REAL FILM: REALIST FILM THEORY, SEMIOTICS AND THE DOCUMENTARY FILM

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Abstract

Recent work by Ian Aitken and others has sought to re-establish a "Realist approach" to the documentary film in reaction to the post-modernist, pragmatist approach popular in the 1970s and 80s. The Saussurian/Lacanian orientation of the semiotics that played a large role in the older film theory is rejected and replaced by an analytic theory of representation based on the work of Mary Hesse, Hilary Putnam and W.V.O. Quine. Although this may seem a setback vis-à-vis semiotics, it actually opens up Realist Film Theory to an application of the doctrine of signs more closely aligned to traditional realism, that of Pierce and Poinsot. This presentation outlines how Realist Film Theory can be enriched and developed by such an application. In particular, Aitken's model for the processing of the truth-value communicated through a documentary film can be strengthened in this manner. We will look at a short filmic example to illustrate the resulting development of the theory, manifesting how the documentary film is anchored in both reliably representing reality and creatively organizing and construing it.

Semiotics and Film Theory have been together for almost 80 years in some form or another. As the Screen Theory of the 1970s wanes in persuasive authority more and more, the disciplines of semiotics and Film Theory may seem ready to divorce, going their separate ways. In the midst of this dénouement comes a revival or restitution of Realist Film Theory (Aitken 2001, 2005). Although Realist Film Theories have rarely had much time for semiotics, the time is ripe for a renewed, yet quite different, courtship to begin.

Ian Aitken and the Renewal of Realist Film Theory

Realist film theory hasn't been respectable until very recently. After Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma by Jean Mitry — which was lauded in the prestigious British film journal, Screen, as placing "a full stop after the pre-history of film theory", (Willeman 1973) — the several path-breaking realist film theories which flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, went into an all-devouring black-hole. Relegated by many film theorists of the 1970s to a sort of "dream-time" in the development of film theory, the declared fossil-like state of realist film theory became such an accepted commonplace that some introductory surveys of the field entirely forgot it had ever been a going concern. For examples of this amnesiac condition, both Bill Nichols' essay 'Film theory and the revolt against master narratives' in Reinventing Film Studies (Nichols) and David Bordwell's earlier 'Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory' in Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies (Bordwell) exhibit no memory of it as even an historically important approach.

Yet the endurance of the path-breaking work of György Lukács, John Greirson, Siegfried Kracauer, and André Bazin from the early part of the century, together with the notable efforts of Terry Lovell, Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, and Alan Casebier in the later part, shows that it did not become an extinct film-theory-a-saurus. Indeed, its erstwhile replacement, the Screen Theory of the 1970s, has been increasingly criticized and abandoned as a viable direction for theoretical discussion of film. Screen Theory began in the sixties with many good intentions. It endeavored to found a film theory at the juncture of Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Saussurian semiology which would challenge dominant capitalist, patriarchial and neo-colonial modes of cinema production and reception, allowing for an alternative counter-cinema to nourish a nascent counter-culture. At this juncture, however, a large array of notable scholars such as Noel Carroll, Carl Plantinga, David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Murray Smith, Greg M. Smith, and

many others, have abandoned it and its concomitant Saussurian/Lacanian semiotics, to embrace approaches based on cognitive psychology and pragmatist philosophy. Moreover, they have rejected it not out of disagreement with its ends, but from the inadequacies they see in the Screen Theory approach.

To enumerate some of the major theoretical problems of screen theory, there are the following: (1) Screen Theory contains an implicit commitment to determinism, emphasizing the action of deep social/psychological mechanisms; (2) Because of this, Screen Theory limits human agency, rendering the achievement of its own goals problematic; (3) Insofar as it tries to correct problem 2 by invoking an Althusserian "theoretical practitioner" who by dint of elect "Screen Theory" knowledge rejuvenates human agency (somehow), Screen Theory exhibits an elitist predilection; (4) Screen Theory can slide into a historical essentialism especially in some of its explications that emphasize structualism; (5) often, Screen Theory finds itself unable to assemble its detailed semiological or semiotic descriptions of a representation into a meaning of the same representation in a non-arbitrary manner; (6) the dependency of Screen Theory on theorizing internal structures and relations undermined it as any challenge at all to any referent in the external world. During the nearly fifty years since Mitry's pioneering book, the limitations of Screen Theory have become progressively more apparent.

On the other hand, Realist Film Theory has been in disarray. Realist theoretical methodologies have been all over the map: Lukács and Lovell sought to employ a non-conventionalist (non-Althusserian for Lovell) Marxist humanism; Grierson, Kracauer and Bazin all utilized eclectic approaches emphasizing an intuitionistic realism drawing from German Idealism, Phenomenology, psychoanalysis, Weberian sociology and Existentialism; Allen and Gomery developed the ideas of the British philosopher of science, Roy Bhaskar, whose realism proposes that experience may, when carefully studied, yield insight into the causal (generative) mechanisms behind it; Alan Casebier relies on a mature Husserlian phenomenology; Brian Winston laments for Grierson's realism because of the knotty problems raised by contemporary digital technology. The situation indicates plenty of diversity and little commonality in Realist Film Theory.

Despite this methodological incoherence Realism has shared a common goal. In the words of Terry Lovell:

It does not identify the real with what can be experienced, but as a multi-layered structure, consisting of entities and processes lying at different levels of that structure, including the surface level of the empirical world. The empirical world with which we are familiar is causally connected to 'deeper' ontological levels and it is by virtue of these causal connections that we can use ... experience and observation in constructing knowledge of the structures and processes of the real. These causal connections cannot themselves be understood through experience, because neither the underlying structures nor the connection between these structures and the empirical world are themselves experienced. The connections can only be reconstructed in knowledge. (Lovell, 1983: 22)

Allen and Gomery state it as:

To the Realist, reality is complex and only partially observable, even with the most sophisticated scientific tools. The level of observable phenomena is but one of a multilayered structure. The [observable] event ... is the effect of processes and mechanisms at work in other layers of reality. Explanation for the Realist consists of describing not only the observable layer of reality but also the workings of the generative [causal] mechanisms that produced the observable event. (Allen and Gomery 1985: 14-15)

Reconstructing the causal relations involving the cinematic image in knowledge has been the driving impulse behind the variety of Realist Film theories. Now what can be done about the crazy-quilt of methodologies all claiming to wend their way successfully to it?

The recent work of film scholar Ian Aitken has begun to bring some order to this situation. His books on Film and Reform, European Film Theory and Cinema, Realist Film Theory and Cinema, and editorship of monumental The Encyclopedia of the Documentary, have placed him at the center of the scholarship linking reappraisal of older film theory, Realist Film Theory methodologies and the theory of the documentary film. For the first time, a scholar has surveyed and made his own the variety of Realist Film methodologies, while also articulating a particular methodological approach that attempts a workable synthesis.

Aitken's own approach at this point consists of only two short sketches: one in the final chapter of Realist Film Theory and Cinema (published in 2005), and the other in the entry in The Encyclopedia of the

Documentary (published in 2006) entitled "Realism, Philosophy, and the Documentary Film". He is currently at work on a more developed account, but that has not yet appeared. Since there are some variations between the two published accounts, I will consider them in publication order, then draw them together.

In the earlier work he proposes a "representational realism" which holds that although external reality exists independently of our representations of it, it is known only through our representations (Aitken 2005: 202). Our representations of reality come largely from our own construction, but also have substantive and authentic relationship to the external reality. Aitken appeals to the British philosophers of science Rom Harré (1985), Roy Bhaksar (1975) Mary Hesse (1970) and the American Hilary Putnam (1992) for the philosophical under-girding that explicates the relationship between our conceptual representations and external reality. This relationship is an "oblique, imperfect, but nevertheless homologous" one that unites representation and reality. Thus, Aitken's representational realism holds that (1) reality exists independently of representation, but that (2) representation normally 'converges' with it. This first claim he identifies as "ontological realism" and the two together as "metaphysical realism". Since important aspects of external reality are inevitably brought to light by alternate ways of representation, Aitken carefully defines his type of representational realism so that it remains skeptical about the hegemony of any particular representation over others. This avoids the pitfall of undertaking an overly strong, epistemologically doomed, version of "metaphysical realism". Beyond these two requirements, there is yet another principle of Representational Realism: (3) "no epistemological system can ever fully 'converge' with reality and ... the danger of divergence between thought and reality can never be fully averted" (Aitken 2005: 205). Because of the third principle, Aitken finds Putnam ultimately disappointing since his version of representational realism restricts itself to internal criteria wherein "truth does not transcend use" and so cannot address the question of 'convergence' with the real (Aitken 2005: 209; Putnam, 1992a: 115). At the end of the day, Putnam's "internal realism" remains just another version of pragmatist conventionalism for Aitken.

In order to move beyond a pragmatist conventionalism as exemplified by Nelson Goodman or Richard Rorty, Aitken wants representational realism to recognize an 'ontological depth' in reality and to have a correlated 'epistemological depth' which can comprehend "the existence and influence of abstract, intermediate and empirical

determining factors, which also have a strong genetic and evolutionary dimension" (Aitken 2005: 210). Critical to developing such comprehensive correlations is the importance of the empirical in providing the basis of representational realism. Aitken, following Lukács, Lovell and other Marxist critics of bourgeois empiricist traditions, distances his use of the empirical in representational realism from any sort of philosophical empiricism (Aitken 2005: 75-76; 2001: 193). Instead, together with Putnam he holds that the empirical acts as the "boundary conditions" for our representations of reality. In the most intriguing, yet most fleeting part of his discussion, he calls on Mary Hesse's thought-experiment of a machine which models how 'convergence' between representation and reality may occur (Aitken 2005: 212-213; Hesse 1970: 216-219). The relationship of the empirical sensed by Hesse's machine and the 'coded input' which represents it "does remain constant during the process of data collection and theory building ... this is the set of physical conditions under which input becomes coded input" (Hesse 1970: 224). Both Aitken and Hesse assert that these physical conditions are stable enough so that "a high proportion of statements in the C.I. [coded input] are true" (Aitken 2005: 213; Hesse 1970: 224). At the level of human senses, this assertion seems uncontroversial for the most part, since we only infrequently experience highly unstable physical conditions. In any case, Aitken holds out Hesse's thought-experiment as a promising way of theorizing 'convergence' between representation and reality (Aitken 2005: 213).

In the later encyclopedia entry on this same topic, Aitken offers a slightly more developed example of how Realist Film Theory might actually proceed. Although in the earlier book just discussed he referred to Allen and Gomery's highly influential realist account of the cinema verité movement in the United States during the 1950s and 60s, he himself offered no such realist treatment of a film or film movement. Here, he does.

After briefly recounting Hesse's work on the thought-experiment-machine, he shifts to:

> ... something more targeted: an analysis of documentary realism in terms of yet another philosophical realist principle ... that of 'warranted assertibility,' particularly in relation to the use of theory and evidence. In addition to the brief account of the relation between projection [i.e., of representations] and convergence [to the real] just given, therefore, it will be

argued here that an enhanced account of documentary realism can also be theorized through exploring the documentary film in relation to the issue of truth-value and warranted assertibility in the use of evidence and theory (Aitken 2006: 1101).1

To explicate his goal of warranted assertibility Aitken pursues an epistemological model and its associated methodology derived from Hesse, Quine, Putnam, and Duhem, called the "network theory of meaning" (Aitken 2006: 1101; Hesse 1970: 210-216). This model regards a theory as "a network of theoretical categories, ranging from the abstract to the intermediate to the particular and formed around a set of core concepts internal ... [to it]" (Aitken 2006: 1102). The theory can then be applied to a subject of enquiry, creating the opportunity to develop initial provisional hypotheses based primarily on the internal theoretical categories of the network. A wider collection of "empirical concepts" derived from observation is then brought into conjunction with the theory, in order to qualify the network and its account of the subject of enquiry. These "empirical concepts" are constituted and influenced by the theory-network, and so are not theory-neutral; however, their primary function is to modify and affect the terms and relations within the network, rather than verify or refute the hypotheses. Aitken notes that the "empirical material inevitably, and always, contains a quantity and diversity of terms and relations that are more extensive than those contained within a theoretical network" (Aitken 2006: 1102). The impact of this observationally derived material is to change the theoretical network to some extent, oftentimes only amounting to assimilation of the material, while, at other times, leading to a process of qualification and internal inquiry that creates radical alterations within the theory itself.

Aitken applies this model and methodology to the classical "expository" documentary which is the "staple form of the genre, one that millions of people rely on to give them 'the facts' about the world around them or at least interpret those facts plausibly soundly" (Aitken 2006: 1101). In so doing, he brackets out discussions of rhetorical or discursive conventions that dominate most of the critical work on documentary film. Instead he proposes that the expository documentary may been seen as one or more systems of theoretical categories (that is,

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[1] Cf. more pragmatist theorists such as Renov (1986: 71) "every documentary issues a truth-claim of a sort" and Carroll (1983: 24), writing that documentary filmmakers "index their films as non-fiction".

abstract, intermediate and particular), organized about some core concepts, and applied to a subject of inquiry. A documentary on the subject might evolve in different directions from here and Aitken details two of them: (1) a comparative approach where competing hypotheses are briefly surveyed (with or without a judgment about them explicitly made in the film); or (2) one hypothesis is selected at the outset and then elaborated at length. Both of these have methodological inadequacies, since the first may amount to superficial conjunctions of the theory with the empirical concepts leading to little or no conclusive result, while the second, unless it promoted a hypothesis at odds with some of the core theoretical concepts, will most likely "legitimate, rather than challenge, the dominant paradigm" (Aitken 2006: 1102).

Irrespective of the direction of the documentary, however, the methodology remains the same: (1) the theory-network provides descriptions and provisional causal explanations concerning the problematized subject that suggest solutions to the problematic being; (2) a more comprehensive collection of observationally derived empirical material would then be brought together with the theory-network, leading to a renewed range of alternative potential explanations due to the relational richness of the new empirical material; (3) these empirically rooted changes will suggest new theoretical categories, and perhaps entirely new theories, which will be antithetical to the dominant paradigms, sometimes radically so. Aitken writes:

> Antithesis will also be suggested by the abstract terms and relations of the theory, as these cannot be rationally formulated without reference to their antithesis in the first place. But it is at the empirical level that the antithesis is most apparent, because, even though the empirical is absorbed into concepts within the network, the richness of the empirical material and attendant ability to suggest additional structure of causality and content resists complete absorption. The greater the range of empirical material encountered, the more likely it will also be for alternatives to be generated (Aitken 2006: 1103).

Regrettably, Aitken doesn't provide a concrete example of his Realist Film Theory methodology in this encyclopedia article. "Nevertheless", he writes, "it should be apparent that the model of warranted assertibility in the use of theory and evidence set out here can be applied to scrutiny of the sort of documentary film, or news report, that we see on our

screens everyday, and would provide a better model than the semi-theorised ones currently used by professional broadcasters and journalists" (Aitken 2006: 1103).

Tying these two accounts together allows us to observe the following concerning Aitken's approach to the documentary film: (1) the representational realism he holds is not a simple, naïve realism, but an evolved philosophical approach with three principles — (a) independence of reality from representation, (b) a normal trajectory of 'convergence' between the two, and (c) the impossibility of full 'convergence' and the ever-present possibility of divergence; (2) it refuses to privilege one representation over another on the basis of theoretical (i.e., non-empirical) considerations alone, avoiding an untenably strong "metaphysical realism"; (3) it relies on Mary Hesse's thought-experiment-machine for a plausible model of how 'convergence' might work as an "invariant relationship between data reaching us from the external world, and our cognitive and perceptual processing methods" (Aitken 2005: 212); (4) holds out the epistemological model and methodology of the "network theory of meaning" to yield an account of warranted assertibility for the meaning and production of at least "expository" documentary films. However in all of Aitken's theoretical discussion, he only mentions semiotics with respect to its post-Saussurian Screen Theory forms, which he — as well as most other Realist Film Theorists — clearly rejects. Nonetheless, an application of the doctrine of signs more closely aligned to traditional realism, namely that of Pierce and Poinsot, should be possible within the purview of Realist Film Theory. With these four observations in hand, let us now turn to tracing an application of the Poinsotian-slash-Piercian semiotics to Aitken's representational realism.

A Poinsotian / Piercian Semiotics of Aitken's Representational Realism

Peter Wollen's final chapter on the possible use of Piercian semiotics in Signs and Meaning in the Cinema, published in 1969, was a pioneering effort at combining semiotics and realism in film theory (Wollen 1969: 116-155). Unlike the Saussurian/Lacanian semiotics taken up by Screen Theory in the 1970s and 80s, Piercian semiotics had few adherents in the development of any branch of film theory — whether Screen, Pragmatist, Cognitivist or Realist.2 Perhaps the emphasis of

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[2] Pragmatist and Cognitivist film theories often intersect as in the work of David

Screen Theory for all those years on an anti-Realist starting point — Realism being assumed to be somehow a simple-minded reactionary mode unworthy of attention (Furst 1995: 18-21) — led to a aversion toward semiotic approaches that acknowledge the empirical in their purview.

Between the late 1960s and now, another remarkable thing happened: the recovery of many of the historically important semiotic systems of the ancient classical and Latin ages (Deely 2001: 159-484).3 One of the most prominent of these systems is that of John Poinsot (Poinsot, 1632). As John Deely has extensively documented, it was Poinsot (aka John of St. Thomas) who first explored the triadic nature of the sign as a relation. A sign relation has three aspects: an aspect which provides the basis of the sign, another which represents, and a third which grounds the representation to another (Poinsot 1632: 1.647-648). For Poinsot, the first two aspects could be either mind-dependent or mind-independent, and the third could be simply virtual (Poinsot 1632: 1.651). Peirce consciously undertook to retrieve the earlier Latin Age "way of signs". He read widely through many of the classical and Latin age authors, but doesn't seem to have read Poinsot as far as can be ascertained (Deely 2001: 612-614, 619-620). Nevertheless, Peirce's

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Bordwell, Noel Carroll, Murray Smith and Carl Plantinga. See (Bordwell 1996), (Caroll, 1996), (Smith 1995), and (Plantinga 1999).

[3] The Latin philosophical tradition built on Augustine's breakthrough approach to the sign. For them *signum* most clearly fell into Aristotle's category of relation: "*that whose being is the same as being referred to some other in some manner*" (*Cat*. 8a31-33). Or "*illa, quorum totum suum esse se habet ad aliud*", i.e., *that whose whole being consists in being-toward-another*. One of the problems with Augustine's definition was its reference to the senses. After Avicenna noted that relations may be formed wholly within thought, e.g., logical or fictional relations, these "mind-dependent relations" (*relationes rationis*) occasioned many controversies which cannot be discussed here. But they motivated later thinkers to a further refinement of *signum*: "*quod repræsentat aliud a se potentiæ cognoscenti*", i.e., *that which represents something other than itself to a possible knower* (Deely 2003: 69-83).

That the senses were not indispensable to the action of signs quickly began to reshape the medieval semiotic approach. Beginning with Aquinas (c.1225-1274) and Roger Bacon (c.1214-1294), then developing after in the writings of Duns Scotus (c.1266-1308), William of Ockham (c.1285-1349), Pierre d'Ailly (c.1350-1420), Dominic Soto (c.1495-1569), Pedro da Fonseca (c.1528-1599), the scholars at the University of Coimbra (Conimbricenses, c. 1606-7), Francisco Araújo (c.1580-1664), and culminating in the work of John Poinsot (c.1589-1644), it was agreed that not only sensible objects, but also those interpretive "shapings" of the mind (*species expressæ*, i.e., ideas, images, and emotions) which allow the structuring of experience fulfill the function essential to being a sign (Deely 2001: 159-484).

definition of the sign corresponds closely to that of Poinsot with appropriate changes to the terminology: the first aspect Pierce terms, the ground; the second, the correlate; and the third, the interpretant (Pierce 1867: 1.551-553).

So how to square the four observations made earlier concerning Aitken's representational realism with our Poinsotian/Piercian semiotics? First of all, the treatment of reality that emerges from Poinsotian/Piercian semiotics is much richer than Aitken's, but is not contrary to the goal of the realist such as stated by Aitken, Allen and Gomery, and Lovell. As Deely writes in his "Dialogue between a Semiotician and a Would-be Realist", "... semiotics cannot be reduced to any such position as traditional philosophical realism, even if Peirce be right in holding ... that scholastic realism is essential to if not sufficient for understanding the action of signs" (Deely 2003: 167). Rather, Deely in his "Dialogue" sketches out reality through the action of a Poinsotian/Piercian semiosis yielding both the species-specific objective worlds and supplying the relational bond between the external thing and the experienced object:

> In order for an organism to be aware of something outside itself, there must be inside itself a disposition or state on the basis of which it is related cognitively (and I would add affectively) to that outside other. If the outside other has an existence of its own quite independent of the cognition of the cognizing organism, then it is a thing, indeed. But insofar as it becomes known it is an object, the terminus of a relation founded upon the psychological states inside the organism. Neither the relation nor the thing become object are inside the knower. All that is inside the knower is the disposition or state presupposed for the thing to exist as known. And the relation is inside neither the knower nor the known, but is over and above both of them. Compared to the subjectivity of either the knower or the known, the relation as such is suprasubjective. But as related cognitively to the knower the thing known is the terminus of a relation founded in the knower's own subjectivity. As terminating the relation it is an object. That same object if and insofar as it has a subjective being of its own is not merely an object but also a thing. ... if the object has no subjectivity proper to it ... then it is only an object, what the scholastic realists used to call a 'mind-dependent being' ... every mind-dependent being is an objective reality or being, but not every objective reality is a mind-dependent being. Some objects are also things in which case they are

mind-independent beings as well as objective realities (Deely 2003: 179-180).

The relations Deely refers to in this passage are of course signs, some of which put us "in contact with the surroundings in precisely something of their physical aspect of things obtaining independently of us ..." (Deely 2003: 172). With this in mind, the first observation made above on Aitken's representational realism would seem to be well in hand. Observation three concerning Aitken's reliance on Mary Hesse's thought-experiment-machine becomes supererogatory, since even the thought-experiment-machine can be seen as a simple model of a subjective knower that Deely outlines with much more detail in the citation above (Deely 2003: 175). Rather than positing some unspecified "invariant relation" between reality and representation as Hesse and Aitken do, utilizing a Poinsotian/Piercian semiosis actually details this relation as that proper to the sign (Aitken 2005: 212; Hesse 1970: 216-218; Deely 2003: 180-188).

The fourth observation concerning the epistemological model and methodology of the "network theory of meaning" which yields an account of warranted assertibility for the meaning and production of at least "expository" documentary films is more challenging. The "network theory" model can be assimilated to the action of the Poinsotian/Piercian semiosis as it also builds meaning as a "network of relations". Again Deely writes:

> Subjectivity ... is what defines things as things. Objectivity, by contrast, obtains only in and through relations, normally a whole network of relations, which give even the things of the physical environment their status as experienced and whatever meaning they have for the lifeform experiencing them. Since objectivity always includes (through sensation) something of the subjectivity of things in the environment, this objective meaning is normally never wholly divorced from the subjective reality of the physical world, but it is never reducible to that reality either ... every object is merely the terminus of some relation ... or complex of relations, [that is] a 'semiotic web' ... (Deely 2003:175-176).

Beyond this, the "warranted assertibility" methodology of Aitken poses a problem since it neatly divides its content into "theoretical categories" and "empirical concepts", the first being purely mind-dependent and the

second somehow straddling the divide between the mind-dependent and the mind-independent. This division is a remnant of the empiricist tradition that Aitken inherits from his philosophical authorities — Hesse, Quine, Putnam, Bhaksar, and Harré — that he forcefully rejects in other places (Aitken 2005: 75-76; 2001: 193). Perhaps the methodology he proposes may be recast as a simplified treatment of what Deely outlines as our ability to conduct experiments within our experience (which is constituted by our on-going semiosis). Through our experiments we may distinguish within experience between aspects of the world which exist physically as well as objectively and aspects which exist only objectively (Deely 2003: 172). Making these adjustments while retaining the gist of Aitken's methodology would involve replacing this empiricist distinction by the finer distinction between the mind-dependent object, the mind-independent object (the thing), and replacing the vague notion of the "empirical concept" giving rise to "antithetical paradigms" with the more sophisticated Piercian Semiotic Spiral of abduction, deduction and retroduction (Deely 2003: 164).

Finally, the second observation, that Aitken's representational realism refuses to privilege one representation over another on the basis of theoretical (i.e., non-empirical) considerations alone, avoiding an untenably strong "metaphysical realism" is also problematic. Perhaps we could quote a sentence from Deely once again: "Since objectivity always includes (through sensation) something of the subjectivity of things in the environment, this objective meaning is normally never wholly divorced from the subjective reality of the physical world, but it is never reducible to that reality either" (Deely 2003:175-176). As I read this, Deely seems to be saying that there may be more than one objective meaning for a particular subjective reality. Since an object is never reducible to a subject, there is room to cast a range of objects from different points of view all of which remain tethered by sensible sign relations to the subjectivity of things in the environment. The range has some limits due to the limits of sensation, but would be further modified by our on-going semiosis, keeping one way of casting the objective world from becoming identified with a hegemonic "God's-eye view" (Aitken 2005: 205). Of course the distinction between "theoretical categories" and "empirical concepts" implied in this observation would need to be replaced in exactly the same way that we noted in the discussion above.

Conclusion

Realist Film Theory does not need semiotics. It could continue happily on its way full of leftovers from empiricism, vague methodologies based on sketchy models from analytic philosophy, and driven by a noble search that insists that "the truth is out there" as they used to say on The X-files. On the other hand, the demise of Screen Theory has so sapped the reception of any proposed semiotics that a film historian colleague of mine with a recent Ph.D. from the film studies program at the University of Chicago casually remarked at a faculty gathering just last Spring that "semiotics is pretty much dead". What can Realist Film Theory gain from reinventing itself in a semiotic guise?

Deely, in the previously mentioned "Dialogue", puts the following into the mouth of his "Would-be Realist": "Realists assume our experience begins with things as such, whereas now I see that our experience directly is only of things as subsumed within objects and the species-specific structure of an objective world!" (Deely 2003:188). I would like to say that Realist Film Theory stands to gain a coherence from such a reinvention which it has not achieved on its own. As we have outlined above in considering the four observations, Ian Aitken's approach for the processing of the truth-value communicated through a documentary film can be strengthened in this manner.

Much more work is necessary to turn this brief sketch into a coherent Semiotic Realist Film Theory. Perhaps it will be done someday.

Example — "Mail Sorting" Sequence in Grierson's Night Mail

The example is from John Grierson's best-known film "Night Mail" (1936) which was produced in collaboration with W.H. Auden as one of the writers and Benjamin Britten as the composer. The scene we are watching is from the mail-sorting section of the film. It is easy to observe the 'semiotic web' of relations that form the environment of work for these men. Just as easy to see is the pervasive and sense-originated subjectivity of things in the environment in which they work and the on-going semiosis keeping the whole postal bureaucracy running. The audience comes to know, that is becomes educated, about the manner in which the mail was sorted on the night mail trains between London and Glasgow in the mid 1930s. It should be noted that one of the goals of Grierson's film unit at the General Post Office was to educate the public.

Consider the relations between the ego and the autonomous
On the other hand it would be hard to describe how to apply Aitken's "warranted assertibility" methodology. What are the theoretical categories? Where do we encounter the bare "empirical concepts"? And how do they get conjoined? It is hard to tell, really.

We can note along with Brian Winston that, due to limitations of the synch sound equipment, the shots of the interior of the sorting carriage were filmed on a set built in a studio. The effect of a moving train that we observed was given by gently swinging the string that was hanging down from the top of the sorting boxes as each shot was filmed and telling the postal workers to sway a bit during the takes (Winston 1995: 121). However, since the achieved aim of Grierson is not to misinform us by presenting a deliberate lie as to how the mail is sorted, but rather to inform us by presenting as faithful a reconstruction as possible, it is silly to wring our hands over it as Winston does (Winston 1995: 122-123). What is represented to us is the semiotic web of thèse postal workers as best it could be communicated at the time of the production.

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