

# REALIST CINEMA AS WORLD CINEMA: A CONVERSATION WITH LÚCIA NAGIB

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In her latest book, *Realist Cinema as World Cinema: Non-Cinema, Intermedial Passages, Total Cinema*, Lúcia Nagib suggests that the integrity with which *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, and anonymous, 2012) presents its subjects—as performers, producers, and spectators of their own reenactments—directly affects their reality.<sup>1</sup> Refusing to cut away in the most uneasy and revealing moments, the documentary revels in exposing its subjects' desire to turn their history into the cinematic illusion found in Hollywood genres. Duped by their own desire to speak of and lavishly reproduce the atrocities they enacted decades earlier, the “gangsters” at the center of the film appear utterly ignorant of the futility of their cinematic performance as an avenue for redemption and acclaim; they have become pawns in the directors' effort to ultimately let reality—not cinematic artifice—speak for itself.

For Nagib, the documentary presents an ethics of the real in relation to genre (in its reenactment scenes), authorship (as the filmmakers manipulate their subjects), and internal spectatorship (in the impact that watching his own reenactments had on the Indonesian death-squad leader Anwar Congo). One of the many films Nagib closely analyzes in her book, *The Act of Killing* is emblematic in its direct interaction with the reality of its own production, in the explicit reflexivity of its focus on production and spectatorship, and in its presentation of performance and reenactment as modes for modifying reality.

Assessments of how such films embrace, articulate, and affect reality (or life itself) constitute the central focus of the book, which revisits key theories of cinematic realism to make the claim that “realist cinema” is a more compelling and substantive term for what has otherwise been called “world cinema.” For Nagib, because it is often defined against Hollywood



cinema, the latter term fails to stress the extent to which a realist mode of production constitutes the key common denominator in films under its umbrella. While this adjustment might at first seem merely semantic, Nagib attempts to correct what she sees as a misnomer, not by prescribing but by describing and highlighting the key features of the realist mode of production—namely, a commitment to exploring the reality that surrounds this cinema. In other words, her unpacking of “realist cinema” does not alter the corpus of films but instead redirects attention to “an ethics of the real that has bound world films together at cinema’s most creative peaks” (16).

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 3, pp. 83–87. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2021 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2021.74.3.83

As André Bazin, theorist of film realism par excellence, would have it, cinema is rooted in reality by the ontology of what it represents: “[T]he photographic image is the object itself,” he wrote.<sup>2</sup> Elaborating on the inherent indexical property of the film image to which Bazin alludes, Nagib focuses less on the ontological link between film and referent than on how and when such indexicality becomes imperative in a film. Sidestepping the drawbacks of realism as an effect allows Nagib to explore an ethics of the real by investigating realism at the point of production. In support of this significant reconfiguration, she underscores the “tremendous effort a number of film crews and casts from all over the world put into *producing* as well as reproducing reality” (22; italics in the original). Nagib expands Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image to investigate how the indexical nature of cinema puts its own artifice of production on display as films work to establish and articulate a relationship with the profilmic.

If cinematography is always already embedded in realism, Nagib’s reframing helps raise the critical question about these films: Which reality do they address? Thus realism here refers less to a cinematic construct—an effect or an illusion produced by the film—than to the existing realities upon which cinema may capitalize. Still, Nagib’s “realist cinema” umbrella is no less broad and presumes to leave no film behind; indeed, any effort to recast world cinema as realist cinema would be futile were it not wide enough in scope to assert both the ubiquity and the stakes of realism in these films. To manage such a vast corpus, Nagib divides the films she analyzes into three original submodalities of the realist mode of production—noncinema, intermedial passages, and total cinema—each constituting a different part of the book and seemingly occupying different positions in a spectrum of realism as production.

The first part of the book concerns what Nagib terms “non-cinema,” consisting of films that politically intervene into life itself, defying film’s own limits as an art and medium. Here, the author analyzes filmmakers’ investment in social phenomena at the expense of their own films’ status as cinema. In other words, the impact of noncinema lives not just outside of films’ respective diegeses, but beside and beyond them, within the reality that precedes, surrounds, and outlives them. Nagib groups into this category films as varied as *The Act of Killing*, Wim Wenders’s postmodernist *Der Stand der Dinge* (*The State of Things*, 1982), Miguel Gomes’s *Tabu* (2012), and Jafar Panahi’s tetralogy shot in defiance of the Iranian government after it banned him from filmmaking. All of these films are primarily concerned with an external reality, whether questioning cinema as a medium or its efficacy to convey history, death, or violence.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is “total cinema,” a term borrowed from Bazin’s dream of a cinema that could capture the real world in its totality, and which Nagib addresses in the third section of the book.<sup>3</sup> She adopts this moniker for films that attempt such an encompassing feat, while simultaneously acknowledging their inability to accomplish the utopian goal of an integral realism. Whether discursively or directly, these films negotiate cinematic representation and cope with its limits, exploring the reality of art and mediation itself and inciting viewers to fill in the wide gaps of knowledge they purposely open. Works discussed in this section include Edgar Reitz’s series *Die zweite Heimat: Chronik einer Jugend* (*Heimat 2: Chronicle of a Generation*, 1992), which seeks to explore a total history (while acknowledging its limitation to do so) as well as *Die Geschichte vom weinenden Kamel* (*The Story of the Weeping Camel*, Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni, 2003), *Leviathan* (*Leviathan*, Andrey Zvyagintsev, 2014), and *Timbuktu* (Abderrahmane Sissako, 2014), all of which create a totalizing cosmos out of their monumental, expansive landscapes. In the latter case, locations are turned into cinematic landscapes to root the films in an irrepressible reality, even when they serve as backdrop to a fictional narrative, as in the case of Cristina Gallego and Ciro Guerra’s *Pájaros de verano* (*Birds of Passage*, 2018).

Also in this section Nagib revisits Luchino Visconti’s historical landmark in cinematic realism, *Ossessione* (1943), claiming that its foundational realism cannot be found where one would expect it—that is, in its on-location shooting, or in its use of nonprofessional actors. Her unique reading of Visconti’s film focuses instead primarily on how opera and music—as diegetic motif and expression of the dispossessed characters in the film—contribute to (rather than detract from) its realist impulse, establishing an intermedial dialogue between distinct artworks. She argues that it is the interaction between cinema and opera that inaugurates this influential realist mode of production.

In the book’s midsection, between noncinema and total cinema, Nagib wedges films that operate with “passages to reality” by way of intermediality—a term she has been developing in her work for years.<sup>4</sup> In their engagement with other artistic and medial forms that are themselves in progress—such as poetry, music, theater, and painting—these films interact with the social reality they wish to affect. Nagib speaks of the passage to reality as “the fleeting moment where both film and life merge before becoming themselves again” in a blend of artistic and political impact (175). Such is the case with the prominence and importance of theater in Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Zangiku monogatari* (*The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums*, 1939) and Yasujiro Ozu’s *Ukikusa* (*Floating Weeds*, 1959) and of the visual

arts—paintings, murals, drawings, and sculptures—in Raúl Ruiz’s *Mistérios de Lisboa* (*Mysteries of Lisbon*, 2010).

In her discussion of intermedial passages, one chapter stands out in its scope—covering these passages to reality as they have taken place in Brazilian films since the so-called *Retomada* (Revival) of the 1990s—and its methodology. It functions, in the author’s words, as a companion piece to a documentary she codirected with Samuel Paiva, *Passages* (2019). Nagib and Paiva’s film presents interviews with contemporary Brazilian filmmakers on their use of mixed media and art in their realism-oriented work, while this chapter investigates in more detail how some of these films’ intermedial moments provide and articulate their passages to the real.

Across all three categories, realism is achieved through a near-Brechtian reflexivity, highlighting “the unmasking of representational artifice as the only possible realist method” (88). Nagib finds true realism not in the uninterrupted long takes celebrated by Bazin but rather in moments that provide insight into the films’ presentation and representation of reality. The films she discusses are concerned with social phenomena that affect (or seek to affect) the material and political reality in which they are inserted.

Nagib’s close readings of these films constitute deep exploratory dives into their presentation, reflexivity, and political impact; they are presented here as prime examples of what is clearly an insurmountable corpus of films produced across the globe. In recasting these films as parts of a thread of realism already present in world cinema, however, Nagib lays the groundwork for more-rigorous understandings of films that, through realism, transgress cinema itself. At its core, *Realist Cinema as World Cinema* is a muscular endeavor that showcases Nagib’s vast scholarship and inclusive approach to films, one that highlights their investment in the world around them. It is both fitting and invaluable that this book is available for open access worldwide.

**BRUNO GUARANÁ:** How did this project come into being, and how does it expand on your 2011 book, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*?<sup>5</sup>

**LÚCIA NAGIB:** Realism has been at the core of my approach to cinema from the very beginning. My first book, *Werner Herzog: Film as Reality* [1991], discussed Herzog’s method of physical engagement with objective reality in his films, and also in his writings and books, one of which, *Walking on Ice*, I [earlier] translated into Portuguese.<sup>6</sup> In my subsequent book, *Born of the Ashes: The Auteur and the Individual in Oshima’s Films* [1995], the question of bodily engagement in Nagisa Oshima’s films, not least via real sex on-screen, takes pride of place.<sup>7</sup> Herzog and Oshima, together with

a host of other filmmakers, from Inuit Zacharias Kunuk to Brazilian Glauber Rocha, then reappear in *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* [2011], in which Alain Badiou provided me with the structuring principle—the fidelity to the event of truth—which, I argue, underpins all the films studied in it. After I moved to the United Kingdom in 2003, it became clear that what the Anglophone world was calling “world cinema” was in desperate need of serious scholarship. I devoted many years to this task. And now I have fused these two research subjects together, realism and world cinema, because all of a sudden I realized I was talking about one and the same thing!

**GUARANÁ:** What kind of intervention does your reconfiguration of the term “realist cinema” in lieu of “world cinema” seek to perform in film studies?

**NAGIB:** Since my first paper on world cinema, “Towards a Positive Definition of World Cinema,” in 2006, I have been insisting that different cinemas of the world have to be defined positively—by what they are, not by what they are not.<sup>8</sup> The very term “world cinema” emerged in opposition to Hollywood, or mainstream commercial cinema. Even though it acknowledged the existence of cinemas other than Hollywood, its negative definition created a distorted picture that ended up reaffirming Hollywood as “the” cinema and all the other cinematic outputs in the world as “alternative” to it. So in order to understand the latter, you had to study the former.

Scholars, though recognizing the importance of other cinemas, continued to study Hollywood to explain them, very often via the conventions discovered and described, with groundbreaking insight, by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, about the so-called classical Hollywood cinema. But this meant that, for example, the style of acting, shooting, and editing in the films by someone like Yasujiro Ozu was posited as “contravening” Hollywood, when Ozu was very little worried about contravening anything, but simply about creating his own rules in line with the principles of his studio, Shochiku, which was hegemonic and entirely mainstream in his country, Japan.

Exploring world cinema via the question of realism, or the way films of the world come to grips with reality, allows a positive value to be ascribed to them. Theorists such as Thomas Elsaesser have already suggested that world cinema distinguishes itself from mainstream cinema thanks to its heightened degree of realism, but I wanted to go further into that line of thought.<sup>9</sup> I wanted to start from the fact that realism is the central issue in film studies. Thanks to the combination of images, sound, and movement, cinema is the art closest to reality. Cinema does not only imitate

reality, but records it and can be used as evidence of it. Thanks to film's evidential power we can learn from it.

**GUARANÁ:** Throughout the book, you offer careful close analyses of a large number of films, often dedicating entire chapters to a single film. What was your selection process to make up this apparent continuum from noncinema to total cinema? How did you arrive at the final structure of the book?

**NAGIB:** The book is structured across three categories of realist modes of film production: “non-cinema,” or a cinema that aspires to be life itself in a creative clash with the medium's inevitable manipulation of world phenomena; “intermedial passages,” or films that incorporate other artworks in progress as a channel to historical and political reality; and “total cinema,” or films moved by a totalizing impulse, be it toward the total artwork, total history, or universalizing landscapes. The case studies are mostly recent productions; however, each part starts with the analysis of foundational classics, which have paved the way for future realist endeavors. My aim was to prove that realism is timeless and inherent in cinema from its origin . . . This is why I include Mizoguchi, Ozu, Visconti, and Wenders with the likes of Panahi, Miguel Gomes, Joshua Oppenheimer, Cristina Gallego, Tata Amaral, Andrey Zvyagintsev, and so on. It's also, no doubt, a personal choice that reflects very much the kind of films that have been the object of my attention throughout my career, but it's also hopefully a model to be applied to a variety of other films—hence, hopefully, qualified to produce overarching conclusions.

**GUARANÁ:** You suggest and demonstrate that realism be studied at the point of production. Which materials are important to access, beyond the films themselves, for a successful assessment of realism within such a framework?

**NAGIB:** My focus is on realism at the point of production according to the following categories and their variations: the physical engagement on the part of cast and crew with the profilmic event; the search of identity between cast and their roles; real location shooting; the privileging of the index, or film's evidentiary property; and a new category I have launched, which is the focus on works of art in progress within the film. These procedures demonstrate what I have termed, in my previous book, an “ethics of realism,” or a political commitment on the part of crew and cast with the event of truth.

To believe in realism in cinema, even with someone with philosophical sophistication like André Bazin, has been the subject of accusations of naivete, in particular during the reign of poststructuralism, when all “apparent” reality

was reduced to a mere question of “discourse.” However, for the filmmakers and films in my book, the world is not a mere construct or discourse, but [is] made of people, animals, plants, and objects that physically exist, thrive, suffer, and die. Children are dying in the hands of drug traffickers, forests are burning around the world due to criminal exploitation and climate change, wars are raging under the influence of the gun industry. The films I discuss all have something to say about this; crews and casts are putting themselves at risk in order to show this reality. They feel part of, and responsible for, this material world and want to change it for the better. I have made it my mission to offer a response that acknowledges the efforts of these filmmakers.

**GUARANÁ:** And you are performing such valuable work to that end, from publications to collaborative research projects, and now to filmmaking—an unusual practice for film scholars. In fact, in one of the chapters in the book, you foreground the film that you codirected with Samuel Paiva, *Passages*. How did that project come about?

**NAGIB:** *Passages* is the result of a major bilateral research project, on which I was principal investigator—the Intermedia Project, funded by the AHRC [Arts and Humanities Research Council] in the United Kingdom and FAPESP [Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo] in Brazil—which brought together scholars from the University of Reading and the Federal University of São Carlos. Our task was to reconstruct the history of Brazilian cinema through an intermedial perspective—that is, by focusing on the interface between cinema and the other arts and media.

The part of this project ascribed to Samuel [Paiva] and myself was the study of the musical movement Manguebeat in relation to its cinematic counterpart, *Árido Movie*, which took place in Recife (the capital of Pernambuco) in the 1990s. Because I come from São Paulo, and Samuel from Pernambuco, we started to study the cinematic collaborations between Pernambuco and São Paulo from the 1990s *Retomada do Cinema Brasileiro* (Revival of Brazilian Cinema) onward. I applied for further funding from Reading to make a full-fledged, feature-length essayistic documentary film. This resulted in the film *Passages*, which focuses on fifteen film professionals from São Paulo and Pernambuco, their films, and the ways in which other media and arts in them open up a “passage” to social and political reality.

**GUARANÁ:** How do *Passages* and the chapter on intermedial works in your book complement one another? It would be so useful to have simultaneous access to both.



**NAGIB:** They are companion pieces to each other but also independent pieces. The chapter is much more theoretical, talks about fewer films, but goes into further depth in the analysis of each of them. It is also my own voice and entirely independent from the views of the filmmakers. In *Passages*, we took those ideas expressed in the chapter and tried them out on the filmmakers and other collaborators. To our delight and relief, they provided full confirmation of our hypothesis that other arts used in their films were a means to reach the physical and political reality of the country, and the clips we provide offer eloquent evidence of this. *Passages* is currently completing its international festival circuit, and we are considering offers of distribution. My wish is that it can be made available for free on the web in a not-too-distant future.

**GUARANÁ:** In your introduction, you celebrate the relative ease of circulation of “world cinema” through video-on-demand platforms while cautioning that this increased accessibility facilitates “an active process of decontextualising, neutralising, and burying cultural differences” (17). How may scholars, filmmakers, and viewers resist this process?

**NAGIB:** A distinctive aspect of the streaming platform menus is that they privilege quantity over variety, offering repeatedly the same kind of films, series, and genres, which are most of the time Anglo-American and Anglophone. However, variety exists in these very services—albeit buried, dispersed, and camouflaged. This is why talking about “the world” and “world cinema” is still important and relevant—because it ensures that cultural diversity finds a home and a channel of expression. Internet streaming favors a passivity on the part of the receiver, who is caught up in a chain of “recommendations” based on previous viewings, creating a vicious circle of sameness. Even if the recommendation ends up being a “foreign language” film (a term I abhor), its difference will be effaced via the equalizing mechanism of saying, “Because you’ve seen such and such . . .”

I’m not against commercial cinema and not immune to it at all. But reminding viewers of the existence of “the world” will hopefully stimulate more active viewing choices on their part. The facility to actively choose what to watch was much more prominent in the age of physical video rentals, but it is being gradually corroded. The positive side of streaming, however, is that the availability of films has increased exponentially, so reviving our ability to choose may be doubly rewarding. My hope is that my book, together with other scholarly work of this kind, will help viewers orient themselves within the bewildering multitude of films on offer.

**GUARANÁ:** What are you working on for your next project?

**NAGIB:** I’m seriously considering more films along the lines of *Passages*. Many of the filmmakers interviewed in it suggested that we should make more or make a series. It’s a very tempting idea at a time when people are watching more and more films, but, I fear, reading less and less about them. So I’m just waiting for Netflix to offer me a big budget for the sequel!

BOOK DATA Lúcia Nagib, *Realist Cinema as World Cinema: Non-Cinema, Intermedial Passages, Total Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. €105.00 cloth; \$0.00 e-book. 302 pages.

## Notes

1. Editor’s note: For more on the film, its history, and its reception, see the “Special Dossier on *The Act of Killing*” section in *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (Winter 2013).
2. André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema?: Essays Selected and Translated by Hugh Gray*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1967), 9–16.
3. André Bazin, “The Myth of Total Cinema,” in *What Is Cinema?: Essays Selected and Translated by Hugh Gray*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1967), 17–22.
4. See Lúcia Nagib and Stefan Solomon, “Intermediality in Brazilian Cinema: The Case of Tropicália Introduction,” *Screen* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 122–27; and Lúcia Nagib and Anne Jerslev, eds., *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013).
5. Lúcia Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (New York and London: Continuum, 2011).
6. See Lúcia Nagib, *Werner Herzog: O cinema como realidade* (São Paulo: Estação Liberdade, 1991); and Werner Herzog, *Caminhando no gelo*, trans. Lúcia Nagib (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1982).
7. Lúcia Nagib, *Nascido das cinzas: Autor e sujeito nos filmes de Oshima* (São Paulo: Edusp, 1995).
8. See Lúcia Nagib, “Towards a Positive Definition of World Cinema,” in *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*, ed. Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim (London: Wallflower Press, 2016), 30–37.
9. Thomas Elsaesser, “World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence,” in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, ed. Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2009), 3–19.