

## GENUINE POETICS: EXPRESSIVE AUTHENTICITY IN FILM

SÉRGIO DIAS BRANCO

This chapter seeks to reflect on the concepts of entertainment, engagement, and poetics applied to cinematic art and it inscribes this set of reflections within the scope of aesthetic authenticity in cinema. The discussion is structured around the question of the autonomy of art, understood as a kind of characterization or requirement, a topic that remains current in the critical debates around cinematographic works, with a focus on the relationship between film aesthetics and authenticity. In delimiting the field of film aesthetics, which he ties to questions of value, Andrew Klevan writes about:

those occasions where, for example, ideological, contextual or conceptual content, even if it relates to formal or presentational matters, is the primary concern and the basis of the evaluation. Equally, not all values relating to the visual, aural, and sensory, the features ostensibly underpinning aesthetic interest, are automatically of aesthetic value. (2018, p. 20)

Following this line of thought, expressive forms in film are the product of the patterns and relationships between the elements of *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, sound, and editing. Film aesthetics is then akin to film *artisticness*, since it concentrates on the artistic qualities of films, but with a philosophical bent. Hence, “aesthetics” in the concept of film aesthetics convokes approaches and inquiries

that go beyond the consideration of the mere aesthetic qualities of the work by themselves. Indeed, the aesthetic study of film can be conducted in multiple ways and usually transcend immediate aesthetic interests to include the treatment of a subject matter, for example.

Debates about entertainment films and committed or engaged cinema works, even when they are not presented in this way, have this problem as a background. I argue that the concepts of entertainment and commitment deserve a critical examination that articulates them with the notion of poetics, in order to think of cinema as an aesthetic and social phenomenon, with no alibi, with no other place than where it takes place, as Theodor Adorno did in relation to art (1997, pp. 225-261) – to think of cinema, therefore, as having a relative autonomy from other spheres and practices.

I discuss these theoretical questions also by analysing some films to make the discussion more concrete and the arguments more cogent. The films are analysed as works that affirm the aesthetic authenticity of the film practice in different ways. The first fulcrum is the absolute autonomy of art, synthesized in the Latin expression *Ars Gratia Artis* (art for art's sake). In contrast to this initial conception, the remaining sections develop the idea of the relative autonomy of cinema as an art, rooted in a critical investigation of the relationships between entertainment and alienation, engagement and poetics, and production and thought. Talking about *relationships* in these cases is already to critically challenge the understanding that these terms form dichotomies, that is, that they are mutually exclusive or contradictory concepts.

Authenticity is an additional concept that can be helpful in going beyond dichotomic thinking because it can be grasped as a quality with dialectical characteristics. Susanne Knaller contends that authenticity is a category that validates a work of art as art and shapes subject-object dynamics with normative and non-normative aspects (2012, pp. 28-29). She later introduces the gradual forging of the normative approach to artistic authenticity. The truth is that this discussion has been mainly developed outside of film studies, but it can easily be imported through the philosophy of film. Regarding a film, we may ask if and how it is authentic. In other words: in relation

to what can we say that a film is authentic? As the itinerary of this chapter will make clear, my proposal is that these questions can only be answered within the practices of film analysis and criticism, without an immutable standard to appeal to. A film would be authentic in relation to its artistic project and the expressive possibilities of film, which are ever-expanding. This is what Denis Dutton calls *expressive authenticity*, which investigates the meanings and identities of films by “marking and tracing relationships and influences” (2005, p. 270). The following sections will explore this kind of authenticity, starting with a broader discussion of the limits of conceptualizing works of art as autotelic, as things that have a purpose in themselves and not apart from themselves.

### Ars Gratia Artis

*Ars Gratia Artis* is a Latin expression associated with a vision of art that asserts its absolute autonomy. Coined by Benjamin Constant in 1804, it was the French Théophile Gautier, a key figure of romanticism, who was committed to the staunch defence of the idea of *art for art's sake*. In addition to studying the philosophical roots of this idea – in particular, in the work of the Germans Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant (Baumgarten 1970 and Kant 2002) – it is important to discuss its persistence and function in capitalist society as circumscribing the field of art to the ludic that is self-sufficient. In the context of cinema, this expression cannot be disconnected from the concept of entertainment – after all, *Ars Gratia Artis* is the official motto of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), the great production company founded in 1924 in the United States, engraved in its famous logo around a roaring lion. Be that as it may, the idea is also recurrent in the thinkers who are the heirs of Kantian aesthetics, who stratify cultural production in order to differentiate a priori what art is, without the necessary critical foundation, and to basically deny its inscription in the social and historical fabric (for an example of this approach, see Stolnitz 1965). The “purposeless” and “outside of oneself” of art thus works as a way of omitting or hiding the determining connections that weave, for example, a

film. This idea brings with it the loss of lucidity regarding the many possibilities and perspectives of cinematographic art in terms of creation and enjoyment and leads us to a broader discussion on the relationship between art and society.

This idea was particularly strong in France and associated with aestheticism, a theoretical approach that understood art as an activity aimed at producing formal perfection, devoid of any purpose, a kind of refined game performed only for itself. This did not aim at the uselessness of art, but its autonomy. In the preface written in 1834 by Gautier for his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1994, pp. 5-30), the exclusion of art from any external purpose is a weapon used against those who use art as a means of education and edification, but also as proof of the artist's distance from mercantile tendencies, the reducibility of the work of art to the criteria of bourgeois society, for which beauty and usefulness are antithetical. Therefore, we find two meanings for the expression *art for art's sake*: art as an exercise in virtuosity within a self-defined vacuum and the assertion of artistic values as autonomous values.

To say that art is purposeless is not usually to mean that it really has no purpose, but that its *sole purpose* is to be contemplated. It is a heritage from Kant's overarching aesthetics, which defends that contemplating a beautiful landscape, aesthetically perceiving and reflecting on such an object of nature, is a source of a pure and disinterested judgment of taste, and it is no different from contemplating the beauty of a work of art (2002, pp. 87-230). In order for these two aesthetic experiences to be considered essentially similar, the specific poetic work behind human-produced objects such as works of art, which include instances of land art and environmental sculpture, has to be ignored or erased. Yet ignoring or erasing this conceptual and material process of production is an amputation of art as a human activity. Moreover, as Nicholas Wolterstorff claims (2015), art is a social practice whose meanings and values rest on the fact that its works emerge in a larger context of relationships and that people respond to them in an equally complex situation.

The controversy about aestheticism and art for art's sake may seem outdated. More concretely, it may seem like a discussion that

belongs to the 19th century and has lost relevance today. Nevertheless, even if the question comes from a long time ago, it is still alive in contemporary thought on art. The idea of the absence of purpose in art can already be found in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1997), in which purposes for aesthetic-making are not indicated, although differences between poetic genres are established. At the same time, philosophers such as Michalle Gal (2015) have resumed the defence of aestheticism with new concepts such as deep formalism. To reflect on these issues, I chose three films produced in the United States as objects of study: *The Band Wagon* (1953), *Harlan County USA* (1976), and *Valse Triste* (1977). The restriction about the national origin of the works has to do with the fact that this is a country with contributions of great artistic value in popular, documentary, and experimental cinema, which are aesthetically diverse and also allow for comparison. It is also a nation with a history of intense conflicts within its capitalist society.

### Entertainment and Estrangement

It is common to think of popular cinema as entertainment (Dyer 2002), but the alternative expression *popular cinema* involves an aesthetic qualification, since it signals the way in which this type of cinematic art is produced to be accessible to a vast audience, without the need for specialized instruction or certain knowledge, unlike avant-garde art (Carroll 1998, pp. 243-244). Now *entertainment* is a word that, instead, refers us to the purposes of the experience of a film. In common and trivialized usage, this word is placed in opposition to art. On the one side is entertainment. On the other side, in stark contrast, is art. Each one seems to have its own field and distinct nature. Thus, entertainment would be just a form of fun and distraction. It is not, however, the distraction that Walter Benjamin was talking about, which is the ability to look in a non-concentrated, dispersed, but attentive manner (1969, pp. 239-240). It is an *estrangement*, an attempt to find refuge from the everyday world or to put it into perspective. In Bertolt Brecht's aesthetic, *estrangement* is part of a distancing effect (originally, *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-effekt*). The German playwright used it for the first time in the essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (Brecht 1964, pp. 91-99), published in 1936, in which he describes the process of hindering the audience's

simple identification with the characters to make spectators conscious of their reactions to the actions on stage. For Karl Marx, estrangement or alienation is associated with labour in a relationship that separates work from the means and products of production (1977, pp. 66-80). Estranged labour is a form of human self-estrangement through which there is an externalization of the worker's activity and output. Brecht's estrangement is a way of making critically strange what has become uncritically familiar and combatting alienated responses in theatre, or any other art for that matter, which is a cultural form of the alienation in capitalist society that Marx scrutinizes. What I mean by estrangement is similar to Brecht's definition because the goal is also to make film viewers more conscious and critical, but it is done by enhancing and perfecting entertainment as such instead of pulling away from it.

Cinema was and is often seen as entertainment – particularly if we unearth its genealogy of playful moving image devices such as the zoetrope. Either that or the cinematic corpus is separated between that which is entertainment and that which is art, therefore, making a distinction that is not descriptive of aesthetic differences, but that is evaluative, given that it equates entertainment with low artistic value and art, *properly speaking*, with high artistic value. This arrangement of categories is quite simplistic and avoids reflection and questioning about the concepts it uses. Accordingly, it is necessary to (re)think the very idea of entertainment, particularly the way in which imagination serves as its engine. *Entertaining* refers to the ability to treat someone in a certain way, to hold her or his attention, to be hospitable, even. More precisely, the notion of entertainment in film can be recovered to describe ways of making cinema that hold the spectator's attention, but that also invite her or him to consider or entertain dreams, feelings, and reasons.

In order to probe this rethinking of entertainment, let us look at a musical number from *The Band Wagon*, directed by Vincente Minnelli and starring Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse, one of the most popular musical films produced by MGM. Based on a 1931 Broadway musical starring Astaire and his sister Adele, the film follows a veteran of musical comedies, Tony Hunter (Astaire), who is concerned that his career in theatre and film may be declining.

He accepts the invitation of two friends, Lester and Lily Marton, to participate in a play written by them. Of course, the stage production faces many problems and obstacles. The film came at a time when racial segregation in the United States continued to generate social and political tensions (Sitkoff 2008). It was not until the year after *The Band Wagon* premiered that racial segregation in schools was considered unconstitutional through a United States Supreme Court decision in the case that opposed Oliver L. Brown to the Topeka Board of Education in 1954 (Patterson 2001). It was not until a decade later, in 1964, that the Civil Rights Act put an end to the various state systems of racial segregation known as the Jim Crow Laws.

In one of the film's most celebrated musical numbers, Astaire searches for an old theatre but finds a games room instead. Feeling low, he sings and dances to a song, "Shine Your Shoes," one of the highlights of *The Band Wagon*. His shoes are polished by a black shoe shiner. Philosopher Stanley Cavell refers to the way in which Astaire assumes the heritage of black culture through his dance movements in the scene, which the shoe shiner actually follows when he moves around him or interacts with him, and asserts the harmony between them (2005, p. 236). In these dance steps, they rehearse and find the equality that was still denied in reality. More than equality, Cavell seems to suggest that this cultural fraternity belongs to a still remote America, yet not fully realized (on this topic, see Cavell 1989). The moment when they lean on their left knees on the ground and shake their right hands is the most eloquent point of brotherhood that this sequence choreographs and enacts (for a reading that critically dialogues with Cavell's, see Gooding-Williams 2006, pp. 43-68).

### Engagement and Poetics

We can think of the opposite of entertainment as *engagement*. The escapism of the entertainment is thus counterposed by an engagement that would involve exposing and denouncing situations in which human dignity is called into question and, eventually, a commitment to the political struggle for the resolution or overcoming of these situations. The option for engagement is not, however, sufficient

in itself to give artistic value to a work. As we saw in the previous case from popular cinema, the key is once again in the way the film is worked out and gives form to entertainment or engagement or even to both. The same is to say that what counts is the *poetics*, the artistic work that creates a film (see Bordwell 2008). When criticizing engaged cinema because of the supposed instrumentalization of art, what seems to be rejected outright is the notion of *art as an instrument*, despite the fact that art can also be considered a peculiar type of instrument – for example, at a cognitive level. If cinema as an art is an instrument, it is also a means, not for transmitting according to the communication paradigm, but for expressing – that is, a medium in which communicational effectiveness is replaced by polysemous expressive qualities.

*Harlan County USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple, allows us to address the issue of engagement by linking it to poetics. The film documents the Brookside Strike, through which 180 coal miners and their wives fought for safer working conditions, fairer working practices, and decent wages starting in June 1972. The mine where they worked, located in Harlan County in southeastern Kentucky, was owned by the Eastover Coal Company, a subsidiary of the Duke Power Company. This large power company enjoyed annual profit increases of 170% in the early 1970s, while the miners' families lived in impoverished conditions, some of them living in dwellings without running water. They had received a 4% increase when the cost of living had increased by 7% (for a more developed and first-hand account of the history and memory of Harlan County, see Portelli 2011). The UMW – United Mine Workers of America union helped organize the strike. Kopple and her team spent years with the miners' families and recorded the difficulties they lived in, such as the workers' serious lung illnesses, and the situations they had to face, such as the violent attacks during the strike. The film's stance is not neutral and so it is unsurprising that the film crew was the target of some of the same physical assaults (Arthur 2006). The filmmaker and her collaborators also began to realize that their presence acted as a deterrent to violence. The thoughtful documentary *The Making of Harlan County USA* (2006) showed that some of the miners considered years later that

if the team had not been present and had not taken sides in their favour, the strike would not have been successful.

This tension is powerfully inscribed in *Harlan County USA*, in the arduous shooting, in the unpolished and grainy image, and in the moments chosen with precision to integrate the film. Rather than using a storytelling device to explain what is happening, the documentary lets people's actions speak for themselves. The presence of the camera is denounced by the protagonists, namely by the police officers placed at the service of the company and other armed men, who look directly at the lens – as if recognizing that they are being observed and have to weigh their actions. The sound has a different function, densely textured to transcend the visual moments of struggle and to connect them to the cultural and political history of the labour movement. Paul Arthur writes that “[a]mong *Harlan County USA*'s many deviations from vérité dogma is its innovative sound design, featuring the intensive use of working-class musical anthems, which is crucial to the film's emotional impact” (2006).

### Production and Thought

The notion of art for art's sake in film persists today in certain ways of theorising and discussing cinematic art. This is particularly noticeable in the field of criticism, in the appreciation of what is understood to be internal or specific to the art of film, without giving due attention to all the elements, references, and connections that make up a film. Cinema is often understood as a ludic construction in the aesthetic domain, with a purely autonomous essence, to which thematic elements of a political, social, or moral nature are added as appendices. Such a view is highly disseminated in newspapers and magazines, and it frequently equates technical achievement with artistic merit. This understanding of art is groundless because it confuses the possible decomposition of elements of a work with the differentiation of value between each one of these components. It fails to consider the function and relationship of each of these elements in the structure of the work as well as to tackle the work as an organic whole. Art is not an activity that exists alongside or above

the social fabric and the historical conjuncture. Artistic works do not exist in a separated and hermetic space, isolated from the forces that determine them and with which they inevitably dialogue, even when this dialogue takes the form of a refusal.

The short film *Valse Triste* by Bruce Conner allows us to fathom this arguably more lucid way of understanding cinematic art. Conner's lyrical cinema is inseparable from an experimental montage work based on archival footage. This laborious activity develops from a playful sense of visual combinations that produce creative associations, sometimes also incorporating a narrative structure. In the artist's filmography, *Valse Triste* follows *Take the 5:10 to Dreamland* (1976), to which it is related. Both films use sepia-toned images and some of the shots of the first work are re-used. The two films open with a shot of a little boy going to sleep, followed by his dream which evokes the filmmaker's past.

*Valse Triste* is an intimate work that emerges from memories of the author's childhood in Kansas. Conner worked from existing filmed material, what is called *found footage*. He, therefore, builds his vision from the visions of other people. Finding his own memories in the images collected and produced by others may seem like a contradiction, but that is what gives the film its wide and open character. Simultaneously, this work appears wrapped in a dreamlike mantle that the narrative structure underlines when, in the beginning, the little boy lies down to sleep and dream. It is with great frankness and subtlety that Conner evokes his childhood days. Unlike some of his other films, here the criteria for selecting images seems straightforward from the outset (on Conner's first works, see Sitney 2002, 297-300). All the images originate from the 1940s, the period when he was a child, so that, through the reuse of these visual materials, he can parallel his life experiences. The kid who goes to bed appears to dream most of the film and the resulting work is made up of fragments that awaken memories: the steam train, the coal mines, the sky, the sheep, the landscape of ears, among other images. Regarding the music, the composition we hear throughout the film is "Valse triste," op. 44, no. 1, a small orchestral piece written by the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius in the early 20th century. It was originally used in a scene

from Sibelius's brother-in-law Arvid Järnefelt's play *Kuolema* (*Death*) in 1903. The theatrical scene took place at night. A son watches over his sick mother, lying on a bed, and falls asleep from exhaustion. Gradually, a reddish light diffuses through the room (Clive 2019). The reddish in the theatre play gives way to the yellowish in the film. *Valse Triste* combines images, joined together by the narrative of a dream that is a memory and by the warm and melancholic colours. The lugubrious piece of music is another element that underlines the continuity between the images.

### Conclusions

In a recent book that discusses aesthetic and artistic autonomy and demonstrates the relevance of this topic in the philosophy of art, Robert Stecker argues that *aesthetic value* is autonomous, that is, that it does not derive from other values, while *artistic value* is not autonomous, but heteronomous (2005, pp. 31-48). Following this author, and others like Noël Carroll (1999, pp. 200-201), we can say that the aesthetic value has to do, not only with our experience of a work of art, but with the way in which that experience involves the appreciation of the formal qualities of a work. Consequently, artistic value includes cognitive, historical, moral, interpretative aspects, among others, which have as much to do with the context in which the work emerges as with its aural, visual, and narrative features. It also has to do with the perspective or gaze that the work constructs. In this sense, what Stecker clearly proposes is that art – cinematic art, for example – is *relatively* autonomous. Complete autonomy would mean that the cinematic sphere would and could exist completely unconnected with other spheres of social life.

In any case, the value attributed to a work of art is always historically situated and often in a double manner: on the one hand, in relation to the historical situation of the interpretation and, on the other hand, in relation to the original historical situation of the production. György Lukács develops the idea that art oscillates between a temporal essence and a timeless value that confront each other in the singularity of the work, inseparable from its unique insertion into the historical-temporal course (1970; for a systematic review of

Lukács' aesthetics and this idea in particular, see Királyfalvi 1975, pp. 71-87). This singularity, understood in a Hegelian way, is the knot of the process of becoming in which universality and particularity are moments (Lukács 1970, p. 61). It amounts to challenging the romantic and idealist position that attributes full sovereignty over the production of art to the artist, conceived as a demiurge in an imaginary or remote land – and versions of this belief germinated also in cinema, for instance in extreme variants of authorism.

Furthermore, for Adorno, the historical dimension of works of art demands the acknowledgment that the artist's choices are made in precise circumstances because art is created under determined conditions of material production:

To this extent, each artwork could be charged with false consciousness and chalked up to ideology. In formal terms, independent of what they say, they are ideology in that a priori they posit something spiritual as being independent from the conditions of its material production and therefore as being intrinsically superior and beyond the primordial guilt of the separation of physical and spiritual labour. (1997, p. 227)

The temporality/timelessness of art is a dichotomy analogous to the autonomy/heteronomy dichotomy of art. In each case, leaning only to one side or only to the other is a reduction of the complexity of the artistic phenomenon. These dichotomies can be contrasted with a dialectical relationship. In concrete terms, art is always situated between the need to isolate itself from other dimensions of reality and the need to fully insert itself into it (Anceschi 1936, pp. 226-229). Art is an aesthetic fact as well as a social fact (Adorno 1997, p. 250). Adorno articulates artistic autonomy and heteronomy as the “double character of art – something that severs itself from empirical reality and thereby from society's functional context and yet is at the same time part of empirical reality and society's functional context” (1997, p. 252). The program of defining the work of art as self-contained and isolated is political at its core and it results in the fetishization of these objects as well as their disconnection from the process of production. According to this view, “artworks, products of social labour that are

subject to or produce their own law of form, seal themselves off from what they themselves are” (Adorno 1997, p. 227).

The analyses developed in the previous sections demonstrate these points and also exemplify the need for Klevan's methodological caution:

It is important not to fall prey to a popular misconception [...] that aesthetics is equivalent to Formalism: an adherence to form at the expense of content (for example, subject matter). Nor is it equivalent to Aestheticism if this is taken to mean an exaggerated devotion to beautiful forms, once again at the expense of content. Aesthetics does not discount or demean moral, political, emotional, cognitive, or conceptual content. This content is important, and often essential to an aesthetic evaluation, but the engagement will be with the value of its expression through the form of the work. (2018, p. 20)

This passage goes beyond concerns about methodologies for the close analysis of films. It calls into question the dichotomy between form and content in film, which disregards the role that each one plays in the *integral whole* that is a cinematic work. The same can be said concerning the dichotomies entertainment/alienation, engagement/poetics, and production/thought. My analysis of the three films sought to overcome these dichotomies very precisely through their expressive authenticity, based on a kind of poetics that genuinely uses, deepens, and expands the potential effects and meanings of cinema. Each of the films is expressively authentic in its own way. *The Band Wagon* is authentic insofar as it employs the artistic possibilities of a popular cinematic genre, the musical, to construct a fantasy that responds to the historical phenomena of racism and segregation in the United States. *Harlan County USA* is authentic to the extent that it uses the conditions of its small-scale production to unite with the labour movement and give aesthetic form to the precarious life of miners and their families. Finally, *Waise Triste* is authentic inasmuch as it takes advantage of experimental collage of archival images to tap into the links between social history and personal memory, and dream and reality.

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