

Documentary REAL-ism: *Catfish* and *This Is Not a Film* Le RÉELisme documentaire : *Catfish* et *Ceci n'est pas un film*

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Article abstract

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ABSTRACT

This article explores two recent documentary films, one of which may not be a documentary, the other of which may not be a film. Although starkly different in their subject matter and political stakes, both *Catfish* (Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost, 2010) and *This Is Not a Film* (Jafar Panahi and Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, 2011) point to underappreciated dimensions of filmic realism, in particular its propensity to evoke what I will call Real-ism—i.e. hints of the Real that emerge precisely when the symbolic framework governing reality becomes imperiled. Drawing upon Jacques Lacan's notion of the Real and Jacques Rancière's concept of the "aesthetic regime," I will suggest that elements of conventional filmic realism have the potential to produce a politically destabilizing Real-ism which, rather than involving the representation of reality in any recognizable form, calls forth that which is necessarily excluded/repressed from the symbolic framework.

Introduction

For Rancière, the representative regime of art presumes a stable correspondence between a "type of subject matter and a form of expression," between the "the visible" and the "sayable," such as we find in conventional realism (Rancière 2006, p. 53; 2007, p. 12).¹ But Rancière emphasizes that, contrary to expectation, it is not necessary to abandon realism in order to a break with the representative regime: "the break with [the representational regime] does not consist in painting white squares rather than . . . warriors" (Rancière 2007, p. 13). What is required, instead, is giving up the opposition between reality and appearance that is essential to the representational logic.

Rancière rejects a traditional politics of the image based on consciousness raising in which images are thought to "make

viewers aware of the structures of domination and inspire them to mobilize their energies” (Rancière 2009b, p. 80). For Rancière, the political potential of the realist form lies not in its ability “to counter-pose reality to its appearances,” but rather “to construct different realities, different forms of common sense” (p. 101). More specifically, for Rancière, an aesthetic politics is achieved by creating a “dissensus”—the unsettling of naturalized systems of perception which, by masking the exclusions upon which the impression of such a totality depends, perpetuate the illusion of total inclusivity. His political project does not merely seek to give voice and representational privilege to those who have been marginalized within a given system, but instead requires challenging the very configurations of the sensible through which such exclusions occur.

This article additionally contests two prevailing (yet diametrically opposed) currents within film theory which take up the relationship between realism and deception: 1) indictments of filmic realism for deceptively creating illusions that are mistaken for reality; and 2) celebrations of cinematic realism for its unique ability to expose the deception inherent in the construction of hegemonic narratives. By contrast with the first position, deception in my account does not function as an obstacle to truth, but rather as a necessary conduit for the emergence of the Real. And while I share with the second position the belief that filmic realism can contribute to a political aesthetics, I locate this potential not in film’s ability simply to reveal what has been concealed, but rather in its more radical capacity to disrupt the given perceptual framework through which such suppressions occur. In particular, I argue that both of the films engage the aesthetic regime’s power to “sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said, and what can be thought and consequently, a new landscape of the possible” (Rancière 2009b, p. 103).

Catfish

Catfish, promoted as a “reality thriller,” takes deception as its key topic of investigation. The film traces Nev (Yaniv) Schulman, a twenty-four-year-old New York photographer, throughout his year-long embroilment with a Michigan family.

At the film's start, Nev has received a painting in the mail from an eight-year-old girl named Abby Pierce, who uses Nev's photographs of dancers as models for her own art. A correspondence develops between Nev and Abby's family, which spans a range of communication technologies from snail mail and cell phones to Facebook and G-Chat (conspicuously devoid of its video potential). This leads to a romantic relationship between Nev and Abby's older sister, Megan, conducted solely over these communication devices. As Nev's feelings for Megan appear to intensify, so, too, do doubts that she might not be the person she claims she is. Nev and the filmmakers (his brother Rel [Ariel] Schulman and friend Henry Joost) set out on a trip to Michigan to investigate their suspicions that Megan and her family may not be who they appear.²

At the level of content, uncovering the deception surrounding the identity of Megan and members of the Pierce family serves as the film's central narrative device. But through their quest to seek out the truth about the Pierce family, Nev and the filmmakers are suspected of perpetuating a hoax of their own. Specifically, through the very act of making the film Nev and his cohorts invite the ticklish question of whether they have indeed been deceived or whether they have deceived the audience about their deception. This suspicion is born primarily out of what, in many of their comments, viewers have taken to be a flimsy initial premise for undertaking the documentary (a premise that Nev diegetically announces): to document Nev's budding long-distance correspondence with a promising eight-year-old painter, Abby. Viewer doubt about this premise circulates not around a concern that the film is unreliable in its presentation of the events, but rather around the fact of their presentation in the first place. As one reviewer puts it, "At what point would any filmmaker say 'oh you know what, my brother got some paintings of his portraits from an 8 year old, that are mediocre at best, perhaps we should start documenting this?'" (Hutcheson). In short, the documentary's very possibility, it seems, hinges on foreknowledge of the twists that, in the film, take Nev and the filmmakers by surprise, a foreknowledge that contradicts the film's premise.

Also fuelling doubts around the film's credibility as a documentary is an implicit assumption regarding which of the different players in the film are most likely to be the tricksters and which the tricked. When asked to account for why audiences doubt the veracity of the documentary, Nev himself articulates the source of their doubt: "How could some country bumpkin in Michigan fool three savvy creative New Yorkers" (Solon). Yet I suggest that the response of Angela (Abby's mother) to being exposed as the perpetuator of a deception complicates the assumption that she has been exploited by the filmmakers, an assumption that operates to conceal ways in which Angela counters efforts to make her a passive spectacle. I will contend that through disrupting this assumption, Angela introduces a dissensus in the film. In particular, she troubles the representative regime's efforts to categorize her merely as an object of interest, and pushes the film into an aesthetic regime in which its excluded elements can become forceful disruptive agents.

The deception (by Angela) which functions as the film's central narrative device begins to trickle over into the film's form when Nev and the filmmakers travel to Michigan in an effort to learn the truth about what they have come to suspect is an elaborate ruse. In the context of their burgeoning "virtual" romance, "Megan" sends Nev audio files of songs that she claims to have written and performed. Through a YouTube search, Nev discovers that these songs have already been recorded by a different singer. Soon a growing web of uncertainty entangles Megan's and Angela's claims to identity. This apparent revelation compels the Schulman brothers and Joost to embark on a disingenuous face-to-face encounter with the Pierce family, in which they seek to uncover the truth while concealing their suspicions.

The intersection of these two intradiegetic deceptions—the one of which Angela is suspected, the other by Nev and his crew—paves the way for a productive collision, which, I suggest, drives the film beyond the constraints of the representative regime. The men's fascination in seeking the "truth" behind Nev's romantic entanglement (which teeters between giddy and sensationalist) meets the unexpected brute reality of Angela's life. We discover that she is a profoundly isolated, unfulfilled

woman, largely responsible for the care of her two severely disabled stepsons (one of whom we learn has died by the time of the film's completion) and estranged from her older daughter, Megan—the template for the ersatz Megan, through which Angela forged the connection with Nev. An eight-year-old girl named Abby is indeed her daughter, but she is not the child protégé who painted the pieces sent to Nev; they are the work of Angela herself. Angela reveals an additional disturbing detail—that she is about to begin chemotherapy for her newly diagnosed uterine cancer (a condition, we are told in the closing credits, that she does not have).

This presentation of multifarious layers of deception on the same representational plane facilitates a shift from the representative regime to the aesthetic regime of representation, and thus, from Rancière's point of view, constitutes a site of the film's radical political work. In particular, by refusing to adjust its filmic register to “appropriately” accommodate the pathos of Angela's life, the film performs a gesture central to the aesthetic regime: the refusal of the “presupposition that . . . some subjects are suitable for artistic representation while others are not . . . [and] that a series of changes can be made which render the inappropriate subject appropriate” (Rancière 2007, p. 118).

From a Rancièrian perspective, there is an additional aspect of the film that may function in the service of an aesthetic politics. *Catfish* disrupts the established distribution of the sensible by refusing to recognize the distinction it makes between objects, people, and events which can be appropriately accommodated into its image-repertoire and those which should be excluded in order for the representational system to appear complete and without contradiction. *Catfish* accomplishes this disruption by committing to an aesthetic regime that incorporates a principle of radical equality that makes it possible for everything to be represented: here “everything is now on the same level. . . . Everything is equal, equally representable” (Rancière 2007, pp. 120-21). In particular, *Catfish* makes the radical democratic move of including Angela and her family within the realm of those who “count,” along with the intra-diagetically located filmmakers. *Catfish* thus confronts viewers with an

unsettling heterogeneity: Nev's exhilarating quest for the truth and the dreary bleakness of Angela's existence appear on the same representational plane.

Indeed, Angela, in a sense, hijacks the film as a forum for her self-representation, thus achieving equality within the field of representation. In a keenly insightful soliloquy, delivered by Angela's previously reticent husband, Vince, we discover that the film is named for Angela. She is the eponymous *Catfish*, who in Vince's characterization "keeps people on their toes." Vince draws the analogy from cod exporters' solution to their fish becoming flabby and inactive upon arrival from long-distance shipments. Adding a catfish into the barrel, we are told, keeps the cod lively and alert.

The Real and the Unrepresentable

Let us now situate the question of how *Catfish* operates within an aesthetic regime of representation within the context of a relation between the conceptual frameworks of Rancière and Lacan. Rancière uses the term "heterology" to refer to "the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed [when] a spectacle does not fit within the sensible framework" (Rancière 2006, p. 63). But, as with the Lacanian Real, we should avoid being misled into thinking of such a "spectacle" as an external phenomenon that is too disturbing to be represented. In this respect we can consider an unsettling scene from *Catfish* in which one of Angela's non-verbal stepsons, impatient for her to stop talking with Nev so that she can prepare his lunch, is shown intently trailing her while carrying a cooking pot. This episode constitutes a Rancièrian disturbance, not because it is somehow inherently unrepresentable, but rather through the film's refusal to frame it as an unexpected "special" event that needs to be treated with a certain delicacy. That is, for Rancière, what is significant is not an element that is somehow intrinsically unrepresentable, but rather a perceived mismatch between the mode of representation and the subject it represents. Thus the "spectacle" can be understood as an artefact of the constraints that govern the representational system. Similarly, for Lacan, the Real emerges through the failure of the symbolic fiction to fully and without

remainder represent the “whole of ‘reality.’” Thus, by contrast with frequent characterizations of it as a terrifying Thing that causes the symbolic to warp in its attempts to capture it, the Real is not external to the symbolic system. Rather, as Žižek emphasizes, the Real emerges as the *effect* of the inevitable failure of the symbolic to flawlessly render reality fully and without remainder (Žižek 2008).

In accord with these remarks, Rancière expresses “a certain intolerance for an inflated use of the notion” of unrepresentability (2007, p. 109). “The assertion of unrepresentability,” he argues, is a “claim that some things can only be represented in a certain type of form . . . appropriate to their exceptionality. . . . This idea [of unrepresentability] is vacuous” (2007, p. 137). In short, he dismisses the “impossibility of representation” as no more than a failure of the established representative regime to make an event intelligible. Such failures do not occur within an aesthetic regime as there is no presumed correspondence between making “visible” and making “intelligible” (2007, p. 112). Thus, aesthetic regimes embrace a principle of heterology, which, by making visible what is “unintelligible,” opens up the possibility for new forms of thought and new realities.

Rancière’s critique of the unrepresentable can be understood from a deeper metaphysical perspective. Reality as we know it hangs together on the condition that we avoid confronting the necessary exclusions which confer upon it an air of completion. As Žižek puts it, “the ‘whole’ of reality cannot be perceived/accepted as reality, so the price we have to pay for ‘normally’ situating ourselves within reality is that something should be foreclosed from it . . .” (2001, p. 71). In order to prevent recognition of symbolic incompleteness, the representative regime conspires to paint these necessary exclusions—what Lacan calls the Real—not as points of a fundamental failure on the part of the symbolic order but rather as markers of the “incapacity on the part of art” to justly render the full affective dimension of special events/moments/traumas—art’s incapacity to render their singularity intelligible.

Thus, paradoxically, it is through the philosophical conception that there are things which are “unrepresentable” that the

representative regime consolidates a sense of symbolic wholeness. And this conception in turn masks the real/"Real" problem of representation: which is *not* that there are exceptional events, (trauma, etc.) falling outside of symbolic competence, but rather that the symbolic is fundamentally, constitutively unable to fully represent reality, full stop. The aesthetic regime, in effect, exposes this problem. By abandoning the expectation of an appropriate correspondence between exhibition and signification, it helps reveal that the problem is not that "language for conveying [traumatic events] does not exist," but much more disturbingly, that "the language that conveys the experience is in no way specific to it" (Rancière 2007, p. 126). The obscenity thus lies in the fact that the existence of limits to an established system of representation is not due to exceptional, "unrepresentable" cases, but instead calls for some other "aesthetic" mode of expression. By insisting that nothing is unrepresentable and by representing everything on the same plane (for example, by refusing to make "adjustments" to register the magnitude of an event with greater sensitivity, the problem of representation emerges as a problem intrinsic to the symbolic system itself, rather than a special challenge posed by exceptional "external" events. In Rancière's terms, there are no "events and situations which are excluded *in principle* from the adequate connection of a process of exhibition and a process of signification" (Rancière 2007, p. 123) (my emphasis).

We now seem to face what appears to be a contradiction between Lacan and Rancière, namely Lacan's insistence that the Real is intrinsically unrepresentable and Rancière's rejection of the idea of the unrepresentable. One way in which these two competing views may be reconciled is to emphasize that the Real—the failure of the symbolic system—cannot be represented within the representative regime, but that the representative regime's very failure to cope with the Real may be "activated" or indexed as an impossibility or absence within the aesthetic regime. Through the example of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, Rancière makes exactly this point. In particular, he illuminates how what is unrepresentable in the representational regime may be displayed through the aesthetic regime. Rancière contends

that the key representational challenge regarding the Holocaust lies not “in reconstructing a gas chamber and its victims, but in the fact that we possess almost exclusively the words of a small number of survivors to inform us about a process conducted in secret. In the case of Lanzmann, there is a specifically artistic choice which is to activate absence—an absence of the things in the words, an absence of traces in the sites—so as to make the process of the double disappearance felt, by disconnecting it from any embodiment of external causality” (Rancière 2007b).

Here unrepresentability emerges not as an ontological property of a horrific event, but rather as an epistemological contingency. Unrepresentability, in this epistemological sense, may be expressed through the aesthetic regime’s capacity to evoke what exceeds the capacity of being shown within the representative regime. To be specific, within the aesthetic regime, dominant modes of perception are reconfigured in order to introduce the possibility of thinking something that was previously unthought. When an exceptional event occurs that causes the given perceptual system to stumble, the aesthetic regime’s way of expressing this event is to make this upset palpable—to allow the disruption to be felt as a challenge to the given organizational system of perception, rather than dismiss it as unrepresentable. The aesthetic regime enables such challenges to produce heterologies within the realm of the perceptible, which make untenable the given order of sensible relations and incite the assembly of new distributions of the sensible.

Such a move, I will argue in the next section, is brilliantly facilitated in *This Is Not a Film*, in which Panahi cleverly expresses the impossibility of representing his treatment by the oppressive Iranian government. His representational challenge is doubled: he is both banned from representing (through the injunction to not make films) and prevented from being represented (through the prohibition to speak to the media). The film deftly accomplishes the expression of this double condition of unrepresentability not by merely making his circumstances visible, but rather by throwing into crisis the very representational system under which his plight is made invisible. Panahi

thus employs the position of the double exclusion from which he speaks to highlight the double exclusion at the heart of the representational regime's "separation between the idea of fiction and that of lies" (2007, p. 35). In particular, I will contend that by demonstrating simultaneously the impossibility of realism to draw out the truth and the necessity of fiction as a guise for arousing the Real, Panahi prompts a challenge to the very sensible system from which he is excluded.

This Is Not a Film

Whereas in *Catfish* the fact of the film's making figures retrospectively to imperil its documentary status, Jafar Panahi's *This Is Not a Film* takes the very fact of the film's making as its explicit subject matter. In the film, the internationally acclaimed Iranian filmmaker Panahi attempts resourcefully to represent his censorship by the repressive Iranian government. As a punishment for beginning to make a film that did not have government approval, Panahi was sentenced to a twenty-year ban on making films, as well as put under house arrest, with an impending six-year prison term, and prohibited from leaving the country or talking with the media. This injunction rendered Panahi both unrepresentable and unable to represent, a point to which we shall return later. His response, *This Is Not a Film*, owes its international distribution to the successful smuggling of a USB drive baked into a cake shipped from Iran to Cannes, and received by allies from within the international film community.

The film takes as its premise Panahi's impossible feat of making a film about his notmaking films. The opening scene of the film is shot with a stationary video camera positioned to face Panahi's breakfast table. Carrying a basket of bread, Panahi enters into the *mise en scène* where he sits alone in front of the camera and begins to eat. While eating, he makes a phone call to invite his friend, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, a documentary filmmaker, to come over to discuss an idea. Upon his arrival, Mirtahmasb takes the reins of the camera as Panahi reveals his plan: since he is not permitted to make a film, he will have Mirtahmasb film *him* while he simply describes—"tells"—the

film that he had begun when the injunction was imposed. Panahi compounds the duplicity evinced by the mismatch between the title of his film and its filmic status, through inter-diegetic reminders that the contrivance of addressing the camera puts him in the position of a liar. Despite these protestations that the film is not only untruthful, but also “not a film,” what unfolds on the screen is widely deemed to be totally real. One reviewer describes it as “One of cinema’s rare masterpieces of truth” (Kasman 2012). Panahi’s assertions that he is not making a documentary and that he is lying do not imperil the film’s realist status, but rather enhance it. When viewed as a protest triggered by Panahi’s real circumstances, the very act of undermining the credibility of the project works to make it more credible.

A lesson from André Bazin helps illuminate this phenomenon. Ivone Margulies highlights Bazin’s observations that cinematic images bear the “marks of two heterogeneous realities, the filmmaking process and the filmed event. . . . [T]he registered clash of different material orders best defines for him, in turn, that which is specifically cinematic. . . . What interests Bazin are precisely . . . the moment of encounter and productive maladjustment between representation and the actuality of filmmaking” (Margulies 2003, pp. 3, 4). In this view, for Bazin, the essence of cinema lies not simply in the camera’s ability to indexically record reality, but rather in bringing these two dimensions into confrontation.³ Serge Daney cites Bazin’s explanation of this phenomenon: “When a savage head-hunter is shown in the foreground watching for the arrival of the whites, this necessarily implies that he is not a savage because he has not cut the cameraman’s head off” (Margulies 2002, p. 37).

This Is Not a Film highlights such “productive maladjustment” to powerful effect. The very titular announcement that what we are watching is “not a film” operates not merely as a metalinguistic comment regarding the nature of the object it describes, but rather works to draw attention to the impossible constraint under which Panahi labours. Thus, instead of wielding metalanguage as a tool for circumscribing meaning, the film’s title functions to disperse meaning by operating as a

prominent reminder of its conditions of production. In other words, the title does not simply stand outside and authoritatively comment upon the film, but rather enters into the intradiegetic struggles that the film recounts. The film demonstrates the destabilizing effect that occurs when such acts of enunciation enter into the enunciated content. In particular, we see how the very act of enunciation (the act of naming the film *This Is Not a Film*) unsettles the truth value of the enunciated statement (that this is, indeed, not a film). In this sense *This Is Not a Film* differs from conventional realist films, which elide the disruptive potential of metalanguage by appealing to its transparent role of seamlessly complementing the content it designates.

The Real of Fiction

Let us return briefly to *Catfish*, which I suggest provides a sort of counterpoint against which to analyze *This Is Not a Film*. As Rebecca Milzoff observes, *Catfish* eschews the expository documentary conventions of “talking heads or voice-over and doesn’t include after-the-fact commentary—its action simply unspools like a scripted film’s” (Milzoff 2010). This appropriation of the form of fiction undermines its realist status, but at the same time enhances its potential for evoking the Real.

Rather than unruly spontaneity, the story that emerges follows an uncannily tight and dramatic narrative arc, rare in unscripted films. When questioned about this, the filmmakers cede creative credit to Nev’s inherently “cinematic” life. Rel Schulman accounts for the film’s surprising ability to include everything relevant (even before their significance could have been anticipated) by explaining that the “events in [Nev’s] life are . . . so cinematic . . . and I’ve missed too many of them. So I just film him constantly” (Milzoff 2010). This explanation points towards the Lacanian insight regarding the fictional status of reality itself. Žižek puts this insight in the following terms: “if our social reality itself is sustained by a symbolic fiction . . . then the ultimate achievement of film art is not to recreate reality within the narrative fiction, to seduce us into (mis)taking a fiction for reality, but, on the contrary to make us discern the fictional aspect of

reality itself, to experience reality itself as a fiction” (Žižek 2001, p. 77). Žižek’s point helps us to see through the real trap that the film sets for its viewers: the enticement to ask whether we are misidentifying a fiction as reality. Once we are released from this absorbing question, a more radical question may impose itself: is reality itself a fiction? In this way, the more crucial issue raised by *Catfish* is not whether it is realist, but rather whether it lures out the Lacanian Real.

Fiction of the Real

For many critics, the realist potential of *Catfish* is compromised not by a failure of indexicality, but rather by an excess: the fact that *Catfish* leaves us with no gaps. As one critic emphasizes, “In *CATFISH*, absolutely anything that holds any weight in the movie is on camera somehow. So [in addition to] running a production company and making another film at the same time as *CATFISH* they still had time to film Nev almost completely non stop and at all the perfect moments. So this is either extremely lucky, or really staged” (Hutcheson 2010). Thus, rather than constant documentation working to ensure realism, meta-filmic knowledge of how unlikely it is to capture everything (and in acceptable quality) imperils the film’s claim to realism.

A further analogy with Bazinian realism deepens this point. Bazin, as we have seen, points out that “narrative ellipses,” omissions within a filmic text that occur in moments when the filmmaker would be in danger, strengthen the realist impact of a film. Ellipses mark the conspicuous intrusion of the filmmaking process into the filmed event with the effect of strengthening, rather than undermining, the film’s claims to realism. In reference to Bazin’s commentary on Thor Heyerdahl’s *Kon-Tiki* (1951), Philip Rosen asserts that “here Bazin claims that realism is manifested by the film precisely because, at the moment when the filmmakers are depicted as being in danger, a chunk of time encompassing the events of most interest must be omitted. . . . This frustration acts to draw a greater quotient of belief from the spectator, for the interruption serves as evidence that the danger was real” (Rosen 2002, p. 58). This recognition

illuminates the ways in which conventional approaches to realism, built upon the premise of seeking to make the filmmaking process invisible through continuity editing, may actually make a film vulnerable to the breakdown of reality associated with the Real. Put bluntly: When filming head-hunters, if the cameraman's head is not cut off, then the events must not be real; if the cameraman's head is cut off, then the event becomes Real. Thus, rather than pledge an unwavering commitment to the realist powers of indexicality and the erasure of the presence of the camera, certain pro-filmic events call for the switching off of the camera as an effective technique for accomplishing filmic realism.

Narrative ellipsis thus emerges as a precarious technique for filmic realism; it wagers that the destruction of transparent realism through the reminder of the camera's presence is more than compensated for by the creation of evidentiary realism. But this evidentiary realism hinges not on the camera's ability to document the events in its purview impassively; rather, it seeks to prove that the camera really was there, because it was affected by the very conditions it sought merely to record.

But here we encounter a point of divergence between Bazin's claim that, in certain instances, intrusions of the filmmaking process into the filmed reality enhance a film's reality effect, and the way that, in *This Is Not a Film*, the intrusion of the filmmaking process into the filmed reality destabilizes claims to conventional realism. How might we account for this divergence? I suggest that there are two aspects of Panahi's film which lead the camera's intradiegetic involvement to disrupt conventional realism. First, in contrast with Bazin's examples, in Panahi's film the camera functions from the start as an explicit diegetic object. The selection of which recording devices should be used (iPhone or video camera) and the complex discussions that emerge over who should wield them play an overt role within the film. An awareness of the camera's presence is thus built into the content in such a way that it denaturalizes its role at the level of form, enabling it to accrue the power to unsettle conventional realism. Second, Panahi undertakes an ingenious two-part strategy for unsettling

realism by a) adhering faithfully—perhaps to the point of “overconforming,” in Žižek’s sense—to its most prized tenets, while b) demonstrating the impotence of the realist form to render the truth. I develop these points in the next section.

Show and Tell

Under the gaze of the camera, dutifully wielded by Mirtahmasb, Panahi’s attempt at “telling the film” that he had planned to make fails. His elaborate descriptions (replete with scenic demarcations, blocking, character descriptions, plot developments, etc.) come to an abrupt halt when Panahi, overcome by the futility of the endeavour, laments: “If we could tell a film, then why make a film?” I suggest that we read Panahi’s remark as an insight into the necessity of deception for the emergence of the truth—a view akin to Žižek’s stance that “in the guise of fiction, the truth . . . is articulated” (Žižek 2001, p. 75). The documentary form does not pave the path to truth; only fiction can provide “the protective mask” necessary for truth to emerge. In the particular instance of *This Is Not a Film*, Panahi demonstrates this viewpoint by explicitly performing the defiant act of making a film while proclaiming that he is not making a film. This act is further complicated by his claim that even when he explicitly makes films, he is not fully the maker—rather his films contain moments of truth that escape his control. It is only when he is NOT making films that his films, in their full sense, are made. He thus effectively destroys the director-function, from which he has been politically excluded, through the introduction of the paradox that his true moments as a director occur when he is divested of directorial authority—when an actor wrests control from him.

It is significant that Panahi does not simply *tell* us about this phenomenon, but rather *shows* us videotapes of his fictional films where his directorial authority is usurped by unanticipated intrusions of the Real. Through these clips, Panahi presents to us stirring instances where actors exceed their fictional consignment by recalcitrantly “speaking back”—either explicitly (as in the case of the child actor who tore off her costume—replete with arm cast—because she had had enough) or more subtly (as

in the case of an “amateur” actor who becomes so upset at his character’s predicament that his organic expressions of agony begin to appear excessive for his character). Taken in and of themselves these moments do not have the power to blur the boundary between truth and fiction, but nonetheless, due to Panahi’s aesthetic choice to include them, unremarked, within the completed film, they trigger such a blurring. Typically, if such scenes are shared with viewers, they are safely relegated to the circumscribed category of “out-takes” or “behind-the-scenes” footage. Marking the footage as exceptional thus reinforces the status quo. But in Panahi’s oeuvre of fictional films the exnominated inclusion of these unexpected moments has a destabilizing function.

This Is Not a Film adopts a different strategy. Panahi includes unplanned, exceptional events and surprising filmic objects, but marks them as such. For example, during Panahi’s confinement in his house, he is asked to look after a veritable menagerie of animals, (including his daughter’s endearing pet iguana) and makes an extended acquaintance with the building’s fill-in garbage collector. Rather than having these unexpected subjects appear in the film in the same register as Panahi himself, their appearances are marked as exceptional. A review of the film, for example, promises “You haven’t seen a scenery-chewing, scene-stealing supporting role until you’ve seen Igi, Panahi’s four-foot-long iguana, slithering diva-like into shot” (Clarke 2012). Most explicit in this context is the filmic treatment of the garbage collector, who inquires as to why Panahi is filming him on his iPhone when a higher quality video camera is sitting unused in his living room. At this prompt, Panahi abandons the rhetorical device that he employs throughout the film up to this point: the conceit that if he is neither directing nor professionally filming the action then he is not making a film. He takes up the directorial reins by filming with the video camera and thus overtly marks the garbage collector/art student (as we come to learn) as a filmic subject. The garbage collector’s place in the representational scheme moves from a potentially disruptive inclusion (a person who typically falls out of the symbolic frame) to a circumscribed filmic subject.

Despite this aberration, however, Panahi avoids taking up the role of the filmmaker through a double denial: both on the technical grounds that he is not making the film and on the philosophical grounds (articulated via his discussion of his other films) that his films are only ever really made when he is not making them. Panahi thus speaks from the only position from which his exclusion can be included. His dilemma cannot be represented through the representative regime, since the very ability to depict his double unrepresentability undermines his unrepresentable status. Rather, he cleverly succeeds in expressing the inability to both represent and be represented by “activating” a similar structural impasse through the ability of the aesthetic regime to evince a coalescence of being unrepresentable and unable to represent.

It might still appear that *This Is Not a Film* remains within the representational mode, apparently committed to traditional politics of the sort Rancière criticizes, in which images serve political ends through their ability to reveal to viewers a problem and consequently inspire them to take up action. But I suggest to the contrary that this very appearance contributes to the film’s ability to facilitate a Rancièrian aesthetic politics. Panahi’s passionate plea that he needs to “make” films, rather than simply “tell” them, lends the impression that he is committed to the constraints of the representational regime in which showing and telling function as distinct representational mechanisms for distinct events and objects. But this guise of matching a representational mode to a represented event provides the occasion for the more radical assertion that, as an aesthetic form capable of luring out the Real, “making” (fiction) is preferable to “telling” (documentary). By adhering faithfully to the constraints of the representative regime—perhaps to the point of overconforming to its requirements, as witnessed through Panahi’s emotional tribute to preservation of the distinction between showing and telling—Panahi establishes a foundation well-primed for the emergence of the Real. To be specific, Panahi succeeds in blowing apart the representative regime’s logic from within the regime itself, by adhering to a stable model of exhibition and meaning in order to provide viewers

with an ingenious code for undermining this very principle. Through offering the examples of his own fiction films, Panahi provides us with a cunning cipher for his documentary, craftily pointing us toward the realization that fiction is necessary for accessing truth. In particular, Panahi's expression of feeling false when "playing" himself resonates with Žižek's description of how fiction is more successful than documentary as an aesthetic mode for luring the real: "When we film 'real-life' scenes in a documentary way, we get people playing themselves . . . the only way to depict people beneath their protective mask . . . is, paradoxically, to make them directly play a role" (Žižek 2001, p. 75).

Panahi's commitment to fiction as the modality best suited to give rise to the Real is shared by Rancière. Thus, Rancière's claim that "the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought" should not be interpreted in terms of the post-modernist polemic that there is nothing real (Rancière 2006, p. 38). This assertion, rather, speaks to the Baudrillardian phenomenon in which the realms of fact and fiction become blurred through the ability of the simulation to precede, and hence organize, what we take to be reality. Fiction, here, can best be understood as the organizational schema for making reality both meaningful and coherent. For Lacan, because reality itself is a cover for the Real, it requires a symbolic fiction for sustenance. The impression of an opposition between reality and fiction operates to mask their collusion; once the conspiracy between reality and fiction is revealed, a recognition of the fictional nature of reality yields to eruptions of the Real.

The Real/REAL-ism of Leaving the Camera On

Both films, in distinct ways, adhere to the documentary tenet of "leaving the cameras on." For the filmmakers of *Catfish*, this acts as a guiding principle of their filming (for example, Rel's contention that that he must continually film his brother so as not to miss out on any moments of his reliably "cinematic" life) and also as a retrospective justification for the film's truth status in the face of its improbable premise. Yet, as I have suggested, rather than vindicate the film in the face of accusations of

fabrication, the claim to have the camera on at all times fuels these attacks. Although *Catfish* includes diegetic gestures to the filmmaking process, the filmmakers' extra-diegetic reassurances imply a false view of the camera as a neutral apparatus that mechanically records events within its audiovisual range; the filmmakers' disingenuous attempt to obscure their creative role merely casts a cloud of suspicion over the documentary status of the film. By showing too much, the reality-effect is compromised.

Thus *Catfish* points to another instance of the fruitfulness of Bazin's insistence on thinking of realism as a relationship between the filmmaking process and the filmed event. But rather than a "productive *mismatch*," between these two realms, we encounter a surprising *harmony* between them. Tom Conley describes how narrative expectations can be disrupted through the ability of the "passive register of the camera [to] dislocate the artistic privilege that a creator had owned when he or she was said to . . . impose a 'vision' upon a form" (Conley 2005, p. 96). But in *Catfish* both the camera and the profilmic reality conform *too perfectly* to expected aesthetic conventions, creating an uncanny confluence that gestures towards the way in which reality itself assumes the form of fiction.

Perhaps the film's unsettled status as a documentary lends *Catfish* its principal tie to the Real, however. The refusal of the film to seal its generic status activates a productive indeterminacy that beckons the Real. The suspension of symbolic closure opens the path towards new configurations of the sensible in which truth and fiction are no longer counterparts but rather co-conspirators in the effort to keep the Real at bay. Once their complicity is exposed, their efficacy in maintaining a taken-for-granted sense of reality is diminished.

In *This Is Not a Film* the commitment to leaving the camera on may be seen, in Jon Frosch's words, as nothing short of "an inherently political act of defiance" (Frosch 2011). Frosch reminds us that this position is held by Mirtahmasb himself, who tells Panahi, "What matters is that this is documented. It matters that these cameras stay on." This view appears to emerge from an anti-Rancèrian conviction that art becomes political

through the creation of an “awareness’ of the state of the world” (Rancière 2006, p. 63). Against this view, Rancière argues that political art must not merely depict a given state of events, but activate a “rupture” within the conventional logic through which these events are made meaningful.

These two views of the political are less far apart than they might appear. Documentation of a singular reality does not preclude its ability to rupture the dominant order of the sensible. Here we return again to Bazin, this time to his well-known example from “Death Every Afternoon,” in which he confronts the disturbing ability of film to reproduce the singular event of death: “On the screen the toreador dies everyday” (Bazin 2002, p. 31). Here, a singular reality takes on a sense of unreality through its impossible repetition. Cinema’s initial ability to *record* an unrepeatable event works to secure its special status as a technology of the real, but its potential for incessant duplication ruptures its reality effect.

Perhaps, then, Bazin’s insistence that realism emerges from the relation between the filmmaking process and the filmed event should be extended to include consideration of the viewing process. Along these lines, I suggest that through the repetition of singular moments, filmic realism may give way to Lacanian Real-ism. Fragments of reality begin to speak in new ways when assembled and reproduced within a cinematic context. Miriam Hansen credits Siegfried Kracauer with this insight. She refutes the usual interpretation of Kracauer as a “naïve realist,” insisting that for Kracauer, “cinema’s photographic dimension emphasizes film’s capacity to displace the world it depicts” (Kouvaros 2008). George Kouvaros cites Hansen’s elaboration of this point:

The same indexicality that allows photographic film to record and figure the world also inscribes the image with moments of temporality and contingency that disfigures the representation. If Kracauer seeks to ground his film aesthetics in the medium of photography, it is because photographic representation has the perplexing ability not only to resemble the world it depicts but also to render it strange, to destroy habitual fictions of self-identity and familiarity (Hansen 1997, p. xxv).

In a similar vein, I suggest that the commitment to leaving the cameras on, for both *Catfish* and *This Is Not a Film*, undermines their claims to traditional realism, but pushes them in the direction of the Lacanian Real. The potential for these films to destabilize the given distribution of the sensible is enhanced through their use of the documentary form to highlight the fictional nature of reality itself. By drawing attention to the illusion of completion that undergirds our symbolic system, these films enable new configurations of the sensible to emerge and therefore help us to envision a “world . . . in which everyone counts” (Conley 2005, p. 103).

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NOTES

1. Rancière provides perhaps his most succinct overview of his categories of the ethical, representative and aesthetic regime in the short chapter “Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity” in *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

2. The film faces the unusual challenge of claiming to truthfully document a deception by using the same media that were used to perpetuate the deception. If they successfully demonstrate that they were taken in by the clever sham, then viewers are understandably encouraged to doubt whether they, too, are prey to a similarly devious deployment of technology.

3. Although Bazin’s view of cinema’s ontological link to reality is most frequently emphasized, it is important that this position not overshadow his commitment to thinking about the aesthetic, semiological and psychological functions of cinema. As he writes powerfully in the final, stand-alone line of “Ontology of the Photograph.” “On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language” (Bazin 1960, p. 9). This point is made beautifully by Nico Baumbach, who incisively argues that Bazin’s emphasis on film’s “ontological link to the real”—its “technical realism”—should not be confused with the particular form of cinematic realism for which he advocated. Rather, he contends that for Bazin the filmic medium faces a special challenge in achieving proper “aesthetic realism,” as it has to overcome “its ability to reproduce reality so easily” (Baumbach, p. 62).

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RÉSUMÉ

Le RÉELisme documentaire : *Catfish* et *Ceci n'est pas un film*

Jennifer Friedlander

Cet article porte sur deux films documentaires récents, dont l'un n'est peut-être pas un documentaire, tandis que l'autre affirme ne pas être un film. Bien qu'ils diffèrent grandement quant à leur sujet et à leurs enjeux politiques, *Catfish* (Ariel Schulman et Henry Joost, 2010) et *Ceci n'est pas un film* (*In film nist*, Jafar Panahi et Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, 2011) font tous deux ressortir une dimension méconnue du réalisme cinématographique, à savoir sa propension à faire surgir ces fragments de réel qui font irruption précisément lorsque le cadre symbolique qui gouverne la réalité est mis en péril. En s'appuyant sur les concepts de « Réel » (Jacques Lacan) et de « régime esthétique » (Jacques Rancière), l'auteure suggère que les éléments constitutifs du réalisme traditionnel peuvent produire un « Réelisme » politiquement déstabilisant qui, plutôt que de représenter la réalité de manière reconnaissable, fait émerger ce qui est nécessairement rejeté ou exclu du cadre symbolique.