TAKE HOME ESSAY

PART I

1. In “An aesthetic of Reality” Andre Bazin notes the paradox that: “Realism in art can only be achieved in one way – through artifice.” He further states “Reality is not to be taken quantitatively.” Using an example of any film screened in class and referring to Bazin’s essay, please discuss:

a) How is realism to be measured, according to Bazin, if not quantitatively by the amount of reality captured in the artifice of a film? Does the film you have chosen to discuss measure up?

b) Do you agree with Bazin?

Art is a constructed medium, and therefore any realism derived from it must itself be constructed. As Andre Bazin, in his article An Aesthetic of Reality, “realism in art can on be achieved in one way – through artifice.” With regards to film the concept of realism in art is only further complicated due to the myriad of components and elements that are used to create reality. Bazin adds that “reality is not to be taken quantitatively.” In the film industry technology and techniques tend to develop towards realism, creating greater verisimilitude with everyday experiences. Simply fusing these different techniques together does not in itself create realism, rather it is the style and method with which these elements are compounded that better produces this effect. Although the cinematic realism that Bazin refers to originated in Italy, many modern films use elements of this genre in their manipulation of reality. Bahman Ghobadi, for example, uses may neo-realistic components in his film Turtles Can Fly (2004). However, Ghobadi employs these techniques in a manner that provokes doubt as to what, in fact, constitutes reality. Ghobadi's very first scene can be argued, to carry both realistic and constructed elements, giving it a somewhat unclear position within Bazin's reality continuum. In this manner he plays with artistic realism in his film, and with the concept of reality itself, as it exists both from our individual and collective perspective.

Ghobadi begins his film using hyper-mediation in order to place his audience in a geographically and historically accurate location. It can immediately be argued that there is conflict in the kind of realism that this produces. In his article An Aesthetic of Reality, Andre Bazin refers to a spectrum
of realism. Specifically he refers to a range that exists between Farrebique and Citizen Kane\(^1\). This mention of a range of realism refers to the very same concept of measuring realism qualitatively. Although Ghobadi’s use of a hyper-mediated element may be seen as interruptive to the picture's realism\(^2\), it can equally be argued that his placement of the story within a time and space that is both specific and accurate merely adds to the film's realism\(^3\). It gives the film a documentary quality in the very first instance that ultimately marries the script to its setting, creating a context whereby the location cannot be eliminated without completely disrupting the script's social order\(^4\). Nevertheless the very setting of the film, with regards to its background, the language spoken by the characters, and the context referred to in the film's dialogue dispenses with the need for such hyper-mediation. The film's geographical and temporal placement are self-evident within the film's own mise-en-scène\(^5\), throwing doubt as to Ghobadi's true purpose for employing this technique in the opening scene of his film.

This brief documentary exposition is then followed by a close up of one the film's protagonists, in a scene that is later exposed as a depiction of the future. Incidentally this is one of the few moments in which Ghobadi actually makes use of close up shots, further emphasizing the importance of both the character and the scene in relation to the rest film\(^6\). The placement of this scene at the very beginning of the narrative almost immediately breaks the sense of realism, not because of the scene itself, but rather because of its temporal position in relation to the scenes that follow\(^7\). The use of

\(^{1}\) Andre Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality”

\(^{2}\) Michael Thomas Carroll, “The Disembodied Voice” in Popular Modernity in America

\(^{3}\) Martin Jesignhausen, “The Sky over Berlin as Transcendental Space”

\(^{4}\) Bazin

\(^{5}\) Ibid.

\(^{6}\) Steven Jacobs, “Narrative, Theatricality and Absorption” in Framing Pictures

\(^{7}\) Joshua Hirsch, “’Night and Fog' and Posttraumatic Cinema” in Concentrationary Cinema
dramatic irony immediately places the audience in a position of omniscience, as well as that of an observer. In a chronologically sequential film, that position does not necessarily interrupt the narrative's realism because the audience is not given any greater knowledge. There is no expectation of an occurrence or an event, and therefore, there is little potential desire to alter the course of the storyline before the narrative is finished. In this way Turtle's Can Fly manipulates and plays with the concept of reality from the very beginning, providing the audience with conflicting information as to the story's position in the real world as well as playing with their perspective and position as observers.

Both of Ghobadi's protagonists, as well as the other actors in his film, are non-professional actors, a common practice in neo-realistic films. He also focuses his story line largely on the common, poor class of Iran, and more specifically on Iran's children, another common aspect in neo-realism. This factor is further highlighted in Ghobadi's use of disabled child actors, depicting a lackluster side of reality that is often ignored by traditional Hollywood studio productions. Moreover, although Ghobadi's narrative follows mainly two protagonists, the story itself is just as much about the protagonists as it is about the village, and in fact the country as a whole. This dependence on the narrative of the community is further emphasized by the absence of close ups. The audience is provided with a wide perspective of the environment and the atmosphere that surrounds the characters and thus given a greater scope of these same characters' world. The film is also shot on location, with the use of mostly diegetic sound and lighting, placing the audience in the space of the film. However this also means that the editing becomes more evident in the film. With little to

8 Robert A. Harris, “A Glossary of Literary Terms”
9 Bazin
10 Ibid.
12 Bazin
know sound bridges between different scenes more attention is drawn to the actual cut, further removing the audience from the narrative and replacing realism with self-reflexivity. Ghobadi does make an effort to create lighting bridges in his editing, fading to black just before a night scene, or making a greater effort to depict the day dimming or brightening as it progresses. However, his inconsistency with this technique merely provokes the opposite effect as the difference in pace of time between each day is, thus, emphasized.

Regardless of these factors, the realism of the film is clearly established through the use of diegesis, the historical events clearly indicated throughout the narrative, and the crudeness of the setting within which the characters exist 13. Ghobadi further stabilizes this reality by using mostly still camera shots, or jib operated camera movement, giving the audience a fixed and seamless depiction of the space and the movement within it 14. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ghobadi chooses to employ a handheld camera in the very instances where he decides to fragment reality. When Agrin is walking towards the cliff and experiencing flash-backs her memories are all displayed in handheld camera motion, indicating a break in the temporal reality of the film.

Ghobadi also uses handheld in less obvious way, such as the scene that follows Hengov's prediction of the truck exploding. Although the handheld camera movement increases the audience's sense of urgency and chaos in the scene 15, this is also the first instance where Hengov has revealed a prediction to Satellite. The lines of reality in this instance are blurred and the confusion of the camera's shots represent the audience's own confusion with regards to Hengov's ability 16. In order to further obscure the difference between the real and the imaginary, Ghobadi uses still camera and jib shots during Hengov's hallucinations of Agrin, and Agrin's hallucinations of Riga. Additionally, he

13 Bazin
14 Martha Mollison, “Composition and Framing” in Producing Videos
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
employs a handheld POV camera shot as Riga is walking around the barrier of metal pipes and calling for his father. This inconsistency in camera use creates an uncertainty between the world of fantasy and that of reality, a narrative technique that is commonly referred to as magical realism. Although it might sound like a contradiction or a paradox, magical realism is a genre whereby seemingly impossible or unreal events occur within an otherwise ordinary, realistic setting. For example in the scene where Riga is found tied to a tree in a mine field; although Satelite is injured when Riga causes the mine to explode, Riga himself escapes unscathed. Moreover, somehow both Agrin and Riga are unharmed despite the fact that Agrin brought the child into the minefield through a cloud of fog and was unaware of the impending danger. Ghobadi uses a variety of magically realistic elements throughout his film, however since all these events are placed within the chaos of Iranian life on the brink of war, it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between what is real and what isn't. That is precisely what Bazin refers to when he states that “reality is not to be taken quantitatively” in the realm of film and art. Ghobadi uses narrative and film techniques in a way that enhances his film's realism while simultaneously manipulating these same techniques in order to further obscure the lines between realism and fantasy. Cumulatively, Ghobadi's method creates realism, however it is the style with which he employs each of these techniques that proves most significant with regards to the actual end result.

Any form of art can do no more than creates what is inherently a representation of reality through the construction of whatever elements the medium has available. With regards to film, in particular, the evolution of its elements and techniques tend towards a more accurate representation of this reality, with cleaner sound recorded by smaller microphones, better software for more seamless

17 Barbet Schroeder and Miguel Littin, “Latino Art through European Eyes, or Against the American Evil Eye” in World Directors and Their Films, Bert Cardullo ed.

18 Eva Aldea, “Introduction: Magical Realism” in Magical Realism and Deleuze
editing and so on\textsuperscript{19}. Nevertheless, the purely cumulative employment of these different techniques and technologies is not what necessarily generates greater realism within any one particular film. In \textit{Turtle's Can Fly}, Bahman Ghobadi clearly demonstrates that the very same techniques that are used to further emphasize realism, can be deployed to depict the fantastical and vice-versa. In this way, Andre Bazin's statement about realism and reality in art and film indicate a greater awareness of the constructive processes used in film making and how these processes contribute to the film overall. With the development of post-modern philosophy, films and art are tending progressively more towards self-reflexivity, which indicates that there may always be a struggle between realism in art and the artifice that constructs it.

\textsuperscript{19} Bazin.
PART II

1. Fritz Lang’s “M” as bridge between silent and sound film aesthetics

As his first exploration of sound in cinema, Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931) creates an aesthetic of sound that bridges the space between the old and new technology. Through diegetic sound and Lang is able to highlight the role of his setting as a character and create action in empty space. Lang's use of off-screen sound throughout *M* also mimicks the use of title cards in silent films. Most notable of these is the scene where Police Commissioner Lohman narrates the police's actions following the publishing of Bekert's letter, as images of the analysis and research are presented on screen.

Moreover Lang takes advantage of the presence of sound in order to emphasize the significance of silence, such as in the scene where objects associated with Elsie are presented as an allusion to her murder. Lang thus manipulates sound to create action in empty space and adds a new dimension to film aesthetics without renouncing the value of the aesthetics of silent film.

3. The Legacy and Relevance of Third Cinema Today

In his article “For an Imperfect Cinema” Julio Espinosa explains that Third Cinema must allow art and film to be created by the masses, with no separation between them and the filmmaking elite.

In today's society the barrier of entry into filmmaking is lower than ever, with the rise of the independent industry and re-mix culture. Bahman Ghobadi’s 2004 film, *Turtles Can Fly* illustrates this perfectly in its documentary style magical realism. Ghobadi demonstrates the injustices of the Iranian economic and social situation, as well as the chaos provoked by constant war. His employment of non-professional and disabled child actors follows Fernando Solano and Octavio

21 Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*  
22 Gunning
23 Roy Armes, “Third Cinema” in *Third World Film Making and the West*  
24 Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in a Hybrid Economy*
Getino's idea that revolutionary cinema must break with traditional hierarchies. Moreover his manipulation of reality breaks free from the constraints of classical Hollywood realism to create its own unique form. In a world where access to information and resources has never been easier or cheaper, Third Cinema is probably one of the most relevant forms of cinema available, socially opening space for a dialogue that crosses borders and classes.

25 Armes
26 Ibid.


