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Partial Credit: A Bazinian Assessment of Realism and Emotion in Hitchcock's Vertigo *Kiss Scene*

Through his critiques, Bazin develops his concept of *total film* in which the director aims to pack as much reality into the medium as possible. Under this theory, films that seem to be more realistic have more merit since they best leverage the automation of representation provided by photography. Bazin's ideas led to an era of filmmakers who were almost over demanding on certain nascent technologies for creating realistic shots, including especially deep focus and Italian narrative editing techniques of long shots in logical succession. In alignment with Bazin's ideal of *total film* directors avoided melodramatic connotations and cheap emotions to focus on setting up a gritty scene that reads more like a documentary. This paper will assess Bazin's high regard for realism and attempt to explain how he might still assign merit to "the kiss" scene in *Vertigo*, as Hitchcock's deviations from *total cinema* substantially enhance the emotional value and narrative themes of the work.

Bazin's praise for achieving realism also extends to the technical skill and innovative structure of the films of Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, particularly their use of long shots and Italian narrative editing techniques. Enabled by deep focus technology, Welles and Hitchcock's use of background noise and activity restores freedom of attention for the audience since viewers have a choice of where to look. In his review of Rossellini's *Paisa*, Bazin lauds the wide shot used by the director in a crucial scene, since the camera remains a neutral representational object and never artificially focuses attention on the heroine of the film. He admires how Rossellini leans on the emotional content of the narrative to draw empathy from the audience rather than trying to force the audience's eye to notice her devastated expression. Unlike the industry standard "shot-reverse-shot" technique which cuts between talking heads like a tennis

match, these new longer shots were able to give a sense of temporal duration to the events in the film and allow for realistic movement and expression of the actors. Whereas classical editing techniques "separated reality into successive shots that were just a series of either logical or subjective points of view of an event" (Bazin 28), these modern techniques provide a realistic representation of narrative events.

Another innovation of realist directors in Italy is the use of narrative editing techniques that allow for some ambiguity in the content and order of shots, through which they are still able to maintain a logical structure of film by letting "the mind has to leap from one to another as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river" (Bazin 35). The director still provides significant facts and a logical pattern for the viewer to establish causal relationships and understand the narrative and allows the viewer to slip up in making narrative jumps and fall stranded in ambiguity as this sometimes happens to the mind. Bazin himself posits that even the best art "cannot make reality entirely its own because reality must inevitably elude it at some point" (Bazin 29) since even automatic representation techniques (i.e. photography and film) have some margin of error from reality, but this does not necessarily hinder the audience's understanding of the art.

Bazin recognized that with this increased push for realism in *total cinema* comes a realization that exact representation of reality is not necessarily a good product since "the 'art' of the cinema lives off this contradiction" (Bazin 26). Sometimes the resistance of technical developments that enhance realism can further create equally functional art as "reality is not to be taken quantitatively" (Bazin 27). Since the viewer is still able to recognize the object on the screen through imperfect cinematic representation, this offers directors the "potential for abstraction and synthesis" by removing certain qualities of the event on screen while maintaining the realism of the narrative. For example, one can recognize that a silent black and white shot of an ocean does not necessarily mean that the actual location filmed is devoid of sound or color. Bazin argues that these intentional deviations from realistic representation are made for didactic or aesthetic purposes in the film, creating a tension between realism and artistic choices. He holds that the successful director chooses "image facts," which are fragments of reality which the mind must interpret in a certain way to understand the narrative, while leaving other details in the scene ambiguous as reality is

"multiple and full of ambiguity" (Bazin 37). However, Bazin criticizes Rouquier's technical imperfection in *Farrebique* for its exclusion of natural background materials (i.e. image facts) that were not essential to the scene, but nevertheless necessary to prevent an entirely staged aesthetic. He refers to a "margin of loss, implicit in any realist choice" that can be filled with aesthetic choices "to increase the effectiveness of his chosen form of reality" (Bazin 29), which furthers the tension placed on the director to create the most narrative "bang for his buck" when deviating from realism.

In order to understand how Bazin might critique a film like *Vertigo*, one must first acknowledge his *auteur theory*, which elevates the reputation of the author of a work to be a primary consideration for the critique of a film. This theory aims to recognize the technical skill, personality, and soul/ of the director in increasing order of importance, since directors are expected to build on their use of technology and style to create a realistic narrative that conveys some deeper meaning. Proponents of the auteur theory believe that it is impossible to honor a work without honoring the artist involved, and more staunch defenders echo Giraudoux's famous line "There are no works; there are only authors" (Sarris 655).

However, it is important to recognize that Bazin is actually more moderate than other critics on his own theory, as shown by his fondness for Hollywood film genres and by his recognition of the commercial value of film. He tends to drift from strict preeminence of the director to offer appreciation for popular genres (e.g. comedies, westerns, and gangster films) across different directors and to avoid the extreme elevation of the director's personal meaning/style which can result in an "aesthetic cult of personality" of self-indulgent film-making that have no commercial value for the public. In "the kiss" scene of *Vertigo*, Hitchcock clearly moves away from his established realistic techniques in favor of a more melodramatic moment between the two lovers, but by evaluating the technical skill, stylistic elements, and soul of the director found in the shot, one can analyze whether or not this suspension of realism is narratively significant.

The **technical skill** of Hitchcock is on full display in "the kiss" scene as he creates and then eclipses the realistic environment of the hotel room. His use of long, wide-angle shots from the corner of the room with deep focus technology capture the movement and anxious expressions of Scottie as he

waits for Judy to exit the bathroom. Hitchcock hammers home this long shot technique by only letting the viewer hear the door handle turn and swing open during an emotional zoom on Scottie's face without initially showing Judy emerging from the bathroom. Similar to aforementioned Italian editing techniques, this Hitchcock shot spends a significant duration on the emotional reaction of Scottie while allowing the viewer to make a type of mental jump to fill in the narrative detail of Judy entering the room.

However, Hitchcock abruptly switches to an intermittent shot-reverse-shot montage of both of their faces as Judy walks out of the bathroom to bounce Scottie's anxious countenance off of Judy's daunting, almost expressionless face. Here, Bazin would need to grant some break from reality for aesthetic purposes because the amount of hard cuts between the two characters detract from the realism of previous long shots. A Hitchcock defender might try to argue that capturing Scottie's obsessive gaze on Judy's plain face, heightened by his slight head tilt to get a glimpse of the back of her hair is significant enough to the narrative to justify this melodramatic montage as it helps capture the significant emotion of this moment.

The most striking technical break from realism in this shot is definitely the 360 degree pan shot of their embrace to show primarily the swirl in Judy's hair and Scottie's reactions to kissing the girl with whom he has been obsessed. It is important to note that Bazin lauds a similar emotional 360 degree pan shot in Lattuada's *Il Bandito* in which the camera shows a look of horror on an Italian prisoner's face before circular panning around the entirety of his destroyed house and landing back on his face. Bazin admires the combination of the offset perspective and varying speed of this pan, as it allows the viewer to register the emotion on the prisoner's face while also tracing the scene with the same confusion and shock experienced by the man. Here, Lattuada clearly sacrifices a more realistic shot in the form of a stationary wide-angle image from the character's perspective in favor of a more stylized technique that furthers the emotion of the narrative, similar to Hitchcock's emotional choice in "the kiss" scene.

Additionally, it seems that there is an actual change in the background image of the *Vertigo* pan shot when Scottie breaks the kiss and looks up, which is tipped off to the viewer by leather seats, wood paneling, and a canopy bed that could not have been in the room in the previous shots. This change in

stage materials coupled with the mostly darkened background marks a significant variance from realistic image fact, which is similar to Bazin's critique of Rouquier's overly staged scene in *Faberrique*. Although this pan shot altogether constitutes a pretty clear break from realism, one can examine how it is complimented by Hitchcock's style elements of lighting and music in an attempt to find aesthetic and/or emotional significance that might justify this breach.

As this is a clearly staged shot, Hitchcock is able to manipulate the lighting to fit his **style**, as he injects the darkness of film noir with a pale green light that pours in through the window creating a haunting mist around the bathroom door illuminating Judy as she walks towards Scottie. Nevertheless, Hitchcock's lighting style might not find favor with Bazin, who believes that "lighting only plays a minor expressive role" (Bazin 33). Bazin argues that the need for a studio setting and the mind's natural affinity for greyscale for documentary footage renders technical adjustments to lighting as a way "to touch up excessively the plastic quality of the style" (Bazin 33). Although one might argue that Hitchcock's excessive darkness on the peripheries of shots might only add aesthetic value to the film noir atmosphere, the lighting of this scene is not only realistically explainable but also important to the narrative meaning. Upon emerging from the bathroom, Judy is partially blurred by a combination of mist, which is quite realistic from doing her hair in a humid bathroom, and the pale green light that actually pours in through Judy's window from the enon sign of the hotel vanishes. The resulting hazy green mist that cloaks Judy has haunting significance for Scottie, who is still not completely sold that he has resurrected his past love, but as Judy approaches him from the mist, his obsession allows him to put aside doubt and embrace her.

Another noticeable stylistic feature of this Hitchcock film is the powerful, eerie score composed by Bernard Herrmann, which seems to swell loudly at important moments in the film. The progression of the score here is a noticeable break from realism here as the music pushes to the forefront of the viewer's perception, but each movement seems to perfectly reflect the emotional context of the scene. The fluttering strings in the background give an anticipatory vibe as Scottie sits in wait for Judy's final transformation, and they turn into a louder melodic overture as soon as Judy walks into the room. These strings gain accompaniment and swell into a crescendo as the two lovers embrace and kiss each other,

with the camera slowly swirling around them as the lights dim. As the background begins to change behind the darkness, Scottie breaks from the kiss and looks up, and the music changes to more jaunty oboe riff as he gazes around the room to orient himself. He leans back in to kiss Judy, causing the background to darken and the music to swell again as the audience finally sees her hair whirl.

At this point of the scene almost all realism built up by the long deep focus shots and Italian narrative editing techniques has been stripped away from the scene in favor of narrative emotional value by Hitchcock's elevation of style during the pan shot. However, Bazin's own theory of total cinema still allows for departures from realism for aesthetic and narrative purposes, and his auteur theory places the director's intention for deep narrative meaning at the heart of the film. This scene might constitute a significant break from reality on several levels, but Bazin might be able to give a partial benefit of the doubt through showing how these technical and stylistic elements enhance the themes of the film for both the director and the audience.

Hitchcock is known for making film noir thrillers, but getting to the **deeper meaning** of this film involves digging deeper than simply the personal style of the director. Clear themes of Scottie's obsession over an idealized woman and unhealthy preoccupation with the past are defining features of *Vertigo* as a narrative. According to Bazin's theory of *total film*, these narrative themes are brought in through breaks from realism, especially through the nostalgic 360 degree pan shots, the eerie black and pale green lighting, and Hermann's powerful score. This is a watershed moment in the film at which Scottie finally allows himself to believe that he has successfully brought back his past love and gives into his obsessive love for Judy.

Although your average person has likely not experienced an out-of-body spinning makeout session to the soundtrack of Hermann's orchestra, this scene clearly sacrifices realistic representation in order to convey the emotion of having a powerful encounter with a lover. Someone in a similar position in real life might close his eyes to the rest of the world as his heart soars like orchestral strings during this emotional kiss. Granted, the actual reality of this event might have been a sloppy, makeup-smearing kiss with Scottie and Judy gasping for breath under the ugly green light of a neon hotel sign, but a strict

adherence to image facts here would lose the sheer emotion conveyed by a love-crazed man who thinks he has finally won the recreated object of his affection. In that moment for Scottie, nothing else in the world matters until he briefly disengages to consider his doubts, before returning to his beloved.

It is likely that the absolute contribution of emotion and fulfillment to the narrative's theme of obsessive love might allow Bazin to partially overlook Hitchcock's disintegration of reality, especially as a vocal supporter of Hitchcock's work as an auteur. Bazin would likely respect the stylized elements of the narrative at the expense of realism, but it's likely that he might slightly prefer the couple's first kiss with the ocean waves complementing Hitchcock's deep-focus shot and Herrmann's beautiful score. Regardless, the incredibly high narrative and emotional merit of this scene would likely provide a well-deserved favorable review from Bazin of a scene that was emotionally significant to the soul of the director and still available to the audience.