

# Flat Film: Strategies of Depthlessness in *Pleasantville* and *La Haine*

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## Abstract:

In this essay I consider the device of depthlessness in film. I am interested in particular in the ways in which this device can determine, or at least raise questions about, the nature of the fictional world. Taking my cue from two films from the turn of the century – Gary Ross’ 1998 film *Pleasantville* and Matthieu Kassovitz’ 1995 *La Haine* – as well as, more broadly, arts historical and cultural theoretical debates, where rather more attention has been devoted to the issue of depthlessness, I focus on moments in which depth, that is, in Andre Bazin’s oft-cited words, the “continuity” of the fictional realm, is flattened so as to trace the correlation between depthlessness and the ontology of the fictional world. The two strategies I look at are shallow focus and the dolly zoom. What I intend, here, is to offer some first, superficial (no pun intended), reflections that may allow us to begin thinking about this cinematic notion of the depthless as a device and concept in its own right, with its own rationales and implications, just as art historians and cultural theorists have found it an interesting concept by which to study and categorize artistic and cultural developments. There is so much discussion in film studies about depth – from Bazin’s discourse about neorealism’s “decisive step forward” re-introducing deep focus, to Gilles Deleuze’s talk about Orson Welles’ “freeing” of depth, it might be helpful to consider its supposedly backwards, “restrictive” antithesis as well.

**Keywords:** flat film; flatness; depthlessness; superficiality; surface; depth of field; shallow focus; dolly zoom; *Pleasantville*; *La Haine*

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In what follows I have a look, or, given the space and the nature of my concern, a cursory glance, really, at the device of depthlessness in film. I am interested in particular in the matter in which this device can determine the nature of the fictional world. Taking my cue from two films from the turn of the century – Gary Ross’ 1998 film *Pleasantville* and Matthieu Kassovitz’ 1995 *La Haine* – I focus on moments in which depth, that is, in Andre Bazin’s oft-cited words, the “*continuity*” of the fictional realm (2005, p. 28), is flattened so as to trace the correlation between depthlessness and the ontology of the fictional world. To be sure, I specifically discuss instances of depthlessness as opposed to, say, superficiality, thinness, or surface qualities like glossiness, smoothness and evenness. What this means is that I am interested in the relationship between that which is not deep but which has been or could be – and less that which is without depth, of which depth is not an intrinsic quality or part.

The two strategies I consider are shallow focus and the dolly zoom. These are obviously not the only strategies of depthlessness let alone of “flattening” more generally – indeed, one of the aims of this special issue as a whole is to show just how many strategies of superficiality there are. Nor, I imagine, are the examples I engage with necessarily symptomatic for all performances of shallow focus or the dolly zoom. What I intend, here, is to offer some first, superficial (no pun intended), reflections that may allow us to begin thinking about this cinematic notion of the depthless as a device and concept in its own right, with its own rationales and implications, just as art historians and cultural theorists have found it an interesting concept by which to study and categorize artistic and cultural developments. There is so much discussion in film studies about depth – from Bazin’s discourse about neorealism’s “decisive step forward” re-introducing deep focus (2005, p. 27), to Gilles Deleuze’s talk about Orson Welles’ “freeing” of depth (2005, p. 105);<sup>1</sup> it might be helpful to consider its supposedly backwards, “restrictive” antithesis as well.

### Shallow Focus

I doubt there are many viewers, even those who consider themselves seasoned film buffs, who are not struck by the game *Pleasantville* plays with style and meaning, with “how” and “what”, particularly in terms of genre. Indeed, most scholarly accounts of the film make mention of it

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1. See Comolli (1986) and Harpole (1980) for critical evaluations of discourses of depth in classical film studies.

(cf. Grainge, 2003; Walters, 2008). A film that crosses more genres than I can recount here, including but not limited to the 1950s sitcom, the small town film, film noir, melodrama, the *nouvelle vague*, 1980s blockbusters and the 1990s teen film, its gimmick is to treat generic visual tropes as if they are intrinsically linked to ontological predispositions. For instance, because 1950s sitcoms never showed any blood, or anyone going to the toilet, or sex – the reason being, of course, that these were censored – this is taken to mean that the sitcom’s fictional world was a world without blood or toilets or sex. There is a striking scene early on in the film when one of the characters enters the toilet cubicle to find, to her surprise as much as ours, that it is empty. Or if a small town film was set, presumably due to budgetary constraints, only in main street, this is taken to mean that there is only main street, that the world consists exclusively of this one, single road, looping from back to front. Indeed, *Pleasantville* goes as far in its conceit to suggest that all 1950s fictional worlds are all black-and-white. When protagonists David (Tobey Maguire) and his sister Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) are zapped into the 1950s sitcom Pleasantville – the premise of the film – she remarks, disgustedly: “I’m pasty” (Vermeulen, 2014).

*Pleasantville* introduces these conceits, gives the viewers a heads-up, if you will, straight from the get-go. Its opening scene depicts what seems like an exchange between David and an unnamed girl (Heather McGill) from his school. Cutting back and forth between isolated medium close-ups of David (fig. 1.) and the girl (fig. 2.), each of them set against a distinctly out-of-focus a background, the film suggests that the two are talking to one another. David asks the girl to go out with him, she nods shyly, he smiles, surprisedly, sweetly, she laughs, and so on. However, at the end of the exchange, the camera pulls back to reveal, now in deep focus, that the two are at different ends of the school yard (fig. 3.). They are both physically and socially worlds apart. By playing with the conventions of cinema, in particular shallow and deep focus, with depth of field, the film momentarily causes the viewer to believe in one scenario, set in one world, only to then have us discover that we are in fact looking at another scenario, in another world. In the first, David is a heartthrob, in the second, well, a bit of a freak, I guess it is fair to say; in the former world David and the girl are within touching distance, in the latter, they are not even close. The message, however, is clear: the stylistic register determines the parameters of the world. Style is not just a vehicle for narrative, not simply a shipment container or envelope delivering separate or in any case separable contents. It is part and parcel of the narrative, an audiovisual unfolding at once drawn from parts of and circumscribing in its entirety the film’s fictional world.<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 1.* Medium close-up of David in shallow focus.



*Figure 2.* Medium close-up of unnamed girl in shallow focus.

What I mean when I talk about images shot in shallow focus are images which depict one or two planes in-focus – the so-called “depth of field” – and all the other planes out-of-focus. Often, the plane in focus is the top layer, the surface layer. But it also happens that the focus is put further

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2. See Perkins (1993) and Klevan (2000) for detailed discussion of the relation between style and narrative along these lines.



Figure 3. Long shot of David and the girl in deep focus.

back, past the top layer onto a subsequent dimension of the world. Furthermore, the emphasis within a shot is not necessarily fixed on one plane only. It can move, shift from one plane to the other – the process of racking focus. In the case of *Pleasantville*, the focus, the “depth of field”, is stable: it lies exclusively with the top plane. We can without exception see David’s face sharply (fig. 1), whereas the contours of his surroundings remain vague – indeed, it should be noted here that they are, comparatively, inordinately vague, suggesting less a subtle distinction between foreground and background than a harsh cut, a strict separation of spheres, in which the one seems divorced from the other by a sheet of translucent glass (in fact, if I did not know better, I might have even assumed David and the girl were set against green screens). This is a reflection, presumably, of the extent to which the conversation takes place within David’s imagination, an illusory universe where the social strata that structure reality do not apply. We can, however, imagine scenarios in which the distribution of focus is both less stable and less rigid, concentrating first on one layer, and then, gradually, evenly, on another. In 1990s soap operas, after all (or at least those I watched with my mother in my early teens), the focus often transitions from a character in the foreground to one in the background, shifting the emphasis from the former’s articulation of her feelings to the latter’s emotional response.

One might suggest that shallow focus, in this sense, should be understood as a momentary, and partial, suspension of depth – not its definitive, or indeed its entire, abandonment. The so-called “continuity” of David’s environment is paused mid-air, postponed as if separated by a

sheet of translucent glass, or surrounded by a spell of fog; but it is not obscured to the point of doubting the possibility of depth. Indeed, shallow focus is not only temporal but also partial in its suspension of depth in that it does not so much abandon all optical qualities of depth, which conventionally tend to be perspectival qualities (Panofsky, 2012), as that it puts some of them on the back burner, as it were.

As the frame grab of David (fig. 1) shows, shallow focus does not here render depth unrecognizable. The rules of linear perspective, for instance, are maintained. Persons and objects in the foreground are demonstrably larger than people and things in the background: David's face occupies as much space, compositionally, in the right front half of the image, as the whole body of a schoolmate does towards the back left. Planar perspective, the creation of depth through (overlapping) planes, however, though not abandoned, has been problematized. For one, it has been reduced to two planes: an in-depth medium close-up of David's face and one out-of depth unified background. For another, planar perspective has been contracted, pulled together, pulled into one another, to the extent that the second plane, the so-called background, is a unilateral collage of various layers. That is to say, the background combines as one, in one plane, the second and third and fourth and potentially even seventieth layer. As a result, the atmospheric perspective, the diminishing of contrasts over distance, collapses, creating not the gradual dissolution of form but its sudden effacement. I would propose, insist even, that shallow focus's temporal and partial nature means it constitutes, or in any case should be understood in terms of, a depthlessness as opposed to superficiality. The very term depthlessness, after all, suggests the possibility of depth, alludes to the fact that depth was once there and may be there again, whereas superficiality merely invokes a sense of thinness – the existence of one plane. As David Bordwell (1998) has noted, the notion of depth of field implies depth of focus as well as depth of staging: what this suggests is that a plane may not be in focus at any one moment but it has certainly been staged in case the lens reorients and/or recalibrates.

In shallow focus, depth is put off, obfuscated, not obliterated. In this sense, it resembles the depthlessness Fredric Jameson (1991) speaks about when he speaks about the photography of Andy Warhol, or discourse theory, or the decline of existentialist philosophy, or indeed, postmodern culture on the whole: depth is abnegated rather than nonexistent. *Pleasantville* suggests that shallow focus, like Warhol's gloss or Michel Foucault's insistence that the "soul" is an effect of social relations, draws our attention to the surface as opposed to whatever it is that may lie or lurk beneath it. "Look here, look here!", it says, "this – and only this – is where it's at. No need to look any further." In his slim but splendid

volume of essays *The Barbarians*, the Italian essayist Alessandro Baricco (2013) writes about a similar mode of engagement in terms of surfing which seems to me to be a particularly apt metaphor: there is depth, you just do not want to fall in. In fact, since surfing requires strenuous practice, hours and hours of training, what the metaphor implies – rightly or wrongly – is that depthlessness is an actively sought out reorientation of our movement, our body and our senses.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to contemplate for a brief moment what the strategy's implications for the way in which we understand depth might be in this respect. I think that these are twofold, and not necessarily compatible. First, the racking focus, the movement between planes, relocating from the top layer to the bottom layer to the middle one, from one point to the other, implies that the suspended depth is both continuous and layered, or rather still interspersed. *Pleasantville's* fictional universe can here very much be understood as what in the Netherlands we call a "kijkdoos" (a "looking box"). The kijkdoos is sometimes translated as "toy theatre" but they are not the same, exactly. A kijkdoos, looks, for one, much more like a camera obscura. In short, a kijkdoos is made from a shoebox. A peephole is cut in one of the narrow sides, the back or roof is exchanged for crepe paper or transparent foil which allows in light, and layers of paper – often in the shape of people, animals, buildings or the natural environment – are inserted to create a view of a miniature 3d landscape. What matters for the purpose of my argument here, the reason *Pleasantville's* use of shallow focus reminds me of a kijkdoos, is that depth is measured as a straight line between the peephole and the horizon, i.e. the vista's backdrop. This line of sight is divided up by flat sheets of paper providing proprioceptive parameters of distance. As we concentrate on one layer, the others recede from view. To be sure, though, they are there. They have not disappeared altogether. It is just that it is difficult to look at them all at once in detail.

As Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie and Marc Vernet (1992) have noted, however, shallow focus' second implication is precisely that depth is not a set spatio-temporal configuration, a container, in whose space stories can develop; but a narrative that configures, that temporalizes and spatializes. In *Pleasantville*, the deep focus shot is included not simply to establish that there is depth, but rather to establish, to create, the very principle, the properties, the measure, of depth: distance. Depth here is distinctly not an ontological *a priori* as much as a performative *a posteriori*: a "depthing", a breaking

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3. See also Vermeulen (2015).

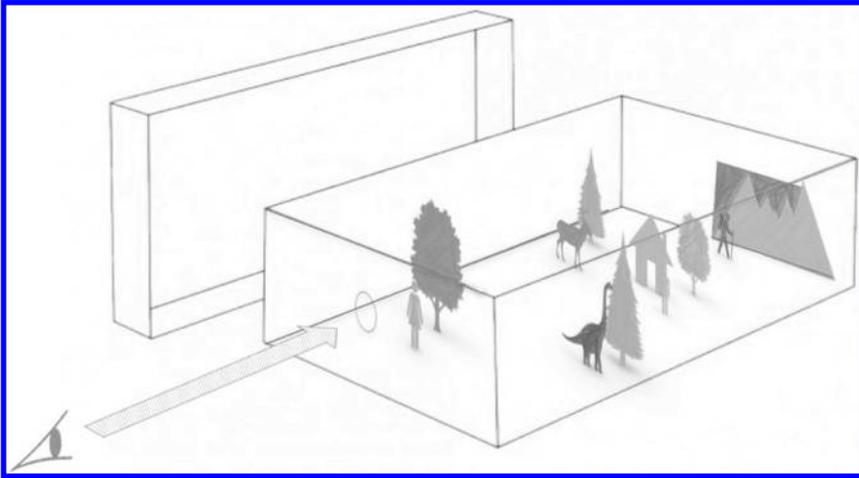


Figure 4. Kijkdoos (toy theatre).

through the sheets of glass, a pulling from the mist. To return to the metaphor of the *kijkdoos*: the box is flat, the front pressed to the back, until the deep focus shot actively pushes it open from within. In this sense, *Pleasantville*'s use of shallow focus implies a logic of depth that, paradoxically, or even schizophrenically, both reminds one of Deleuze's (2005) noted description of D. W. Griffith's spatial system of "parallel planes [...] each with its own importance" and resonates with his equally well-known account of Orson Welles' "continuity of duration", "a diagonal [...] crossing all planes, making elements of each interact with the rest" (2005, pp. 104–5). Depth is at once a state and a disposition, a being and a becoming .

In both instances, however, what is interesting is that depth is related to vision: in the first depth is constituted as the space that allows vision; in the latter it is the actively looking eye itself. Indeed, at no point during the scene does the camera physically cross or in any case is seen crossing the space. It twice relocates (from David to the girl and back and from them to the back of the school yard), but the process of relocation itself remains invisible. It does not so much move with the action as that it marks off its perimeters, perforates peepholes of varying sizes into the shoe box that constitutes its universe from different sides.

### The Dolly Zoom

Perhaps the most spectacular instance of depthlessness in film, or at least the one that, for what it is worth, seems to be getting most Youtube hits,

is the dolly zoom or trombone shot. Popularised by Hitchcock in *Vertigo* (1958), the dolly zoom combines the act of dollying in, with that of zooming out, or, alternatively, that of dollying out with zooming in, creating a disorienting, imbalanced effect of backdrop and character being at once pulled close and pushed apart. Over the years, the dolly zoom has been used to many effects, sometimes, as in *Vertigo*, to create a deepening of space, a space that sucks you in; at other times to render the environment flat, to engender the sensation of being shoved out. The strategy often reflects internal turmoil, but occasionally it is the world itself that is suggested to be unstable.

The instance I want to concern myself with here is a well-known shot from Matthieu Kassovitz's 1995 surprise hit *La Haine*, a black-and-white film following three teenagers in the aftermath of riots in their *banlieue* which has since come to be considered one of the key examples of the genre or group of the *banlieue* film. The shot in question is, tellingly, the inverse of Steven Spielberg's famous dolly zoom of suburbia in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). It opens with a clear, unobstructed bird's (or, since the camera is not that high up, rather perhaps a bird-in-a-tree's) eye view of central Paris. As the camera gradually tracks back, it exposes two teenagers, Vinz (Vincent Kassel) and Saïd (Saïd Taghmaoui) casually overlooking the city from behind a balustrade. Pulling ever further away, the two gradually turn their backs towards the city and towards the camera. Meanwhile, a third teenager, Hubert (Hubert Koundé), comes into view, restlessly pacing from left to right, in and out of the frame.

At the same time the camera tracks back, however, it also zooms in. The disorienting effect is that the more distance, the more planes there are between the camera and the city, obscuring the latter's view, the closer the parts of the city that remain visible seem to get. By the time the camera stops pulling back, what is left of the city has come so close it looks like Vinz, Saïd and Hubert are placed in front of a billboard or wall photo.<sup>4</sup>

There is obviously plenty to be said about the function this scene fulfills narratively and the socio-political commentary it expresses. In both cases, I suppose, it entails the extent to which the scene explicates that the social gap between city and *banlieue* is unbridgeable. The joys of central Paris are increasingly shown to be inaccessible to these boys from the suburbs (which they are keen but unable to leave behind). Indeed, most of the generally excellent discussion of this film concentrates on these two issues

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4. Indeed, Murray Pomerance has suggested to me the picture of Paris may well be a green screen or rear projection, an observation that rings true to me even if I have not been able to establish its veracity.

of plot and politics (cf. Higbee, 2001; Mottet, 2001; Vincendeau, 2005). For the purposes of my argument I want to focus here exclusively on the implications for thinking about the qualities of depthlessness and depth, first, briefly, in terms of production; subsequently within the context of style and meaning.

In terms of production, the dolly zoom creates a sense of depthlessness by retreating physically, that is, by actually, corporeally, crossing a distance; whilst simultaneously advancing what you might call mentally, visually, i.e. imagining the crossing of a distance. As the cinematographer steps back, the camera looks forwards. The surveyor retires, the phenomenologist takes over their spot. This means that, at least in terms of the creation of this fictional universe, its God, the directorial team, creates the effect of depthlessness only, and exclusively, through the very act of “depthing”, of making depth. Paradoxically, our sense of distance collapses only as it is articulated. Depthlessness always already implies depth. Indeed, in a sense, you might say that it is nothing more, and nothing less, than the collision of two depth-models: depth as physical movement and depth as visual movement, what I have above called the “actively looking eye”, mapping out distance from opposite ends – but in any case both of them imply performative understandings of depth as opposed to ontological ones.

Visually, the dolly zoom does not suspend depth – physical or visual, performative or ontological; on the contrary, it foreshortens it, though not in the art historical sense of the word associated with the Renaissance and the invention of perspective as much as with a funhouse or concave mirror parody of that convention. *La Haine*’s “wall photo” is not a sheet of translucent glass separating us from Bazin’s world of “visible continuity”. Rather it is a reflection of the process of pulling that world towards us at the moment we are being pushed out in the other direction, like an anchor hooked into muddy waters during a storm, lifting up the sea beds, the skin of the floor, from the ocean floor until it latches onto a rock; or like the back of the *kijkdoos* being pulled towards the peephole. Indeed, the reason that this reflection looks so flat, is that in the process, the last planes in sight have been dragged over the middle ones, as it were: the background shot of Paris in and of itself fulfills all rules of perspective – linear, planar, atmospheric, i.e. things in the back are smaller than things in front, objects on a distant plane are overlapped by those near, detail is increasingly effaced; it is just that in relationship to the foreground, its proportions are off. Shallow focus creates a sense of depthlessness by contracting the background layers, convoluting atmospheric perspective; the dolly zoom foreshortens depth by cutting out the middle ones, causing the linear perspective to jump.

In *The Material Ghost* (1998), Gilberto Perez develops an interesting reading of Jose Ortega Y Gasset's canonical history of modern painting in the context of film studies. As Perez explains, Ortega Y Gasset distinguishes between two types of painting, the first of which he associates above all with the frescoes of Giotto whilst the second is exemplified by the oeuvre of Diego Velasquez. Ortega Y Gasset's argument is that whilst Giotto "paints solid objects", pictures in which "everything, whether near or far, seems painted at close range," as if it could be touched, Velasquez "paints the air": in his pictures "everything seems distant and indistinct" (Perez, 1998, p. 135). There is a difference between "proximate vision" and "distant vision", the tactile and the spectral, that is to say, between a focus on "bulk" versus a gazing at "thin air":

In proximate vision we don't merely see, we virtually seize hold of an object with our eyes, an object we apprehend as palpably rounded and corporeal against the blurred background of the rest. In distant vision no object stands out and our gaze instead spreads over the entire visual field, so that the central object of attention becomes the space between objects, the hollow space that reaches to our eyes as objects recede into the distance, the air in which all seem to float like a mirage. (Perez, 1998, p. 135)

Perez argues that the distinction between proximate and distant vision is not exclusive to painting and can, indeed, be observed in film as well. The films of the likes of Theodor Dreyer, Sergei Eisenstein and Ingmar Bergman, he suggests, "favor the solid", focus on "rounded corporeal individualities" (1998, p. 136). Filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni, Max Ophuls and F.W. Murnau, in contrast, "favor the empty", the between. What this often means, in practice, is that in the former films images are composed like still lives, as self-contained universes where everything has its place, whilst in the latter they resemble moves in a chess game, each composition an "unstable equilibrium [...] open on all sides" (Perez, 1998, p. 138). With respect to the former, one only needs to remember Dreyer's shots of Joan of Arc, the face starkly lit up and in focus, separated from the backdrop. As per the latter, one can think of Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), where so many of the compositions are structured around an empty centre yet to be inhabited – by the vampire himself, of course; or indeed of Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), where scenes begin a while before the action takes place and end long after, a "temps mort", to use Seymour Chatman's (1985) phrase, that suggests there is more to the world than the plot. In each of these, what is drawn attention to is space.

What is interesting for our purposes here is that Perez argues that proximate vision in cinema tends to be aligned with the device of the



Figure 5. Medium wide angle shot of Vinz and Saïd against a layered backdrop of Paris.

close-up. Distant vision often takes the form of the long shot (1998, p. 136). The dolly zoom, generally speaking but certainly in *La Haine*, at once zooms in from a medium shot so as to set up a close-up, and pulls back with the purpose of initiating a long shot. If we accept Perez's argument – and I for one do – the film thus simultaneously imposes – or attempts to impose – proximate vision and distant vision. The dolly zoom draws close and sets apart, in the process encouraging the viewer both to focus on objects and on thin air. The image's *mise-en-scène* certainly suggests as much, separating the rounded portraits from their increasingly blurry background whilst centering throughout on the empty space between them. Indeed, the composition is divided horizontally into five even parts the entire duration of the shot to ensure the experience of vertigo, which is, of course, the inability to locate objects so as to judge the parameters of space. Initially (fig. 5), Vinz and Saïd are each flanked by trees on the left and right, respectively, whilst being separated from one another by a view of a busy Paris street. By the end (fig. 6), Vinz is flanked by a lamp on the left, Saïd is joined by their friend Hubert to the right, and the centre is occupied by a church tower. What this achieves is that the frame closes in both the characters and the viewer from all sides, the passageway of the street exchanged for what amounts to a brick wall.

In Perez's account there is little attention to one aspect of Ortega Y Gasset's discussion that is not of interest to his argument but is important to mine. This aspect amounts to the following: the distinction between proximate vision and distant vision, bulk and thin air, the fixed and



Figure 6. Medium zoom lens shot of the teenagers against a single plane backdrop of Paris.

the ephemeral, is not merely a difference between nearness and distance. They imply two separate depth-models. Proximate vision sees objects as voluminous, often almost tactile, but isolated. In the paintings of Giotto all of the portraits and objects appear to float in their own little universes which begin and end with the boundaries of their shape. This has partly to do, of course, or at least it has to our twenty-first century eyes, with the inconsistency in the use of perspective. The individual figures are often similar in size and detail regardless of their position on the canvas. They are stacked on top of each other rather than placed in relation to one another diagonally. Figures might further be painted from different points of view – though this is, to be sure, far less common in the frescoes of Giotto than it is in those of his contemporaries. Finally, the backdrops tend to lack almost attempt at detail. Colors are often uniform, a thick slab of, say, blue paint with little attempt at representation or even grading. Proximate vision, Ortega y Gasset notes, is “exclusive” (1972, p. 115): each figure exists on its own, simultaneously. Another, more contemporary word that comes to mind is multiplicitous, in that it encourages a viewer to “shift” the gaze “from one [figure] to the other to make each in turn the center of vision” (Ortega y Gasset, 1972, p. 114).

In the paintings of Velazquez, in contrast, people and objects appear voluminous primarily because of their relationship to other figures and the “hollow space” between them (Ortega y Gasset, 1972, p. 110). Individual figures differ in size and detail depending on their position in the frame, they are not stacked on top of each other but placed relationally in a three

dimensional space, and they are seen from a unified point of view running all the way from the painter to the horizon. These people and objects are grounded, each and everyone of them, in one and the same universe. This, for Ortega y Gasset, constitutes “unity” (1972, p. 115). To rephrase, in proximate vision, depth is measured not in terms of continuity in space and/or time, but as a short-circuiting relief. If anything, it is something to be felt out, haptically. It is not surprising, in this sense, that someone like Deleuze (2005) has discussed the close-up in exactly these terms: it is a device that “extracts the face from all spatio-temporal coordinates” (p. 111) to open up “a dimension of another order favourable to ... compositions of affect” (p. 104). In the case of distant vision, however, depth should be understood in terms of the *kijkdoos*, a progression from here to there, the horizon, by means of this and that.

I have suggested above that the dolly zoom suspends depth physically, in terms of production, through the collision of two depth-models: the physical and the visual, the surveyor and the phenomenologist. The dolly zoom foreshortens depth visually through a simultaneous affirmation and negation of two depth-models as well: proximate vision and distant vision, the relief and the continuum, touch and the gaze. It is tempting to say that these procedures mirror one another but I do not think they do. In terms of production, the surveyor, measuring space physically, retreats whilst the phenomenologist, mapping distance visually, mentally, enters. But here the surveyor, to continue with the metaphor for a moment, appears hesitant to step back, blocking the phenomenologist’s view. The result of this standoff, or kerfuffle (we all know how stubborn surveyors are and how short-tempered phenomenologists), is that both approaches continue but neither is able to take measure fully. The final instance of the shot (fig. 6.) focuses on rounded figures but with their corresponding properties of size and detail in space suggesting an interrelationship, which is to say a movement away from bulk towards space and by extension not multiple isolated universes but a single, shared one. It also centres on the thin air between objects, but as an air that has gone stale, if you will, one that does not allow us to look into the depths of this picture. Indeed, the camera directs our gaze to an empty space only to make us realise there is nothing to see, “nothing behind the surface”, as Andy Warhol once noted with respect to his own flat photographs (Williams, 2009, p. 241). It is a blind alley, a dead end, the walls closing in not just on the characters but us as well, leaving us less and less space to maneuver around except for from one rounded figure to another, exclusively .

What depthlessness means here, in other words, is the possibility of touch and exclusivity but not its achievement, not its actuality; and the

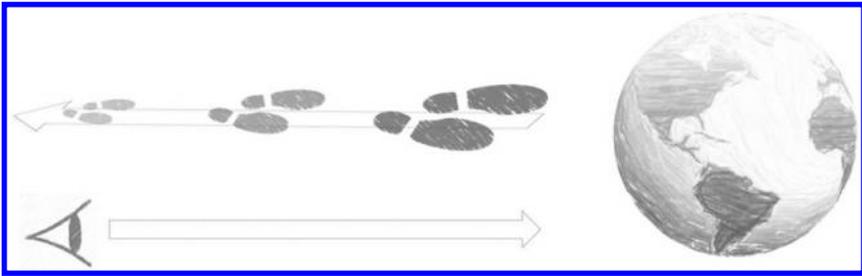


Figure 7. The surveyor retires, the phenomenologist takes their place.

potential for continuity but not its fulfilment. I do not have the space to consider the implications this notion of depthlessness as simultaneous affirmation and negation of competing depth-models has for thinking, in turn, about depth, but let me just say that at first sight, it seems to me to suggest that depth is here above all understood as a continuum, measuring visual distance from back to front; yet interestingly, it is a continuum whose consistency and poles are unstable, less constants than variables, prone to change – implode, extend, expand – under any circumstance. In *Pleasantville*, depthlessness amounts to obfuscating and/or contracting the line of sight towards the back of the *kijkdoos*; but the properties of the box are fixed. Here, however, it is the box itself shrinks and grows on all sides.

Wrapping up, I want to reiterate a few things I noted at the start of my essay, and perhaps add one or two others. First: it is obvious, I would assume, that these engagements with cinematic configurations of depthlessness, and through a back door, depth, have been tentative. Further, each of the engagements – and especially the inferences drawn from them – could have been complicated by thinking in more detail about genre, point of view, narrative space, and tone. Both the shallow focus in *Pleasantville* and the dolly zoom in *La Haine*, after all, might be argued to be related to the state of mind of characters – though, as far as my point goes, I would maintain that in the first this link is only established after the fact, and in the second it is uncertain, if subjective then collectively so as opposed to being linked with one character in particular. For more extensive contemplations on the relationship between depthlessness and genre, I refer the reader to some of the other essays in this issue, especially those by Lisa Purse, Matt Denny and Maryn Wilkinson. Here I have tried to make a beginning considering strategies of depthlessness such as shallow focus and the dolly zoom in relationship to one another, as a group, or category, so as to make a first step towards understanding the effects they might have both on the nature of the filmic worlds and our experience of them. As I hope to have demonstrated, even

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comparing two of these strategies, two strategies whose effect is not entirely dissimilar, allows us to consider anew notions of worlding, of suspension and foreshortening, and watching, of being held at bay and pushed back. That is to say – yes, let me end this essay on a flat note, a cliché (and a pretentious one at that) if there ever was one: of film.

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