Programmatic and Proto-Reflexive Realism: Feuillade's La tare (1911) and Erreur tragique (1913)

Guido Kirsten

When discussing cinematic realism, we need to distinguish between at least two different levels: firstly, the film medium itself is characterized as 'realistic' in comparison to other art forms such as theatre, literature, painting and plastic arts. Secondly, some films or film movements (such as G.W. Pabst's 'New Objectivity,' Italian Neo-Realism or the British New Wave) are considered to be representative of a realist film aesthetics. We can call the first level 'realism *of* film', the second 'realism *in* film.' While the first relates to all kinds of films and is based in the technical or perceptual specificity of the medium,[1] the second is supposed to designate a form of fictional and narrative film which creates the impression of being realistic (while other films, like most genre films, don't). Both concepts thus have different extensions and need to be theorized by different means. They also appear to have emerged and re-emerged at different times in film history.[2]

The first problematic prevailed at the beginning of cinema history. Audience reactions after viewings of early films did not relate to style, narrative or actors as being realistic, but rather to the general impression produced by the moving photographic images projected onto a screen. For example, after the presentation of Lumière's cinematograph in December 1895, Henri de Parville described his "impression of an extraordinary truth" and the "astonishing scenes of realism" he had witnessed (cf. Morin 2005 [1956], 117). In the journal *Le radical*, another observer noted the "illusion of real life" (cf. Banda/Moure 2008, 39) emanating from the projections. A year later, in 1896, the Mexican poet Luis Gonzaga Urbina wrote about the screening of *Querelle enfantine* (Louis Lumière,

---

1. There are two main lines of argument for the medium's realism: One is semiotic and draws on Charles S. Peirce's 'indexical' signs (Peirce 1998 [1893–1913]; Bazin 1960 [1945]; Wollen 1972 [1968]), the other is phenomenological and psychological and can be related to Albert Michotte's notion of the 'impression of reality' (Michotte 1991 [1948]; Metz 1972 [1965]). For a critical discussion of these terms, see the first two chapters of my *Filmischer Realismus* (Kirsten 2013).
2. Of course, in theories like Bazin's and Kracauer's both kinds of realism have often been theoretically, or at least rhetorically, intertwined.

F 1895): "You neither hear the one cry nor the other laugh, but their gestures and mimics are captured with such accuracy that *the feeling of reality* takes possession of the spectator and completely dominates him" (Urbina 2008 [1896], 45; my emphasis).[3]

The second question –that of a realist aesthetics *in* film– slowly emerges only in the years after 1900. It seems that people needed to get used to the cinematograph's spectacular new possibilities of recording real "life" before they could become aware of different forms of filmic storytelling. 'Realism' was used to identify a specific kind of film only after different forms had begun to be categorized, as evidenced for example in the catalogue of Pathé which introduced the category "dramatic and realist film" in 1900 (Abel 1994, 96). Between 1900 and 1910, we witness an incremental change in the idea of cinematic realism. The film historian Paul Young (2008) has called this the shift from "mimetic" to "verisimilitude realism". We could also describe it as the shift from the general 'impression of reality' and cinema's 'indexicality' (the realism *of* film) to a more specific 'narrative and fictional realism' that emerged with the development of different kinds of fiction film in those years (the realism *in* film).

Fig. 1

Louis Feuillade's famous 'manifesto' "Scènes de La vie telle qu'elle est" from 1911 attests to this shift [*fig. 1*]. The claims brought forward in his mixture of advertising and aesthetic manifesto need to be read with caution regarding their truth, but they certainly have a symptomatic value. For example, when Feuillade asserts that Gaumont, the company he headed as artistic director at the time, was "the first" to "project realism on the screen, just as was done some years ago in literature, theatre and art" (Feuillade 1988 [1911], 54), he voluntarily omits comparable attempts by James Williamson, Ferdinand Zecca,
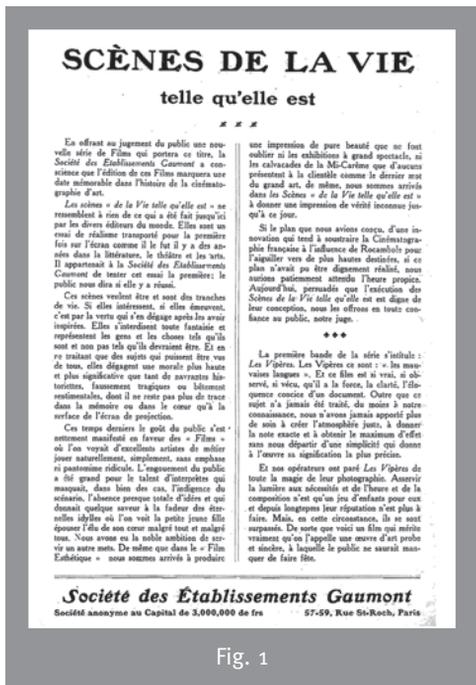
---

3. "On n'entend ni l'un pleurer, ni l'autre rire, mais les gestes et les mimiques sont saisis avec une telle exactitude que *le sentiment de réalité* s'empare du spectateur et le domine entièrement." [All translations from the French are mine.]

David W. Griffith and others. Each of these could have claimed to be "the first" to realize some kind of realist aesthetic in cinema. Nevertheless, it is interesting how eager Feuillade was to take credit for something which, some years earlier, may have seemed irrelevant.

When Feuillade refers to realism in literature, theatre and the arts, he places himself in a line beginning with the masters of nineteenth century French literary realism –Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Zola and others, the inventor of naturalist theatre, André Antoine, and painters such as Gustave Courbet and François Millet. While this implicit comparison may seem self-aggrandizing, it is certainly meant to signal an ostentatious break with the then dominant cinematic forms: 'actualitiés', comedies, chase films, historical dramas, 'féeries', or the recently celebrated 'film d'art.'

It also means that the realism Feuillade endorses, prior to the release of his films, has nothing to do with the media's immediate 'impression of reality' of the early years; it is based rather in questions of narrative and verisimilitude. This programmatic poetics, which claims to take stories from life without embellishment, is reminiscent of Cesare Zavattini's famous ideas on cinema in post-war Italy (Zavattini 1978 [1953]).

Feuillade's idea of realism is also linked to a new, minimal and naturalistic acting style. Film historians like Georges Sadoul (1951, 192) and Richard Abel (1988) have stressed the historical connection to the success of the films by the American company Vitagraph in France at this time. Victorin Jasset, another film director from the period working at Gaumont, described the arrival of new Vitagraph films in 1909-10 and pointed to the appeal of an acting that "was absolutely calm, to the point of exaggeration." He writes: "When we saw one of their films on the screen, the [visual] harmony and the calm, poised performance of the actors gave us the real illusion of life" (Jasset 1988 [1911], 57).[4]

Feuillade was certainly aware of this persuasive power of the new performance style upon the general public. Of course he hastens to add, with regard to his competitors' films, that in most cases the felicitous performance of talented actors only masked "the poverty of a scenario and its total lack of ideas", "those eternally insipid idylls in which we see the young woman marry the young man of her dreams, despite all odds" (1988, 54). His own ambition, he says, was far greater: he wanted to present stories that create "an impression of previously unrecognized truth." This "truth," however, is not supposed to be strict documentary, so much as to give a feeling of authenticity. Speaking of the first film of the series, *Les vipères* (F 1911), Feuillade claims: "This film is so realistic, so closely observed, so true to life that it has the power, clarity, and concise eloquence of a document." And yet this impression is described as the effect of the filmmakers' attempts at creating the "right atmosphere" and to "achieve the maximum effect without abandoning the simplicity which gives the work its

---

4. The shift from the 'histrionic' to the 'verisimilar code' in Griffith's Biograph films of those years is meticulously described in Pearson 1992.

most unambiguous significance." Feuillade and his crew thus attempt to achieve a self-consciously *fictional* realism.[5]

Some later commentators have argued that the so-called-manifesto is actually far more interesting in itself than the films that were to follow:

The only real interest of the "La vie telle qu'elle est"-series lies in Feuillade's manifesto, despite the empiricism proceeding his claims and the half-failure that followed. Indeed, it was the first time that a film director gave a coherent and clear definition of his work to differentiate it from others'. He opened up about his intentions in all their scope and precision to the public. (Lacassin 1964, 48).[6]

Feuillade's manifesto is doubtless one of the first paratextual documents of a self-conscious realist film aesthetic. Seen from a semio-pragmatic point of view it can also be regarded as a contextual influence on the mode of reading that spectators would then employ.[7] As much as advertising his new works, Feuillade communicated his poetics to the public, so that spectators would judge his films according to their realist aspirations.

La tare

After advertising *Les vipères*, the first film of the "La vie telle qu'elle" series, Feuillade wrote another short introductory text for *La tare*. This is Feuillade's first film with three reels and a total running time of more than 40 minutes. It is probably the most ambitious work of the series, premiering as the main feature at the opening of Gaumont Palace in Paris on October 1st, in 1911.

Reminiscent of morality plays, the film tells the story of a waitress, working in a Parisian nightclub, who is rescued by a doctor running a charitable hospital in the country. He teaches her the job and has her continue to run the hospital after his death. Unfortunately, one day someone from her past in Paris recognizes her. This causes a scandal which leads to her eventually being chased out of the hospital and she ending up destitute.

The film's message is a very simple, general critique of a society that does not allow anyone with a tarnished reputation to re-establish herself. Or, in Feuillade's own words:

---

5. The slogan of "tranches de vie" ("slices of life") is a direct reference to André Antoine's naturalist theatre, which had used the same phrase for publicity purposes.
6. "Le seul et véritable intérêt de 'La vie telle qu'elle est' réside dans le manifeste de Feuillade, en dépit de l'empirisme qui précéda ses affirmations et du semi-échec qui les suivit. C'était en effet la première fois qu'un metteur en scène, proclamant ce qui différenciait son œuvre de celle des autres, en donnait une définition esthétique aussi cohérente et nette, et livrait dans toute leur ampleur et leur précision ses intentions à la publicité."
7. For a semio-pragmatic approach to filmic realism, which I do not have the space to devolop here, see Kirsten 2013.

Fig. 2

La tare is a problem play that can be summarized as follows: within the current moral regime is it possible for a sinner to redeem herself in the eyes of society, such that, should her past be suddenly revealed, she would lose none of the benefits of her efforts to be good? [...] With brutal forthrightness, the author answered "No!" From the perspective of Christian morality, society is wrong, but that's how it is... (Feuillade 1911, quoted from Sadoul 1951, 194)[8]

This quote reveals the dubiousness of Feuillade's social criticism, because, despite its critical pretensions, it leads to a weary affirmation of society's *status quo*. Feuillade does not seem to doubt that working in a night-club is indeed a "sinful" occupation. And, furthermore, the narrative appears to regard a paternalistic act of pity as the only possible solution. Feuillade does not in the least consider political or collective action as a means to change circumstances.

---

8. "*La tare* est une pièce à thèse qu'on peut résumer ainsi: Est-il possible, dans l'état actuel de nos mœurs, à une pécheresse de se racheter aux yeux du monde au point que son passé brusquement révélé ne lui fasse pas perdre tout le bénéfice de son effort vers le bien? [...] Avec une brutalité franchise, l'auteur a répondu: 'Non!' Aux yeux de la morale chrétienne le monde a tort, mais cela est ainsi..."

Many film historians such as Georges Sadoul (1951, 195), Jean Mitry (1967, 461f), or Ulrich Gregor and Enno Patalas (1989 [1973], 17), have similarly critiqued Feuillade's morality. François de la Breteque and Michel Cadé state:

It so happens that the desire to climb up the social ladder is judged legitimate, but presented as impossible due to social blockages. This is the case of *La tare*, whose lesson, despite its moralizing leaning is deeply conservative and appears to condemn everyone to their place. (Breteque/Cadé 1988, 22)[9]

Most relevant to the question of realism is the film's mise-en-scène. In the very first shots in the bar, Feuillade makes rather naturalistic use of the space. He shows not only the table in the front, where the action is going to take place, but many others in the depth of the field, between which waitresses run back and forth [*fig. 2*]. The scene thus acquires what Alan Williams has called the film's "visual matter of-factness." The acting style is relatively subtle, at least in comparison to many films from preceding years.

However, Feuillade's realistic films from 1911 and 1912 did not have the public success he had hoped for. Most of them had quite simple, mostly melodramatic narrative structures and were produced on low budgets.[10] Others, like *Le trust ou Les batailles de l'argent* (*Trust,* F 1911) tried to integrate more spectacular, gangster genre plots, to highlight their entertainment value for a public apparently bored by scenes from ordinary life.

Erreur tragique

In December 1912, when Feuillade had already abandoned his series due to its lack of public esteem and commercial success, he made an interesting film which displays a kind of realism quite different from that expressed in the "La vie telle qu'elle" series. *Erreur tragique* (Louis Feuillade, F 1913) tells the story of Count René de Romiguières, who is called from his honeymoon to tend to business matters in Paris. In his free time he attends a picture show where he sees a film in which he recognizes his wife, arm in arm with another man. The Count supposes that she has been unfaithful to him and returns to her, sick with jealousy. When the Countess receives a letter from her brother, the Count suspects him to be her secret lover and plans an attack on her life, which she only just survives. The misunderstanding is eventually resolved and the film closes with a happy ending.

---

9. "Il arrive que le désir de gravir les échelons soit jugé légitime, mais présenté comme rendu impossible par le blocage social. C'est le cas dans *La tare*, dont la leçon, profondément conservatrice malgré ses velléités moralisantes, semble condamner chacun à sa place."

10. In his memoirs, Henri Fescourt, another director working for Gaumont in those years, claimed that it had been economical reasons which lead Feuillade to pursue his realist ideas in the first place (Fescourt 1959, 85–87).

Most interesting in this film is the 'auto-thematic' sequence showing the Count attending the cinema. Feuillade takes up a topic that had been present in literature and cinema for some years: filmic 'evidence,' films recording and later reproducing some delicate incident (cf. Bottomore 1985).

In *Erreur tragique*, the film shown in the cinema resembles an actual film existing outside the realm of fiction. It seems to belong to the *Onésime*-series, a popular series that

Fig.3

had been directed for Gaumont by Jean Durand since the summer of 1912 (cf. Abel 1994, 404ff). This series featured the actor Ernest Bourbon as the protagonist in films such as *Onésime, l'amour vous appelle* (F 1912), or *Onésime, douanier* (F 1913) and many others with similar titles. However, the film shown within *Erreur tragique*, "*Onésime, vagabond*" does not actually belong to the series. It was faked by Feuillade, again using Bourbon as the main actor. For an audience familiar with the series, this was probably supposed to authenticate the fiction that the Count's wife and her companion could really have accidentally blundered into the shooting of the film.

Also important is that Bourbon's acting style in *Onésime, vagabond* is quite different from René Navarre's (as the Count) in the main story of *Erreur tragique*. The Onésime film deploys the registers of the burlesque, intentionally exaggerating movements and gestures, and having the actors address the camera. Feuillade uses this as a contrast ('cinema' vs. 'reality') to the much more sober and almost anti-dramatic performance of Navarre, whom he had instructed to play in this manner, as the actor later confirmed:

Feuillade asked us to eliminate the useless gestures that came from pantomime. It was my mug they wanted me to use, more than anything else. He almost forced me to keep my hands in my pockets, fidgeting, while using only my eyes and my face (Navarre, quoted from Sadoul 1951, 197).[11]

In contrast to the artificial and comical style of Bourbon's Onésime character, Navarre's naturalistic acting ostentatiously connotes the 'realism' of his behaviour. But something else is happening at the same time. At the moment the Count recognizes his wife, the status of the Onésime film appears to change

11. "Feuillade nous demanda de supprimer les gestes inutiles, venus de la pantomime. On me demanda de me servir avant tout de ma gueule. Il m'obligea presque à tourner les mains dans les poches en me servant seulement de mes yeux et de ma figure."

Fig. 4

radically: from being a purely fictional film, and strongly marked as such, it is suddenly turned into a document which is witness to a true event –at least in the eyes of the Count. His 'indexical reading' is marked in the film by a switch from a shot showing the screen in one corner of the image [*fig. 3*] to one where it fills the whole frame [*fig. 4*]. We can interpret this as emphasising both the importance of this moment and of the semi-subjective (or even point-of-view) status of the shot. In the words of Roger Odin's semio-pragmatic theory we can say that the Count switches from a "fictionalizing" or "spectacularizing" to a "documentarizing" mode of reading (cf. Odin 2000; 2011). He does not take his wife to be a fictional character anymore, but a real person whose quotidian actions have been captured coincidentally by the camera. (Shooting practices of early cinema, sometimes using real locations and filming passers-by, made this indeed possible; cf. Belloï 1995).

To make sure that he is not mistaken, the Count buys the film reel and studies it frame by frame with a magnifying glass [*fig. 5 & 6*]. The 'documentarizing' mode of reading seems to be more apt on the 'filmographic' level, when the flow of images is interrupted (and the diegesis with it) and the film is fragmented into its base of photographic frames. Now the Count has verified his suspicion: "There is no doubt, the camera lens has caught the Countess's mistake,"[12] the intertitle tells us, in an 'indirect subjective style.' However, whereas the Count

---

12. "Plus de doute, l'objectif cinématographique a surpris une faute de la marquise."

Fig. 5

is indeed right in recognizing his wife and in inferring that she must have been present at the film shoot by chance, he is mistaken about the nature of her relationship to the other man. If one wanted to theorize this, one could conclude that film's 'indexicality' as such provides less information than is sometimes thought. It attests to Roland Barthes' famous "that-has-been" ("ça a été"), without being able to specify exactly *what* has been there. In the Count's mind, prone to jealousy because of the interruption of his honeymoon, the recorded event takes on a different meaning to the one it actually had. The seemingly 'objective' indexicality is immediately subjectified and overwritten by interpretation.

Fig. 6

Conclusion

I began by distinguishing two different levels of realism: one level of film's general affinity with the real (attested to in terms of a strong 'impression of reality' in eye-witness

accounts of the first film projections) which I named the 'realism *of* film'; and another level of the more specific kind of 'realism *in* film' (in comparison to non-realistic genres and in the tradition of realism in other artistic media such as painting, literature and drama). Louis Feuillade's 'manifesto' for his "La vie telle qu'elle est" –series is one of the first documents of a programmatic account of this second, more specific kind of fictional and narrative cinematic realism. It is defined by an attempt to create 'truthfulness' of stories and characters, by a reduced and more naturalistic acting style and by the social and moral implications of the messages in the films. Feuillade's *La tare* can be regarded as an exemplifier of this practical poetics of cinematic realism.

Another kind of realism can be found in *Erreur tragique*. This 'proto-reflexive' realism is not defined by story, character psychology, or social morality, but by displaying the medium's capacities of witnessing and reproducing real events. The fictional 'effect of truth,' first created and then relativized, could be seen as a reflexive integration of the film's realist potential into the story –cinematic realism as a kind of filmic deliberation on the 'realism *of* film' in a narrative and fictional form.

Bibliography

ABEL, Richard (1988) *French Film Theory and Criticism, 1907–1939. A History/ Anthology. Vol. 1 1907–1929.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.
—— (1994) *The Ciné Goes to Town. French Cinema 1896–1914*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.
BANDA, Daniel / MOURE, José (Ed.) (2008) *Le cinéma: naissance d'un art 1895–1920.* Paris: Flammarion.
BAZIN, André (1960) The Ontology of the Photographic Image [fr. 1945]. In: *Film Quarterly* 13,4, pp. 4–9.
BELLOÏ, Livio (1995) Lumière und der Augen-Blick. In: *Kintop* 4, pp. 27–49.
BOTTOMORE, Stephen (1985) Le thème de témoignage dans le cinéma primitif. In: *Les premiers ans du cinéma français*. Ed. Pierre Guibbert. Perpignan: Institue Jean Vigo, pp. 155–161.
BRETEQUE, François de la / CADÉ, Michel (1988) La petite bourgeosie dans les films de Louis Feuillade. In: *Les Cahiers de la Cinémathèque* 50, pp. 17–26.
CHAMPREUX, Jacques (2000) *La Vie telle qu'elle est*: Un manifeste pour rien? ou pas de manifeste du tout. In: *1895* (Special Louis Feuillade), pp. 63–72.
FESCOURT, Henri (1959) *La foi et les montagnes ou le septième art au passé.* Paris: Paul Montel.
FEUILLADE, Louis (1911) Scènes de la vie telle qu'elle est. In: *Ciné-Journal* 139 [22.04.1911], p. 19 [engl. in Abel 1988, pp. 54–55].
GREGOR, Ulrich / Patalas, Enno (1989) *Geschichte des Films 1, 1895–1939* [1973]. Reinbek: Rowohlt.

JASSET, Victorin (1988) An Essay on Mise-en-scène in Cinematography [frz. 1911]. In: Abel 1988, pp. 55–58.

KIRSTEN, Guido (2013) *Filmischer Realismus.* Marburg: Schüren.

LACASSIN, Francis (1964a) *Louis Feuillade*. Paris: Éditions Seghers.

METZ, Christian (1972) On the Impression of Reality in Cinema. In: *Film Language. A Semiotics of the Cinema.* New York: Oxford UP, pp. 3–15.

MICHOTTE van den Berck, Albert (1991) The Character of 'Reality' of Cinematogrpahic Projections. In: *Michotte's Experimental Phenomenology of Perception.* Eds. Georges Thinès, Alan Costall, George Butterworth. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 174–187.

MITRY, Jean (1967) *Histoire du cinéma. Art et Industrie. I. 1895–1914.* Paris: Éditions Universitaires.

MORIN, Edgar (2005) *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

ODIN, Roger (2000) *De la fiction.* Brüssel: DeBoeck.

—— (2011) *Les espaces de communication. Introduction à la sémio-pragmatique.* Grenoble: PUG.

PEARSON, Roberta A. (1992) *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films.* Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.

PEIRCE, Charles S. (1998) *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings. Vol. 2 (1893-1913)*. Edited by the Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP.

SADOUL, Georges (1951) *Histoire générale du cinéma. Tome III. Le cinéma devient un art (1909–1920). Premier volume. L'avant-guerre*. Paris: Denoël.

URBINA, Luis Gonzaga (2008) Le sentiment de réalité [1896]. In: Banda/Moure 2008, pp. 44–47.

WOLLEN, Peter (1972) The Semiology of Cinema [1968]. In: *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, pp. 116–154.

YOUNG, Paul (2008) The Flickering Window: Early Cinema's Realist Fantasies. In: Winfried Pauleit, Christine Rüffert, Karl-Heinz Schmid & Alfred Tews (eds.) *Das Kino träumt. Das Kino träumt: Projektion, Imagination, Vision / Cinema Dreams: Projection, Imagination, Vision*. Berlin: Bertz und Fischer, pp. 82–102.

ZAVATTINI, Cesare (1978) A Thesis on Neo-Realism [ital. 1953]. In: David Overbey (ed.) *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neo-Realism.* London: Talisman Books

Abstracts

El realismo programático y el realismo protoreflexivo: *La tare* (1911) y *Erreur tragique* (1913) de Feuillade

La ponencia gira en torno al realismo cinematográfico del director francés Louis Feuillade a principios de 1910. En su célebre manifiesto *La vie telle qu'elle est*, afirmó que era el primero que llevaba el realismo a la pantalla. Su *La tare* (1911) se plantea como un intento para llevar a cabo la poética programática del manifiesto, mediante la combinación de unas técnicas escénicas naturalistas y una trama predominantemente melodramática. Menos típica es *Erreur tragique* (1913), que despliega la capacidad del medio para presenciar y también reproducir los hechos «reales» y se puede concebir como una forma «protoreflexiva» del realismo en la película.

El realisme programàtic i el realisme protoreflexiu: *La tare* (1911) i *Erreur tragique* (1913) de Feuillade

La ponència gira entorn del realisme cinematogràfic del director francès Louis Feuillade a principis de 1910. En el seu cèlebre manifest *La vie telle qu'elle est*, va afirmar que era el primer que portava el realisme a la pantalla. La seva *La tare* (1911) es planteja com un intent per dur a terme la poètica programàtica del manifest, mitjançant la combinació d'unes tècniques escèniques naturalistes i una trama predominantment melodramàtica. Menys típica és *Erreur tragique* (1913), que desplega la capacitat del medi per presenciar i també reproduir els fets «reals» i es pot concebre com una forma «protoreflexiva» del realisme a la pel·lícula.