RECESSIVE FORM, so let's begin with those. To assess their claims, we should appeal to the first, semantic, strand in the conception.

(i) *The first two candidates*

Accuracy and precision are really very close to the relations in content the semantic strand involves. Perfect alignment requires R not to misrepresent any features of O, and not to miss any features either. The notions of accuracy and precision just are these ideas, or perhaps these ideas made slightly more precise. If the conception captures our basic idea of realism, accuracy and precision will thus surely count as species of it. Now, we might worry that the connection is *too* close: that we are not really vindicating their claims to be realisms by appeal to something distinct, but have merely written them into the conception from which their legitimacy is to flow. However, this worry is misplaced. Accuracy and precision are forms of realism, if anything is. The right account of realism *per se* must vindicate their claims to count. If it does so by, in effect, building them into the basic conception or image that guides our thinking in this area, so what? Why think this amounts to a failure of theory, rather than showing that we built our theory on the right foundations?

Making the connection to RECESSIVE FORM is a little more complicated. According to the conception, the ideally realistic representation has only those formal features necessary for it to have its perfectly accurate and precise content. This is not quite the idea of recessive form. Earlier we divided formal features into those that determine content and those that do not. RECESSIVE FORM requires that neither be prominent to the person engaging with the representation R. The conception precludes the ideally realistic representation from having any formal features other than those that determine content. Since what doesn't exist can't be prominent, RECESSIVE FORM and the conception agree that the fewer content-neutral formal features we are aware of, the more realistic we will find the representation to be. But what of content-determining features? The conception allows R to have them, but if they are prominent R's form will not be recessive. Does RECESSIVE FORM thus demand more than the conception requires? Here we might make either of two moves. We might take the moral to be that we should refine RECESSIVE FORM, replacing it with something more closely tailored to the semantic strand in our basic conception of realism.¹¹ Or we might note that, if form is limited to what content

¹¹ Alon Chasid (2007) has advocated an account of pictorial realism that is, in effect, just this.

requires, even that form is likely to be recessive. Attention is liable to be drawn to the content supported, form itself being treated as mere means to that end, and thus overlooked.

So much for the easy cases. What of ILLUSION, TRANSPARENCY and COLLAPSE? I will tackle these in two phases, first laying out some first thoughts on each, then revisiting them to consider residual options or problems.

(ii) *The last three candidates: initial thoughts*

Let's begin with COLLAPSE. There is a superficial obstacle to its fitting the conception. COLLAPSE concerns our *experience* of R and its relation to O, whereas perfect alignment concerns how R and O are *in fact* related. However, it is surely not too great a stretch to think that a phenomenon counts as realism when it involves either things really being a certain way, or their seeming to be that way. COLLAPSE will count provided we experience a relation between R and O of the kind the conception describes. And surely that condition is met. The effect of collapse is to remove a level of representation from the world as experienced. In general, where R's representation of O is mediated by M, R must capture features of both O and M. It cannot capture only those of M's features that O also shares, for then what makes it a representation of both O and M, rather than O alone? But if it must capture features of M that are not also O's, to that extent it must align with O less perfectly: some of R's features will be there only to reflect M, and so will dilute its capturing of O. Removing the mediating level of representation thus removes obstacles to R's aligning with O as well as it might. This is true of mediated representation in general. It will also be true of the particular case in which Events Filmed mediate the relation between Moving Images and the Story Told. In the world as experienced, the onset of collapse leaves the Moving Images aligned more closely with the Events Filmed. Collapse promotes alignment, and so counts as realism.

Next, consider ILLUSION. We might hope to vindicate this too by appeal to the semantic strand in our conception of realism. Where representation is illusionistic, the nature of R, at least as experienced, is so closely aligned with that of O that we no longer see the difference between them: R looks to be O itself. What closer alignment could we desire? Unfortunately, things are not so straightforward. Indeed, the conception and illusion are in tension. Our conception treats realism as a modification of representation: the alignment at its heart is between *the form and content of a representation* and the represented item. And surely in this respect the conception gets things right. Representations of things can be realistic, the things themselves cannot. A picture or description of my cat can be realistic, but what would it mean for my cat to be? Illusion, in contrast, is antipathetic to representation. To the extent that experience is illusory, representation disappears from the world as we experience it. The alignment it offers is instead that of identity. If, for instance, there were fully illusory cinema, it would involve our no longer seeing the Moving Images or the Events Filmed. We would not be aware of anything before us as a representation: all we would seem to see is the events the film narrates (the

Story Told). It takes two to align representationally, but here only one remains. Of course, illusion need not be complete. But even where it is partial, the point stands: the more illusory our experience of R, the less we are aware of what is before us as alignment between a representation and its object. Every extra bit of illusion removes a bit of representation. Illusion seems fundamentally at odds with a key element in our conception of realism.

Are we missing a trick here? Illusion banishes representation from experience, not from the world. Even a fully illusory movie would be just as much a representation as any other film. Perhaps, then, we can solve the problem by appeal to a combination of how things are and how they seem. Realism requires representational alignment; in illusory cases, representation is really present, and alignment is apparently so. However, this won't do. What realism requires is not just representation plus some alignment, but the sort of alignment in which a representation can stand to its object. For all that has been said, that is present neither in reality nor in experience. In reality there is only representation, in experience, to the extent that illusion occurs, there is only identity.

Finally, let us consider TRANSPARENCY. It fails to connect with the semantic strand in our conception of realism. Photographs can be transparent whether or not they are accurate or precise, and whether or not their obvious features are limited to their content (Walton 1984: 258-9). A photograph might be transparent to its object even if the image is very faint and blurry, and even if the picture has many visible properties that have nothing to do with what it depicts - creases, tears, stains, gloss or matt patches, and so on. Even if we concentrate on the picture's content, the point holds. A photo taken through a powerfully distorting lens is still transparent to its object, even if the set up makes many such objects look more or less alike. Given this, it seems a picture could be transparent, and yet fail to align with its object at all closely. Transparency and representational alignment are independent of one another.

What of the causal strand in our conception of realism? Does it offer TRANSPARENCY a firmer hold? At the heart of transparency lies natural counterfactual dependence, and what is that, if not a special kind of causal relation between the photograph and the object on which it depends? When a representation is dependent in this way on its object, the former arises from the latter without essentially depending on anyone's mental states.¹² In the terms offered by our conception of realism, the object confronts a means of making representations in such a way that a representation emerges without anyone's mental states directly determining what its content or formal features will be. This purely mechanical way of generating a representation may not fit the *result* in our conception of realism - as we just saw, it doesn't secure alignment between representation and object. Nonetheless doesn't it somehow constitute

¹² Walton talks only of beliefs. But it helps TRANSPARENCY's case to broaden the notion of natural dependence to include other mental states too.

a particularly pure instance of the *process* that conception describes? Here is a promising place to look for a vindication of TRANSPARENCY.

However, it's another question whether that promise is fulfilled. First, note that it is far from obvious quite how the specialness of natural counterfactual dependence counts towards realism. Of course, philosophers are used to associating the idea of independence from the mental with some notion of realism. However, the realism in question is *metaphysical*: roughly, the idea that some thing, property, fact, or state of affairs is as it is independently of our mental states. Our interest throughout has been in the rather different notion of *representational* realism: the realism exhibited by external representations such as pictures, novels, poems, movies, sculptures, or plays. It is an interesting question why we use the term 'realism' for these two very broad ideas.¹³ Whatever the answer, however, there can be no doubt that they are distinct. How, then, does the fact that transparency involves independence of the mental bolster its claim to count as a species of *representational* realism?

Second, and more importantly, there is more to transparency than natural counterfactual dependence. It also involves the *visuality* condition. Walton is quite clear that either condition can be met without the other being, and that only when both hold does transparency occur. Any connection between our conception of realism and natural counterfactual dependence promises (at most) to show that the latter counts as realism. That realism would be present wherever natural counterfactual dependence is, whether or not the *visuality* condition is also met, and so whether or not transparency occurs. Thus, even if the connection between the conception and natural counterfactual dependence can be made, *transparency's* claim to be realism remains unproven.

(iii) The last three candidates reconsidered

My treatment of illusion and transparency may seem too quick. In particular, some might wonder whether it relies on trying to do the impossible. The conception of realism offered above is quite general - it applies to representations of any type (pictures, words, theatrical presentations, etc.). Illusion and transparency, in contrast, are features only of representations of certain types - those that, like pictures, movies and sculptures, are in some key way visual (or perhaps auditory, or at least in

¹³ A side benefit of the conception of representational realism above is that it offers some kind of answer. These days it is a familiar idea that our mental states are themselves representations. Metaphysical realism about a subject matter can thus be reframed (still crudely) as the idea that the existence and nature of the relevant items is not determined by our representations of them, be those representations mental or external. Representational realism, on the current conception, requires that an external representation be determined, to the highest degree possible, by things the existence and nature of which is independent of that representation itself. (Note that representational realism does not entail metaphysical: a realistic representation needs something independent of itself to capture, but not something independent of *all* representations: indeed, what is captured might be another representation.) In metaphysical realism, things are not determined by representations; in representational realism, representations are determined by things. The forms of determination in question will differ (constitution, in the metaphysical case, causation in the representational); the relations run in different directions; and one involves absence of determination, the other its presence; but, these differences aside, the two involve broadly the same relations and relata, and form mirror images, or complements, of one another.

some sensory mode or other). Can we reasonably hope to make sense of what is realistic about transparency or illusion, while limiting ourselves to ideas applicable to representation quite generally?

As put, the complaint can't be quite fair. Collapse too is a phenomenon limited to visual representations (indeed, it is probably limited only to film), yet we had no trouble using the conception to vindicate its claim to count as realism. So it is not impossible to use an entirely general conception of realism to make sense of realisms found only in representations of a certain type. Even so, the complaint raises an important question: does our sense of what is possible here shift if we allow ourselves resources specific to particular types of representation?

Let's consider just one attempt to use type-specific resources to help ILLUSION and TRANSPARENCY. Proponents of either view may, and indeed are likely to, accept something like the following: when we grasp what a picture (any picture) represents, we are in some way visually presented with its object. They may also accept that it is the job of all pictures to present us with things in this way. Now, as we saw in discussing seeing-in and imagining seeing (section 2), in general the visual presentation of objects by pictures is very different from that involved in seeing things in the flesh. Still, what is not true in general might nonetheless be true in special cases. Illusionistic pictures visually present us with O in a way indistinguishable from seeing O face-to-face; and transparent pictures visually present us with O in a way that counts as really seeing it, albeit indirectly. The former matches seeing O in the flesh in terms of phenomenology, the latter matches it in terms of the relation in which we are placed to O (perceptual contact). But seeing O face-to-face is not just any old way of being visually presented with O, but the central, paradigm case. If pictures aim to visually present us with their objects, and if illusion and transparency share features with the paradigm case of such presentation, each fulfils in a special way the mission that defines pictorial representation generally. Perhaps this is what makes them realistic: they count as kinds of realism in pictures because they count, in different ways, as ideal fulfilments of picturing's mission. (Compare John Kulvicki's discussion (2014: 124-6) of 'kind realisms'.)

This is an interesting line, but it faces a question. If illusion and transparency count as realisms because they are in some sense limiting cases of pictoriality, where does this leave realism in general? There are at least some forms of realism that can be found in representations of any type: accuracy and precision, and recessive form. There is at least one other kind of realism found only in a specific type of representation (film): collapse. We made sense of how collapse counts as realism without appeal to the ideas just sketched. And it is hard to see how appeal to them could begin to vindicate the claims to realism of accuracy and precision, or recessive form. So vindicating ILLUSION and TRANSPARENCY by these means threatens to leave us unable to make sense of the realm of realism as a whole. If some phenomena count as realist for one kind of reason, and others do so on entirely different grounds, nothing unites that realm. It is left partitioned into permanently isolated and mutually incomprehensible

pockets, a theoretical Balkans. The question for the present proposal is whether it can avoid this outcome and, if not, how far this should motivate us to explore other options - including abandoning the idea that illusion or transparency count as realisms after all.

I close by returning to COLLAPSE. Just as some might worry that my treatment of ILLUSION and TRANSPARENCY was insufficiently sympathetic, others might wonder whether I've given COLLAPSE too easy a ride. There are really two ideas in COLLAPSE: that we cease to see the Events Filmed, and that we continue to see the Moving Images as photographic.¹⁴ It was the former I appealed to above: collapse involves loss of mediation and so closer alignment, and that's why it counts as realism. But it is surely the latter that made it plausible to treat collapse as a form of realism in the first place. The thought was that we experience fiction films as documentaries, i.e. as the moving photographic record, of events that are in fact merely fictional. Can we also vindicate the claims of the photographic element to count towards collapse's realism?

Since photography is a special way of making pictures, we might expect its connection to realism to go via the conception's causal strand. However, that was a path we explored in discussing TRANSPARENCY, without much result. I propose we take a different line. In offering transparency as what is special about photographs, Walton chose a feature that comes apart from accuracy and precision. But on other accounts of photography's distinctive nature, its connection to those semantic features is much closer. Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin (2004), for instance, argue that we are at least inclined to treat photographs as more accurate and precise than other pictures, even if we are not right to do so. And I have suggested that, while many photographs in fact fail to be accurate and precise, photographic systems are governed by the ideal of promoting those features (Hopkins 2012). Either of these views ties being photographic to the first kind of realism in our list of five. So one way to secure the link between realism and both aspects of collapse would be to appeal to views such as these. Collapse is doubly realistic: it not only removes an obstacle to alignment by banishing from experience a mediating representation; but also positively promotes it by importing into experience a way of making pictures that is closely tied to accuracy and precision.

Conclusion

The moral of all this is that we should perhaps exercise more caution in speaking of realism in film. All five phenomena discussed above are interesting. At least most are found in film, and many are important to its aesthetic and emotional impact. Whether all count as forms of realism is, however, not so clear. I've suggested a way to try to make progress with that question, in terms of the conception of realism in section 3. That does not clearly vindicate the realist pretensions of all five. However, as

¹⁴ In earlier work (Hopkins 2008, 2010) I used the term 'collapse' so as to refer only to the first idea. Here I've used it to cover both.

things stand, it is quite unclear what could do that. Film may indeed be realistic in special ways, or to a specially high degree. Whether it is realistic in every way that has been proposed is quite another matter. And this, not because it fails to have the features claimed (about that, I have said almost nothing), but because some of the features it really has may not count towards its realism, after all.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

What is it for a film to be realistic? Having first focussed on a particular kind of film, I outline five kinds of realism it has been thought to exhibit: accuracy and precision, recessive form, illusion, transparency and 'collapse'. The five are not direct competitors: film might be realistic in all five ways.

Still, they are strikingly diverse, and this raises the question of what they have in common. What is realism, if these five all count? To answer, I describe a conception of ideally realistic representation, against which the claims of the five can be measured. While some plainly pass this test, for others the result is much less clear. We should perhaps be more cautious in claiming that certain interesting features of film count towards its realism.