

The Cinematic Real: Aesthetics and Spectacle

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The Transcendence of Aesthetic Realism

Contemporary film culture, particularly mainstream film culture, esteems an essentialist notion of realism in which cinema is a mimetic art, or a ‘reality myth,’ to paraphrase André Bazin. Cinema promises the possibility of the perfection of representative art: the revelation of truth and a profoundly humanist capacity for the illumination of Nature, self and culture. This is perhaps why studies of culture (and the corollary focus on subcultured identity) seem to have turned their analytical gaze to the cinematic screen.

Kracauer offers a seminal formulation of the realism principle of cinema:

All these creative efforts [of the filmmaker] are in keeping with the cinematic approach as long as they benefit, in some way or other, the medium’s substantive concern with our visible world. As in photography, everything depends on the ‘right’ balance between the realistic tendency and the formative tendency; and the two tendencies are well balanced if the latter does not try to overwhelm the former but eventually follows its lead.¹

According to this formulation, cinema presents the capacity to reveal the Real in its fullest sense, in its image and process.

Foregrounding the realist aspect of film is often perceived as a necessary component of criticism. Thus Robert Ray suggests that

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 39.

the American Cinema's apparently natural subjection of style to narrative in fact depended on a historical accident: the movies' origins lay in the late nineteenth century whose predominant popular arts were the novel or the theatre...it adopted the basic tactic and goal of the realistic novel.²

In this way Classical Hollywood cinema was thus connected to a realist aesthetic that achieved its zenith in the nineteenth century realist novel and drama. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* are read as essentially social historical dramas that find an ancestor in American realism and naturalism of the late nineteenth century. Similarly, in popular media, the greater part of film reviews consider film's relation to a pre-existing and eminently discoverable reality for a sense of its aesthetic or cinematic worth. Thus, Mike Leigh or John Sayles are praised for their unique brand of social realism. Leigh's cinematic philosophy esteems realism over spectacle, the Real over the generic artifice. Discussing *Vera Drake*, Leigh asserts that his characters are 'specific and idiosyncratic.'³ Of his artistic philosophy, Leigh suggests that 'primarily, my films are a response to the way people are, the way things are as I experience them.'⁴ The implication here is that a notion of the Real pours forth the artistic representation as near to verisimilitude as the medium will allow. Moreover, the triumph of the Real finds form (or at least credibility) in the departure from the *non-Real*. *Secrets and Lies* employs naturalistic acting styles and camera angles to ground the image in the parameters of an external social reality. In the same way the naturalistic cinematography of *Matewan* or *Lonestar* complements Sayles's political project that engages with material working conditions and a contemporary class-consciousness.

But realism is not merely located in the ostensibly 'real' or 'true' story. Genre animation such as *The Incredibles* is valued for what it might say about the 'real world,' and by extension, real lived experiences and even a sense of the communal self. Lisa Schwarzbaum, writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, suggests that

² Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 34.

³ Quoted in Sean O'Hagan, 'I'm allowed to do what I want — that amazes me!' Interview. *The Observer*, Dec. 5, 2004.

⁴ Quoted in Michael Coveney, *The World According to Mike Leigh* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 5. [Originally *International Herald Tribune*, Feb. 2, 1994.]

the family's escapades in the field are indeed stupendous, an homage to the exploits of classic comic-book masters of the universe. But the true heroism in this spectacular movie — as worthy of a best picture nomination as any made with fleshly stars — shines brightest in that suburban house, where Bob, with his midlife bulge and his thinning hair, pines nostalgically for the old days, and Helen marches anxiously forward, bending to her family's needs.⁵

The value of the digitally animated image is discovered by Schwarzbaum in character, theme and narrative rather than image, shot, sequence, or a notion of spectacle. *The Incredibles* is spectacular, but for the most unspectacular reasons.

Similarly, the conventional (in both senses of the word) genre film is often subjected to critical scrutiny based on a traditional realist approach to cinema. Genre cinema is less than 'reality,' but it functions for mainstream film reviewers in much the same way, evidenced by Schwarzbaum's approach to *The Incredibles*. David Fincher's *Se7en*, a remarkable exercise in cinematic style, is more readily appreciated as 'realistic' *neo-noir* than hyper-stylised revisionist spectacle. Classical genre cinema of the 1930s and 1940s did a very similar thing, transposing an essentially classical realism for its contemporary audience. Consider, for example, the invisible editing of the Hollywood studio film of the 1930s and 1940s.⁶ Finding its business in the genre film, the studio aesthetic exemplified an editing process that diminished the degree of artifice in plot and characterisation. The perfection of the *film noir* in *Double Indemnity* offers a depiction of a harsher reality of post-Depression America (servicing the traditional realist aesthetic) amid the stylised dialogue and acting.

Bazin and the Myth of Total Cinema

André Bazin offers a vital point of origin of cinema as a predominantly realist medium insofar as his notion of reality is anchored in

⁵ Lisa Schwarzbaum, 'The Incredibles.' *Entertainment Weekly*, 15 Sep. 2005.

⁶ Hollywood's so-called 'invisibility of style' worked on the idea that the connection between one shot and the next (the particular choice of editing strategy) reproduced the perceptual expectation of the viewer, thus appearing 'invisible' in spite of its complexity.

a historical privilege accorded to the representative or mimetic art form. Bazin recuperates the ethos of classical realism as the aspiration of a new *kind* of image in the cinema: 'Painting was forced, as it turned out, to offer us illusion and this illusion was reckoned sufficient unto art. Photography and the cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all, and in its very essence, our obsession with realism.'⁷ He is correct to begin with the assumption of realism as an obsession, a necessity to contort what is fundamentally artificial (in this case, the cinematic image) into the shape of what it is said to indelibly represent. But rather than address the ontology of realism as a representative standard (that is, the Real as aestheticised reality), Bazin addresses the technological evolution toward the perfect realisation of the Real. In his work on the photograph, he explores the 'ontology of the photographic image,' in which he suggests a profound ontological shift from the earlier, and inherently flawed, realism of the master painter. 'No matter how skilful the painter, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity. The fact that a human hand intervened cast a shadow of doubt over the image.'⁸ However, in the ascendance of the photograph over the representative painting, 'for the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent [the camera lens].'⁹ For Bazin, the photographic image is empowered with the greatest ontology yet to 'lay bare the realities.'¹⁰ Thus, even before the technological components of image-making had been realised, the ontological foundation of representative art was to reproduce the Real without the impingement of the subjectivity of the artist or the shortcomings of a primitive technology: the crudity of an artist's tools, the unreliability of the human faculties to reproduce perfectly what they perceived. In realising this myth, cinema achieves what it had been destined for, an art laying bare the world in 'all its cruelty and ugliness.'¹¹ This was an image that was pure in relation to its object, an art of the Real and a new artistic realism.

⁷ Bazin, André. 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image.' In *What is Cinema*, Volume 1, trans. Hugh Gray, 9-16. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967.

⁸ *ibid.* 12.

⁹ *ibid.* 13.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 15.

¹¹ André Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema.' In *What is Cinema*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 27.

Depth of Field and Focus

Bazin locates the realisation of the myth of total cinema after 1940, particularly in Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942). It is his contention that Welles's use of 'deep focus' and 'depth of field' challenges the ontology of the montage as the cinematic purveyor of reality. Deep focus is a cinematographic device in which the focus of a single shot is broadened to encompass more than a central figure or a single point of reference. The dominant style of classical Hollywood cinema (1930s and 1940s) was a 'shot-reverse shot' sequence in which the spectator is presented with a shot and a subsequent reverse shot contextualising the arrangement. A shot would therefore have a focal point (commonly centre-screen), a high contrast with a background that remained out of focus, and a subsequent cut to a reverse shot to give the focal arrangement a point of reference. Robert Ray suggests that the shot-reverse shot was integral to the maintenance of the 'invisibility of style' in classical Hollywood: 'The shot-reverse shot figure, therefore, played a crucial role in a formal paradigm whose basic tactic was the concealment of the necessity of choice.'¹² In contriving the invisibility of style editing process in its major, primarily genre films, the Hollywood studio system presented the cinematic image as unadorned, servicing only the structural requirements of the narrative. The shot-reverse shot drew the spectator into the action, collapsing the screen that ordinarily functioned as a point of demarcation between cinematic text and spectator. The screen was dissolved, arriving almost paradoxically at the perfection of the realist aesthetic through the immersion of the spectator in the story, characterisation, thematic, and by extension, the Hollywood studio system. The spectator, relinquished of the necessity to choose (or forge her subjective interpretation of the sequence of images), assumes that the reality on screen is identical to the one it represents.

In response to various strategies of montage, Bazin celebrates the cinematic image's potential to reproduce the Real, and thus to reject the inherent artificiality of 'visible' editing, exemplified in the work of Eisenstein. If montage is a 'collision of two factors which gives rise to an

¹² Ray, 39.

idea,¹³ Bazin considers the process of arrangement, or the ordering of single shots, an intrusion into the visual reality: ‘It is simply a question of respect for the spatial unity of an event at the moment when to split it up would change it from something real into something imaginary.’¹⁴ The montage is essentially a putting together of two or more otherwise unrelated shots into an ordered system, forming a narrative component. This ordered system does not permit the spectator to partake in the realisation of the image on the screen because the order of the image sequence is determined wholly by the filmmaker.

Bazin conceptualises a transcendental Real, an *a priori* ‘spatial unity’ that pre-exists the cinematic representation, the reproduced image. His ‘language of cinema’ is essentially a language with which to reproduce the inherent ‘*continuum* of reality.’¹⁵ Cinema is a system of *reproduction*. This ontology of the real image is manifested in the deep focus shot.

The use of the long take in *Citizen Kane* permits the action to unfold according to a natural spatial and temporal dimension. The extended take is favoured by Welles over the cut, approximating the movement of the actor to real life, and offering the spectator the depiction of movement as it would appear off-screen. Bordwell and Thompson offer a detailed reading of a sequence early in *Kane* in which the camera unobtrusively moves from a long exterior shot to an interior conversation involving characters positioned in various depths of shot.¹⁶ The scene is imbued with a sense of intimacy, and yet there is a fluidity of movement from exterior to interior shot. The depth of focus emphasises the inherent continuity of the shot — background to foreground becomes a space that remains in focus.

The immersion of the image in focus functions literally as a resistance to the cut. While the camera holds on Charles’s aunt and uncle inside the house, Charles is never ‘out of focus’ in the exterior, but merely off-screen. This is precisely the revolutionary aspect of deep focus that several critics have failed to appreciate. Deep focus and the long take equate

¹³ Eisenstein, 19.

¹⁴ André Bazin, ‘The Virtues and Limitations of Montage.’ In *What is Cinema*, trans. Hugh Grey (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 50.

¹⁵ Bazin, ‘The Evolution of the Language of Cinema’, 37. Original emphasis.

¹⁶ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1980), 223-227.

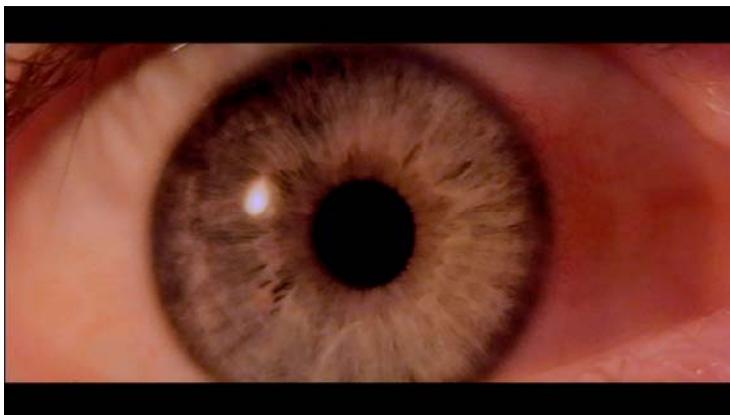
to an inherent continuity of the image in which action and movement are in a sense always occurring. For Bazin, this offers the nearest approximation of an external reality in which, if a person turns her head from one direction to another, what thereby leaves her field of vision continues its own progression into the future while she remains oblivious. Space and time are in a state of perpetual movement in relation to the spectator gaze.

In contrast, the cut is for Bazin connected to an earlier fascination with the still-life image captured by an earlier form of reproductive technology:

Orson Welles restored to cinematographic illusion a fundamental quality of reality — its continuity. Classical editing, deriving from Griffith, separated reality into successive shots which were just a series of either logical or subjective points of view of an event...The construction thus introduces an obviously abstract element into reality. Because we are so used to such abstractions, we no longer sense them.¹⁷

One could contrast Welles's 'continuous' shot with Kubrick's use of the cut as an organising principle of space and time in the last chapter of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. For Welles, deep focus maintains continuity in the represented image. For Kubrick, the cut literally erases a figure from the shot. After Bowman (Keir Dullea) exits the wormhole, he is shot from outside the spaceship. The first cut fractures the causality of the conventional shot reverse-shot. Now the spectator sees Bowman positioned outside the spaceship, but the point of view shot positions the spectator *inside* the spaceship. The prior incarnation of Bowman (who materialised in the spaceship after exiting the wormhole) is now occupied subjectively by the spectator.

¹⁷ André Bazin, 'An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of Liberation.' In *What is Cinema, Volume II*, trans. Hugh Grey (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 28.



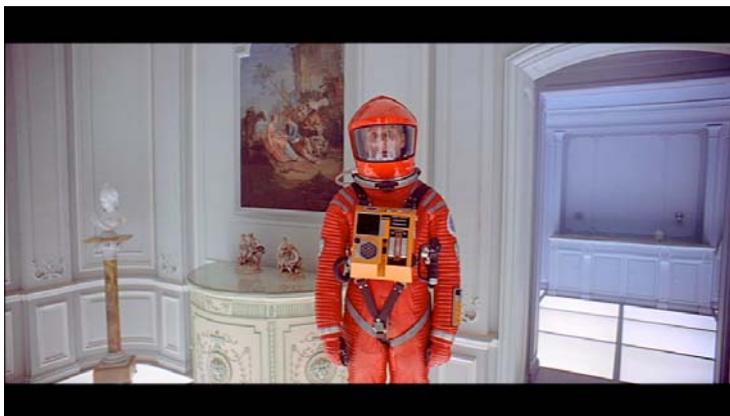
2001 Fig 1



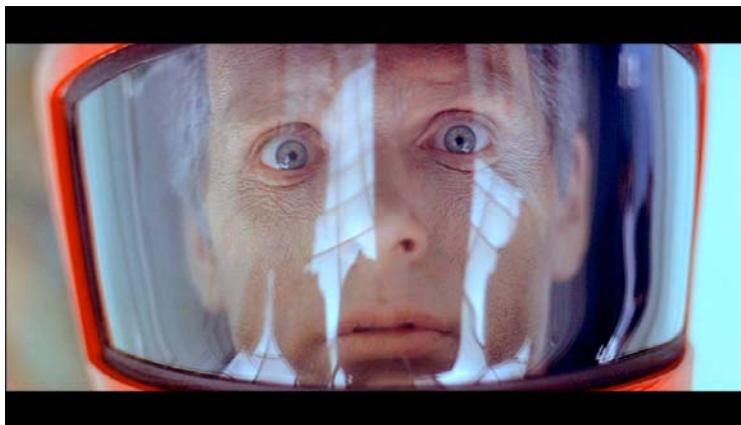
2001 Fig 2



2001 Fig 3



2001 Fig 4



2001 Fig 5



2001 Fig 6



2001 Fig 7



2001 Fig 8

The cut installs the spectator into Bowman's subjectivity that has *simultaneously* been displaced to the exterior of the ship. This occurs three more times as a hard cut erases Bowman's presence from the scene. The cut is used throughout this extraordinary sequence to dissociate the new Bowman (the precursor to the Star Child) from a natural cause-effect determinism. In this case, the erasure is literally achieved through the cut,

which alters the point of view of the sequence, transforming the (subjective) reality of the shot. This is Kubrick's remarkable visualisation of a quantum space and time through cinematographic principles.

More Than Real: Beyond Bazinian Realism

A meaningful critique of Bazin's realism must engage with his theory of the ontology of the cinematic image. We must begin with his notion of a possible cinematic realism that is realised in opposition to the montage. If the montage is a strategic connecting of unrelated images to form a narrative segment (the montage itself), deep focus allows the shot to maintain an inherent spatial unity by erasing the edit, the join, and by allowing a free flow of the temporal and spatial reproduction of the Real. Deep focus allows the camera to photograph reality *as it is*. To address this, I will return to a scene in *Kane*.

Charles Foster Kane sits in an office signing away his great fortune. Welles characteristically places this scene a third of the way through the narrative and returns to Kane's youth in the scene that immediately follows. The sequence in which Kane stands from the desk and walks to a rectangular window, pauses and then returns to sign the document is striking for a number of reasons.¹⁸ The single take is held in deep focus. The spectator perceives the contours of the desk, Mr Thatcher, Mr Leland at the right of shot, as well as the rectangular windows in the background. Kane stands and moves towards the windows while the shot holds in deep focus. As Kane approaches the window, the spectator realises that the depth of field of this shot is also a trick of perspective. The windows on the set are six feet above the ground.

¹⁸ *Citizen Kane*. DVD Two Disc Special Edition (Warner Bros. 2001): 27-28 minutes.



Citizen Kane Fig 1



Citizen Kane Fig 2



Citizen Kane Fig 3



Citizen Kane Fig 4



Citizen Kane Fig 5



Citizen Kane Fig 6



Citizen Kane Fig 7



Citizen Kane Fig 8

Roger Ebert describes this as an ‘optical illusion,’¹⁹ which of course it is. The spectator is deceived into thinking the windows are conventionally proportioned for an office building. Instead, the spatial dimensions of the shot are incongruent with an external reality while emphasising the ‘reality’ of the scene through long takes, deep focus, and depth of field. Thus, while the scene is exemplary of deep focus as a cinematographic device, it is also an example of Welles’s ingenious use of deep focus to deliberately encode the Real with an inherent artificiality.

This illusion of realism is employed several times in *Kane*. The famous opening on Xanadu, Kane’s pleasure palace, is a seamless blend of a constructed set and a matte drawing of Xanadu’s façade; both set and drawing are held in the shot in deep focus. Rather than revealing the reality of the shot, deep focus positions a cinematic gaze that is subject to an inherent illusion: Xanadu, constructed in the spatial reality of the shot, does not exist. The trick of perspective is used a number of times in *Kane* to symbolise the rise and fall of a ‘great man.’ As Ebert suggests, it works as a ‘visual pun,’²⁰ but it works also as a cinematographic technique that signifies meaning in more than one way.

Welles employs a similar visual pun in the shot in which Kane walks towards a gigantic fireplace in Xanadu’s great hall, exemplifying what Wood has called ‘the most artificial kind of cinema.’²¹ According to Ebert, *Kane* is ‘filled with special effects. When you look at the movie for the first time, you just see a political rally [Ebert is referring to a shot of Boss Jim Getty and Kane exiting a civic hall]. You don’t think of it as a special effects shot, but it’s as contrived as anything in *Star Wars* ... it’s made out of thin air.’²² Deep focus is a striking innovation in the technical aspect of *Kane*, yet it is essentially a cinematographic strategy employed to aestheticise a narrative in a visual medium. Welles employed deep focus precisely to foreground the contrivance of the cinematic shot (as Godard

¹⁹ Ebert, ‘Commentary.’

²⁰ Ebert, ‘Commentary.’

²¹ Robin Wood, ‘The Trouble With Marnie.’ *Marnie (The Hitchcock Collection)*. DVD. Universal, 2001. While Wood refers to Hitchcock’s ‘virtuosity’ with the stylistics of the shot and sequence, this artificiality might equally apply to Welles’s manipulation of field and focus in the manufacture of non-reality cinema.

²² Ebert, ‘Commentary.’

and Truffaut would do two decades later, inspiring a wave of innovative auteurs).

Cinema fractured as a mimetic form in the years after Welles, and *Kane* must surely be credited as a landmark film in this aesthetic revolution. Mimesis was ultimately subsumed by the cinematic possibilities to contrive variations on the Real. In the work of Welles, Hitchcock, and, later, Godard, the cinematic and the Real were absorbed into each other. The classic shower scene in *Psycho* is constructed out of forty separate shots in a sequence lasting less than a minute.²³ The cinematicity is foregrounded in the very deliberate arrangement of the sequence. In this scene, Hitchcock reveals only that the Real was extinguished when the cameras started to roll. It was already cinematic.

Bazin is relevant to any study of film aesthetics (and certainly any consideration of cinematic realism) simply because his concept of the film image is well defined. But why should depth of focus have anything at all to do with a more faithful reproduction of an external reality? Bazin formulated his myth of cinema in response to what he saw as a transformation in signification practices, though he might have conceived of this transformation quite apart from the structuralist apparatus of Christian Metz and others.²⁴ But exactly what is transformed in Welles's *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*? *Kane*'s cinematography does not allow a richer interpretation of the character. If anything, what I've argued is that the essential artifice of deep focus mirrors the inconclusiveness of the narrative. The narrative structure of *Kane* is perhaps most interesting in the context of the later European art films (*Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *L'Année Dernière À Marienbad*) that employed non-linear narrative structures to foreground the artifice in narrative composition.

Focus and Signification

The ontology of deep focus as inherently 'real' fares poorly in the light of

²³ See François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (London: Granada, 1969), 348-352.

²⁴ Metz, 'Some Points in the Semiotics of Cinema.' Here Metz draws on the semiotic structure of connotation and denotation conceptualised in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. For a useful summary of the contribution of the structuralists to film semiotics, see Warren Buckland, 'Film Semiotics.' In *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 84-104.

post-structuralist theories of the image and the perpetual displacement of signification. Roland Barthes addresses the ontology of the photograph in a way that challenges Bazin's model. He concurs initially with Bazin's ontology in his essay, *The Photographic Message*:

The photograph professing to be a mechanical analogue of reality, its first-order message in some sort completely fills its substance and leaves no place for the development of a second-order message. Of all the structures of information, the photograph appears as the only one that is exclusively constituted and occupied by a 'denoted' message, a message which totally exhausts its mode of existence.²⁵

Here the denoted comprises a first order signification, the unmediated relation of the signifier to the signified, the photographic image to its representation, an external reality. As does Bazin, Barthes contrasts the fullness of photographic reality with the mediation of the Real in traditional representative arts: 'In short, all these 'imitative' arts comprise two messages: a *denoted* message, which is the *analogon* itself, and a *connoted* message, which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it.'²⁶ Yet Barthes very quickly re-organises the ontology of the photographic image according to a characteristically Barthesian scepticism of the 'unmediatedness' of the Real:

The photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art' of the treatment, or the 'writing', or the rhetoric, of the photograph).²⁷

Barthes's system of denotation and connotation can be applied to Welles's use of deep focus. On the level of denotation, the depth of focus in the sequence in *Kane* in which the young Charles Foster Kane is removed from his home opens up the temporal and spatial dimensions of the shot: young Charles playing in the snow, the intrusion of his mother's head into the right of shot, the long track back through the window to rest on a high

²⁵ Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message.' In *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 18.

²⁶ *ibid.* 17.

²⁷ *ibid.* 20.

angle shot of a table in which Charles will be signed over to Mr Thatcher (this scene has a remarkable congruence, stylistically and thematically, to the scene in which Charles signs away his beloved paper in Mr Thatcher's office). The cinematic reality is denotatively faithful to the dimensions of the scene external to the shot. But the second-order meanings, the connoted 'treatment' (to use Barthes's term), only proliferate with the use of deep focus. Deep focus results in an explosion of connotative meanings. This is precisely what Barthes has in mind with the paradox of the photographic message: 'It is that here the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message *without a code*.'²⁸ Deep focus lays bare the lack of a coding (or compositional arrangement): a scene literally without a 'viewing' code or template.

The unconventionality (and invisibility) of Welles's cinematography foregrounds the camera as a signifiatory mechanism. This invisibility is perfectly contrasted with the 'invisibility of style' of Classical Hollywood cinema. Hollywood achieved a classical realism through, paradoxically, a complex and highly structured editing style. In *Kane*, rather than 'laying bare the realities,' the gaze of the deep focus camera, untethered from the edited cell and the montage, reorganises the spatial and temporal sense of the shot. The depth of focus lays bare only the visibility of the contrivance in which the deep focus shot is an *intrusion into* an assumed invisibility of style. The focal depth (in Bazin's notion of the continuity of the image, it is an infinite focal depth) provides the perfect canvas with which to explore the artifice of shot composition (as Welles did throughout his career, most deliberately in *Touch of Evil*). *Kane's* visual sensibility is based on this duality: a freeing of the conventions of classical Hollywood editing to explore the boundaries of what Hitchcock called 'pure cinema.' The purity of the image achieves its resonance as a *photographed* (and thus reproduced) reality; deep focus allows the photograph to draw the entirety of the Real into its construction.

Consider the obverse to the deep focus shot in a striking sequence in Wong Kar Wai's *Chungking Express*. After a short sequence in which a man and woman converse across a food counter for the first time (the spectator is informed that she will fall in love with him in six hours), the man leans forward and summons the woman to him with a gesture. The

²⁸ *ibid.* 19. Original emphasis.

scene cuts to a close-up profile of the two faces that now fill the shot.²⁹ The man's face, nearest the camera, is in macro zoom and perfectly in focus; the woman's face, according to the spatial unity of the scene, should be positioned slightly behind his and marginally out of focus, if at all. However, her image is luridly out of focus. She has been positioned some distance behind the man to capture the extreme shallow focus of the shot.

If Welles's deep focus is striking for its unconventionality, Wong's shallow focus is equally provocative. Yet neither evokes a sense of an external reality. Rather, both techniques foreground the artifice of the shot. In terms of Barthes's connotative reading, Wong complements the jarring shallow focus with the anachronistic music accompaniment, *California Dreaming* (The Mamas and The Papas) and a cool existentialism that recalls Godard's *Breathless*. Shortly after this first meeting, a medium shot holds the man at left screen and the woman at right. The depth of field of the shot is visually striking and noticeably unconventional. Wong has the actors move in super-slow motion and speeds up the film. Thus, the passers-by move at twice the normal speed while the man and woman appear to inhabit a spatial and temporal frame in isolation.

Deep focus and depth of field are cinematographic performance spaces that express only an ontology of the constructed image. Cinema is and always has been about contorting a crude reality to the aesthetic elegance of the cinematic image. How can the spectator respond affectively to cinematic physicality without an awareness of its status as constructed artifice? Welles and Wong explore a film aesthetics in contrast to what had preceded it. Welles's deep focus stands out only in an era in which the Hollywood studio had encoded in its major pictures an invisibility of style. Welles, always a precocious talent, celebrated his pioneering of a technical innovation that has since become legendary to theorists and historians of film, if not mainstream film audiences. Rather than revealing a reality beneath the artifice of Hollywood, Welles exploded the connotative possibilities of the cinematic image, and Hitchcock, Godard, Scorsese, Tarantino and Wong only followed suit.

²⁹ *Chungking Express*. DVD. Rolling Thunder Pictures: 42:30 minutes.

The Transcendence of the Image

The legacy of classical cinematic realism is such that the spectator assumes a degree of passivity. Realism, essentialised as it has been in the work of Bazin and others, or the adoption of the studio's 'invisibility of style' of the 1930s and 1940s, requires the spectator to insert herself into the image or, paradoxically, remove herself from it. A knowing engagement with the dimensions of the spatial and temporal *disunity* — what I have referred to as the inherent artifice of the cinematic image — is forbidden. Consider, for example, Graeme Turner's conception of the point of view shot.³⁰ Turner's book is a detailed work on cinema as a 'social practice,' and to this end he attempts to establish the potency of the camera as a tool of signification. In discussing the sequence in *Citizen Kane* in which Kane stands over Susan Alexander, Turner writes: 'In this sequence, the manipulation of camera angles is the major means by which the audience is informed about the changing relationship between the two characters.'³¹ That is, Kane looming over Susan Alexander conveys Kane's largeness and Susan Alexander's smallness. In this schematic, a high-angled shot connotes a relationship of superiority/inferiority (or dominance/submissiveness), the low-angled shot the reverse. However, Turner fails to address the inadequacy of the shot as a (mimetic) signifiatory unit. The cinematic shot exists in a system of relations of various modes of signification: music, lighting, props, the physical presence of the actors, etc. Kane's point of view is challenged by subsequent shots of his diminishment in front of the gigantic fireplace or the wildly disproportionate interiors of the film. The point of view is less a physical space or the interior of a character's subjectivity than a *cinematic* reconfiguration of these physical (and psychical) dimensions. There is no point at which the shot — long, zoom, high angle, low angle, point of view — is a purely mimetic mechanism.

Turner goes on to address a sequence in Spielberg's *Jaws* in which the spectator apparently inheres in the shark's point of view:

In *Jaws*, we are given numerous shots of the victims from the underwater point of view of the shark. The confusion caused by our discomfort with this alignment, and our

³⁰ Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 52.

³¹ *ibid.* 52.

privileged knowledge of the shark's proximity to the victim, exacerbates the tension and the impression of impotence felt by the audience and enhances our sense of the vulnerability of the victims.³²

Jaws has two striking sequences in which the camera constructs a relationship between the shark and the spectator through the camera's point of view. The justly famous opening shows a young woman swim from shore, leaving her friend on the beach. After a long shot in which the woman is seen back-stroking through the calm sea, the camera cuts to a close-up of the still water, ruptured from beneath by the woman. The idyllic quality of the scene is maintained as the woman turns from camera towards the last sunlight and the shore, heightening the stillness and her isolation from the party. The scene then cuts to the first underwater shot. At this point, the spectator cannot inhere in the shark's point of view simply because the denotative message, to return to Barthes, has provided only the enchantment of the still water, a socially transgressive skinny-dip and the body of a naked woman treading water. The camera begins a slow movement towards the woman from beneath the water, and only then is the accompanying John Williams theme heard. The spectator is transported into a cinematic 'space' through the rising theme and the slow zoom.

It is not only the intrusion of the shark into the idyllic setting that sustains the suspense. Prior to the zoom, the underwater shot positions the spectator in a realm of cinematic *otherness*, a voyeuristic distance. She does not vicariously share in the power and brutality of the shark, or in the weakness and defilement of the young woman. The spectator enters the cinematic image and fractures the mimetic, and conventional, functionality of shot signification. The fracture occurs only at the commencement of the slow zoom and theme, anticipated with silence and a long pause. I agree with Turner about the 'confusion caused by our discomfort.'³³ I cannot agree, however, that Spielberg's camera is subject to the conventional parameters of mimesis. The point of view shot in this case (and several times in *Jaws*) is less than reliable as an indication, or initiation, of the spectator's subjectivity into the fictional subjectivity (of the shark) on screen.

³² *ibid.* 53.

³³ *ibid.* 53.

Zizek offers a similar reading of a much discussed sequence in *Vertigo* in which Hitchcock corrupts the conventional shot-reverse shot as a signification of point of view. Scotty (James Stewart) enters Ernie's restaurant for the first time. The sequence in which Scotty and Madeline (Kim Novak) 'interact'³⁴ has been subject to several analyses, which Zizek accuses of overlooking the central panning shot in which the spectator is removed from Scotty's subjectivity. Zizek draws on a notion of the Lacanian *Real* that intrudes, or extrudes, from the alignment of spectator and conventional point of view. This Lacanian *otherness* (at least in terms of the spectator) shares something with the depth of the underwater shot in the opening sequence of *Jaws*, which is broken at the commencement of the slow zoom.³⁵ Raymond Durnat suggests something similar for several so-called point of view shots in *Psycho*. It is Durnat's contention that too much has been made of the point of view (or subjective) shot in Hitchcock's work to identify either the filmmaker or the spectator with his films' deviant psychologies: L.B. Jeffries (*Rear Window*), Scotty Ferguson (*Vertigo*), Norman Bates (*Psycho*), Mark Rutland (*Marnie*). Durnat has two objections to this analysis:

one, that in fictions like *Psycho*, camera and diegesis are logically incompatible, so that diegetic space and camera space read as a non-continuum, and, two, that most spectators overlook camera POV, much as they disregard cuts, which, if taken literally, would jump them about in space, like performing fleas. The reasons are well known in visual art theory and in scientific psychology.³⁶

While Durnat does not take up the issue of the content of the camera space, as opposed to the diegetic space, it is significant that he recognises a distinction between the two.

³⁴ This must surely rank as one of Hitchcock's greatest scenes. If the spectator considers that both Scotty and Madeline are 'performing' their invisibility, the astonishing detail of the shot and scene resonate in which each is knowingly unaware of the other. It is a motif that recurs throughout Hitchcock, but never more complexly structured than in this sequence.

³⁵ See Slavoj Zizek, 'Vertigo: The Drama of a Deceived Platonist.' *Hitchcock Annual* (2003-2004), 70. The eye of the camera functions for Zizek as the 'organ without a body.'

³⁶ Raymond Durnat, *A Long Hard Look at 'Psycho'* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 4.

This abstract, though vital point can be better illustrated with a second example.



Jaws Fig 1



Jaws Fig 2



Jaws Fig 3

In the sequence in *Jaws* in which Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) sits on the beach keeping a lookout during the 4th of July weekend, the gradual intrusion of the shark into an idyllic setting is played out in much the same way as in the opening sequence. The attack occurs suddenly and the viewer is inserted into Brody's point of view. However, rather than a conventional point of view shot from Brody's perspective, Spielberg uses what is referred to as the 'push-pull.' The camera fast zooms on Brody's face while the focal length of the shot decreases dramatically.

The effect is wholly unconventional and disorienting for the spectator because there is no recourse to the focal conventions of human vision. The shot is essentially a cinematic contrivance, a manipulation of the spatial and temporal reality (focal length and speed) into the artifice of the shot. The spectator, rather than being aligned with either of the primary characters — Brody, his wife, the boy who is attacked, or the shark — inhabits a contained, and contrived, cinematic space in which her subjectivity actively engages with the image. The quality of this engagement cannot be a literal and seamless transference of spectator/character subjectivity.

It is interesting to compare Spielberg's use of the push-pull in *Jaws* to Hitchcock's similar use of dollying and focus to achieve the famous 'Vertigo' shot. Hitchcock employs the push-pull (or at least a variation of the device Spielberg uses) precisely to identify the spectator with Scotty; the disorientation of the shot perspective conveys what Scotty feels when he looks over the edge of a precipice. In Hitchcock's usage, the push-pull inserts the spectator (to some degree) into Stewart's character. In Spielberg's usage, a similar cinematographic trick inserts a space between spectator and character subjectivity. The use of the push-pull in *Jaws* disrupts the neat transference of the cinematic message. In fact, in light of the cinematic-ness (or the hyper-cinematic aesthetic) of the contemporary spectacle film, the relation between the image/shot/sequence and the reality it purports to represent is increasingly ephemeral, even as it attempts to correlate spectator and character subjectivity.

While it is necessary to appreciate the tangible relations between the Real and the cinematic reproduction (the subjective transference in the literal point of view shot, for example, which occurs frequently in Hitchcock, particularly *Rear Window*, *Vertigo* and *Psycho*), it is equally necessary to appreciate the shortcomings of such a conceptual framework.

Point of view shots are rarely an insular, wholly contained point of view. The notion of the ‘voyeuristic distance’ of the cinematic image (which I have used above) compromises a perfect transference of the spectator/character subjectivity. However, this distance has little to do with Denzin’s gendered gaze:

Always a gendered production, usually male, but not necessarily, the voyeur exposes the erotic, political sides of everyday life. In doing so, this figure shows how the gaze is inevitably gendered and structured by the laws of patriarchy.³⁷

In Denzin’s analysis, the voyeur is an ideologised, and indeed, politicised position. Without rejecting the ideological voyeur, central as it is to contemporary theories of gender and power in film, the place from which the spectator views the cinematic image on a screen is dissociated from the space that appears on that screen, or the space that comprises the reality external to the movie theatre. In regard to Denzin’s notion of a cinematic distance as ideologised, I remain sceptical. In my opinion, *cinematic* voyeurism is ontologically connected to the cinema. Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* is still the best example of the ‘romanticisation’ of the cinematic voyeur. Consider an early shot in which Grace Kelly is ‘presented’ to the spectator. The camera offers a close-up of her features (she is simultaneously Lisa Fremont and Grace Kelly, a film icon, and the camera’s adoration is directed toward both) as she advances toward the spectator. The spectator does not inhere in Jeff’s (James Stewart) point of view. Rather, the interaction is with a cinematic image *and* a film icon. The shot cuts to their ‘first kiss,’ a languorous slow motion sequence, and a rarity for Hitchcock.³⁸

Theories of the ‘society of the spectacle’ vacillate between a grudging acceptance of the centrality of the image to contemporary culture to an extreme, almost religious embracing of the image as ontologically transcendent over the object. One need look no further than Jean Baudrillard’s fashionable theories of simulation and simulacra for the location of this phenomenon:

³⁷ Denzin, 58.

³⁸ While I concur with writers like Laura Mulvey and Tania Modleski that the cinematic voyeur and the average Peeping Tom have something in common, I would also argue that too much has been made of the sameness of these two (very different) ways of seeing.

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.³⁹

Baudrillard has since found his way into the conceptual framework of *The Matrix* franchise (Morpheus's 'desert of the Real' echoes Baudrillard; indeed, in the shooting script of the first film, he explicitly references Baudrillard in explaining the relationship of the Matrix to the Real) and *Fight Club*, in which the disenfranchised narrator experiences postmodern America as 'a copy of a copy of a copy.'⁴⁰ Mass culture of the 21st century, it seems, has been taught to think in terms of the language of the simulacrum. Theorists like Baudrillard and writers like Don DeLillo (who seems to practice a 'poetics' of the simulacrum: consider his reading of the Zapruder film of the JFK assassination as the simulacral expression of the Real in *Underworld*, a theme central to his earlier *Libra*) reflect on an apparent loss of the Real, a disgruntled sense of the fickleness of personal and social relations. Metaphors of surface and depth have proliferated since the announcement of the dominance of the Postmodern Condition by Lyotard,⁴¹ yet depth unfortunately connotes the diverse, nuanced, subtle, complex, contextualised, historicised, reactionary Real, while surface connotes the transparent, superficial, sophomoric, simplistic, and ultimately valueless reproduction. Thus I reject such metaphors of cultural and aesthetic phenomena as inadequate to describe my own interaction with — and within — popular culture and its myriad of signs, texts and experiences. What does it mean to suggest that a cultural production — art, work, commodity — is *depthless*?

* * *

It used to be that only movies were on film; now the whole world is. More than ever, visual technologies seem intent

³⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

⁴⁰ *Fight Club* (film). Dir. David Fincher.

⁴¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984). See especially the Introduction for a summary of Lyotard's argument.

on striving for what Kracauer called ‘the status of total record.’ And not only does it seem at the start of the new century that everything is on film or video...but thanks first to video and then the Internet, scenes that were never shown before — from natural disasters and human atrocities to sexual intimacies and ecstasies — are now public spectacles that are instantly shown everywhere.⁴²

Can the world be cinematic? And what would be implied in the dawning of a meta-cinematic aesthetic in which the external reality itself must submit to the ontology of the image/shot/sequence? Does the fact that the world (in whatever sense Black intends this) is captured on film alter the relationship of an external reality to its reproduced image? Of course it does. This essay has attempted to theorise just such an alteration in the ontology of the Real. A classical realist aesthetics is incompatible with the cinematic medium; an engagement with a meaningful film aesthetics must confront a new ontology of the *cinematic* Real.

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⁴² Joel Black, *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 4.