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Truth and Authenticity in Cinematography. Robert Bresson and the Cinematic Realism

Abstract:

The search for truth has been the task of philosophers for a long time. The artist has been banished from Plato's ideal city, precisely because of his/her passion for phantasia, for the illusion the masses always adore. It was believed that the appearance itself has no value in the absence of the universal, transcendental truth. Later, in the romantic period, Wagner's attempt to transform music into drama, the importance conferred by the composer to appearance, passion and to the acting itself was strongly incriminated by Nietzsche. Nowadays, our consumerist society is viewed by theorists like Guy Debord or Jean Baudrillard as a society of spectacle or as a space invaded by simulacra. They believe that the representation detached from any reality conquers the world, conducts lives and destinies, isolates people, transforms the individual into a trivial copy of a star specialized in apparent living. The artists react: modern playwright Berthold Brecht dissociates his epic theatre from emotional manipulation, film directors like Robert Bresson, and the members of the Nouvelle Vague or Dogma 95 plead against convention and theatricality.

In this uncertain context, how can we define the art of Cinematography?[1] Is it a component of the society of spectacle or a version of Plato's cave? Can it be dissociated from the appearance, can it be redefined as a quest for the truth? On the other hand, is this technical image able to cope with traditional aesthetic categories like beauty or contemplation?

All these questions will be discussed in the context of Robert Bresson's films and writings. A series of connections with other auteurs and groups related to cinematic realism will also be made. The meaning of image, music and actor's performance along with the differences between cinema and theatre or painting will be questioned with the goal to distinguish between what can be considered false and what can be considered truth in film. With the help of key texts written by Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag and André Bazin and by employing a number of paradigmatic theories of beauty and truth[2] this paper will search for an inner connection of cinematic realism with categories such as beauty, truth, and authenticity.

Keywords: cinematic realism, Robert Bresson, beauty, truth, authenticity.

1. Intro – short justification

This paper aims to clarify, first of all, the reason for the contemporary revival of classical concepts such as truth and authenticity. Part of this interest is due to the popular-

ity of cinematic realism and the plurality of texts which bring forward elements of the thinking of André Bazin in relation with the films of contemporary *auteurs* like Chantal Akerman, Abbas Kiarostami, Bela Tarr, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, the American Neo-Neo Realism group[3] as well as Cristi Puiu and other directors of the New Romanian Cinema (NCR[4]) (Gorzo, 160-162). I claim that the correct understanding of the ontological realism promoted by Bazin – which differs from the naïve or psychological realism focused only on the believability of the story and characters – requires a good knowledge of concepts like truth and authenticity.

Secondly, this paper recalls the general debate on the returning of the concepts of truth, contemplation and beauty in the field of contemporary criticism and artistic practice. From the 1990s onward, scholars such as Dave Hickey or Stefano Zecchi ask for a reconsideration of beauty in the field of aesthetics. Likewise, philosophers such as Noel Carol and Carl Plantinga propose a reevaluation of the idea of truth (Gorzo, 120-125). At the same time, directors like Bresson, Tarkovsky and Antonioni have opened the way for the recent trend of the so called *contemplative cinema* represented by, among others, Chantal Akerman, Bela Tarr, Alexander Sokurov, Terrence Malick, Abbas Kiarostami, Theodorus Angelopoulus and Gus Van Sant. The strong relation between this trend and the bazinian realism based on the long take, deep focus, limited montage, is obvious. In my opinion, the analysis of the concept of contemplation, defined in a nutshell as an objective, enduring admiration of beauty, can be useful both to understand the recent contemplative cinema and the bazinian realism.

Thirdly, the menace of consumerism, the way in which the logistics of production (management of the resources, budget and locations) and the mechanism of advertising alter visual arts and cinema call more than ever for a critique of authenticity and truth. I have to stress the fact that the cinema of contemplation, which engages a particular relation with time, in line with bergsonian approach of *time as duration* and the segregation from what Debord called abstract, *irreversible time*, can be interpreted as an anti-consumerist protest in itself.

2. Cinema as technical image and form of abstract thinking

In this paper, cinema is approached in the context of *technical image*[5], the image produced by means of a technical apparatus, by the cold and ubiquitous eye of the camera. It should be noticed that the idea of placing the film alongside with photography, as a species of the technical image produced by an apparatus, is compatible with the bazinian approach of cinema as a realist-photographic image. Thus Bazin considers both cinema and photography as objective, even though only cinema is *objective in time*. Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer, the German film theorist who continued and radicalized bazinian approach, stated that all the elements of film should be subservient to the photographic element, defined as the essential ingredient.

In the context of the technical image, a series of questions are waiting to be answered. Is the mechanical vision of the apparatus able to provide more than a trivial

mimesis of the world? Can we find deep down in the technique an inner metaphysics or a hidden aesthetics? Can we relate the pursuit of truth and beauty not only to traditional media such as painting and sculpture but also to the technological media such as photography or cinematography?

In order to provide an answer we have to take into account the fact that for the first half of the century technology and its correlate term *technical image* have not been favored by theory. Defining modern times as a paradigm adulterated by positivism, functionality and technology, Martin Heidegger criticized the tendency that takes nature and humans into possession and transforms them into inventory items. Likewise, Walter Benjamin considered that the capacity of technically reproducing images and sounds leads to a more independent copy which sometimes can surpass the original (through operations like zoom and slow motion), but which most times replace it in a simplified, inconsistent form. In this context, the mass distribution of millions of reproductions of paintings, sculptures, concerts and theatre performances (via press, albums, radio etc) has been accused as the reason for the loss of the *aura*[6], that subtle authenticity touch of the original, the direct contact of the public with the work of art (Benjamin 5).

Following Heidegger and Benjamin, a number of contemporary so called dystopic theorists (Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio) associate the use of technology with the irremediable loss of the natural distance that enables art and contemplation. For them, it appears that our world, in which nature has to be intensively controlled and exploited while humans have to be transformed in human resources, runs out of liberty, authenticity and beauty. There is no place left for poetry and mystery.

What can we respond to such accusations? Even though photography and film are the very offspring of the technical reproduction, it is impossible to ignore their significant aesthetic development. A new criticism has been born in the field of contemporary visual arts and a different point of view is embraced by film theorists, art critics and curators, photographers and film directors.

As an example, British curator and theorist Charlotte Cotton presents in her seminal book *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, photography as a medium with its own language and aesthetics (see for instance the cold, transcendent, large scale aesthetic of *deadpan*[7]), fully embraced as legitimate by the art world, equal in status to painting and sculpture. Deadpan photography can be easily related with cinematic realism. Both signify a celebration of the new technical vision, of a new stage in humans' domination of Nature. Therefore, feeling omniscient and empowered, the viewer takes the position of a conductor in front of an orchestra. "The adoption of a deadpan aesthetic moves art photography outside the hyperbolic, sentimental and subjective. […] The emphasis, then, is on the photography as a way of seeing beyond the limitations of individual perspective, a way of mapping the extent of the forces, invisible from a single human standpoint, that govern the man-made and natural world" (Cotton, 81).

It is widely accepted that the real evolution of any new artistic form starts with the decision of dissociating itself from other media of expression. In the field of cinema this decision was made during the mid-twentieth century, making the dissociation from painting, theatre and literature a crucial aim. The departure was made in infinitesimal steps. One of the first attempts to define cinema as a new artistic medium was Alexandre Astruc's manifesto, *Camera stylo* (1948) which pleads for a strict delimitation of film from fairground attraction and entertainment, from plain documentary or from the filmed theatre (in fashion with the advent of talking films). Starting with a quotation from Orson Welles – "*What interests me in the cinema is abstraction*" – the manifest calls for a new language as suitable form for the modern abstract thinking. Therefore, Astruc wrote: "Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16 mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discours de la Méthode* would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily" (Astruc).

Starting from this very approach of cinema as a form of abstract thinking Astruc provided what we can call the first form of *auteur* theory. In his words an *auteur* is a director seen not as a technician whose aim is just to illustrate a story but as an artist capable to *write* with his camera as the writer uses his pen. The *auteur* writes his own script in a personal style. The script is open to improvisation saving space for chance and for the actors to express themselves. (Astruc) Astruc connects the unique capability of film to capture and represent time with the dynamic nature of thinking: "Every film, because its primary function is to move, i.e. to take place in time, is a theorem. It is a series of images which, from one end to the other, have an inexorable logic (or better even, a dialectic) of their own." (Astruc) Hence, film can be approached as a theorem[8]. Film *auteurs* such as Jean-Luc Godard and Paolo Pasolini, or philosophers like Gilles Deleuze have taken over this definition.

Another seminal source for redefining cinema was the artistic and theoretical contribution of Robert Bresson. Firstly, we can interpret Bresson's work, at the beginning of the 1950's, as an attempt to dissociate from the so-called *Tradition de la Qualité*, a fashionable group of writers specialized in modern adaptation, the winners of all the great cinema competitions of the time. This critique becomes explicit with Nouvelle Vague's writings. Therefore in *Une Certain tendance du cinéma français* (1954), a founding text of the group signed by Francois Truffaut, the classical French cinema is described as a pseudo-realist gang of *masters of adaptation* with no real respect even for the literary works' true spirit. We notice how the independence of the cinema concerned Truffaut as well: "Because they are not *hommes du cinéma* and therefore lack any awareness of the capabilities of this medium, their attempts to graft literary or highbrow values onto film eschews any concern for cinema as an independent art form" (Burnett). The dissociation from the *Tradition de la Qualité*, a group whose first aim was the conquering of the public, helped Bresson and the Nouvelle Vague members to redefine cinema as an artistic practice concerned with the capturing of reality. Cinema as art could not

aim for the trivial conquest of the masses: "It is useless and silly to work specially for a public. I cannot try what I am making, at the moment of making it, except on myself. Besides, all that matters is to make well" (Bresson, 66).

As an *auteur* who dedicated his entire work to the search of truth and authenticity permitted and filtered by the objective eye of the camera, Bresson has defined the new cinematic language in conjunction with a new species of truth, the truth of the apparatus: "The truth of cinematography cannot be the truth of theater, nor the truth of the novel, nor the truth of painting. (What the cinematographer captures with his or her own resources cannot be what the theater, the novel, painting capture with theirs)" (Bresson, 5). This mechanical or technical view of the apparatus might be interpreted as the transcendence of the natural human perception and cognition described by Kant, in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, as limited in space and time, submitted to the laws of physics like causality. Could the apparatus and the technique be a version of the divine, the ubiquitous eye that can transcend space, time and any limitation? The quote above, referring at deadpan photography, encourages us to think so. Bresson himself ingeniously interpreted the apparatus and his inner techniques neither as positivist, predictable resources (in the way Heidegger has defined technology), nor as instruments of a certain industry (as Vilem Flusser has seen them), but as sublime machines of divination, capable to carry us "far away from the intelligence which complicates everything" (Bresson, 72). Therefore, the camera and the tape recorder as "prodigious, heaven-sent machines" (Bresson, 63) will preserve the mystery and offer a chance to abandon one's futile rational side.

We can infer that, in the 1950s, the search for the film's specific language and aesthetics was made concomitant with the redefinition of the apparatus and its inner technique as an authentic instrument or, in the words of Robert Bresson, as "*a sublime machine of divination*." This change was made in the context of the cinematic realism promoted by André Bazin and practiced (with minor or major differences) by a long list of directors starting with Bresson and the Nouvelle Vague members[9]. The idea of the cinematography as a new, independent medium and the *auteur theory* would later influence the post-Nouvelle Vague and Free Cinema movements throughout all Europe and even further (see American New Wave and the independent filmmaking of John Cassavetes). For all of them the great aim of cinema as art was the representation of the world as it is or it is seen by the camera's ubiquitous eye, beyond any radical political implications.

André Bazin himself has defined cinema as a new language capable to express a more accurate perspective of the world. As *Cahiers du cinéma* co-founder and Nouvelle Vague theorist he stressed the major importance of the *mise-en-scène* for this new language. The form, the technique is what counts more than the story (the plain matter of the film). The shot in depth and the long take, for example, will introduce a special metaphysics, more liberty for the spectator to choose what to focus on and at the same time a more real and ambiguous structure of the image. "Any technique calls a spe-

cial metaphysics" said Bazin, and in his steps Jean-Luc Godard will reformulate his thought giving birth to the probably best known critical statement on film and philosophy: "tracking shots are a question of morality"[10]. The lack of ethics in aestheticising atrocities such as the Holocaust (by using close-ups or symmetrical composition) will be taken up two years later by Jacques Rivette in his essay *Of Abjection* (1961). All these arguments stand for the idea that a technique itself always hides an inner conceptual message, an inner metaphysics or a way of seeing.

Twenty years later, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze will take up the idea of cinema as a language capable to express abstract thought redefining the film *auteur* as a philosopher working not with traditional concepts but with concepts such as "The Movement Image" or "The Time Image." Deleuze's books *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* (1983), and *Cinema II: The Time-Image* (1986) are examples of what we can call "film-philosophy," a practice that treats film and philosophy as complementary ways of thinking, not considering cinema as a plain object of study as the classical philosophy of film does. Directing a film becomes the act of thinking with moving images, sound and time. Furthermore, Deleuze argues that the practice of cinema can help us better understand the concept of time itself. In a recent book on Deleuze and cinematic thinking, Cezar Gheorghe explains: "The take, the focal plane, the shot and the montage are fundamental thinking elements of cinema, just like reasoning is a fundamental element of philosophical thinking". Furthermore: "Through all its technical elements which compose its 'grammar', the film is a way of thinking in space, a rationalization of space (and of time) which can describe, understand and transfigure objects and beings. In the rhythm of the camera's movement, in its turns, accelerations and slowdowns there's a poetic potential, a way of thinking independent of narrativity." (Gheorghe, 147)*.

3. Cinematography as search for the truth

After twenty years of generalized doubt under the reign of postmodernist theory, the 90s brought forward the need for a reevaluation of *truth*. Does the truth in itself signify more than a convention or a limited agreement? Can we define at least realist art in conjunction with such categories as truth or objectivity? In their writings on film and Post-Theory, philosophers Noel Carol and Carl Plantinga dissociate themselves from relativism and radical skepticism, stating that in the realm of film theory (and culture at large) a certain degree of objectivity is needed for any debate or argumentation to take place (Gorzo, 120-125). In this context I find my enquiry on truth and objectivity adequate and even necessary.

A very useful distinction is the one made by Robert Bresson, both in his *Notes on* Cinematography and interviews, between *Cinema* (The Industry) and Cinematography (used in the sense of the creative film making discussed above, referring to film as an independent art form, which engages different resources from the ones of theatre, painting, literature or music). Thus, *Cinema* signifies merely a copy, the trivial appear-

ance that satisfies the masses, always in search of the most obvious feelings, of the spectacular but not authentic emotion. We can interpret this observation as a direct critique of the classical French cinema or as a more general stand against any attempt of cheating the truth of film as art. It is obvious that we cannot talk about Cinema other than in terms of *false* in an ontological manner, similar to the way Plato discussed the status of image as bad mimesis incapable of pointing to the Truth and transcendent Ideas.

Godard will take over the bressonian critique of commercial filmmaking in his well known ironic comment from the prologue of *Tout va bien* (1972): all you need for making a film is money, some stars and perhaps a love story. It is important to notice that the Godard-Bresson critique was focused on consumerism only, without interfering with the territory of the apparatus and its technique. In their approach, the technique in itself was nothing but an object of praise and adulation. As I mentioned in the previous section of this paper, it took some time for refining the critical theoretical stance which incriminated both the film as industry and the apparatus along with its inner technique. It seems that an eye of a director-theorist was needed for this fine delimitation. By critical theoretical stance I refer here to the already mentioned heideggerian approach of technology as well as to Walter Benjamin's interpretation of film as industry from *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. At the end of the 1930's Benjamin has pointed out the way in which the logistics of production (management of the resources, budget and film locations) determine the process of sequentialization of the narrative, the order in which scenes are shot and their own logics. He also signalized the transformation of the living actors into immaterial images. The loss of the aura of authenticity becomes visible in their need to pretend, in their preoccupation to act *as if*: no real feelings or connection to the character and to the story as a whole (Benjamin, 5). Thirty years later Guy Debord will announce the advent of the *star* specialized in apparent living. Bresson's response to such criticism will be the replacement of specialized actors with interprets or models: "No actors. (No directing of actors). No parts. (No learning of parts). No staging. But the use of working models, taken from life. BEING (models) instead of SEEMING (actors)" (Bresson, 1).

The opposite term, Cinematography, addresses the very art of film, described in perfect concordance with the *Camera stylo* manifesto as „writing with images in movement and with sounds" (Bresson, 2). This approach of film as a way to express conceptual thought explains why his productions, made in the purest cinematic manner, have become cornerstones for the *auteur* theory and the Nouvelle Vague manifesto. Bresson defines Cinematography in conjunction with the search for the truth. Although the bressonian truth is in a way similar with Plato's Ideas: "Forms that resemble ideas. Treat them as actual ideas" (Bresson, 16), a better comparison is however the one with Aristotle's less transcendental concept of form or essence (if the platonic Ideas belong to the upper, transcendental world, the aristotelian forms or essences belong to the sensible, mundane world). The opinion that film is capable to reveal

essences is also supported by André Bazin, in his attempt of defining cinematic realism. He explicitly points out the importance of film essence: "I have never been to a bullfight, and it would be ridiculous of me to claim that the film lets me feel the same emotions, but I do claim that it gives me its essential quality, its metaphysical kernel: death" (Bazin 2003, 29).

The search for the truth in art is usually interpreted in terms of the *correspondence theory*, which states that truth consists in the relation of the artwork to reality. Therefore the artistic truth should be evaluated in terms of mimesis of the world, either in the superior form or in the naïve, naturalist one. As Plato in *Timaeus* and Aristotle in *Poetics* have put it, this search will aim at the hidden structure of reality and nature (the superior mimesis) not only the surface of the world (the appearance or naïve mimesis). That being said, it is clear now that the search for the truth in Cinematography will mean the search for the real and superior mimesis. The prime purpose of art should be to represent a species of reality that is constructed, stylized, "attained through a *process of abstraction*" (Tam). One form of superior mimesis is the imitation of the general essences or Ideas of the world. The way in which an abstract artist represents the flight in itself, and not a particular bird flying, gives us a good illustration. Another form of mimesis, presented by H.G. Gadamer in his essay "Art as mimesis," implies the representation as the creation of a new order (in this interpretation music, painting composition, the frame of photography and film and the *kosmos* itself are based on the same perfect numerical ratio or order) (Gadamer, 27-29). This particular form seems to relate to the way in which Bresson himself interprets the cinematic representation. For him the cinematic truth will be therefore hidden in the very game of putting in order: "The truth is not encrusted in the living persons and real objects you use. It is an air of truth that their images take on when you set them together in a certain order (...) " (Bresson, 38). For him Cinematography is nothing but a postmodern game with bits of reality provided by the camera: "Because you do not have to imitate, like painters, sculptors, novelists, the appearance of persons and objects (machines do that for you), your creation or invention confines itself to the ties you knot between the various bits of reality caught. There is also the choice of the bits. Your flair decides." (Bresson, 38) Its specific creativity (reminding us of Lev Manovich's "logic of selection") stands in the very selection of the bits and in the manner to interconnect them:

An important observation has to be made here. The fact that truth and authenticity signify an *end in itself* for Bresson, the principal aim that imposes a certain form for his films makes us think, at least at a first glance, that he is less interested in beauty than it is in truth**.** Despite the fact that in her essay "Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson"[11] Susan Sontag shares the same opinion, I will try to argue the opposite in the last section of this paper. The same search for *truth*, along with Bresson's denial of drama and naïve sentimentalism had influenced the way he directed his non-professional actors. The models had to submit themselves to an ascetic use of emotions: "It is not a matter of acting *simple* or of acting *inward* but of not acting at all." The concept

of non acting is very subtle, though. I claim that Sontag's conclusion that: "idea is for the actors not to act out their lines, but simply to say them with as little expression as possible" (Sontag, 4) is wrong. Bresson himself tells us that the model should not be totally and willfully inexpressive: "To put sentiments on his face and into his gestures is the art of the actor, is theater. Not to put sentiments on his face and into his gestures is (still) not cinematography. Involuntarily expressive models (not willfully inexpressive ones)" (Bresson, 39).

It seems that, in a way, Bresson shares with Plato the belief in *oikeiopragia* (the need for specialization and work division) (Plato, 168-170). In *The Republic* this economic principle applied literally in the organization of Plato's ideal city was also transmuted in the field of mimesis and acting. Therefore, in Plato's opinion, actors have to be specialized: some of them acting tragedies, other comedies etc. Moreover, a strong, good character shouldn't mimic bad deeds and weaknesses. Plato's subtle intuition has suggested him that somehow the simulation marks the nature. In his turn, Bresson has understood this subtle but strong relation between the interpreter and his role. Therefore any of his characters on the screen are unique products, miracles having been born with the film, from the mixture of one model and one role. This explains Bresson's urge not to use the same model in two films.

It should be pointed out that the truth of a person can't be interpreted in the terms of world mimesis. The truth of a person implies the person's authentic nature and rise questions such as: do people have a nature or an essence? Are we the same every day? Are we totally different? It is difficult to decide whether Bresson was a true partisan of the substantial approach. The truth of a person or character is sometimes presented in his writings in a platonic manner by the aid of concepts like: essence, heart of the heart, eternal. Other times the subject seems to be fragmented in a nietzschean manner as an ever-changing fluid or confrontation of opposed forces (among which Reason is the most not-truthful). Therefore the true "I" is mysterious and non-rational, full of contradictions and obscurities: "Model. It is his non-rational, non-logical "I" that your camera records" (Bresson, 41). In a powerful attempt to recover the automatism of real life (the most honest of our gestures are not conscientious) Bresson asks his models to repeat their lines and gestures until these become habits. In his notes, the director quotes the words of Montaigne "Every movement reveals us" adding: "But it only reveals us if it is automatic (not commanded, not willed)."

Making a comparison with brechtian critical distance[12] that prevent naïve public involvement in the plot and the fate of the characters, Sontag states: "The emotional distance typical of Bresson's films seems to exist for a different reason altogether: because all identification with characters, deeply conceived, is an impertinence – an affront to the mystery that is human action and the human heart." (Sontag, 3). The same rejection of acting is further explained by Sontag starting from Bresson's interest in the purity of the art. Talking of purity we can invoke *The Case of Wagner* where Nietzsche rejected the synthesis of the arts, pleading for the simple and plain art forms. Bresson's

thought meets both the accusation referring the mixture of music, literature, stage design and also the one referring the unreflective sentimentalism associated with the romantic music.

4. Bresson and the cinematic realism

In her essay on Bresson, Susan Sontag introduced an opposition between emotionally immediate art that creates empathy and a much colder art that detaches, provokes reflection, an art that even if it is able to make the spectator weep or exult, postpones the emotional involvement and favors the disinterested process of contemplation. Robert Bresson along with Ozu, Brecht or Vivaldi exemplifies the second aesthetics. At a first glance it seems that Sontag was referring to the same old confrontation between expressionism and realism. The visible connection between Bresson's films and almost all realist trends in the second half of the 20th century cinema can be illustrative for this standpoint. The opposition between Bresson's formalist manifest film *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc (1962)* and Theodore Dryer's landmark production, the expressionist silent *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (1928)*, both claiming to be based on the actual record of the trial from 15th century, provides another proof. With his extreme experiment (models just reading the lines from the record of the trial, no music involved, just a drum beat at the beginning and in the end of the film) which resembles a report of extreme formalist objectivity, Bresson has challenged the classical silent and its bold pretentions in revealing the historical truth. We can read in Bresson's notes: "For want of truth, the public gets hooked on the false. Falconetti's way of casting her eyes to heaven, in Dreyer's film, used to draw tears."And further on: "Reject historical films whose effect would be "theater" or "masquerade". (In my *Trial of Joan of Arc* I have tried to avoid "theater" and "masquerade", but to arrive at a non-historical truth by using historical words.) " (Bresson, 66). Last but not least, he has also noted: "Do not try, and do not wish to draw tears from the public with the tears of your models, but with this image rather than that one, this sound rather than that one, exactly in their place" (Bresson, 66).

It is a clear fact that Bresson's aesthetics was incompatible with the obvious expression of feelings. The same accusation of trivial sentimentalism is to be found in Plato's *Republic*. No surprise when, in a platonic tone, Bresson recommends: "Production of emotion determined by a resistance to emotion." And further on, in a wittgensteinian tone that reminds us of the outlook on beauty in terms of correctness or precision from the *Lessons on aesthetics*: "It is from being constrained to a mechanical regularity, it is from a mechanism that emotion will be born. To understand this, think of certain great pianists." (Bresson, 65). However, a more interesting opposition, the one Sontag has founded her essay on, is the one between *reflective art*, which aims to analyze the hidden structure of reality (in the words of Aristotle the true mimesis), and naïve, naturalist way of making cinema, based on trivial mimesis of feelings and objects of the world**.** In fact, we are facing the same well known distinction made by André Bazin

between the two ways of approaching reality, *realism* and *pseudorealism* (psychological mimesis): "The quarrel over realism in art stems from a misunderstanding, from a confusion between the aesthetic and the psychological; between true realism, the need that is to give significant expression to the world both concretely and its essence, and the pseudorealism of a deception aimed at fooling the eye (or for that matter the mind); a pseudorealism content in other words with illusory appearances." (Bazin 1967, 12). Thus, Cinematography, as Bresson (and Bazin) has defined it, is a genuine realist form of art that demands a deep, permanent contact with the real, other than what the psychological mimesis could offer.

We can also invoke the distinction made by Bazin between the two broad and opposing trends: "those directors who put their faith in the *image* and those who put their faith in *reality*." (Bazin 1967, 24). Bresson takes part in the second trend, alongside filmmakers of the 20's silent film (Stronheim, Murnau, Flaherty), alongside Jean Renoir, neorealist directors and Hollywood legends like Welles or Hitchcock. It was the realist set of technical and aesthetic improvements (sound, deep-focus panning shots, long takes, the shot in depth, the straight rejection of photographic expressionism and tricks of montage) that allowed the so called *directors of the reality* "to look back beyond the resources provided by montage and so uncovered the secret of a film form that would permit everything to be said without chopping the world up into little fragments, that would reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them" (Bazin 1967, 38). Moreover, genuine realist cinematography doesn't imply a visual asceticism but the very liberation of the spectator. A shot in depth, for example, will permit the spectator to choose what to focus on. At the same time the structure of the image will become more real and ambiguous. Bazin explains further that, far from being disposed, montage and close-ups will be used in a stronger and more abstract manner. Founded on a much higher degree of realism, the image "has at its disposal more means of manipulating reality and of modifying it from within." (Bazin 1967, 40). It is more clear now what Bazin meant by his quip. "any technique calls a special metaphysics." A new metaphysics calls for a new language, able to present the world and the humans in their inner complexity. The last phrase of Bazin's essay: "The film-maker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, at last, the equal of the novelist" (Bazin 1967, 40) reminds deeply of Astruc's *Camera stylo* and also of Bresson's definition of Cinematography.

The film directors who put their faith in reality, authenticity and truth will gain a lot of adepts throughout the 60's and 70's with the advent of Cinéma-Vérité, Nouvelle Vague, Free Cinema and American New Wave movements. They will produce film manifests such as: *Chronique d'un été* (1961), the well known anthropological documentary by French director Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin, *Ma nuit chez Maud* (1969) the film Eric Rohmer delayed just for the purpose of filming the streets of a provincial town in the very period of Christmas and having a scene shot during an authentic Christmas Mass, John Cassavetes' improvisation *Shadows* (1959) and Andy Warhol's

anti-films *Sleep* (1963), a long take footage of a close friend, sleeping for five hours and 20 minutes, and *Empire* (1963), eight-hour-long film showing the Empire State building. The trend has continued to grow with the more recent productions of Dogme 95 (Thomas Vinterberg, Lars von Trier), Louis Malle (*My Dinner with Andre*, 1981), Abbas Kiarostami (*Close Up*, 1990), Harmony Korine (*Gummo*, 1997 and *Julien Donkey-Boy*, 1999, made under the self-imposed rules of the Dogme 95). Although these directors don't have the same strong theoretical background as bazinian realism has offered, they all share the same interest for truth. Their films employ a form, imposed by the very search for truth and authenticity, regardless whether the content would be an encounter of two script-writers playing themselves, a *docufiction* of a trial on a stolen identity presenting all the real characters (judge, plaintiff, defendant, witnesses) acting as themselves or the story of a redneck town devastated by a tornado. The form consists of similar sets of rules and aesthetics: documentary filmmaking, non-professional actors, no accent on montage and post-processing techniques. "My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings," is written in the Dogme 95 manifesto.

5. Cinematic realism, form and beauty

Susan Sontag explains, in the same essay on Bresson, why the reflective or contemplative tradition to which his films belong, had so poor success with the audience. "Often described as cold, remote, overintellectualized, geometrical," (Sontag, 2) these films are in fact not well understood. In Sontag's opinion, the key to the puzzle is to relate the air of coldness (that marks even Bresson's most lyrical and humanistic films like *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Échappé* or *Au hasard Balthazar*) with the importance of form that prevails over content in all the reflective tradition. In spite of her declared delimitation from any formalist or intellectualist interpretation, Sontag uses the concept of form and its correlative concept content in a classical manner: "The typical way in which *form* shapes *content* in art is by doubling, duplicating. Symmetry and the repetition of motifs in painting, the double plot in Elizabethan drama, and rhyme schemes in poetry are a few obvious examples" (Sontag, 3). The interweaving of the four separate stories in Griffith's *Intolerance* provides in its turn an example of film narrative form. Aiming at explaining the coldness of Bresson's work, Sontag signalizes the fact that, in all these form-oriented oeuvres, one can attest the presence of a certain manner of reflection, even if of low order. Therefore, art which relies on form, in spite of a first glance coldness, will in fact stimulate the mind and provide a supplementary pleasure (independent of the content). Its reception will thus depend on one's availability to use not just one's senses but also one's mind, to approach art not just as an entertainment but as a metaphysical interrogation.

We can make this clearer if we put it in kantian terms. Kant stated that beauty is a problem of form and the contemplation of such a beautiful form will need more than the participation of the senses; it will demand the very implication of the mind. Pure aesthetic pleasure will thus prove to be nothing else than the harmony of our facul-

ties, of both senses and understanding. This pleasure will also imply the harmonic co-existence of man and universe. Contemplation, in its turn, can be defined (this time in Schopenhauer's approach) as the process which allows the viewer to detach from the mundane tasks and desires and find peace of mind in the world of art and Ideas (forms, essences). I consider that this intellectualist approach that interconnects aesthetic pleasure with Reason, Ideas, and the knowledge of the world is most suitable to deliver a key to understanding art in terms of reflection, distance, and contemplation. Kant defines the aesthetic pleasure of the beautiful as a pure pleasure, disinterested in the physical object. We don't have to possess and consume the object in order to feel it. A distance is needed and the representation inside our mind is enough. Schopenhauer made a step forward speaking about art and contemplation in terms of the privileged access to the essences, to the secret structure of the world, the network of Ideas. This approach promotes a definition of art that implies transcendent value and, as we know, transcendence has to be admired from a distance. Therefore, the process of contemplation engages a theoretical, optical gaze that implies spatial distance. A psychological distance is also needed. The contemplator has to become objective and detach himself from the ordinary needs and emotions of an individual. It is the essence and not the accidents or differences that counts. I have to point out here that the spatial distance can be related in cinematic terms both with the long take and the deep focus promoted by bazinian realism and also by the recent contemplative cinema. Likewise, the delimitation of Bresson and of the other realists from naïve psychologism guarantees the second requirement.

This is an appropriate context to comprehend the need for form or Idea of what Sontag calls the reflexive art. The aim of this art is neither political/ideological (as in Brechtian theatre), nor psychological (as in classical cinema), but metaphysical: "Not to shoot a film in order to illustrate a thesis, or to display men and women confined to their external aspect, but to discover the matter they are made of. To attain that *heart of the heart* which does not let itself be caught either by poetry, or by philosophy or by drama." (Bresson, 20). Now we can better understand Bresson's concept of model. A model is like a black box, mysterious inside, sometimes psychologically implausible. "No psychology!" (39) the film director affirms. According to him, psychology's claim to understand and explain the individual soul is futile. A persons' behavior is not to be understood, one's individual soul has to be and remain opaque. A model doesn't have to act psychological states but to be a part in the story, to take part in the coming into being of a greater *form*. The forms of spiritual action, the eternal network are what really count. In Sontag's opinion the way in which Bresson "has worked out a form that perfectly expresses and accompanies what he wants to say" (Sontag, 3) is his greatest achievement. In the purest kantian, formalistic spirit she describes this narrative form as anti-dramatic, designed to "discipline the emotions at the same time that it arouses them: to induce a certain tranquility in the spectator, a state of spiritual balance that is itself the subject of the film" (Sontag, 3). This anti-dramatic form is found-

ed on the complex relation between image, music and word. Firstly, is the economy of music that sometimes lightens the image or uncovers a deep meaning: "I have suppressed the music and have used silence as an element of composition and means to emotion" (Bresson, 71). Secondly, we notice the importance and the unconventional use of the word in Bressonian films (both Sontag and Bazin commented on this one). The action is thus often doubled with first-person narration fragments, justified by the journal literary technique. We usually get the word first as a means of anticipation able to postpone the emotional involvement. In Sontag's opinion, this technique deliberately flouts the traditional mode of narrative involvement called suspense. The effect of this deadpan narrative form is "to punctuate the scene with intervals. It puts a brake on the spectator's direct imaginative participation in the action" (Sontag, 4).

The idea of form imposed by the very search for truth and authenticity can also be illustrated by Dogma 95's manifesto (a reply to Truffaut's essay *Une certaine tendance du cinéma français*). Among the "ten commandments" included in their "Vow of Chastity" we find the rule on music ("Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot") which points to Bresson. In spite of their critical stance toward Nouvelle Vague[13] rules like the interdiction of classical genres, filters, special lighting, props, together with the recommendation to shot on location, are practically inherited from the French movement and express the common wish of all directors interested in truth and reality to dissociate from cinema as Industry. The rule referring to not crediting the director, interpreted by most like a direct attack to *auteur* theory, can also be seen as the common dissociation from consumerism and from the very idea of considering the director as a star trapped in the society of spectacle.

Considering the fact that Bresson was a painter before turning to film-making, we cannot avoid questioning the importance of the visual form in his work. Is the visual form just a second rate means for him as Sontag has suggested insisting on the prevalence of the narrative or cinematographic form in all bressonian films? His notes suggest the opposite: "See your film as a combination of lines and of volumes in movement apart from what it represents and signifies" (Bresson, 43). The really beautiful shot from the beginning of *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* which confronts us for twenty seconds with a premonitory formal game or the dispute between black and white forms (in the end the black of the clerical garment wins against the white pavement, conquering for an instant the whole screen) is just another interesting evidence in this sense. We cannot deny that he speaks out loud and clear in his writings about the necessary delimitation of film from painting, but it is not the visual, "the ejaculatory force of the eye" (Bresson, 6) he rejects. The rejection aims only at the poor compatibility between Cinematography and painting's stillness. We cannot ignore either Bresson's definition of film as a primarily visual medium or the fact that he cited Leonardo and Cézanne a lot. Moreover, in his writings he praises the faculty of intuition, *the painter's eye*, and his strength to delimitate himself from trivial copy and mimesis: "Have a painter's eye. The painter creates by looking" (Bresson, 67) and "The pistol-shot of the painter's eye

dislocates the real. Then the painter puts it up again and organizes it in that same eye, according to his taste, his methods, his Ideal Beauty" (67). Once again, Bresson proves he has learned the lesson of Plato's *Republic*: an artist interested only in the world as appearance has to be banished from the Ideal City. Bazin's distinction between true realism (in the words of Plato and Aristotle the true mimesis) and pseudorealism points out a similar opinion. We can deduce that the entire trend of photographers and directors associated with the genuine search of reality and truth are not injured by this well known critique (as all modern, avant-garde artists are not). And it is this very rejection of trivial naturalism and psychology, the very process of idealization that the former *Religion of the Beautiful* (Bresson, 34) can persist in.

Thus, the question about beauty, asked at the beginning of the paper, has just been answered. This inquiry has proven that both truth and beauty (as forms) are compatible with the technical image. As theorists Dave Hickey, Stephano Zecchi, Noel Carol and Carl Plantinga have put it, these categories are not dead for good, as some postmodern thinkers had suggested. The additional fact that in our encounter with cinema or with large scale photography we sense a hidden force similar with the one that fascinated 19th century people in front of the large canvases depicting heroic battles or allegorical scenes provided arguments for my positive answer.

A last observation has to be made on the existence of such contemporary species of beauty hidden in the technical image. If this beauty exists it will not be able to subsist beyond the extension of the specific language involved (I have already discussed the same about truth). Therefore, beauty of cinematography should be different from the beauty of painting as the camera's eye differs fundamentally from the human vision. The big difference between static and dynamic imagery should also be acknowledged. A film is a flow and its beauty lays in the very succession of the images, in their relation, in their interplay (not to interpret this interplay in the terms of analytical montage). The concept of contemplation also has to be used cautiously. Contemplation in painting imposes a static vision therefore, in order to use it in the realm of Cinematography, it needs a recalibration. The definition of film as a succession of static paintings is equally problematic: "An image must be transformed by contact with other images, as is a color by contact with other colors" (Bresson, 5). Furthermore, "If an image, looked at by itself, expresses something sharply, if it involves an interpretation, it will not be transformed on contact with other images. […] It is definitive and unusable in the cinematographer's system (Bresson, 5). In this context, the recalibration of contemplation can start with the bergsonian approach of time as duration and its interpretations by Tarkovsky (*Sculpting in Time*) and Deleuze (*Cinema II*). The concept of contemplative cinema packing filmmakers such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky, Terrence Malick, Alexander Sokurov and Bela Tarr has to be more than a "fashionable term used to summarize the quite recognizable features of a films using long shots, panoramic sounds and introverted emotions" (Fagard).

6. Conclusions

I consider that the arguments concerning truth, authenticity and beauty in the realm of Cinematography can be useful both for the correct understanding of the ontological realism promoted by Bazin and for the theoretical principles of what we call today *contemplative cinema*. A further extension of the inquiry of such classical concepts as contemplation beyond Bresson's films and texts could also be useful for the film theorists interested in the newest forms of cinematic realism. In spite of the fact that technical image stands for the concept of technical reproduction and for the loss of the aura of authenticity (due to consumerism and of what the Frankfurt School called *The Culture Industry)*, we can conclude that photography and film are media similar to the traditional painting and sculpture. It is true that every medium has its own language, technique and metaphysics but we also have to admit that in the hands of an artist they all become means of research and expression (to which we can add the fact that all media can also be used for commercial purposes in an Industry).

Benjamin was right in relating technical image with democracy and the will of the masses to posses and bring closer the objects of the world (the work of art included), but we don't have to infer from here the irremediable loss of the aura of authenticity and the loss of beauty. All the examples of artists and works used in this paper showed that truth and beauty can be reached and produced even through the lens of a camera. Moreover, the presence of this specific beauty in contemporary photography and contemplative cinema proves that Benjamin was wrong when he asserts that the only purpose of these arts has to be political. We know that the truth of cinematography is different from the truth of painting and so on, but in the end we have to admit that at least one of the two biggest trends in art presented by Bazin – the trend of artists who put their faith in *reality* – is able to carry on the ancient quest for truth formulated by philosophers aiming at revealing essences and the hidden structure of the world. And, as I have already stated, it is this very rejection of trivial naturalism and psychology, the very process of idealization that beauty can persist in.

Notes:

1 Cinematography is a concept coined by Robert Bresson in his book *Notes on Cinematography.* It refers to film as an artistic practice, as a new language or "writing with bits of reality". In Bresson's opinion, Cinematography has to be delimitated from Cinema (film as Industry).

2 I will use the paradigmatic model of Kant's and Schopenhauer's theories of beauty and the critiques of truth applied to art by Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche.

3 See the group of film directors referred by A.O. Scott in the article *Neo-Neo Realism*, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/ 2009/03/22/magazine/22neorealism-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

4 The abbreviation NCR (New Romanian Cinema), used for the first time by the Romanian film critic Alex Leo Şerban, became popular due to the articles and the second book of Andrei Gorzo, *Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel. Un mod de a gândi cinemaul de la André Bazin la Cristi Puiu* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012).

5 The extension of the concept of *technical image*, meaning an image produced by means of a technical apparatus, includes photography, film, video and digital image. This paper will mostly focus on film and photography. The concept was coined by Vilem Flusser in a theoretic attempt to find a place for artistic freedom in the consumerist age. The menace of any technical image, as presented by Flusser in his book *Towards a philosophy of photography*, is the industry hidden behind it. A connection with Walter Benjamin's concept of technical (mechanical) reproduction could also be made.

6 In his seminal essay entitled "*The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction*" Walter Benjamin defines the *aura* as the *here and now,* the unique history of the authentic, original work of art.

7 The features of *deadpan* are the monumental scale, the visual clarity and the emotional detachment. Firstly it is impossible not to notice at a glance the similarity in scale and the size with the cinema screen. Secondly, both Cinematography and deadpan rely on the cold eye of the camera, on the technical view of the apparatus, proving that we can approach truth and beauty through the lens of a camera. Thirty years later after Bazin and the Nouvelle Vague reformers (Godard, Rivette, Moullet) have connected technique with special metaphysics, a similar approach appears in the field of contemporary visual art: "a cool, detached and keenly sharp type of photography" that shifted this art practice to a more central position on the art stage and surpassed the neo-expressive, subjective painting of the 80's.

8 Sergei Eisenstein's project to adapt Karl Marx's *Capital* was another example Astruc used in his attempt to define film as a theorem.

9 Walking in Bresson's footsteps, Jean-Luc Godard provides one more example of *auteur* director, which uses his own scripts and makes very personal adaptations, as we can see in such films as: *Le petit soldat, Une femme est une femme, Alphaville, Pierrot le fou, Masculin féminin, Made in U.S.A, Week End.*

10 Godard's quip was made at a round-table discussion on the unease generated by Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959)

11 The essay was published in Susan Sontag's seminal book *Against Interpretation* (1966) and refers to Bresson's first six films: *Les Anges du Peché (1943), Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne (1945), Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne (1951), Un Condamné à Mort s'est Échappé (1956), Pickpocket (1959), Procès de Jeanne d'Arc (1962).*

12 We can question here if we are not facing a new answer to an old question raised for the first time in the 1920s by the *Kino-Pravda* (*Cinema Truth*) practice of Dziga Vertov and by the *New Objectivity* of the Weimar Republic. The *New Objectivity* aesthetics, based on realistic settings, straightforward camerawork and editing, the lack of overt emotionalism and social themes, was defined by being the opposite of the early 20s expressionist aesthetics. It is a known fact that the style has been developed in painting (Verism), theater (Berthold Brecht), film (Georg Wilhelm Pabst) and in *The New Photography* (Albert Renger-Patzsch, August Sander, the forefathers of contemporary aesthetics of *deadpan*). A subtle difference has to be made though between the objectivity promoted by the modernist artists of the 20s like Vertov and Brecht and the new approach of cinematic realism born in the mid of the century. The political activism, which profoundly marked the interwar art, was not so urgent any more. The obstinate politicization of art practiced by the radical Marxist aesthetics in order to delimitate from the bourgeois categories like – beauty, creativity, genius – were not so central anymore.

13 "DOGMA 95 is a rescue action! […] Slogans of individualism and freedom created works for a while, but no changes. The wave was up for grabs, like the directors themselves. The wave

was never stronger than the men behind it." from Dogma 95 manifest http://www.dogme95.dk/dogma-95/

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