

Realism in photography, natural photography

by Alfonso Parra AEC

Often we find that to define the photography to be done in a film the images are described as realist or naturalist, using both terms as synonyms. Although realism and naturalism go hand in hand, they are not exactly the same. We should remember that the term "realism" in art first appeared in France in the mid-nineteenth century, coined by critics like Théophile Gautier and Campfleury who used the expression to define the paintings of Courbet as the exponent of a movement which, opposed to the romanticism represented by Delacroix, set its eyes on nature, carefully observing her and analyzing the details that constitute her to then faithfully reproduce her on the canvas. This way of painting attempts to eliminate all subjective aspects and not hide any of the most unpleasant aspects of everyday life, something which sparked the wrath of the romantics, calling the works of Courbet and Millet "ugly". The realist tradition is not only found in painting but also in literature, sculpture and it even extends into the cinema of the sixties when Néstor Almendros said: "My starting point is realism. My way of lighting and seeing is realist. I don't use imagination; I use observation".

In the late nineteenth century, the Barbizón School of landscape painters emerged as a result of and in close relation to realism. The landscape painters combined the observation and analysis of nature with the artist's feelings to transmit not only the real objectively but also feelings and emotions. Corot one of the main exponents of the naturalists pointed out: "Reality is one part of art; feeling completes it. If you truly have been moved, you will convey to others the sincerity of your emotions. I interpret with my heart as much as with my eyes". Thus, the naturalist artist becomes not only an observer but also an experimenter.

This idea has reached us through some of the great directors of photography like Luis Cuadrado, who said "I've always searched for realist photography, that is, photography that can reproduce the sensation of reality as faithfully as possible, from what I call an "expressionised" photography. I mean, I was searching more for the sensation, the emotion it causes, than the detailed reality".

The photographic image is the highest expression of realism since it is based on the observation and analysis of reality and gives priority to its material character instead of the imagination or emotions, so abused by the romantics. The photographic image is both the objective reality that captures and is referenced as the creator of its own reality that can be closer or farther from the natural.

First and foremost, photography is realist. It makes an objective transcription of the real to create an image. Only when the photographer's vision intervenes, in search of emotions and sensations, by means of composition, lighting and subsequent manipulations of the image can we speak of creating a work of art. This objective relation of the photographic image to the real liberated, in great part, painting from its function of documenting, giving rise to the appearance of the vanguard movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries.



The Gleaners. J.F. Millet



Days of Heaven. N. Almendros



Estudio del Pintor. G. Courbet



Tercera Clase. H. Daumier



Ponte de Mantes. C. Corot

Realist and naturalist photography use natural light sources, even if the former uses it objectively, that is to say, during filming, the camera or the emulsion is left to capture the space with the existing light, both in color (color deviations) and in direction and intensity. The latter modifies, supports or corrects the space to achieve a certain photographic intention, apart from the convincingly natural recreation of the real photographed.

Realist photography is photography of the possible. The image's appearance is determined by the way the camera/format combination is able to capture reality, without manipulations or intervention by the photographer- minimum intervention during the filming. The real, existing light in the spaces is used, whether it be natural or artificial, to expose the emulsion or the electronic sensor. Framing is done according to the needs of each moment, from the real instant that surrounds the photographer, without composition or any determination of the elements that compose the shot beyond chance and circumstance. In general, realist photography is used in fiction with a documentary style and in almost all those films that carry the "Dogma" seal. Realist photography creates an aesthetic of the immediate and urgent, captivated, as it were, by the camera/emulsion technique and real spaces. The spaces, of course, are arranged starting from our own three

dimensions and not for the two dimensions used to create the photographic image. If intervention on spaces is impossible, then only close observation and framing can guarantee that their passage onto two dimensions will be really meaningful and not just mere fillers around the actors' faces.



The Spirit of the Beehive.
L. Cuadrado

Director of photography Luis Cuadrado once commented in an interview: "...Often a director with no knowledge of photography arrives on a set and sees a soft light, big windows and a wonderful ambience and says: 'This is what I want'; the problem is that the film emulsion is not the human eye and therefore cannot see the same things. The film cannot reproduce things as they naturally are; that naturalness that the director liked so much has to be invented, recreated, and that has to be done artificially with devices, lights, with flags, gauze and with the emulsion". There is, then, no direct transcription of reality onto the screen since the process of capturing images and manipulating them is so complex that the format, whether analog or digital, subjugates reality. That is why naturalist photography, which is the fruit of observing the real and its manipulation, refers the spectator, on the one hand, to the original space captured by the camera and, on the other, to the atmosphere of the film narrative. Without this manipulation, observation captured without aid lacks photographic interest as a result of the elements' lack of order, relation or interaction. Realist photography, thus understood, depends mainly on the emulsion's technical capabilities or on the digital camera and not on the cinematographer's artistic capabilities.

New digital technologies with their high quality and low cost favor realist photography with its hand-held camera techniques, high grain or noise level, considerable color deviations in relation to natural ones, lack of resolution and composition, among other defining elements.

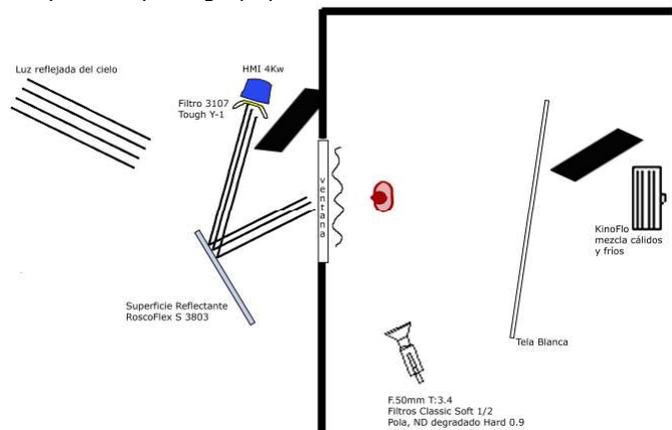
Thinking that realist photography, thus described, brings us closer to the essence of a film's narrative is one of the many justifications used for low budgets and lack of knowledge of filmmaking. As a consequence, many films made this way don't need a cinematographer; the director often acts as the cinematographer and, if not, there is only one person to operate the camera and not necessarily a cameraman. Another thing that goes hand in hand with this way of making films is the very common idea that when you don't light properly, you give the actors lots of freedom in their movements, that the camera proceeds continuously in long sequences that include different sizes. In the majority of cases, this freedom is really just poor planning and lack of good judgment and leaves the creation of the film's structure to the editing phase. Thus, the director appropriates the film completely to him/herself as there is no need for collaborators to develop ideas, just people to carry out his/her orders.

Realist photography, as Delacroix pointed out, ultimately refers to the ugly and immediate as opposed to the beautiful and elaborate; the ground where naturalist photography is born.

No format can capture light the way we see it, but we can create images that evoke what we feel when we see that light in and on objects. That is when the need to create the real arises so that it looks natural to the eyes of a spectator on a screen. What we feel is not only related to the real light in a certain space but also to the dramatic and narrative needs of the movie. Only by means of the emulsions, the cameras and reality can we offer a natural representation of the real. The less the intervention, the less natural will the real photographed appear to the eyes of the spectator. To paraphrase Paul Valery: "the photographer mustn't photograph what he sees, but what others are going to see"

Natural photography goes unnoticed on the screen, while realist photography is noticeable everywhere. In everyday life, people are not aware of how light creates what they see, the light and shadow relations, the color of the light. While a commuter on the metro will not perceive the color deviations from a fluorescent light in a hall, he will see it on the screen that shows those color deviations photographed. In this case, natural photography leaves the sensation the fluorescent lights generate in that hall on the screen, and, depending on the dramatic conditions, they will be more or less bright or with more or less color deviations. All this demands a clear intervention from the cinematographer in choosing the fluorescent tubes, their filters or for the camera, lighting the characters and treatment in the grading.

To sum up, naturalist photography need more means, more time and more knowledge and has little to do with the immediate and cheaper photography represented by realist photography.



In this shot from *Women in the Park* (*Mujeres en el Parque*), you can see the naturalist light treatment. Although, in principle, the natural light was enough to print the emulsion, we wanted to recreate the light from a clear and clean morning after a more than complicated evening for the star. We created a main light emanating from its natural source in the exterior, the sky and an HMI device, through the window, with a slight metallic touch typical of the roscoflex but softened by shades previously agreed on with the artistic director regarding color, texture and transparency. A slight fill achieved with the light reflected off of a white cloth and

some light from fluorescent tubes filtered through the same white cloth give detail to the hair and the backgrounds and silhouettes the character slightly. A pola helps control the skin brightness and the classic soft softens the face even more. Placed sideways, neutral density filters lower the light levels from the shades so as to not overexpose them too much. With this lighting, we wanted to transmit not only the sensation of natural morning light entering a window but also highlight the tranquility and stillness after a very eventful night in the flat.

Translated by Edwin Castaño

© Alfonso Parra.com·2007