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Illusion & reality in film

On Merleau-Ponty and *Rashomon*

Malaysian animation at the crossroads?

"Bentuk" Filem *Nujum Pak Belalang*

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The Blurring Dots between Illusion and Reality in Film: A Metamorphosis

Maszalida Hamzah

Often times, film, infect us with its narrative, awe inspiring characters, visual landscapes and its real life mimicry. While acknowledging this animated 'stills', the conscious mind is in transit, subconsciously forming a 'contract' with the powerful medium of film. They feel, taste, savour and react to the moments, intermingling both joy and suffering as if it is their very own. To Tolstoy, 'a real work of art destroys, in the consciousness of the receiver, the separation between himself and the artist'. Could this be the moment when the reality-illusion partnership is annihilated? Thus, film is in itself, a mode of elevated existence, unconsciously imprisoning and consciously freeing. The knowledge of this powerful art (film) and the impact it brings must be researched as no art can escape truth, beauty, significance and its encounter with the Real. This essay attempts to locate the interspace between reality and illusion in film; translating its seemingly blurring 'dots' as an identifiable manifestation, in the hopes of grasping the unity behind the trinity of reality-dot-illusion in film.

If you desire to know reality, you must know yourself. You are the key, the only key to reality. You are nothing but a mirror of reality. It is enough to reflect.

Abd Qadir As-Sufi (2000)

Introduction

Film as an art, is symmetrical with all other arts; the art of silence (inspiration), the art of paintings (movement), storytelling (verbal), literature (written) and theater (performance). The blurring dots between reality and illusion in film involve the 'process of becoming'; the completion of the art of film. What is transpired onto the celluloid is but dots that

flow under the artistic fingers of the *photopoets* (filmmakers), invoked by the letters and verbs before them and the endless energy giving sustenance: man and nature, renewing the lifeline of images of the existing living: the 'becoming'. To compose the blurring dots between reality and illusion in film is a rather challenging task, a task of conflicting religion and unified faiths in filmdom, a task that may just become centripetal or centrifugal in designing the orbit of the cosmology of film. With that, "May the *force* be with us".

The Real in Reality

Falzon (2002) quoted Cavell's belief that it is misleading to think of film as the mechanism or automatism to satisfy our obsession of realism, for our obsession was never with realism but with reality (with reaching this world, attaining selfhood). Film, in this instance can be seen as the ark by which the viewers embark upon to attain reality. Hugo Munsterberg in *The Photoplay* regards film as existing within two realms, The Outer Development and The Inner Development (Langdale, 2002). In his volume on Art Education, he related this development of film as being connected to science (mechanical apparatus) and isolation in Art (artistic inner world of film).

How does this relate to reality? Science is said be the site for absolute and unquestionable truth (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science#Goals_of_science). However, Munsterberg after much scientific deliberation concluded that science offers no real insight and leads us away from the object we are interested in: the real. As such, in order to attain the 'real' in what is being displayed, Munsterberg points to the true domain of ascertaining reality: the mind of man. Is the mind truly the sole modus operandi in ascertaining reality? *Plato's Picture Show* raises pertinent questions as to the reality of things seen by the eye and processed in the mind. He asserts "everything we ordinarily take to be reality might in fact be no more than a shadow". Here Falzon (2002) quoted Blackburn's view on Plato that invites us to think and reason, rather than to rely on the way things appear to us.

If even the real in reality is a mere shadow, how could we comprehend this real in reality? Can it only be recognized through its illusionary nature?

The Illusion in Reality

The illusionary aspect can be identified in many aspects. To Cavell, film is a technical representation. This view is shared by Rothman and Keane stating that images projected onto a screen are merely celluloid rolls that are moved past a light and are in actual fact, nothing more than a shadow play (Falzon, 2002).

In addition, Cavell noted that “film records real events as they are transcribed on the screen – have simply never taken place. Events in a movie are the ones we can never be, or can never have been, present at apart from the movie itself”. This is the real being illusioned, as one enters the cinema shown in Plato’s Cave. What is projected is not real but a copy of the real, recorded, fictionalized and animated for identification by the audience, mentally. The spectator, in this instance has given himself to an object of imagination and the world of film but is wonderfully cut off from its cares and demands.

Thus, films are not the representation of reality but a projection of reality as stated by Cavell (Rothman & Keane, 2000). This points to the other illusionary nature of film, the separation that unites (iconographies familiar to the audience) which includes the space-time continuum; future, past and present factor in film that simply does not affect their daily lives. This illusionary nature is self-contained as in Plato’s ‘picture show’; we sit in darkness, transfixed by images that are removed from reality (Falzon, 2002). Yet, our beings respond involuntarily to the waves of stimuli before us and transcend the reality of being viewers of the created reality on the screen (Douglass & Harnden, 1996).

Munsterberg in the same light relates this as stimulation of the mind that lies within two poles being depth and movement (simple mental activity) at one end and the stirring of emotions (complex mental activity) at the other (Langdale, 2002). In the first pole, the spectator experiences the medium’s effects that seemed real. This occurs due to the sharpness (optical), the right distance (depth) and movement in the visual representation. Nonetheless, Munsterberg continues that this is mere tricks of perception. For instance, movement really exists in the outer world.

Singer (2004), realising the function of the technical and the meaningful incorporates both realist and formalist approach. The Realists emphasis on the physical world and the photographic process

predominates while the formalists look toward the technical means by which a filmmaker goes “beyond the real world” to express artistic vision. With Singer’s new humanistic approach, ontology and aesthetics disintegrate, and reality is not just captured on film, ‘reality is transformed’.

The Blurring Dots

How could the blurring dots become visible to the ‘eye of the beholder’? Is seeing believing? Plato’s *Theory of Film* as discussed by Purcell (2006) attuned this to the *paradeigmata* that discloses the form as an identifiable image bringing in his teacher’s (Socrates) use of shadows, animals and artifacts as archetypal; for the things ‘visible’ are in actual truth a ‘non-entity’. To Plato, this is the tying knot between paradigm, truth and form. Yet, it is the manifest that resembles the secret (unseen, blurring). The blurring dots in film has thus insofar culminates between entity and non-entity, the secret and the manifested, the illusion and the reality. Herewith, I submit the interpretation of these blurring dots.

Dot 1: The Human Mind

In assessing the reaction towards film, it is worthy to note that all aspects of narrative in film is derived out of human experience amidst the ‘forms’ presented before them that is transported, fictionalised and animated into moving pictures. This is the result of the human’s direct cerebrum adventure which Hugo Munsterberg refers to as ‘stimulation’ (Langdale, 2002). Film in this instance, becomes the stimulus by which the audience acknowledges, sympathises and empathises.

As *photopoets* traverse through time and space, the elements of culture are composed, material culture is animated and non-material culture such as language, beliefs, values, rules of behaviour, family patterns and political systems are choreographed into the narratives and structures of their film product. Perhaps this is when the minds of the *photopoets* are infused with culture; “the text of our lives, the ultimately coherent pattern of beliefs, acts, responses that we comprehend” (Kolker, 1999) that is meant to convey meaning and significance in film narratives. When filmmakers create films that can be comprehended, understood,

interpreted and responded, they are presenting a good deal of the knowledge and skills audience deploy to understand, interpret and respond to events and people in the real world. The portrayal of these culturally manifested images, even in its changing attitudes and desires will somewhat determine its survival. Bordwell ties this element through the Cognitivist Theory where a particular 'emotional transaction' is harboured between film and viewer (Kolker, 1999).

Munsterberg explains further: "film is created by the mind, addressing the still pictures shown in continuous succession. The depth is not an absolute reality of space or motion but our mental perception of it as sensory data. In such an instance, the film screen is equivalent to the human mind" (Langdale, 2002).

To a certain extent, Munsterberg's views suggest that it is the human mental perception that determines the reality and illusionary existence of film. There seems to be a silent 'power of the mind' that commands the gestalt of the very existence of 'filmdom' for without it, the medium would be thrown into oblivion.

Dot 2: The Audience

Bordwell through Cognitive Theory argues that anyone, from the non-reflective casual movie-goer to the self conscious professional interpreter whose work we read in academic journals is a constructor of meaning (Kolker, 1999). Yet this process is not one of simplicity. At the most inner circuit, before the mass addresses the media content before them, an intrapersonal and intra-group processing of information is comprehended, recalled and interpreted within them after which, their family becomes a part of the larger cosmology of the self. As the metamorphosis within finds its way out of the cocoon, it is addressed by the outer realm, the interpersonal and inter-group level. Here, patterns of discourse, interaction, control and hierarchy takes place, setting the norms, marking of boundaries, influence and diffusion, feeding and complementing the triangular communication process of society. It is here that we locate the audiences whose characteristics are predominantly influenced by these ties and experiences and thus, are introduced to the media assemblage as an amorphous constituent. Herein lies its vulnerability and strength.

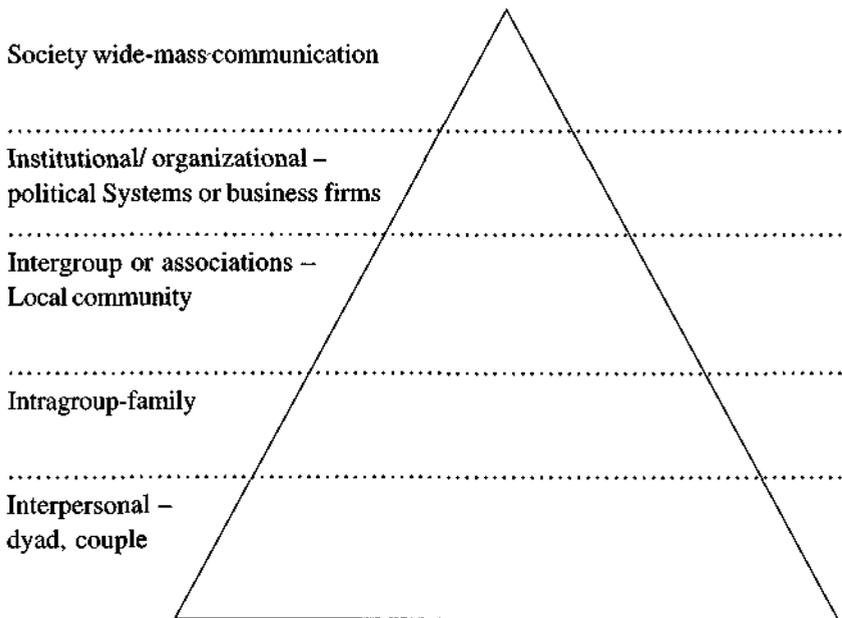


Figure 1: Communication Process in Society

Nonetheless, as norms becomes a palette of culture painted and popularized by the mass, the interpretation of media content poses alarming results. For one, the masses are an abstract entity, threatening and succumbing amidst their constituent powers as shown in *Battleship Potemkin*. Herein, the audience is able to empower themselves as active agents of intervention into media subjectivity. As a multitude, it is ironically an active social agent; a multiplicity that acts (Abdul Majid, 1983). In a world of technological hybridist and increasing mobility, media space-time produces a media assemblage of endless circles, a culmination of the *interterrestrial* of one to the other, forming an extraterrestrial gestalt of filmmaking.

These influences contribute to the overall social fabric of common sense or pop common sense ideas, the general social beliefs and feelings of society (Abdul Majid, 1983). The audience in this instance is fully aware of their cinematic experience that depicts the *cave* they enter as a form of escapism from the real world and to lose themselves in deception, illusion and fantasy. Metz in the most influential formulation on spectator's view said "spectator's attitude towards film image is one

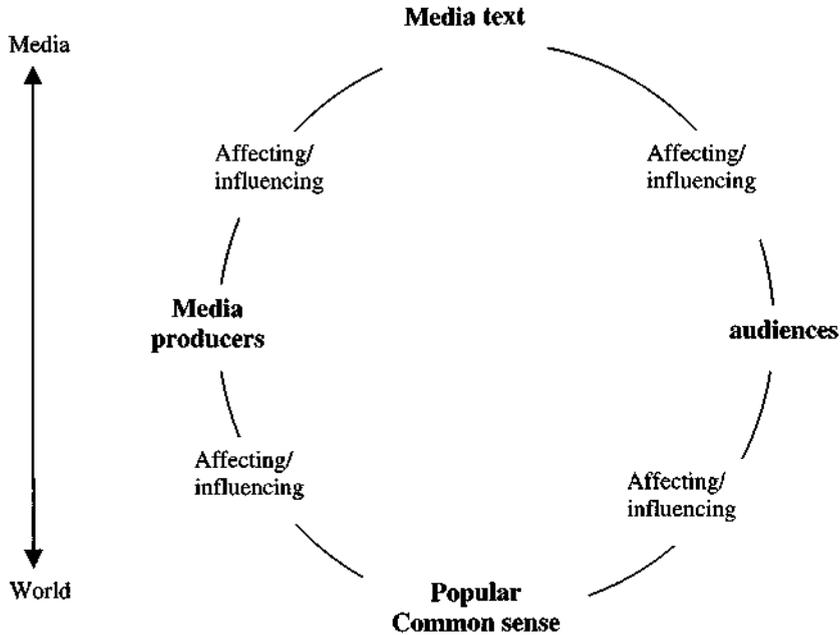


Figure 2: Model of the Media-world Relationship

of 'disavowal': the spectator knows what they are watching is only a representation, but believes that it is real" (Andrew, 1976).

Dot 3: The Network of Shamans

Under close encounter, the impact of film is not merely guided by self-gratification alone. The audience that entails the resurrection of the filmscape as a 'dream factory', is, in itself a networking unit. The Frankfurt School relates this to a pyramidal level where government and industry as a media institution is in close collusion, dominating the mass of people (Miller & Robert, 1999).

The architecture of this institution as proposed by Mcquail (1987), exists within two arcs. One remote and powerful, the other, attuned to the way of things, experience and people. The first arc refers to the main institutions and power centres of society. Abdul Majid (1983) in his *Popular Culture Controversy* relates this power to the 'ruling elements', those with authority, exercises influence where the destinies of others

can be manipulated. They are the intellectuals, the religious and artistic luminaries. The second arc attaches oneself to family institutions, associations, organizations, observing and experiencing the consequences of institutional landscape and its challenges. In addition, the “artist”: filmmakers, force themselves onto the consciousness of viewers and breaks down their normal resistance. It is here that we locate the audiences whose characteristics are predominantly influenced by these ties and experiences.

Thus, the audience is ‘created’ and ‘targeted’ by the network of *Shamans*; filmmakers, producers and policy makers through the formation of the semantics of genres and syntactics of narratives they themselves feed. However, genres are exposed to conflicting structural forces, from the sacred to the subversive, from the religious to the immoral and from the political to the aesthetics. In this light, filmmakers as cultural producers can also be seen as counter reversal in which they themselves are viewers, not ‘floating’ above society, shifting authority to the presumed, predicted and observed response of the audience (Miller & Stam, 2004). Walton (1990) adds that emotion alone is insufficient to engage the audience. They need to empathise and it is here that the blurring dots of the celluloid and viewer are fused in unison and the living illusion projected in film is thus embraced with unconditional acceptance. Film as a medium, illuminate, transform vision and project dreams of visual fictions of the mass culture (Miller, 1999). Backed by the psychoanalytic theory, this medium functions as wish-fulfilling narratives of collective fantasies (Walton: 1990:125). Nonetheless, neither ‘fully legitimate’ nor completely abandoned to ‘the arbitrariness of individual taste’, film as a visual media has been suggested as a neutral mechanism that simply mirrors the world (O’Shaughnessy, 1999).

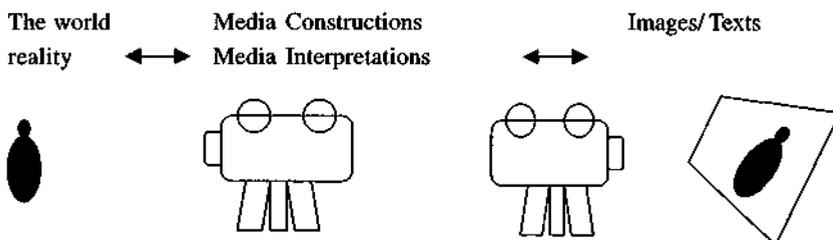


Figure 3:

The Dots of Unification

The dots presented clearly elevates the mass audience, and it too created a somewhat cognitive paradox within the self and audience which Munsterberg (Langdale, 2002) refers to as lower processes of perception: where film supplies the 'material', the base stimulus for mental activity. It is here that film as an extraordinary "medium of the mind" achieves transcendence as the mind has to do so little with the stimulus since the medium stimulate mental structures so accurately. But film as perceived by Eisenstein, is a symbolic language, composed of signs and symbols (Douglass & Harnden, 1996). This symbolical function serves the audience with the opportunity to elevate its mental perception, recognizing both the phenomenal and the external illuminations of this world. To French (2003), the 'phenomenal world' is comprised of our perceptions, experiences, feelings, desires, and attitudes. This daily cognitive phenomenon encounters with the external world, addressing its complex of 'dispositions' and mental constructs which flavour our interactions with the phenomena. Here, French views film texts as existing at the intersection of the phenomenal and external worlds.

Film in this light is able to discover its own metaphorical power: its ability to say many things at once (Monaco, 2000). The network of *Shamans* erodes, by employing film's cultural and cinematic code, connecting between the signifier (denotation) and signified (connotation). The waves of stimuli sparked by this dynamic duo have somewhat transformed the optical images into screening life perception, assessing and deciphering the image that is meant to convey intrinsic meaning and lasting significance in the viewer, striking the emotions of the audience (Douglass & Harnden, 1996). However, this argument asserts that this aroused emotion may stimulate the intellect but adds "the public thinks first of all with its senses" that are difficult to translate into language (ibid).

To avoid the complexities derived out of our senses, Falzon (2002) presents the Platonic cultivation of reason. According to Plato, the use of reason amounts to a process of recollection, in which we gain knowledge by recalling information in our minds, acquired prior to birth, but which we have forgotten. Perhaps it is here that the inter-terrestrial self, the intra-personal self, the hidden self, the secret self is its guiding kingdom. For Cavell (2004), the self is always beside itself, thinking in a

kind of ecstasy where Heidegger too consummates in an idiom deriving from Lacan: "I am what I shall have been for what I am is in the process of becoming." Cavell believes that it is this conception that embodies the idea of perfectionism in the self.

Somehow, it is one of the rare moments in film that we condition our physical reality into transcendence. Seemingly, this transcendency is an archaic element that exists even before the manifestation of the first dot. This is somewhat in synchronicity with the perfectionism in the timeless work of art; an extension of life, depicting the originality and timeless faces, objects and surroundings as invoked by Bazin. This attributes to the feeling of aesthetics in arts (film), as "a new form of true beauty in the turmoil of a technical age". Somehow, the further we dwell, the greater we are exposed to the self as a perfected being, distanced and asynchronously enjoined upon reality and illusion, exemplified by the intricacies of filmmaking.

In "The Aesthetics of the Photoplay", Munsterberg recalls how the moving pictures fit into the theory. To him Art is closely intertwined with reality and that it is the distance between the two that makes something art (Langdale, 2002). If we contemplate, the word 'media' comes from the word 'middle' and thus film as a medium lies at the intersection between reality and illusion. It is the medium that interlocks all other arts into the 'dots' and lines of art, forming images and constructing meaning, visible to the *eye* of the beholder. Thus, film as an art-form must be approached by opening our locked heart upon reality for it contains the D.N.A. of that reality (Truth). It is this tying knot that makes imitation, possible. Singer (2004) first presented his philosophical perspective on this by addressing that all art should be looked at as 'life-enhancement' and that in doing so we 'find the meanings and techniques in each work as internally related to one another'. It is here that film must be recognized as a culmination of an interiorised art (secret) that is exteriorised (manifest).

Undeniably, the product that is churned out of this interiorized art has given birth to 'a life-source' that can be seen, felt and illuminate in various film genres from the peacemakers (*Braveheart*, *The Last Samurai*, *Hang Jebat*) to the triumph of courage (*Terms of Endearment*), through tempting fate (*The Seventh Seal*, *Frankenstein*) undying love (*Meet Joe Black*, *Penarek Becha*, *Puteri Gunung Ledang*), epic (*Lord Of The Rings*) and to downright fiction/science/religious undertones (*The Matrix*). To a certain extent, films can be seen as demonstrating the

power of truth over views that are clouded by prejudice (Falzon, 2002) as shown in *Rashomon* and *Twelve Angry Men*. To this, the unison of deception (illusion) and Truth (Real) in film provides an equally revealing optic on the secrets of the soul (Carrol & Choi, 2006).

Conclusion

Dziga Vertov (1984) said, "It is far from simple to show the truth, yet the truth is simple". This essay has been a journey of addressing and discovering the communion of the blurring dots, between truth (reality) and acknowledging the deception (illusion) in film. It has clearly presented how film is and is not the true portrayal of reality. It establishes the possibilities of interpretation of the blurring dots as the intersection between illusion and reality in film, highlighting the tasks of the unification of the blurring dots to create believability, mimic and validate reality that is ultimately affirmed by the mind. As an art-form, the dots are seen as in 'one' with reality as it contains its trait which is in itself, a timeless art; an art that is a "master of its own illusion." Perhaps this is the reason why audience, consciously knowing that film is an illusion, is safeguarding this aspect as they are able to experience realities in film other than their own, perhaps escape from the reality they live monotonously, address the significance of the events on screen as their own and elevate their mortality existence into transcendence. This is the 'game of make-believe' that they could identify with, professing themselves as the writer, performer and director. Thus, the stimulation that occurs in the minds of the amorphous audience is an altar by which they define themselves: their spiritual, psychological and physiological self. Monaco (2000) asserts, to read and understand a film requires us to become "cinemate: the better one reads an image, the more one understands it, the more power one has over it." The power, as has been presented is not an individual property and not too of audience's alone. It is a unifying circle that vibrates within the individual audience, filmmakers, producers, policymakers, the society and the environment at large. This is the inter-terrestrial of filmhood and at the extra-terrestrial gestalt of the infinite 'screen'; as mere dots on the celluloid of life. Perhaps, to recognise the blurring and possibly invisible dots between the true reality and the irony of illusion on the film screen that is in one with the screen of life, is to come back to the pre-injected knowledge before birth that has been forgotten as

profoundly suggested by Plato (Falzon, 2002). Perhaps, by addressing this, one can submit to the imprisoned *cave* (film and life) and yet be liberated from it as and when he/ she wills. Perhaps, by then, the blurring dots will thus reveal itself in its truest form. This endless pursuit remains to be in the present tense.

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