Cinematic Realism in Bigelow's "The Hurt Locker"

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No one has ever seen Baghdad. At least not like explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) squad leader William James has, through a lens of intense adrenaline and deathly focus. In the 2008 film *The Hurt Locker*, director Katherine Bigelow creates a striking realist portrait of an EOD team on their tour of Baghdad. Bigelow’s use of deep focus and wide-angle shots in *The Hurt Locker* exemplify the realist concerns of French film theorist André Bazin.

Early film theory has its basis in one major goal: to define film as art in its own right. In *What is Film Theory*, authors Richard Rushton and Gary Bettinson state that “…each theoretical inquiry converges on a common objective: to defend film as a distinctive and authentic mode of art” (8). Many theorists argue relevant and important points regarding film, some from a formative point of view and others from a realist view. Formative theorists discuss film in a framework that values the unique ability of filmmakers to use elements such as cinematography, montage, art direction, and sound to set it apart from other media and from reality. Realist theorists examine cinema from a standpoint that places great value on film’s ability to literally recreate images of our world. All theories have a common interest in film as a distinctive process that has the ability to show people the world in a new way. Realist film theory, the forte of theorist André Bazin, derives its significance from its focus on analyzing a medium whose formative elements allow it to recreate reality.

André Bazin, French theorist and critic, held film realism in high regard. Bazin felt that cinema was exceptional as an art form not because of the ways its formal elements could be manipulated, but instead for the incredible capability of a machine to use light to create an image of reality (Braudy & Cohen, 161).
Bazin believed that film reached its greatest potential when it represented real time and space. He focused on elements that perpetuate spatial reality: long takes, deep focus shots, and minimal shifts through editing. Bazin was concerned with the realism of perception rather than content, and he advocated for films that allowed spectators to make choices that give them a more democratic role in the viewing process. In an excerpt from *What is Cinema* Bazin wrote, “[Cinema] is a conquest of realism- not certainly, the realism of subject matter or realism of expression but that realism of space without which moving pictures do not constitute cinema” (355).

Spatial reality, he felt, was best revealed with the wide-shot. In his book *The Major Film Theories*, J. Dudley Andrew reminds us:

Bazin prefers such depth of field shooting to montage for three reasons: it is inherently more realistic; certain events demand this more realistic treatment; and it confronts our normal psychological way of processing events, thereby shocking us with a reality we often fail to recognize. (157)

Bazin wants the viewer to see everything there is to see, hence his preference for deep focus.

*The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow, 2008) is largely regarded as a “realist” film. Bigelow’s stylistic filmmaking and a fragmented narrative offer the viewer an opportunity to delve inside the harried mindset of an EOD team in Baghdad. It is entirely possible to make the argument that *The Hurt Locker* is in opposition to Bazin’s theories. Bigelow’s obvious use of rapid cutting, a plethora of close-ups and extreme close-ups, and frequent abrupt shifts of focus, all suggest a film that Bazin would not consider realist in style. However, there are also many understated formative qualities of *The Hurt Locker* that support Bazin’s ideas.
Bigelow filmed *The Hurt Locker* using a number of cameras running simultaneously to capture action from a variety of perspectives (“Shooting”). While Bigelow does use many close-up shots to intensify the action of the film, there are a number of wide-shots that serve the same purpose. In one of the earliest shots of the film, Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson, wearing his bomb suit, heads toward an explosive device that the team had deployed as a means of diffusing another, larger bomb.

As he closes the distance between himself and the explosive, the film cuts to a wide shot from his point of view. The camera is moving as Thompson’s head would be, and the shot gives viewers a look at the mise-en-scéne. In that moment, viewers must choose what to focus on, just as Thompson is doing in his moment on screen. Whether or not the particular shot reveals anything of consequence is up to the viewer. The realism lies in the viewer’s perception of Thompson’s reality; we are relating to the space he occupies in the same manner that he must be, and the wide shot Bigelow uses accomplishes that goal.

Another excellent example of Bazin’s point about wide shot in *The Hurt Locker* arises in the United Nations embassy sequence. From the moment it begins, the sequence reveals the situation to us through a repeated usage of wide-angle, deep focus, and moving camera shots. We initially see the crowds running away from the building in wide shot, followed by the arrival of the EOD team in another wide shot. One shot reveals an Iraqi shooter stationed on a building above the EOD team. Another reveals the
dead shooter being inspected by officers while a crowd of innocent onlookers stare at the scene.

There is another, similar shot of William James walking towards his first improvised explosive device (IED) with the new team. He is in the bomb suit, and as he walks the scene cuts to a wide shot of the street, first from behind James and then from his point of view. Shortly thereafter, the tension of the story escalates as an Iraqi taxi driver enters the scene and the shots become shorter with tighter framing. After the situation with the Iraqi civilian has been taken care of, James returns to his mission of diffusing the IED.

Again, as with the earlier scene involving the first IED, the shots slow down a bit. More moments are presented in wide shot and deep focus. Just as short, intense editing creates tension, this slightly slower pace with the wide shots and depth of field create a different, but equally compelling tension. As James reaches the site of the IED, the scene cuts to a wide shot from above the street looking down at him. At first viewers question the validity of this shot. There is nothing important that we notice in the frame, so why choose a wide shot for this particular moment?
James then begins his work and diffuses the first bomb. In the process, he discovers a secondary line. The line leads to another explosive with another line. James realizes the situation he has stumbled upon as he lifts the connected wires to expose a set of seven connected explosives. The extensive line of explosives and the implied peril is revealed to the film’s audience through a similar wide shot mirroring the original one that seemed to make no sense. Here again, the wide shot is used as a way to let us look and decide what is important. We are in the moment with James, and the wide shot allows us to observe the moment as we might if we were really there. Bazin’s describe his feelings on the importance of wide shot, “[the spectator] is not only able to move his eyes; he is forced to turn his head” (Andrew 147).

Depth of field cannot be forgotten here either. Andrew writes that Bazin felt that Jean Renoir’s films were prime examples of realist filmmaking because, “[Renoir] employed a lens capable of keeping as much of his subject in focus as was technically feasible” (154). An early example of deep focus in The Hurt Locker shows up during the same sequence where James discovers the seven bombs. As he is walking down the street, the entire area around him is revealed in a wide shot with deep focus. We are able to see the buildings around James and the end of the street his is walking on. Is there something sinister in the buildings? It is up to viewers to look and see.

Bigelow uses deep focus similarly in the UN sequence. When the EOD team is on the ground, there is a quick shot that reveals the city around them. The innocent civilians are shown, as is the shooter who is eventually killed. The deep focus forces viewers to look around the frame to find the meaning beyond the obvious, as we would need to do if we were standing there in that moment. Shortly before the contract team’s leader sprints up the hill after his prisoners, we see the hillside behind the men. The deep focus allows viewers to comprehend the vast expanse of land that is concealing their attackers, which
makes the viewer feel more helpless at the thought of the men attempting to identify the location of the shooters.

Another fantastic example of depth of field appears less than twenty minutes from the end of the film. The team has discovered a civilian with a bomb strapped to his chest. We are able to assess the situation ourselves when the scene cuts to a wide shot with deep focus. The entire area is revealed to the viewers, and the ever-decreasing distance between the bomb and the officers is understood. As Bazin theorized, this is a powerful means of representing reality because viewers are free to determine the severity of the situation for themselves by perceiving the spaces between objects and people with the resulting ambiguity.

Viewing a film is an experience unlike any other. We feel what the characters feel, we see what they see, we live with them in the moment. For Bazin, cinematic realism rested in the idea that the moments on screen were revealed in such a way that the viewer had no choice but to participate. Wide shots create spaces that require the spectator to really look, and deep focus allows those spaces to be visually real. Bazin’s theories regarding realist cinema offer an interesting lens through which *The Hurt Locker* can be examined. Spectators share the story space with James and his team because we see the world around them. The moments they are experiencing are real to us. After all, as Bazin so eloquently stated, “Cinema attains is fullness in being the art of the real” (Andrew, 137).
Works Cited


