Cinema Between the Surgeon and the Observer: Benjamin, Bazin, and Hitchcock's *Psycho*

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I

Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" conceptualized a curious comparison between the painter and the cinematographer. When Benjamin wrote this essay in late 1935, the new visual medium of cinema was often compared to the existing visual medium of painting. Many writers, now recognized as early film theorists[1], explored the new medium of the twentieth century, as cinema presented a grand spectacle hitherto unimaginable in any visual form (with sound joining later). Among them was André Bazin, whose "Ontology of the Photographic Image" remains a quintessential text in early film theory. In this essay, like Benjamin, Bazin reflected extensively on the roles of the painter and the camera operator. This essay was published in 1945 – exactly a decade after Benjamin's essay, though this decade proved to be one of the most dramatic periods in the history of Western civilization. Hitler's rise to power had already occurred in 1933, so Benjamin wrote his essay while in exile in France. The Second World War began in September 1939 with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland; Benjamin committed suicide on the French-Spanish border following a failed escape on September 26th, 1940; and the war ended in another September in 1945 with Japan's surrender. Thus,

[1] Béla Balázs, Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein – to name the most famous ones.

these two essays were written at two crucial points in history – the former following the rise of Fascism in Europe, and the latter on the brink of massive destruction's end and Fascism's defeat.

In this paper, following the remarks on painting and cinema, I shall try to read these two essays together. I shall try to critically explore the differences in these two essays – how, following the same comparison between these two mediums, the authors formulated different conclusions. By doing so, I shall try to read a particular sequence from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), made much later than this historical point, which, neither of the authors have seen.

II

In Section XIV of his essay, Benjamin compared the conditions of a film set to those of a theatre performance. He discussed an ideal spectatorial position that closely resembles the concept of the vanishing point in perspective painting — the point where the spectator must be positioned to achieve the perfect illusion of three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional canvas. Erwin Panofsky (1991) defined the vanishing point in his famous book *Perspective as Symbolic form*, "First, all perpendiculars or "orthogonals" meet at the so-called central vanishing point, which is determined by the perpendicular drawn from the eye to the picture plane" (28) This principle is applied not only to painting, but to the most of the visual arts of the modern age in the western world. Before seriously challenged by the experiments of the artists of twentieth century (cubists, for example), this principle was the central one in the entire oeuvre of western painting.

Benjamin defined the same point in terms of theatre in the following terms: “In principle, the theater includes a position from which the action on the stage cannot easily be detected as an illusion.” (35) This is the so-called vanishing point in theatre, from which the entire action appears most realistic, just as a perspective painting resembles reality when viewed from its vanishing point. But Benjamin wanted to contrast this with the situation of a film set. Curiously, he did not mention the finished film yet at this point. He argued that in a film set filled with camera, lights and other necessary equipment it is impossible to achieve something like the vanishing point, unless, “the alignment of the spectator’s pupil coincided with that of the camera” (34-35). Therefore, film, by nature of its dependence on the mechanical production, can never be termed with classical arts. Instead, to achieve the illusion of reality, one has to depend on the instruments – there is no way instruments can be detached from the surface of the (filmic) real. To quote from his own words,

> In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure – namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device. (35)

At this point, it is important to note that here Benjamin is thinking about the existence of reality in a film set, i.e., a reality which, at least theoretically, can be in existence beyond the instruments. One can fundamentally argue about this point, since reality in cinema can be discussing in terms of its finished product, not just the reality which is there before the shooting. It is termed as pro-filmic, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication, which is “everything placed in front of the camera that is then captured on

film and so constitutes the film image"[2]. Therefore, Benjamin argues that it is practically "superficial" and "irrelevant" (35) to discuss the question of pro-filmic reality without emphasizing the role of the instruments involved. While talking about Bazin, I shall come back to this point extensively.

Then Benjamin highlighted the role of editing to create the illusion – "the illusory nature of film is of the second degree; it is the result of editing". Here, one can read the influence of soviet film makers and theorists – Eisenstein or Pudovkin, who emphasized the role of montage as the main source of filmic signification. Although these two filmmakers debated on the role of montage as collision or linkage (Eisenstein 1949, 37-38); both of them agreed that in cinema, meaning is created through joining the bits and parts of images *after* filming. In other words, the cinematic apparatus (as this word would be used by later film theorists[3]) depends on editing while creating meaning, not on the existence of the pro-filmic reality.

After this, Benjamin used a fascinating metaphor to willfully complicate (or, one might say, making it rather inscrutable) the entire situation. He compared the camera operator working on the (pro-filmic) reality as the surgeon works on a patient's body. In his schema, "magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer" (35); because, unlike the cinematographer, painters do not use mechanical instruments to work on the reality;

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2 https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001/acref-9780199568758-e-2160

3 Jean-Louis Baudry published "Ideological Effects of Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" in 1970. This is the most influential essay which borrowed Louis Althusser's concept of apparatus and applied it to the instruments used for filmmaking. Peter Wollen, Stephen Heath, Laura Mulvey – all of their early works reside within this broader domain.

therefore, she maintains a safe distance from the real while working on it. For Benjamin, thus painter can be compared to the magician on work, because "the magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated" (35). How these two approaches are different? Let us read from his own word –

> The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The attitude of the magician, who heals a sick person by a laying-on of hands, differs from that of the surgeon, who makes an intervention in the patient. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse: he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient's body and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short: unlike the magician, the surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating. (35)

Several points can be raised on this comparison. First, the question of distance – for Benjamin, the cinematographer (or, if we should say, the filmmaker in general) diminishes the distance between the pro-filmic real and the apparatus which a painter naturally maintains. Second, the metaphor of *penetration* – capturing reality through camera is an act of penetrating the reality. After a few sentences, Benjamin wrote "the painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue" (35). Third, the question of construction – though painting is also a (re)construction of reality, cinema uses *mechanical means* to (re)construct it – therefore, in this schema, these two are fundamentally different. Benjamin argued, "The images obtained by each differ enormously. The painter's is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal,

its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law" (35). The new law is montage, as we mentioned earlier. But this concept of totality is a curious one – since it assumes a different kind of construction in terms of the fragmented nature of cinematographer's work. Finally, Benjamin concluded that this construction functioned as a liberating potential for the masses of the twentieth century — a point I shall not elaborate on for the purpose of this paper. Instead, having this framework in mind, I shall turn to Andre Bazin's thoughts about the same.

III

The question of pro-filmic and the reality was equally important for Andre Bazin. While writing in 1940s, his primary point of reference was the contemporary cinema; and unlike Benjamin, he did not treat cinema as a homogenous entity. We have already seen that Benjamin emphasized the presence of mechanical instruments in cinema, that is to say, in *all kinds of cinema*. Bazin looked at the medium more closely – he had a distinction in mind while talking about *different kinds of cinema* produced till then. This is the time where sound cinema already became the central point of discussion, most people took sound as the primary marker of difference. Instead of dividing the medium into silent and sound; Bazin took up a different schema. In his essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*",* Bazin (1967) identified two distinct stylistic trends in the history of cinema up to that point. He claimed this as his 'working hypothesis', "I will distinguish, in the cinema between 1920 and 1940, between those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality". (24) Although 'faith' is a bit convoluted term, given its translation from the original

French; Bazin's claims can be understandable putting the surrounding films and its makers in context. Before going to the "Ontology" essay, I want to dwell on this a little bit.

As mentioned earlier, in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema", Bazin was particularly tackling with the problem of the coming of sound around the late 1920s. There was one strand of argument which claims that sound gave birth to a totally new kind of cinema. Bazin acknowledged this argument, but put a question mark to this claim. "In other words, did the years from 1928 to 1930 actually witness the birth of a new cinema?" (23). His answer focused mostly on editing, although he did not fully support the claim – "Certainly, as regards editing, history does not actually show as wide a breach as might be expected between the silent and the sound film" (23). But his major intervention was the next claim which, I want to quote at length

> On the contrary there is discernible evidence of a close relationship between certain directors of 1925 and 1935 and especially of the 1940's through the 1950's. Compare for example Erich von Stroheim and Jean Renoir or Orson Welles, or again Carl Theodore Dreyer and Robert Bresson. These more or less clear-cut affinities demonstrate first of all that the gap separating the 1920's and the 1930's can be bridged, and secondly that certain cinematic values actually carry over from the silent to the sound film and, above all, *that it is less a matter of setting silence over against sound that of contrasting certain families of styles, certain basically different concepts of cinematographic expression*. (23-24, emphasis added)

The "certain families of styles" – that was the expression I want to highlight. For Bazin, one of the stylistic family had that "faith in image", another had the "faith in reality". Bazin distinguished these two by the basis of the fact that the former relied more on the

plasticity of the image, i.e., making the image more evocative and layered through different means of cinematographic artifice. On the contrary, there are certain stylistic tendencies where the pro-filmic became more important – those filmmakers used techniques to enhance the existence of reality in front of the camera.

One might argue, here Bazin's point is more nuanced than Benjamin's. He is talking about different ways to deal with the pro-filmic through the apparatus, where Benjamin argued about the penetration of the pro-filmic through the apparatus. But, having said that, Bazin was more interested in those kinds of cinema where the apparatus prefers to maintain a distance (using Benjamin's term, but which he used for painting). To elaborate this point, I want to briefly invoke Bazin's reading of the short film *Le Ballon Rouge* in his article "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage". While describing the film, he wrote, "the important thing about it is that this story owes everything to the cinema precisely because, essentially, it owes it nothing" (46). Although, it seems a bit paradoxical by the first glance, but one can decipher the double take on the word 'cinema' – Bazin is advocating *a type of* cinema which can be made possible without the apparent intrusion of the *devices* and *techniques* of cinema (in other words, the apparatus of cinema). These devices and techniques, for him, works as a suggestion (as he claimed while discussing Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*) over the actual reality. He prefers a cinematic style that minimizes these techniques, allowing reality to emerge through the image.

This thought of having a cinematic style which prefers a distance from the pro-filmic is something which goes counter to Benjamin's argument. Here, as Benjamin proposed a penetrative gesture of the mechanical instrument (camera) as a fundamental existence of

cinema as a medium, Bazin is not ready to accept the presence of camera in this way. For him, one can use the machines in a certain way, which would maintain the distance to allow the reality to emerge in itself. Instead of penetration, here the machines constitute the real. Having this in mind, we might look at his argument in the essay "Ontology of the Photographic Image".

In a sweeping overview spanning from Egyptian mummies to the portrait of Louis XIV, Bazin (2022) traced the evolution of visual arts as a pursuit of greater realism. He termed it as the "resemblance complex" (10) and argued that it managed to be manifested itself through the discovery of perspective system.

> The decisive event was the invention of the first scientific and, in a sense, already mechanical system: perspective. Perspective made it possible for artists to create the illusion of three-dimensional space in which objects could be placed the way they would it we perceived them directly. (10)

Now, again Bazin argued about two distinct tendencies in painting. Once artists achieved the means to create the illusion of depth and reality on canvas, one tendency focused on expressing spiritual reality, conveying the artist's inner quest, while the other aimed to replicate the external world as accurately as possible. Bazin named the former as aesthetic, and the later, psychological. Then, again in a provocative manner, he argued that due to the perspective system, the desire to replicate the external world, i.e., the psychological tendency, eventually overshadowed the pursuit of aesthetic one. In two successive sentences, though bridging two different paragraphs, he wrote – "Perspective was painting's original sin. / Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Lumière were its redeemers". (11)

But how the problem of this psychological desire towards greater realism was solved by the invention of camera? The fact that the camera can reproduce the outside world in a fraction of a second was not considered artistic by most people. But Bazin found a unique potentiality through this act of mechanical reproduction. For him, painting is always a human process, whereas photography, by its very nature, is a collaboration between human and the machine. He championed photography for the relative absence of the human intervention within the frame chosen by the photographer. He argued that painting always depends on the human subjectivity – however realistic the painter might be. But, besides choosing the frame and pulling the shutter, a photographer cannot control the inside of a photographed image[4].

To quote Bazin,

> For the first time, the only thing to come between an object and its representation is another object. For the first time, an image of the outside world takes shape automatically, without creative human intervention, in accordance with a strict determinism. The photographer's personality is at work only in the selection, orientation and pedagogy of the phenomenon: as evident as this personality may be in the final product, it is not present in the same way as that of a painter. All art it founded on human agency; photography alone draws its effectiveness from an absence of such agency. A photograph acts upon as a *natural* phenomenon, like a flower or snowflake whose beauty is inseparable from its vegetal or earthly origin. (12, emphasis original)

Therefore, the act of mechanical reproduction is celebrated by Bazin as something which creates the possibility of being faithful to the real. According to Bazin, using a camera

[4] Needless to say, here we are talking about analogue photography. This point is severely challenged through the invention of digital editing softwire applications like Photoshop.

allows one to capture the outside world without intervening or, if I may say, *penetrating* the fabric of that reality.

IV

Now, we have reached the fundamental difference between these two thinkers. André Bazin argues for a distant relationship with reality through the mechanical instrument, while Benjamin emphasizes penetrating that reality using the same mechanical instrument. For Bazin, using montage or editing to alter the meaning of an image captured in a single shot is one way to modify the effect of that reality, a technique largely employed by Soviet filmmakers. Here, the sense of meaning is not inherently contained within the image; rather, it is derived exclusively from its juxtaposition with other images. While Bazin would not advocate for this technique in cinema, Benjamin argued that editing is the fundamental element of cinematic expression.

The question is, how to bridge the gap? Film theory, as it evolved later in the second half of the twentieth century, did not take Benjamin and Bazin together to answer this question. This is a paradox which the discipline of film studies did not pay much attention, because after 1960s, the entire ontological argument was considered naïve by scholars. One of them, Colin MacCabe (2010), later wrote, "for many in the '70s, Bazin was read not through the cinema but through the nets of Parisian theory. When I first wrote about Bazin, in *Screen* in the summer of 1974, I treated him as a theoretically naïve empiricist, a kind of idiot of the family' (66). Bazin's conception of mechanical image staying at a distant is an intriguing one, since it does not subsume itself within the structuralist question of

signification. On the other hand, Benjamin's metaphor of surgeon and penetration is also not explored much, although it is an important conception of theorizing moving image.

In this paper, I am not claiming to fill out the gap – because that's too ambitious a project to contain within one single term paper. Instead, I shall focus to a concrete piece of film – famous in its own right – to think through the framework we established so far.

V

When Alfred Hitchcock made *Psycho* in 1960, none of these two thinkers was alive. In many ways, *Psycho* can be read as inciting the most important questions of the film studies in the following decades[5] - the questions of voyeurism, gaze, pleasure etc. This film was a popular and critical phenomenon in 1960, its famous shower scene is sometimes compared to the Odessa Steps sequence in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). This film holds a series of firsts — never before had a Hollywood film portrayed its heroine killed within the first 40 minutes, never before had American cinema shown a close-up of a flushing commode, and never before had a Hollywood film used 78 different camera setups and 52 cuts to capture just 45 seconds of screen time. And, of course, last but not least, never before had an American audience witnessed someone brutally killed in one of life's most vulnerable moments — naked in the shower.

I want to focus on that sequence, when Marion Crane (played by Janet Leigh) was slashed in the shower by Norman Bates (played by Anthony Perkins). Within our framework, I chose this sequence not for its cult status in cinephile or academic circles, but because it

[5] This point is also hinted by David Thomson in his book *The Moment of Psycho.*

strikingly illustrates Benjamin's metaphor of penetration in a literal sense. As mentioned earlier, Benjamin likened the mechanical instrument of the camera to a surgeon penetrating the fabric of reality, much like a scalpel on a patient's body. In this particular sequence, a character within the film's reality is murdered with a knife that penetrates both the character's body and the reality itself. But what should we make of this?

I want to take a look at the sequence just preceded by this shower scene. Marion Crane and Norman bates had their supper in the office room in the Bates Motel, they had a conversation which gradually became tensed and uncomfortable. Marion went on to her room adjacent to the office. We now stay with Norman; his expression and body language clearly suggest an intention to do something immoral. He hesitates a bit, looks at the signature (which Marion signed by faking her name) at the hotel register and then looked at a particular painting at the wall (fig. 1)

Fig. 1

This is a curious painting which camera shows in close-up for a fraction of a second. It was panted by the Dutch artist Frans van Mieris, the Elder, and it is called “Suzanne et lei veillards”. This was part of a series of paintings depicting a fully frontal nude woman portrayed as being groped and about to be raped by two old men. This reference of non-consensual sexual transgression becomes clear to us within seconds, because, Norman takes off the picture and looks through a hole (Fig. 2 & 3). With this in mind, the word "penetration" acquires an additional layer of meaning.

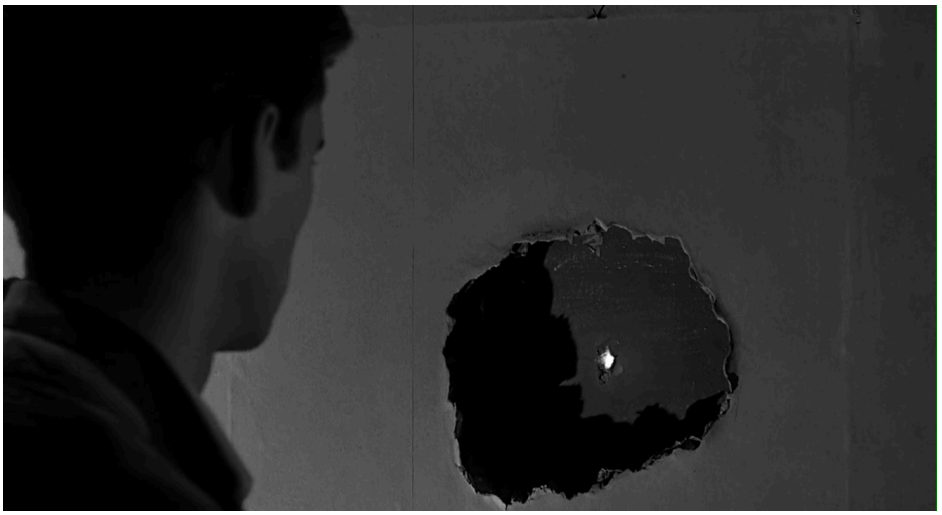

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

This particular frame highlights the act of voyeur – we can connect it to the first shot of the film where the camera travels the city and gets inside the hotel room with two people in their private moment. Here, we need to focus on the camera angle as well – up until now the camera shows Norman from a (supposedly) neutral point – the viewer still watches Norman doing something. But now that thin boundary will be crossed, the camera (and we) would see what the character looks at. (fig. 4)

Fig. 4

This subjective shot — the act of aligning the viewer's point of view with the camera's perspective — is crucial here. From this perspective, the subsequent shower murder is not committed solely by a character but also by the camera itself, which takes pleasure in observing the characters like a voyeur. Hitchcock purposefully invites us (and the camera) to join the crime.

The reference of penetration and active participation is something which echoes the words of Benjamin as we discussed in the opening section of this paper. In the shower scene, camera started becoming fused with the knife (like the scalpel used by surgeons), and it penetrates the characters' body. I want to cite a couple of frame enlargements where it seems that camera takes the POV of the knife itself[6]. (Fig 5 – 8)

Fig. 5

[6] One can bring in the theorization of gaze here, following Lacan or Zizek. But I am not going into that direction here in this paper.

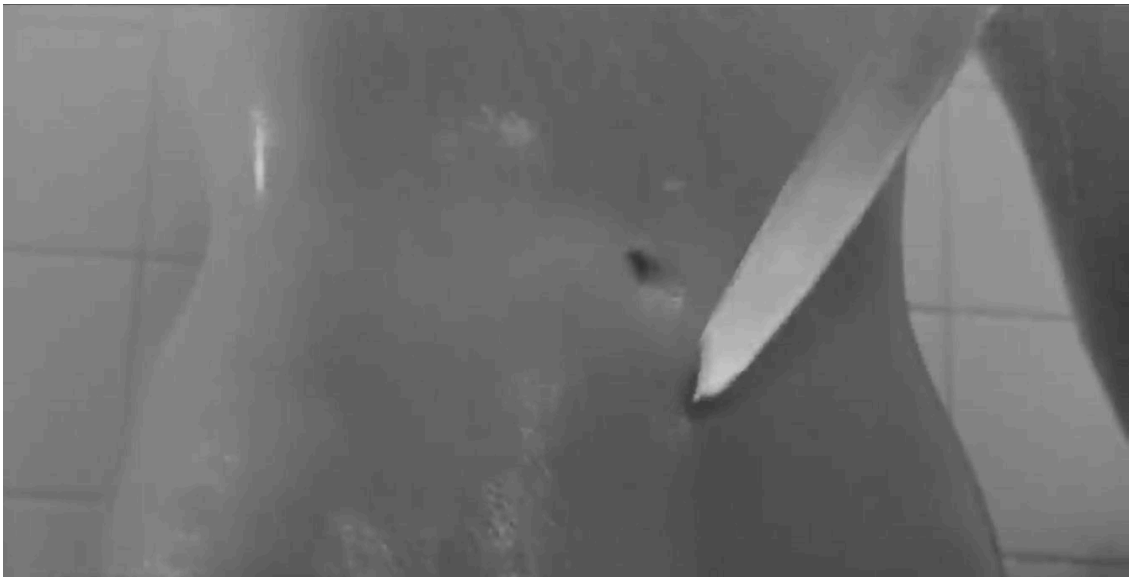

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

But, this is one aspect of this sequence. I want to argue that to understand its significance and the lasting effects on the viewers, Bazin's description of 'photography as a natural phenomenon' is equally important. As mentioned earlier in the paper, Bazin wrote about the presence of a machine between the reality and its image – and it is precisely this fact which becomes responsible of photographed image's credibility. According to Bazin, no matter how distorted or out of focus the image is, "it has been created out of the ontology of the model. It is the model". (13).

I want to argue that in *Psycho*, the filmmakers exploited this indexical quality of the photographed image (Bazin[7]) along with the penetrative aspect (Benjamin), to create the intended shock. On a first glance, 'penetration' and 'editing' seem to be the only important case here – but the fact of having the sequences imprinted within photographed image, not in other medium (say, novel, for example) is key to understand its lasting shocking value. One

[7] Although Bazin never used the term, this word was not used very frequently before the structuralist intervention in humanities academia.

can cite numerous examples when people got shocked watching the film for the first time[8] – and these would have been impossible without the presence of this cinematic medium with its twofold manifestation of the qualities described by Benjamin and Bazin.

To conclude, I want to argue that these two aspects of moving images – penetrating the real and keeping a distance to make it ontologically connected to the real – actually complements each other. This shower sequence can be taken as one example, but any sequence from any film can be analyzed following the framework, and one needs to think this through to create the bridge between these two thinkers.

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[8] Hitchcock and Dick Cavett discussed instances of people getting afraid to take shower after watching this film. I talked with James Lastra while he screened the film for one of our courses in Cinema Studies department. He mentioned that his mother did not take shower for at least a week after watching the film in 1960. These types of anecdotes can be found in books also, such as, *Psycho in the Shower,* written by Philip J. Skerry, *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: A Casebook,* edited by Robert Kolker.