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# Baroque Glances at Society: the Appropriation of Decoupage, the Long Take and Depth of Field Photography in the Early Films by J.A. Bardem.

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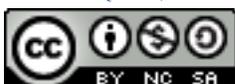
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**Baroque Glances at Society: the appropriation of decoupage, the long take and depth of field photography in the early films by J.A. Bardem.**

Bardem is often described as a Spanish Neorealist, as a director who followed closely the cinema of Italian directors like Fellini, Pietro Germi, Visconti and of course the early Antonioni. Except for *Cómicos* (1954), inspired by the reading of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950) all the films he made during the 1950s are inspired by an Italian source: *Death of a Cyclist* (1955) was inspired by Antonioni's *Cronnica di un Amore/Story of a Love Affair* (1951); *Calle Mayor* (1956), shares similarities in plot and concept with Fellini's *I Vitelloni* (1953); *La Venganza* (1957) with Pietro Germi's *Il Camino della Esperanza /Path of Hope* (1950), and *Sonatas* (1959) follows clearly the new path for Neorealist practise of Visconti's *Senso* (1954), an attempt to achieve a re-interpretation of current affairs via historical events.

We cannot argue that the ideology and, as Cerón Gómez puts it, the questions of ethical matter of these films are not forged in Neorealism. But when we study closely the purely technical and formal achievements in Bardem's films, the mechanics of his style, the Neorealist influence vanishes, giving way to a more Hollywood oriented kind of cinema. We can say that the *Bardemian* style would be just an appropriation of both models: the ethics and moral within Neorealist stories – the ontological, social, and political implications of films –, and the well-crafted filmmaking techniques of 1940s Hollywood cinema – delicate and studious frame composition, the variety of shot sizes in one single scene, dynamic editing that hold together the narrative rhythm, spatial relations, camera movement... It was probably the lack of inspiration in his national cinema that resulted in a virtuoso exercise in the assimilation of foreign modes of representation. Bardem's rejection of previous Spanish national cinema (profoundly linked and attached to Fascist policies) resulted in an appropriation of foreign modes of filmmaking. But the rejection of one model implies the appropriation of another. As concerns questions of technical

order and style, the two major influences in Bardem's cinema would be Antonioni and American Cinema.

Bardem always understood cinema as a product of entertainment that had to reach the audience with successful results. In 1956, in his famous article for magazine *Cinema Universitario*, "What's a film for?", he stated:

...one should look up to provide a momentary entertainment to a biggest number of spectators. Entertainment understood in the most genuine sense of the world, in its actual meaning of pulling the spectators themselves out from the spectacle of their own contemplation and thrust them out into a different world reproduced in terms of light, images and sound.

This statement places Bardem very close to the idea of cinema assumed by the majority of his Hollywood contemporary filmmakers, and distances his cinema from the Neorealist practise. In order to achieve this *alienation*, this idea of "thrusting the spectators out into a different world reproduced in terms of light, images and sound", Bardem made use of specific elements of film grammar developed and exploited during the 1940s in Hollywood. The elements of this grammar to be perpetuated in all his films, especially during the 1950s, were the use of *decoupage*, the long take with its intrinsic exposure in depth of field photography.

The Hollywood techniques of the 1930s gave way to a sort of style that was imitated around the world, as Bordwell recounts in his work on the history of film style.<sup>1</sup> Bazin and his contemporaries of la *Nouvelle Critique* believed cinema was basically realistic, a storytelling art like the novel or the theatre. Moreover, the new critics pointed that the sound era advanced-studio filmmaking was the real *avant-garde* cinema.<sup>2</sup> According to this new criticism one of the major changes that took place during the sound era was the decline of *montage* in favour of *decoupage*, which they believed it had been forged in American studios. While montage is a form of editing that creates a totality out of fragments and may result in an artificial and often discontinuous representation of reality, *découpage* 'breaks a spatio-temporal whole

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<sup>1</sup> Bordwell, David, *On the History of Film Style*, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> See Bordwell, opus cit., p. 46-50.

into closer views' (Bordwell: 1997 52). For example, a scene starts with a *plan américain* shot of two actors talking to each other and then cuts in to a closer shot of one of the actors matching their movement, or even to a closer shot of the two actors. We can also have a cut back to the *plan américain* or establishing shot that we had seen at the beginning of the scene. The continuity of the scene is never broken. Before sound, analytical cutting as used by Griffith (and the Soviet cinema) 'broke up the continuous 'theatrical' recording of the scene'. *Decoupage*, on the other hand, respects the spatio-temporal relations, as a play on stage would, creating a more organised, realistic and smooth flow of images that some refer to as invisible editing or invisible camera. As Bordwell concludes:

A large part of sound cinema's realism, therefore, depended upon the unobtrusive analytical editing, shot/reverse-shot cutting, and smooth camera movement characteristic of most countries' studio cinemas since the mid-1930'.<sup>3</sup>

The over-exploitation of the practise of decoupage in Bardem is obvious from his first solo debut film *Cómicos* (1954). Not only we see examples of decoupage used for shot/reverse shot edits but also a frontal decoupage edit, which implies cutting to closer views frontally, sometimes the size of the shot is only increased by a few inches, almost unnoticed by the spectator. Not only can we find decoupage from wide angle or *plan americaine* shots to medium or close-up shots but also from close-up to extreme close-up shots as in this scene. This use of decoupage appears constantly in Bardem's next two films, *Death of Cyclist* and *Calle Mayor*, but diminishes with his first colour productions. Bardem can take decoupage to bizarre limits. The frontal cut into an extreme close-up coming from a close-up or medium shot, apart from denoting a certain inclination to stylization, seems to pry into the character's mind and consciousness, as if the large image could speak the mind.

By 1941 all the advances in film narrative exercised during the '30s merged together at his highest point of creativity and innovation in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*

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<sup>3</sup> Id., p. 53.

(1941). *Citizen Kane* is said to have innovated filmmaking in all flanks. First, the film broke up with the traditionally accepted chronological story introducing the flash-back as the main sequential element of the narrative. It also made use of innovative deep-space shooting and editing techniques. Depth of field, pan-focus, the long take, black gamma keys to blend images together, long cross-dissolves montage, and a constant shift in point of view that surprised the audience, are some of Welles tricks for innovation. Welles composed the frame in a variety of ways that enhanced the visual elements on the screen. He combined low and high angles shots introducing ceilings on the sets; harmonious camera movements, placing in and out of focus objects and characters on the foreground while action would still be in focus in the background; and a dramatic use of expressionistic lighting. Moreover, the use of sound, voice over, off-screen voice and soundtrack are highly stylised too. Depth of field, the pan-focus (a panoramic adjusting the focus to the elements we see as the camera pans) and consequently the long take permitted audiences to cut within the frame, directing their view to whichever element they felt most important or relevant. *Citizen Kane* was a benchmark in film history marking the beginning of modern cinema. However, we can argue that all these advances didn't appear for the first time in *Citizen Kane*; John Ford, William Wyler or even Renoir in Europe had already used some of the techniques that Welles and his cinematographer Gregg Toland promoted. As André Bazin put it *Citizen Kane* could be seen as “an encyclopædia of old techniques”, in which, to my thinking, it is the premeditated effort to create style what prevails over style itself.

In this paper, we are using *Citizen Kane* as the model for 1940s Hollywood stylised cinema, as regards formal and technical devices that would eventually consolidate a style during the next decades, in America and elsewhere. With *Citizen Kane*, depth of field photography, pan-focus and the long take entered cinema into a new phase, what the French critics called *the real avant-garde cinema*, which was to be imitated or appropriated by European directors, specially from France and Italy. It is a cinema that allows for a deep space shooting that requires “an intricate staging”. In the 1930s “directors moved their performers around the set quite fluidly and used editing to enlarge and stressed aspects of the action”. The deep space staging and framing would soon be combined with wide-angle lenses by which “directors could allow actors to come quite close to the camera, sometimes with their heads looming

in the foreground, while other figures could be placed far in the distance.” Everything could be on focus allowing sometimes for different layers of action in one single plane. This is the main pillar upon which Welles’ style is sustained, and that influenced so many directors during the 1940s and ‘50s. As Bordwell wonders:

Why did this approach emerge in so many countries at the same time? We don’t really know. It wasn’t simply the influence of *Citizen Kane*, as we might think. The Stalinist cinema had developed deep space shooting in the 1930s, and we can find it elsewhere. Probably Hollywood’s 1940s films helped spread the style, but there are likely to be local causes in various countries too.

*Citizen Kane* was released in the US in 1941 but it would not reach Europe until the end of World War II: in France in 1946, and in Spain in 1966, according to Spanish critic Diego Galán. Whether Bardem captured and assimilated the new techniques via Hollywood or via post-1946 European productions, it is obvious that his style – especially empathic in his first 3-4 films — resembles the encyclopaedia of old techniques carried out by Welles. This imitation or appropriation of Wellesian cinematic storytelling becomes at times baroque, just as *Citizen Kane*, in which every shot carries a highly stylised mark.

There are several critics that spotted the Wellesian influence in Bardem. Spanish critic and author Castro de Paz, believes that “the most evident constructive pillars [of his style] derive from a certain American cinema rooted primarily and doubtlessly in Welles’ cinema”. Italian magazine *Cinema Nuovo* film critic Guido Aristarco observed the analogy with Welles in both his reviews of *Death of a Cyclist* and *Calle Mayor*:

From Antonioni, Bardem follows in a certain manner the composition of the frames, their length and formal tone, except for the imitation of Welles in the unexpected numerous cuts, and in the abrupt passage from one scene to the other.

Puline Kael also sees analogies with Welles style of editing. In her not very favourable entry for *Death of a Cyclist* in *5001 Nights at the movies*, she stated: “His editing is rather too flashy in an out-to outdo Orson Welles manner”.

The “unexpected numerous cuts” that Aristarco referred to, allowed for great dynamism in editing in one single scene. Not only establishing shots and closer shot/reverse shot are in used, but a number of closer shots are introduced to enhance the tale and reinforce climatic or important elements of the scene. This dynamic editing increased the pace and rhythm of the film. Cutting into and out of closer views – following the rules of continuity by decoupage – forced the audience to focus where directors wanted to, directing them to look there where the action or dialogue was considered most relevant. As for the abrupt passage from one scene to the other, there is an increasing tendency to avoid the use of dissolves in preference for the straight cut whereby the sound-track from following next-scene image could be heard before we could actually see them.

The dynamic editing and variety of shots were also combined with long takes using depth of field and deep-space staging. As early as in *Cómicos* (1954), depth of field and the long take appeared to be emphatically used. It is Bardem’s own tribute or appropriation of the Wellesian ‘encyclopaedia of old techniques’. The long take served the spectators to draw their attention to that part of the frame that they decided to be most relevant or attractive. The frame is composed allowing actors or objects to filled foreground while retaining action in the background too, both in perfect focus. The first scene in *Death of a Cyclist* is self-explanatory of Bardem’s intention as a stylist filmmaker. In a 1 minute and 30 seconds, he was able to combine deep-staging photography allowing actors to be in focus as they come close to the foreground and keeping action in the background. At the same time, the bicycle wheel is still spinning as the characters walk back to the background of the frame. Leaving objects close to the foreground was one of Welles most recurrent framings. The ideology and significance of this shots speaks by itself: an object in the foreground that relates to the characters and to the course of narrative.

The long take with wide angle lenses usually propelled the over-the-shoulder shot/reverse shot, respecting the 180 degrees rule, in which the imaginary line created by the action and the actors was very seldom crossed.

Only his 1950s black-and-white films are built under Wellesian influence. In his colour productions that immediately followed both decoupage and deep-space shooting allowing depth field, are very scarcely used, and when they are, the result is not as powerful . As Bordwell noticed:

...” During the 1950s two technological changes posed problems for this style. One was the greater use of colour filming, which renders depth of field much more difficult. The other innovation was anamorphic widescreen, a technology seen in Cinemascope and Panavision. These systems also had trouble maintaining focus in many planes when foreground was close to the camera. The flagrant depth compositions we find in black-and-white ‘flat’ films were quite difficult to replicate in colour and anamorphic widescreen.”

Another important aspect of Wellesian *mise-en scene* is the high and low angle shots. Bardem frequently used high or low angle shots, sometimes allowing objects or actors to be in the foreground. The actors are seen from the point of view of the other actors or even from the point of view of the objects there are looking at. Isabel looking up to the chandelier from a very high angle, reduced to a small defeated figure in the foreground, from elevator landing space where she is about to fall... These shots always provided a strong meaning; they might emphasize power, defeat, and insecurity, tension between characters.

Camera movement and pan-focus photography is also a recurrent stylistic mechanism. The camera, whether on a crane, on dolly or tracks, advances laterally following the action, also frontally into actors faces, or pulls back from actors. The movement is sometimes accompanied by left or right panoramic and the image is always in focus. Camera movement could have been used simply as a desire to express style. Some other times these movements carried a certain meaning that the director intends to pass to the audience. In this scene Ana Ruiz is going to make debut with a principal role in a play. As the action of the play evolves on the stage,

the camera crosses the stage in a smooth, steady and quite accelerated movement looking for Ana in the backstage, the surprise element of this movement reveals Ana's anxiety and nervousness, as she waits for her entrance on stage.(VIDEO).

The look into day-by-day life by Bardem or Welles produced a certain Baroqueism that other cinemas of their time rejected. Directors like Renoir, Ophuls, Preminger, Mizoguchi, Carol Reed and others embraced this style of filming. French and Italian cinema of the 1940s would soon use the 1940s techniques, sometimes with different means. The long take, for instance or camera movement was used as a way to render more reality to their films. Cerón critiques the use of depth of field as used by Neorealist filmmakers, which as he thinks allows for an opener sense, less controlled kind of cinema.

...elipsis that do not clarify points of the story, the detention of the camera over moments of life[...]the use of depth of field that allows the spectator to direct their attention to the part of the frame that they decide. Summing up, everything that gives films an opener sense when the filmmaker remains absent. Bardem, on the contrary, proclaims his implication, and when he uses depth of field and the long-take he does it with far different intentions.<sup>4</sup>

Cerón does not, however, tell us which are Bardem's intentions when using the long take. What Cerón forgets is that the long-take is not a Neorealist invention, and the use of long-take as proven by Welles or Wyler does not give their films an opener sense or absence of control by the filmmaker. It is rather the opposite. The choice of long-take scenes or fragments already implies control, choice, and intervention. A long take from *Citizen Kane* differs greatly from a long take in *Paisa*, for instance. The technique is the same, a camera that follows action with no cuts for the duration of an entire sequence or scene. It is the life that the camera captures, the absence of controlled and rigid *misé-en-scène*, in-the-moment performances what make the filmmaker absent but not the photographic technique. It is clear that Bardem

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<sup>4</sup> Cerón Gómez, *Militancia y Posibilismo*, Opus Cit. , p. 33-34

promotes “the intervention of the director over the filmed material in order to guarantee the communication of an interpretation of a clear, precise, rational and ideology-laden reality”<sup>5</sup>. He believed that “ the filmmaker who makes use of a camera, may create another ‘ reality’, setting up a certain cinematographic mode; the reality before the photographic objective”. Hereby, Bardem’s use of the long take, for instance, it is a mere mode of cinematography to create another reality and communicate an interpretation of life modified by the filmmaker, i.e., more critical, less ambiguous, more directed, more Hollywood-oriented, just what Welles did. The presence of the director is omniscient in *Citizen Kane*. The artifice is present in every single shot. The reality rendered is baroque and thrusts the spectator out into a “different world” On the contrary, Neorealist films communicate a less modified interpretation of reality. The director, although making use of similar techniques, remains unobtrusive.

We cannot imply that Bardem was the only European filmmaker intoxicated by 1940s Hollywood or Wellesian style. He was probably one of the earliest who carried out the practice of imitating the dominant cinema in Spain, an exercise that would not find a continuity in the 1960s due to the counter-intoxication of the New European cinemas arising in the late ‘50s. We would have to wait until the late ‘70s and early ‘80s to see conscious efforts to emulate Hollywood modes of filmmaking with directors like José Luis Garci, Pedro Almodóvar, Alex de la Iglesia, Amenábar or Juan Carlos Fresnadillo.

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<sup>5</sup>Id. , p. 33