The Realism of Space in Black Swan

Raquel Bordin

Grand Valley State University, bordinr@mail.gvsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol3/iss1/2
The Realism of Space in Black Swan

The camera pans from the shattered pieces of a mirror to blood pouring from under the bathroom door. The sight of blood comes as no surprise to the audience, who has just witnessed Nina murder Lily in that very dressing room. It is later revealed that there is no blood and that the murder never occurred. Yet, the audience believes these scenes from Black Swan (Aronofsky, 2010) to be real because director Darren Aronofsky effectively evokes the story's illusions out of reality itself. The viewers believe the blood on the bathroom floor to be real and when their belief is proven wrong, they experience Nina's anxiety and become more familiar with her interior reality. An analytical study of Andre Bazin's realist theory demonstrates how Aronofsky is able to consciously manipulate mise-en-scene, camera movement and editing to create a realism of space that reveals essential aspects of the human condition.

Realism of space is an essential aspect of the realist film theory, which prioritizes what a film reveals about reality over what it adds to reality. Realist theorists view cinema, the successor to the photographic medium, as the next step in creating art through the reproduction of physical reality. Consequently, a filmmaker should not rely primarily on montage or contrived plots, but focus on capturing the flow of life in natural settings, thus giving a visual impression of the real world.

André Bazin was among the first theorists to challenge the idea that film does not need to differ from reality to be considered art. He describes cinema as “the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny” (What is Cinema 10). According to Bazin, film satisfies the human obsession with realism by making moments immortal on screen, which he considers to be the truest form of art. In order to achieve a substantial level of reality, a film’s space (mise-en-scene) must be believable.
and unfragmented. In other words, if the reality people experience in life is linear, without the condensation and expansion of time and space, a realist film should not use editing to distort spatiotemporal reality. By looking beyond the resources of montage and carefully crafting a scene through editing, the filmmaker is able to reveal meaning while maintaining the natural unity of space. Additionally, Bazin warns that montage strips away the ambiguity of reality, as it guides the audience shot after shot, preventing the viewers from choosing what to see. Hence, favoring spatial reality and enhancing it with camera movements, deep focus and staging, grants the audience a closer relationship with the image. Therefore, Bazin prefers minimal editing to the expressionistic methods of montage, which continually fragment space. "It is only an increased realism of the image that can support the abstraction of montage" (Bazin, "The Evolution" 167). The viewers are only able to overlook minimal editing and be completely immersed in the story when the film's appearance and structure feel true-to-life.

Moreover, Bazin does not object to special effects or fantastical story elements, so long as the way they are incorporated in the scene convinces the audience and justifies its existence as a natural part of that space. "It is that fringe of trick work, that margin of subterfuge demanded by the logic of the story that allows what is imaginary to include what is real and at the same time to substitute for it" (Bazin, What is Cinema 47). The substitution is clear in Black Swan. The film fluctuates between subjective visions and concrete reality, but the space Aronofsky has created is still perceived as real. Even when the audience is aware what they see might not match what really happened, the images still feel real.

The surreal imagery does not distance the audience from reality because the illusions in Black Swan are not designed to appear fantastical. Aronofsky means for the viewers to see what Nina sees – her perception of reality. Therefore, when Nina is walking home at night and spots a woman who appears to look exactly like her, the audience has the same impression as Nina. They understand what Nina sees and believe it to be real because Aronofsky shows both women in the same frame. Even if the viewers decide to watch the movie again, and are well aware that the woman Nina sees is not
herself, it is impossible for them to look at the image without accepting it as real, for the moment it lasts. Outside Nina’s perspective, the audience knows that they do not look the same, but the audience cannot escape her perspective. The reality of the image is incontestable and for a couple of seconds the two women look identical.

When the viewers see both characters in frame, they are able to establish that the women are both real because they seem to exist in the same world. The idea that the woman Nina sees might not exist or may not be who she seems is only possible because Nina's perception is not reliable. Had both women been permanently separated in space by montage, the scene would have lost most of its realism. "When the essence of a scene demands the simultaneous presence of two or more factors in the action, montage is ruled out" (Bazin, What is Cinema 50). After the woman’s face is revealed, Aronofsky cuts to a reverse shot of that scene, which also shows both women in the frame except, this time, the woman evidently does not look like Nina. At this point, the audience accepts this reality, compares it to the previous shot's reality and determines which reality is concrete and which is subjective. Nevertheless, both shots are perceived as real and the remarkable depth of field in the scene reinforces this effect. By showing both women in frame, Aronofsky lets the viewers know that they are both real, even if only in Nina's mind.

Bazin stresses the importance of depth of field in achieving desired realistic compositions. Bazin writes:

Shooting in depth is not just a more economical, a simpler, and at the same time a more subtle way of getting the most out of a scene. In addition to affecting the structure of film language, it also affects the relationships of the minds of the spectators to the image, and in consequence it influences the interpretation of the spectacle. ("The Evolution" 163)
Throughout *Black Swan*, the camera follows Nina in long handheld takes, leaving the viewers' eyes to wander around the frame and, in a sense, discover the space with her. Camera movements, deep focus and staging offer a greater measure of reality onscreen. Such strategies are what Bazin praises and what Aronofsky effectively employs in *Black Swan*. The scene where Thomas is watching Nina as she practices her dance routine illustrates the director's great command of space. It opens with a wide shot of Thomas, sitting on one of the many chairs in the room. In the foreground, Nina and a male dancer come in and out of frame as they practice their routine, but the camera stays with Thomas and for about 25 seconds, there are no cuts. The next shot is even wider, with a very deep focus and in it we can see the entire room: Nina, the male dancer, Thomas, and the violinist. 35 seconds later, Aronofsky gives the audience the opportunity to see the room from the opposite angle. This time the camera is placed behind Thomas and new aspects of the room are revealed (the mirrors, the piano and more people). At this point, the viewers are familiar with almost every corner of the room. The rest of the scene follows the pattern of depth and adds some camera movements to avoid cuts and make the editing smoother.

There is a short scene in *Black Swan* that is not at all motivated by montage, which grants it an even higher degree of reality, according to Bazin's theories. In the scene, Aronofsky tricks the audience into seeing what would be impossible for the viewers to experience in real life. "Of course there is a trick in it, but it is not one that belongs to cinema as such. Illusion is created as in conjuring, out of reality itself. It is something concrete, and does not derive from the potential extensions created by montage" (Bazin, *What is Cinema* 45). Nina has just been measured for her costume and she is standing alone staring at her many reflections in the mirror. The camera moves to the left, as Nina tilts her body to the right. Her first reflection tilts accordingly, but the one behind it does
not. Instead, it is facing away from her, appearing to scratch her shoulder until it suddenly looks back at her, prompting Nina to look back too. It is a surreal effect, an impossible occurrence in reality. Nonetheless, the lack of cuts and camera movement increase the scene's perceived reality.

On the other hand, Bazin's theory does not completely reject editing techniques. He is aware that close-ups have the power to emphasize aspects of a scene that would otherwise not be noticed, and that parallel montage and accelerated montage make a scene more dramatic. He simply prefers that these techniques do not call attention to themselves, because once they do, they fragment reality and create a gap between the viewer and the image. Bazin would not object to Aronofsky's editing style because of the director shows a "reluctance to fragment things arbitrarily and a desire instead to show an image that is uniformly understandable and that compels the spectator to make his own choice" (Bazin, What is Cinema 92). Aronofsky opts for long takes, wide angles, matched-action cuts for the most part, and uses accelerated montage only when the intensity of the scene demands it. The result is a film that has a heightened sense of reality and which allows the viewers to form multiple interpretations.

When comparing the opening scene where Nina dreams she is dancing the Swan Lake to her actual performance of the ballet at the end of the movie, the difference between the two ways Aronofsky represents Swan Lake is unmistakable. The dream sequence, despite its camera movements and long shot durations, shows no intention of achieving realism in space. There is nothing that tells us where this scene takes place, which renders it ambiguous and unrecognizable. Aronofsky clearly decides to let the audience distinguish Nina's dream from her reality. Conversely, at the end of the movie, the mise-en-scene matches what the viewers would expect reality to be. The final dance sequence is shot with depth, rich camera movements and very few cuts, which only add to the spatial realism of the mise-en-scene. Aronofsky wants the audience to embrace the stage, crowd, costumes, lights and settings as real, despite some surreal elements in the scene (Nina's eyes, the sound of wings, her transformation into a swan and the projected shadow of her wings). Even though the viewers are certainly not blind to these illusions,
this scene is still far more real to them than the opening dream sequence, due to lack of spatial reality in the latter. Bazin states that shooting in depth enhances the relationship between the spectator and the image. "It is correct to say that, independently of the contents of the image, its [depth of focus] structure is more realistic" (Bazin, *What is Cinema* 35). By filming one scene in depth and the other without a sense of spatial reality, Aronofsky bring the viewers closer to the final dance, lets them take in Nina's surroundings and have a clear idea of what being on stage at that particular moment might be like for Nina. Moreover, the last dance requires "a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator" (Bazin, *What is Cinema* 36), while the first Swan Lake dance does not.

With a carefully crafted mise-en-scene, *Black Swan* exemplifies Bazin's realist theory and gives the audience the opportunity to immerse itself in Nina's perceived reality, revealing very important aspects of the human condition. Despite its fantastical elements, *Black Swan* 's themes—sexuality, maturity, perfectionism and sacrifice—are very much real and are so regarded by the viewers. Aronofsky minimizes the distance between audience and film by creating a realistic space with appropriate camera movements, deep focus and invisible editing. These strategies entail “both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress” (Bazin, "The Evolution" 36). Aronofsky's choice to avoid contrived editing techniques leaves room for ambiguity and freedom of interpretation and welcomes the audience to a complex and multifaceted spatial reality.
Bordin: The Realism of Space in Black Swan

Works Cited