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Auteur 3D Filmmaking: From Hitchcock's Protrusion Technique to Godard's Immersion Aesthetic

Delia Enyedi

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***Abstract*—**Throughout film history, the regular return of 3D cinema has been discussed in connection to crises caused by the advent of television or the competition of the Internet. In addition, the three waves of stereoscopic 3D (from 1952 up to 1983) and its current digital version have been blamed for adding a challenging technical distraction to the viewing experience. By discussing the films *Dial M for Murder* (1954) and *Goodbye to Language* (2014), the paper aims to analyze the response of recognized auteurs to the use of 3D techniques in filmmaking. For Alfred Hitchcock, the solution to attaining perceptual immersion paradoxically resided in restraining the signature effect of 3D, namely protrusion. In Jean-Luc Godard's vision, 3D techniques allowed him to explore perceptual absorption by means of depth of field, for which he had long advocated as being central to cinema. Thus, both directors contribute to the foundation of an auteur aesthetic in 3D filmmaking.

***Keywords*—**Alfred Hitchcock, authorship, 3D filmmaking, Jean-Luc Godard, perceptual absorption, perceptual immersion.

I. Introduction

THE notion of authorship in cinema has been an intensely debated concept since the 1950s, as the primary subject of the emerging field of film studies. The French film critics associated with the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* began to answer the question of whether a film has or needs an author [1]. Simultaneously, the Hollywood studio system was at its peak. This Golden Age of Hollywood developed over four decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s, on the assembly-line system adapted to filmmaking by Thomas H. Ince. First and foremost, it was an applied model of financial efficiency, separating the production process into clearly defined stages and appointing specific tasks to the crew members, with little regard to their artistic contribution [2]. The clash between these opposing perspectives on filmmaking was nuanced. During the second half of the twentieth century, a succession of New Wave national cinemas developed in Europe. Their common denominator was envisioning the role of the film director as that of expressing a unique artistic vision. But even with the gradual transformation of the Hollywood studio system after 1960, the notion of authorship penetrated the American film production from the anti-system standpoint of independent cinema. It dated back to the early days of Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, his 1920 drama in response to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* [3]. Micheaux's work was just an example in a growing phenomenon of Biograph, Edison or Vitagraph films being rivaled by independent productions developing alternatives to the themes of race or featuring attractional elements such as violence and sexuality.

After the transition of silent cinema to the sound era, the status of the film auteur in American independent cinema transited two significant periods. First, the advent of television stimulated the rise of the so-called New Hollywood or New American Wave. From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, directors such as Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen and Stanley Kubrick, to only name a few, challenged the paradigm of classical Hollywood. While they cannot be reunited under a common style of filmmaking, they are often being referred to as an auteur movement which directly influenced the proliferation of art-house cinemas and film festivals across the country [4]. Second, there came the development of cable television and videotape market in the 1980s which further defined independent cinema dominated by newcomer directors such as David Lynch and the Coen brothers. On the broader map of the film industry, it culminated with Steven Sodebergh's win of the 1989 Palme d'Or for *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* [5]. This link between authorship in cinema and the evolution of television is not coincidental. In the current post-media landscape, the symbiosis between the television screen and that of the computer reformulates the question regarding its twenty-first century status. For the first time in cinema history, online entertainment platforms such as Netflix combine feature films with various formats of television series in their offer. From the standpoint of the spectator, this implies a common ground of expectation regarding the quality of the art film or the TV drama he chooses to see. The involvement of renowned directors such as Martin Scorsese and David Fincher in the field of television production stands as proof of a shift which determined David Lynch to compare digital cable television with art-house milieu. In other words, after the consequent birth of television and of cable television, there came digital television resolving the dilemma concerning the place of the contemporary film auteur. The strategy of production companies to address the millennials, the first generation coming to age in the digitally revolutionized millennium, has united commercial and art films, initially destined for big or small screens, in a unique offer accessed through an array of smart devices. With film authorship now sustainable in both cinema and television, there remains an important question to be answered.

The audience interested in online cinematic content has been emptying seats in theatres. As a solution, the film industry has resorted to digital 3D technology. It is a return to a technically dominated stage which has always conflicted with film authorship. With a solid space carved for the position of film auteur in both the independent market and the

Delia Enyedi is with the Department of Cinematography and Media, Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania (e-mail: delia.enyedi@ubbcluj.ro).

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digital television, time has come to discuss the perspectives of auteur 3D filmmaking.

II. The Hitchcockian 3D Demonstration

Already established as master of suspense movies, British director Alfred Hitchcock accepted the Hollywood invitation by signing a contract with David O. Selznick in 1939. The following year, the adaptation of Daphe du Maurier's novel *Rebecca,* he directed, won the Academy Award for Best Picture. While not winning in the category for Best Director, the film industry welcomed and recognized his talent, paving the way to a career peaking in the 1950s [6].

During the first half of this decade, more precisely from 1952 to 1955, Hollywood developed the first wave of 3D films which delivered a staggering total of 46 features [7]. At the height of his career, Hitchcock added to this repertoire the 1954 crime mystery film *Dial M for Murder*, based on a stage play by Frederick Knott. The project to produce it with the stereoscopic technology available at the time belonged to the Warner Brothers studio [8].

In accordance with Hitchcock's directorial tendencies, the film was constructed on a backbone of tight plot visually articulated to control the viewer's attention. In the words of Miriam Ross, the elaborate space composition "negotiates a path between haptic engagement and directed contemplation" [9]. In doing so, the space in which five main characters progress the narrative is alternatively presented in deep focus, through individual shots, as well as in scenes composed to isolate background action in order to emphasize the one taking place in the foreground. But in the case of two particular scenes, Hitchcock abandoned the exploration of depth in favor of 3D's defining effect, protrusion. Breaking the frame with the illusion of action approaching the audience was a technique elegantly displayed in CinemaScope, the anamorphic lenses series used for shooting widescreen movies in the 1950s and 1960s. However, from being an attraction protrusion quickly became a trick enhancing the presence of the screen it tried to surpass and overall damaging the audience experience [10]. Thus, it became clear that for Hitchcock to ride the 3D wave meant to reduce protrusion to the minimum. It was demonstrated when chief inspector Hubbard, played by John Williams, thrusts a key towards the spectator and fully exploited in the crucial gesture of Margo, played by Grace Kelly, to reach out of the frame for the pair of scissors with which she defends herself from the attacker [11].

In a symptomatic outcome for the moment in film history when *Dial M for Murder* was released, the audience was far from impressed with the limited share of protrusion in the overall film. As a consequence, 2D prints were released for theatrical run. Re-releases in 3D had to wait three decades and eventually, in 2012, Warner Brothers also launched the film in a 3D Blu-ray version [12]. Despite this outcome, Hitchcock's approach to 3D technique remains a sample of auteur filmmaking integrating technical innovations into the personal directorial signature. Central to decoding the construction of space in *Dial M for Murder* is the theatrical origin of the story. Outdoor shots are reduced to a minimum in favor of placing the action in between the limits of an interior setting, the Wendices' one bedroom apartment. A sense of stability is constructed through the choice of a frontal perspective. In between the borders of this seemingly restrictive space, the sense of depth is established early on. As Margot heads into her bedroom in the beginning of the film, the camera stops in the living room. Several planes are highlighted with the help of objects. A table and an ornament carry the role of marking the foreground, while the door placed midway offering the glimpse of the bed extends the depth of field. Perceptual immersion is thus achieved in the positive parallax space, behind the screen surface, resorting to the instruments long employed in theatre to create the illusion of stage depth. It is an assumed detachment of Hitchcock from the overtly attractional quality of perceptual immersion demonstrated in dozens of films belonging to the first wave of 3D cinema. By committing to his signature task of meticulously guiding audience attention within the frame the director resorts to volumes reaching out of the screen, into the negative parallax space, only as crucial punctuation of tension. Margo's confrontation with the attacker reaches out, assaulting the conventional safety of the spectator's seat. In this way, the pair of scissors becomes the object of a tactile complicity between the female protagonist and the audience, due to its brief and unexpected placing in its immediate reach.

The interpretation Hitchcock gives to 3D technology from his position of studio bound film auteur becomes that of a master not only aware of the conflict technology brings into his craft, but also of the solution which can balance the two. With diegetic absorption reigning supreme in suspense movies, he demonstrates that a break in it can function if the limits of cinematic space are altered in a narrative point of intensified effect. The murder attempt which fails with the killing of the attacker carries the weight of the plot point I in a classical narrative structure. It is a nodal point of enhanced diegetic engagement from the part of the audience which paradoxically gains from a controlled dose of infusion with 3D attraction.

In the retrospective of Hitchcock films, *Dial M for Murder* is considered a minor title in comparison to *Psycho* or *Vertigo*. Even so, it cannot go unnoticed precisely due to its moderate implementation of 3D. Interestingly enough, Hitchcock himself did not credit the technology with a bright future, considering it a nine-day wonder in which "I came in on the ninth day" [13]. Following the first wave of 3D films to which *Dial M for Murder* belonged, a second wave spanned from 1972 to 1978 and a third began in 1981 [14]. Throughout this development, Hitchcock's film remained a cornerstone for 3D auteur filmmaking.

III. Godard's Salutation to 3D Language

French-Swiss film director Jean-Luc Godard's more recent foray into the use of 3D technology also stands as a cornerstone. Associated with the French New Wave cinema, he is considered to be one of the most radical directors of this movement. Equally criticizing mainstream French cinema and Hollywood conventions, renowned film critic Pauline Kael

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included him in the category of "movie brutalists", which she defined as seeing beyond the tags of popular art or mass medium associated with film and envision it as an art form open to their exploration. Among them "Godard is the symbol, exemplar, and proof" [15].

The rather conventional films he directed in the 1960s are in high contrast with the ones from later stages in his career, when he came to condemn most of cinema's history for being bourgeois art [16]. As most of Godard's films from after 2010, *Goodbye to Language* is a narrative and visual collage enhanced by the 3D technology with which it was produced. But it is far from an average example of 3D film as it belongs to auteur independent cinema. Shot with inexpensive devices by a crew of only three, including the director, the use of 3D is in itself the idea behind this project.

The narrative revolves around a couple's inability to communicate resolved by their dog. Referring to the idea it tries to convey, Godard himself returned to that of 3D for the sake of 3D, confessing that "I like it when new techniques are introduced. Because it doesn't have any rules yet. And one can do everything" [17].

What he set out to do in *Goodbye to Language* was to explore new rules in accordance with his long debated thesis in opposition to that of André Bazin's concerning the depth of field as cinematic instrument. For Bazin, depth of field shots opposed montage techniques which depleted them of realism. He blamed the dialectical montage of the Soviet School of Serghei Eisenstein for damaging the ambiguity of cinematic expression. For Godard, montage editing functioned precisely how Bazin claimed it could not, creating ambiguity through breaks in the temporal continuity. In other words, he rejected continuity editing as an instrument conveying predefined aesthetical or political meaning. For him, "the task of cinema becomes that of exploring an ontology of appearing and the burden of viewing what appears" [18].

Godard, a painter in his youth, inserted in *Goodbye to Language* a sequence of himself as painter along a Claude Monet citation. But what he achieved in his first 3D film was to render an acute tactile sense of the brush strokes situated within an arm's reach of the viewer while constructing a monumental depth within the frame, bringing natural elements and objects into being. The smooth surface of a pond or the geometric definition of a chair placed by a roadside are emphasized through their physicality, never attempting to break the screen. Instead, they invite to sensorial immersion into the deep-focused scenery. The negative parallax is obliterated as the positive parallax captures entire worlds into complex layered compositions.

Filled with references to Godard's life and previous films, *Goodbye to Language* is open to many interpretations. But as a bridge between a technical innovation stemming from the cinema industry and an independent artistic endeavor, the film takes the next step further from Hitchcock's protrusion reducing experiment by constructing complex 3D compositions restricted behind the screen surface. It is a false reduction, as the scope of stereoscopic images has never been more brilliantly perfected. The cinema going experience still requires the use of special glasses. Once the film is projected, the tactile sensation conducts a visual essay. What lacks is the traditional confrontation between discourse and 3D image. Instead, there is a self-supporting merge between the directorial vision and a technical instrument previously reserved to commercial cinema.

IV. Towards 3D Film Authorship

In more than a century of cinema, various factors have shaped its development. The outbreak of World War I limited the European expansion in film production in favor of the North American film industry. The coming of sound in the late 1920s revolutionized its possibilities. *The Jazz Singer* directed by Alan Crosland was launched as the first part-talkie, followed by the first all-talkie picture, Bryan Foy's *Lights of New York*. But it was not until *Applause* by Rouben Mamoulian that sound was integrated not as a standing out attraction, but as a functional element in the overall directorial approach [19]. The same progressive path was followed in the 1930s with the introduction of Technicolor, displayed as a novelty in *Becky Sharp*, directed by the same Rouben Mamoulian, only to be perfected in Henry Hathaway's *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* [20].

The waves of 3D films seem to continue this evolution, but at a more precise analysis they invoke the entertainment industry prior to the advent of cinema. At the time, stereoscopic slides were tricks found in the fairground, which characterized them not only visible, but also provocative in nature [21]. While rendering sound and color was the subject to many experiments from the early days of silent cinema, the purpose was that of replicating a film viewing experience similar to that of theatre with which it was competing. Reproduced three-dimensional vision was never at stake as a missing element in the film viewing equation. Instead, it was regularly re-activated from its origin in the end of the twentieth century entertainment industry to counter-balance the competition posed by television, cable television and, currently, digital entertainment. Its ostensive nature has not changed, thus explaining the limited appeal it has been able to raise. 3D has remained associated with the profit based Hollywood film industry as an artifice ready to be displayed in blockbusters such as *Avatar*, with diegetic engagement taking a second seat in favor of a flawed perceptual immersion.

The rare instance when 3D technology strived to surpass the uncomfortable position of stylistic problem and become somehow invisible as a special effect has been in the hands of a film auteur. In the case of Hitchcock, his take on the problem was supported by a major studio, but timing turned out to be crucial. The first wave of Hollywood 3D films was spiraling down, allowing the director to make use of stereoscopy in an extremely limited amount. Furthermore, the narrative of the film embraced in its crucial scenes the aggressive nature of 3D. *Dial M for Murder* stands at the crossroads of directorial authorship, particular genre and fading technical attraction. For the 1954 moment in time history, it offered an answer to a question which would be answered sixty years later. This question was not only if a

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damage control solution constantly recharged by Hollywood crises could echo in independent cinema, but if it could also echo in the European milieu of authorship cinema. In a surprising response, Godard's *Goodbye to Language* reignited his 1960's dispute in the midst of theorizing cinematic instruments. In a similar strong stance, his film freed the possibilities of 3D technology from the large scale production it had always implied up to it. Produced with resources limited to the very minimum, it succeeded in delivering a complex three-dimensional viewing experience. But even more importantly, it annulled protrusion as the defining feature of 3D. As an attraction, the invasion of the negative parallax in cinema has been short lived. While Hitchcock exploited it within specific parameters, Godard excited it in its entirety. Instead of inviting the viewer into a narrative broken by artifice, he created a visual essay with the aim of expanding the positive parallax to extremes never before envisioned.

The discussion on auteur 3D filmmaking must mark the leap taken from what Hitchcock saw as a challenging technique to what Godard formulated as an aesthetic. In between these moments, 3D has failed to what sound, color and even CinemaScope achieved after being introduced, namely to transform from an innovation a standard film production practice. Godard opened an alternative perspective in which 3D escapes the short-lived mass-marketed form of attraction and strives in an artistic redefinition. The shift it implies in space perception forces the viewer to cease associating the role of 3D to that of enhancing realism and instead adding value to 2D [22]. As a consequence, film authorship of the twenty-first century assumes the role of path breaker. What the Hollywood industry could not overcome was the rift between pre-cinema entertainment practices and the production system grounded in its stability. With every new technical innovation, the norms temporarily crashed under the burden of their assault on cinematic composition. Novelty repeatedly acted as threat until gradual steps were taken towards neutralizing its disturbing presence. A number of important film scholars and critics have dismissed a similar outcome for 3D. For them, four attempts to naturalize it as an integrated practice of filmmaking have been sufficient to prove its short-lived existence as attraction. Film aesthetics and spectatorship practices have had little to gain from the violation and consequent highlighting of the screen boundaries, since the screen has always been envisioned as an immersive passage into the illusion of artificial worlds. So it comes as a surprise that a film auteur adopts 3D as a sustainable film language instrument, within the context of independent production. However, in the discussion of 3D authorship in film, Godard's successful demonstration opens a stimulating route with a turn not yet taken. With *Goodbye to Language* adopting the non-narrative form of visual essay, predictions upon a narrative auteur incursion into 3D lose the landmark. In this regard, the studio system standardized the classical Hollywood narrative. In recent decades, the hero's journey was adopted from the field of comparative mythology in order to diversify the domination of this formula. At the same time, Eastern influences have put their mark on Western films with a specific storytelling framework. These are symptoms of depletion in narrative resources to which television has started to respond with serialized fiction. From the margins, independent cinema has mixed linear and non-linear structures, in a bid to explore them cinematically, with narrative content in an intriguing position. Other than beating the system at its own game, Godard's film offers little to no insight into whether narrative 3D authorship is sustainable.

To conclude, incursions into 3D filmmaking such as the ones made by Alfred Hitchcock and Jean-Luc Godard marked a departure from the core feature of 3D technology. In an attempt to put the technology into use, the damaging effect of protrusion was gradually moderated up to complete rejection. Instead, positive parallax 3D was proven effective to broaden the perspectives of 2D image composition through depth of field an object textures. Other 3D auteur films have adhered to this purpose. Wim Wenders' *Pina*, a documentary on German choreographer Pina Bausch, uses 3D to reconstruct the physicality of the dancers' space on screen. Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* transforms 3D into a passage rite inside the Chauvet caves in the South of France, investing forbidden tourist with the spectatorial power of visually touching 30.000 years old art.

If the film industry is on the verge of aborting 3D for a fourth time, auteur cinema has successfully experimented with merging directorial vision with this challenging technology. From a disowned heritage of popular entertainment, 3D has joined the repertoire of groundbreaking aesthetics, capable of rewriting the theory and practice of post-cinema authorship.

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