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Illuminating Realism: A Bazinian Analysis of Spike Lee's "Inside Man"

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In his book *The Major Film Theories*, Dudley Andrew ponders the tremendous impact of Andre Bazin on the discourse of film theory. Specifically, Andrew writes:

He [Bazin] was without question the most important and intelligent voice to have pleaded for a film theory and a film tradition based on a belief in the naked power of the mechanically recorded image rather than on the learned power of artistic control over such images. (134)

Indeed, as Andrew suggests, it would be difficult to overstate Bazin’s pervasive influence on film theory. It is likewise clear that if one is to come to a nuanced understanding of Andre Bazin’s theoretical approach to the study of film, one must first identify its antecedents. Simply put, during his career, Bazin reacted against the formalists who dominated the discourse of film theory at the time. In particular, Bazin opposed the formative notion that montage—and montage alone—ushers film into the realm of art. For Bazin, the aesthetic beauty and psychological effects unique to film come from the artistic power of the photographic image itself, rather than from the manipulation of images through editing. Moreover, according to Bazin, the sin of montage is that it suppresses the filmic image’s inherent ambiguity and thereby undermines the nature of film as the art of the real, according to its mechanical and veridical origins. Consequently, Bazin favors cinematographic techniques that highlight film’s basis in physical reality. For instance, he champions long, continuous shots because they maintain both a clear, unified space and the concrete duration of events. Likewise, he advocates for the utilization of depth of field because, like long shots, it enhances film’s essential realism.

Now, although Bazin undoubtedly employed a unique and clearly discernable theoretical perspective in his work, he never systematically or exhaustively laid out his theories as did Arnheim and Kracauer. As a consequence, in order to understand the nuances and implications of Bazin’s theory, one must extrapolate them from his many essays. Furthermore, because Bazin focused primarily on individual films as a method of practicing film theory, it is useful to attempt to apply his theories to contemporary...
films. Thus, one comes to a better understanding of Bazin’s theories in general, as well as how they can shed light on individual films. One can identify, for instance, the import of Andre Bazin’s theory on Spike Lee’s *Inside Man* (2006). In the film, Lee relies heavily on cinematographic techniques embraced by Bazin—for example, the inherent ambiguity of the single, continuous shot—to engage the audience and create meaning. With this in mind, one can employ Bazin’s theories to meet two ends: one, to help illuminate meaning in *Inside Man*; and two, to analyze the elements of the film that elucidate and shed light on the complexities of Bazin’s thought.

In an effort to clarify one of the core elements of his theory of film in “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage,” André Bazin posits:

> If one forced oneself at this point to define the problem, it seems to me that one could set up the following principle as a law of aesthetics. ‘When the essence of a scene demands the simultaneous presence of two or more factors in the action, montage is ruled out.’ (50)

This principle, simple enough as it stands, is, in Bazin’s work, the product of a highly nuanced and complex ontological study of film and photography. Bazin’s position credits the unadorned filmic image as having its own aesthetic validity, in that it implies the presence and intent of an artist but also allows for meaning, in all of its ambiguity, to communicate itself to the viewing audience. Thus, whereas montage would impose on the viewer various *absolute* meanings, Bazin’s belief in the aesthetic and psychological power of the single shot would open film up to a complexity and ambiguity of meaning that, in many ways, mirrors that of the living world.
In *Inside Man*, the viewer identifies the particular effect of such a cinematographic method when the leader of the robbers, Dalton Russell, after collecting the cellphones and keys of the majority of his hostages, suspects that a particular hostage named Peter Hammond is hiding his cellphone. Upon learning that this is true, Dalton enters an adjacent room into which one can see only through a translucent window. In what is clearly a performance meant to instill fear, Dalton visibly deliberates whether or not he should kill Hammond for lying. Then, having apparently reached a decision, Dalton grabs Hammond violently, takes him into the adjacent room and beats him. Meanwhile, all the hostages watch in trembling panic and anticipation. The sequence is divided into two primary shots: one in which we watch Dalton deliberate in the adjacent room and Hammond look on in fear; the other in which we watch Dalton beat Hammond in the other room while the remaining hostages scream in terror and shock. The effect, in both cases, of simultaneously showing Dalton put on his “performance” and the hostages watch him, results in our becoming, in a sense, one with the hostages. We experience the anticipation not as objective viewers, but as agents sharing the same physical space relative to Dalton, whom we also fear as spectators. The effect would be markedly different if Lee had in one shot shown Dalton beating Hammond and in another cut only to the reaction of the hostages. In this scenario, the viewing audience would cease to interpret the sequence as a terrifying event in real time, having indefinite meaning and ambiguity, and would instead view it merely as an interaction between Dalton and the hostages with definite meaning. That is, the shot-reverse-shot would amount to a simple equation: violent robber + screaming hostages = terror.
Bazin elucidates the difference between these two disparate effects in a discussion of a scene in the English film *Where No Vultures Fly*, when he writes:

> It is obvious that…this sequence would have had the same simple meaning if it had been shot entirely in montage or from process work. But in neither event would the scene have unfolded before the camera in its physical and spatial reality. Hence, in spite of the concrete nature of each shot, it would have had the impact only of a story and not of a real event.

(49)

Here, Bazin’s distinction between the “story” versus the “real event,” operating as an example of his greater belief in the primacy of the single shot over montage, sheds light on the viewer’s interpretation of the scene in question. Because Lee allows his audience to view the dynamic interplay between Dalton and his hostages from the spatial viewpoint of the hostages, and without cutting the scene through montage to impose a simple meaning, the audience perceives the scene as a real event. That is, the audience interprets it as a particular happening caught on film (though indeed fictional), rather than as a contrived, structured story. If Lee had employed a shot-reverse-shot editing pattern, then the scene would not exist as a single occurrence, unified in spatial and temporal reality. Rather, it would consist of building blocks placed together in a strict sequence that would carry, in total, an absolute meaning. The event would cease to be an event in that it would have structure imposed on it from the outside (that is, from the intervening hand of the director).

Bazin iterates his point about the difference of meaning-potential between montage and the single, in-depth shot in his essay, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” in which he writes:

> In analyzing reality, montage presupposes of its very nature the unity of meaning of the dramatic event…In short, montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression…On the other hand, depth of focus reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image if not of necessity—at least as a possibility…The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to
the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into
the very design of the image. (36)

Here, Bazin introduces the aspect of his theory of film that has most to do with the
business of artistic interpretation. For Bazin, the brute image, in and of itself, as a frame
on reality, contains more potential meaning than that which could derive from images in
strict succession—or, in montage. Montage limits potential meanings to one: that of the
filmmaker. As a result, ambiguity in film is abandoned. By contrast, Bazin’s aesthetic
embraces ambiguity. Take, for example, the scene in which Dalton Russell sits alone in
the open bank vault with one of his hostages, a young boy. This scene consists, like the
one discussed earlier, of two primary shots: one, a wide establishing shot of the two
characters sitting across
from each other in the
vault; the other, a
medium shot of the
young boy.

Through these
two shots, the viewing
audience is presented
with an interesting dialog
between the two characters—one that, due to the ambiguous nature of the image, raises
questions about the intent and personality of Dalton Russell. Because the interaction
between Russell and the boy is limited to the two shots, the audience must infer Dalton’s
personality only from the dialog and the dynamic interplay between the two characters in
the same continuous shot. But suppose Lee had filmed the scene in only a series of shot-
reverse-shots between the boy and Dalton. Based on the order of the images and their
content, Lee either could have made Dalton appear intimidating or compassionate, but
not both. Clearly, this approach would undermine the significance of the event for the
spectator, who watches anxiously and curiously, unable at this point to quite pin down
just who Dalton is and what he is about. Thus, Lee’s use of the single continuous shot in
which Dalton and the boy sit across from one another allows for the ambiguity of the event to be conveyed and heightened, and for Dalton to remain enshrouded in mystery.

An in-depth analysis of the cinematographic techniques employed in Spike Lee’s *Inside Man* using the essays of Andre Bazin as a theoretical lens yields a nuanced understanding of how meaning is illuminated in the film. By the same token, putting Bazin’s theoretical positions into practice helps yoke the various ideas conveyed in his many essays together, and thus brings them into focus. Therefore, by considering Bazin’s arguments against montage, and then seeing how much of a film’s meaning relies on the *absence* of montage, one comes to a better understanding of how to use Bazin’s theories in film practice. Finally, it is worth noting that this method of analysis demonstrates the vitality of Bazin’s film theory. Because the theorist worked with individual film texts, the critic, both as a thinker and a filmgoer, learns to employ his methods of analysis at the macro level and relate them immediately to the cinema in concrete terms. Thus, the critic’s understanding of individual films is constantly informed and directed by his or her theoretical perspective, and vice versa. The result, then, is a community of film scholars and filmmakers who push the cinema further in its evolution, allowing it always to expand in various and meaningful ways.
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