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Archaism and Hegel in the Supply Reel

A Philosophical Look at André Bazin's Realism

Abstract

André Bazin's notion of cinematic realism has been either denigrated as "naïve" or been deformed to fit lines of thought in film studies that are at variance with the nature of his thought. However, as this article shows, there are strong influences of what one might call "archaic thought" in Bazin's conception of realism. However, there is another influence on his thought: a substratum of Hegelianism, which often ignored in the reception of his work, contributing to its misrepresentation. At the end, we conclude if we forfeit this residual Hegelianism, not only we can have a better grasp of what realism truly is, but we also can have a more synchronous relationship between cinema and other art forms.

Key words: *André Bazin, philosophy, philosophy of media, film philosophy, Hegel, Plato, archaism, French film criticism.*

Introduction

The richness of cinema in philosophical possibilities is vast. Perhaps one of the first to make full use of the philosophical range of cinema, both in the filmic practice as well as in the theoretical field, was André Bazin (1918–1958). To Jean Renoir, Bazin is “greater than his subject.”²⁵⁸ Although his writing is well known and his legacy as a co-founder of *Cahiers du cinéma* is tremendous, the appreciation of his role as a philosophical thinker of cinema is still underdeveloped. However, on closer examination, the basis of his thought has deep connections to philosophy. Researchers have acknowledged the profound impact that Modernist Catholic theology of the 1920s to the 1940s had in his formative thought, especially in relation to his early contributions to the Personalist journal *Esprit*, for instance.²⁵⁹ Many ignore this connection, as if it were only one more influence on him, as if it had no greater impact on the substance of his work on cinema and the nature of image—but that is misguided. The matter is that philosophy is at the very root of his greatest insight on film: the *realist* vocation of cinema.

However, many do not notice the profound philosophical vision behind that insight. That may have to do with the fact that his definition of realism is somewhat pious. As Peter Matthews stated, “his refusal to follow due [academic] process” made his realism amount to “little more than a loose patchwork of ideas that never coalesced into a stringent system but remained dangerously impressionistic.”²⁶⁰ As I will show below, I do not think that Bazin’s impressionism is a problem *per se*; the source of the problem is deeper. For instance, his use of the word “metaphysics” is choked with the twentieth-century reserve against immateriality. It is not that he is afraid of the word; but when he uses it, he gives it a *materialistic* definition. Therefore, we have in Bazin a transcendental kind of realism that never escapes the realm of materiality, even though Bazin clearly implies this “will” to transcendence.

In this manner, at the core of Bazin’s thought, we have a kind of duel: he is at once a Hegelian and a “Platonist,” as Professor Tom Gunning mentioned *en passant* in his essay in *Opening Bazin* (2011).²⁶¹ To me, it is capital to solve this problem because so far it has been his Hegelianism that has prevailed, which kick-started a two-fold ramification of Bazin scholarship, so to speak:

258 Jean Renoir, Foreword to André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* 2 vols., tr. and ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1:v.

259 Dudley Andrew, *André Bazin*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Ch. 1. See also Peter Matthews, “Divining the Real: The Leaps of Faith in André Bazin’s Film Criticism,” *Sight & Sound* 9, no. 8 (1999): <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/andre-bazin-divining-real-film-criticism-overview>; Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is! Bazin’s Quest and Its Change* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 113; and Philip Rosen, “Belief in Bazin,” in Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, eds., *Opening Bazin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

260 Matthews, “Divining the Real.”

261 See Tom Gunning, “The World in Its Own Image,” *Opening Bazin*.

1. on the one hand we have the “spiritualists,” those who accepted Bazin’s theory of the emanation of a certain kind of spectral reality steams from the screen in the work of certain directors. The spiritualists generally accept that Bazin was the first to understand cinema’s capacity to translate spiritual reality by means of formal expositions by means of the image. This gave birth to the criticism of Rohmer, Truffaut, the early Godard, and the “MacMahon school” of criticism. “Reality” is *feeling* and *arousal*;
2. on the other hand, we have the “revolutionaries.” These are latecomers, emerged in the late 1970s and curiously understood Bazin’s “realism” as “possibility.” Perhaps the most flagrant case of this kind is that of Deleuze:

The idea of cinema as an adhesion to reality [*al reale*] in its unpredictability, and hence as a device in which its specified is that of remaking movement and duration,... precedes Deleuze’s thought, and is present in the reflections of André Bazin.²⁶²

These two views are still philosophically wanting. (1) makes cinema merely aesthetic and sentimental, at odds with the principle that art cannot be irrational.²⁶³ Mere aesthetics impoverishes the artistic experience because it reduces art to a mere pushing and pulling of our emotional buttons. (2), however, spouses an even poorer view, not only of art, but of the *kosmos* as a whole; one that makes politics the teleology of everything in existence—an “one-minded,” theo-epistemic view; in short, a vision aligned with what Eric Voegelin called revolutionary gnosticism, the congenial view of modernity.²⁶⁴ Not unlike those who use cinema as a foil for their philosophical views, this group uses cinema to read political ideology into cinema. As the *Cahiers* historian Antoine de Bæcque puts it,

It was said, after Bazin, that cinema is “all-natural” since the camera and the film stock are made with this in view, “reproducing” reality. But the *Cahiers* labeled this “reality,” as well as the technical apparatus made to reproduce it faithfully, were “entirely ideological.”... [The post-1968 *Cahiers*] were eminently revolutionaries.²⁶⁵

²⁶² Daniela Angelucci, *Deleuze e i concetti di cinema* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012), 14.

²⁶³ Plato, *Gorgias*, 465A. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “Art in Indian Life,” apud Brian Keeble, *God & Work* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), 6: “In every work of art there [must be] a combination of formal-intelligible... and material-sensible... factors, the former corresponding to the ‘ear’ as a symbol of angelic understanding, the latter to the ‘eye’ of sensational experience.”

²⁶⁴ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, in *Modernity without Restraint*, ed. Manfred Henningsen, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 5 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 175ff.

²⁶⁵ Antoine de Bæcque, *Les Cahiers du cinéma. Histoire d’une revue*, 2 vols. (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1991), 2:230–1.

Despite Professor Gunning's observation about Bazin's "Platonism" (more accurately, a traditional or archaic aesthetic view) intermingled with Hegelianism, I feel that this subject has not been so far explored in Bazinian studies, especially in the light of the fact that only six percent of Bazin's writings "have been republished in anthologies or edited essay collections."²⁶⁶ This means, in the long haul, that his definition of realism has not been fully understood or has not been fully explored, paving the way to mischaracterization. Not only that hurts a correct comprehension and appreciation of his thought, it also sets cinema apart from the study other art forms, such as painting or literature, that had the chance of being studied in a more archetypal and traditional light; that is, in opposition to the more sensorial and aesthetical light that, in the best of cases, researchers and thinkers use to interpret cinema. In this article, I will try to show the nature of Bazin's archaism, his Hegelianism, and what profit we might gain by discriminating these two aspects of his thought.

Bazin's Platonism (or Hegelianism)

Bazin's *What Is Cinema?* begins with his most famous text, "Ontology of the Photographic Image." It is the text that heralds his metaphysical and essential understanding of cinema. This "essential" understanding is aligned with a meaning that is comparable with the meaning that the Scholastics held on that word: essence meaning nature or substance. As St. Anselm puts it, "Therefore there is some thing which, whether it is called an essence, a substance, or a nature, is the best and the greatest, and of all the things that are, the supreme."²⁶⁷

Bazin refers to mankind's "mummy complex": our desire to cast out time and its corruptive nature to our bodies and to the world around us. To him, however, this need is psychological:

The Egyptian religion, which entirely directed against death, made survival dependent on the perennial preservation of the material body. This satisfied a fundamental need of human psychology: the defense against time. Death is but the victory time.²⁶⁸

To Bazin, the entire meaning of the plastic arts gravitates around this psychological need. It is necessary to literally "exorcise time,"²⁶⁹ and neither mummification, nor the labyrinths that make the finding of the sarcophagus an ordeal, nor the statuary that used to stand by the side of the mummy in the pyramids could prevent the action of time ultimately to destroy the material body or its depiction. It does not escape Bazin that plastic arts, from this point of view, were firstly thought as something *religious*: "Thus is revealed, in the religious origins of statuary, its primordial function: that of saving the being through resemblance."²⁷⁰

266 Marco Grosoli, "André Bazin: Film as Social Documentary," *New Readings* 11 (2011): 1. Of these, says Lorenzo Fabbrì, "only a handful [have] been translated into English" ("Neorealism as Ideology," *The Italianist* 35 [2015]: 184).

267 St. Anselm, *Monologion*, iii, in *The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14.

268 André Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique," in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma ?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987), 9.

269 *Ibid.*, 10.

270 *Ibid.*, 9.

Even though we are speaking of religion, and therefore of metaphysics, to some degree, Bazin still stresses the need of depicting being photographically as a psychological matter. However, this link between preservation and the body entails that elusive catchword: realism. “If the history of the plastic arts is not one of its aesthetics alone, but more so of its psychology, then it is really about resemblance, or, if you will, of realism.”²⁷¹ By saying this, Bazin decidedly places film as a *noetic* matter—that is, a matter of the mind (*nous*). Evidently, this does not rule out the thesis that the production of meaning in pictures is a double construct of the film itself and the spectator, as Margulies points out.²⁷²

It is not surprising that elsewhere, especially in his writings about Italian neorealism, Bazin stresses time and again that realism has nothing to do with aesthetics *per se*, but with moral prerogatives that the director lays on the screen: “In [neorealist] *mise en scène*, the moral or dramatic significance is never visible on the surface of reality; yet we can’t fail to sense what that significance is if we pay attention.”²⁷³ Therefore, the mind must work to decode the symbolisms disposed on the screen, in a holistic and integrative manner. These symbolisms are not esoteric in kind, but express a species of reality that only the camera can record. It is not corporeal reality, but a reality of the mind; a moment in time captured by the camera and given new life when projected. Cinema is a gateway to a realm of pure intellectuality; it is movement minus time, or *outside* time. Cinema conquers what apparently ancient religions could not do: to extract from history (i.e., from time) and replay this little piece of history over and over again. “For Bazin, [the] moral duty [of photography] is ultimately a sacred one – the photographic media are, in effect, preordained to bear endless witness to the beauty of the cosmos.”²⁷⁴

This is not distant from an archaic or traditional understanding of time and art. By traditional, I do not mean merely a “conservative” view of art, but something in the etymological sense that the word *tradition* implies: “to deliver something.” Likewise, one must understand “archaic” in Mircea Eliade’s meaning of the word: something that is basilar to the conception of something, close to what St. Paul the Apostle writes in Hebrews 5:12: “You have need to be taught again what are basic principles of the words [*tēn arkhēs tōn logikōn*] of God.” It is important to stress that, because Bazin’s contention that cinema partakes of the traditional notion of preserving time—or better yet, of taking man *out of time* and replaying a fundamental action, reviving it over and over—is the true kernel of his notion of realism, which is also behind the traditional philosophy of art as reintegration of eternity into history.

It is not by accident that he used Ancient Egyptian mortuary practices as an example, but he could have used exempla from anywhere in the ancient world. As Eliade explained, one of traditional

271 Ibid., 10.

272 Ivone Margulies, “Bodies Too Much,” in Ivone Margulies, ed., *Rites of Realism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 4.

273 André Bazin, “Germany Year Zero,” in *Bazin at Work*, ed. Bert Cardullo, tr. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo (London: Routledge, 1997), 124.

274 Matthews, “Divining the Real.”

man's basic urges is to escape from the *terror of time* and the *terror of history*. In very traditional societies, true actions do not happen *in time* since they reflect cosmogenic gestures made by god the gods at the dawn of the Creation. That is because "human nature has nothing to do with time,"²⁷⁵ so every gesture in fact is the coming-to-be of a primordial gesture; better yet, every gesture is the coming-to-be of an *eidetic* gesture, the gesture that is a Form. The perfection of each gesture is what validates life, is what makes life worthwhile. "This conscious repetition of given paradigmatic gestures reveals an original ontology.... The gesture acquires meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which it repeats a primordial act."²⁷⁶ In this perspective, art is repetition of primordial gestures rendered by symbols and examples, and the book of nature is choked with symbols: "Hast thou not considered how God sets forth an example [*mathalan*]?" (Qu'rān 14:24). The making of art abolishes the perception and the flow of time, in the manner that it does not serve only to the individual delight, but also to the use of society. Rites and communal acts make use of statuettes, masks, paintings, and other artistic artifacts because they symbolize these primordial examples and acts, something we can readily understand when we attend the Mass of St. Pius V or a communal ritual in aboriginal societies, where often the chief or a high-ranking individual speaks from within hollow statues that represent the founder of the tribe or the first in a blood lineage.²⁷⁷

This is a feature that the "Ontology" stresses, in its retracing of our drive to make realistic images as something dating from our early belief as humans in magic²⁷⁸ (which was probably the first kind of science and religion ever).²⁷⁹ Following this thread, in one of his most superb articles, "The Evolution of the Cinematographic Language," he boldly proclaims there are "directors who believe in the image and those who believe in reality."²⁸⁰ When defining image, he again offers a very traditional definition: "By 'image' I roughly mean everything that can be adjoined to the represented thing in its *representation* on the screen."²⁸¹

This is a definition fundamentally founded on a traditional, archaic, and archetypal figural thought. Let me adduce Erich Auerbach's observations on image in representation in the traditional Christian theory of the figure:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life.²⁸²

275 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian & Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover, 1956), 124.

276 Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos & History* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1956), 5.

277 Leonhardt Adam, *Primitive Art*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1949), 54.

278 Bazin, "Ontologie," 11.

279 See Christopher Dawson, *Progress & Religion* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 81ff.

280 Bazin, "L'Évolution du langage cinématographique," *Cinéma ?* 132.

281 *Ibid.*, 132 (Bazin's *emphasis*).

282 Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, Eng. tr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 53. Some readers may argue that Auerbach presents an historical interpretation of the concept of figure in Christian thought, since he goes on to say that "the two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events

Bazin's definition also is kindred with a cosmetic or ornamental theory of image. Pay attention: I said "cosmetic" or "ornamental," not "aesthetic." Why? As Bazin says, our imagetic drive is not aesthetic. To Bazin, images reveal above all a reality that is not exactly corporeal, but *formal*; that is, *eidetic*, in the Platonic-Scholastic sense of the word. Though Bazin does not use the word formal in this sense (on the contrary, he uses it in its modern meaning of "style," as opposed to "content"),²⁸³ I am not risking infidelity drawing this conclusion. "Ornament" and "cosmetic" have Latin and Greek etymologies; both stem from the words *ordo* and *kosmos*, which mean the same thing: order. Ornament means "the furnishing of anything essential to the validity of whatever is 'adorned.'" It "enhances its effect, empowering it."²⁸⁴ Let us see what he draws from the evolution of Western painting since early modernity—

It is true that universal world painting had reached the point of equilibrium between the symbolism and the realism of the forms. But from the fifteenth century onward in the West, painting started to diverge from its primordial aim of reproducing the spiritual reality through autonomous means and started to focus on a combination of spiritual expression with a more or less perfect imitation of the outward world²⁸⁵—

—comparing it with the traditionalist author Titus Burckhardt:

A rigorous perspective in painting inevitably involves a loss of color symbolism: by their dependence on an artificial illumination that goes hand-in-hand with spatial illusion, the colors lose their direct nature. A Medieval painting is luminous, not because it suggests a source of light situated in the world depicted, but because its colors directly manifest the qualities inherent in light; they are glimpses of the primordial light that is present in the heart. The development of chiaroscuro, on the contrary, reduces color into nothing more than the play of an imaginary light; the magic of lighting carries painting into a sort of intermediate world analogous to a dream, a dream sometimes grandiose, but one that envelops the spirit

or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life. Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but this spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions" (ibid.).

As we have seen, that may have to do with the linear kind historic conception, something necessary in a religion that awaits the coming of the Messiah (Judaism) or that awaits His second coming (Catholicism), an experience that brings about the concept of faith. As Eliade explains, a story such as Abraham's sacrifice points out to the slight difference between "the traditional conception of the repetition of an archetypal gesture and the new dimension, *faith*," created under the spell of the successive defeats of Israel in the military field and "the pressure of history" (*Cosmos & History*, 108–9, 106; *emphasis* Eliade's). Since there is a relation of time between antitype and type, but since there is a relation between antitype, type, and meaning, it entails a creation of a third element: the archetype that confers meaning to antitype and type. This element is necessary because Judaism and Catholicism are religions that still are in the "eternal now" that characterizes archaic thought, even though they are more attuned to the movement of time than, say, Hinduism. Without it, we have nominalism and association between figures by common agreement and not by essentiality. See Ghazi bin Muhammad, "The Traditional Doctrine of Symbolism," in Martin Lings and Clinton Minnaar, eds., *The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), 159n4.

283 See Bazin, "L'Évolution," 136.

284 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Ornament," in *Coomaraswamy 1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 244.

285 Bazin, "Ontologie," 10.

instead of liberating it. Baroque art carried this development to an extreme, until finally spatial forms, suggested by chiaroscuro, lose the almost tangible corporeity conferred on them in Renaissance painting; at this point color seems to acquire an autonomous quality, but it is color lacking in sincerity.²⁸⁶

As I have already pointed out, Bazin does not equate realism with corporeality, or with naturalism, or with verisimilitude with the material world.²⁸⁷ If we meditate on this aspect of his thought, his criticism of Baroque art is not surprising at all, for this was the period when Western painting started to fooling the eye for good, mistaking reality for illusion—the illusion of perspective, which Bazin calls “the original sin of Western painting.”²⁸⁸ With perspective, Western art gained the false impression that pictographic euhemerism is the *nec plus ultra* of reality, that there is a perfect overlap of what we see and the meaning of existence.

In other words, Bazin is criticizing nominalism in art. The particular and individual image drenched in the fake realism of perspective had claimed universal prerogatives; that is, by reproducing what our eyes see—we, immanent creatures—had now thought that we could render reality as it is by our imitation of the corporeal in a more or less perfect manner.²⁸⁹ In short, beginning with the Renaissance and culminating in the Baroque, Western art now *put its faith in the image*, not in reality. Those directors who put their faith in the image and try to fool our eyes and minds are continuing the corrupted nature of Early Modern art.

Cinema is thus the art of reality, and the best director is he who can portray reality on the screen. We have seen how Bazin clearly proclaims the sacerdotal nature of cinema, but how exactly does cinema profess reality? Here we enter in the second most problematic realm of Bazin’s thought (the first being his semi-Hegelianism), and probably that aspect for which you either take him or leave him. Cinema renders reality and reality is something impersonal; additionally, images have no value of their own, being rather the language through which reality shines through. In painting, artists are not required to transmit in their images how they see the world: they have only to portray things as they are with the essential forms they have in their heads—and that form is not exactly the natural, corporeal presentation. How can one portray Jesus Christ naturally?²⁹⁰ This is what led Bazin to love Romanesque and Gothic art, to the point of starting to prepare a documentary on

286 Titus Burckhardt, “The Decadence and Renewal of Christian Art,” in *The Essential Titus Burckhardt*, ed. William Stoddart (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), 138. See also Coomaraswamy, *Christian & Oriental*.

287 Hence it is quite paradoxical to read Professor Margulies acknowledging that Bazin is not concerned with verisimilitude but insisting on the importance of *corporeality* in his realism (see “Bodies Too Much,” 4).

288 Bazin, “Ontologie,” 12.

289 Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York: New American Library, 1976), 16–7: “The most characteristic expression of this subjectivism is the emergence of a perspective interpretation of space which, originating with Giotto and Duccio, began to be accepted everywhere from 1330–40. In redefining the material painting or drawing surface as an immaterial projection plane, perspective—however imperfectly handled at the beginning—renders account, not only of what is seen, but also of the way it is seen in particular conditions. It records, to borrow Ockham’s term, the direct *intuitus* from subject to object, thus paving the way for modern naturalism and lending visual to the concept of the infinite.”

290 See Coomaraswamy, *Christian & Oriental*, 23–60, 117–29.

Romanesque churches.²⁹¹ However, in cinema's case, the camera renders the image of the world mechanically, disinterestedly. The director has nothing to add to it. Thus we are led back to the principles of Medieval art. The camera has reality as an end. Cinema is teleological.

Bazin's Hegelianism

Every end can be perverted, though. Thus, even if, as we shall see, Bazin admits that one can express reality in various manners, there are certain prescriptions that warrant the conveying of reality on the screen. Thus we have one of the most dogmatic pieces Bazin ever wrote, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," where we read that very striking rule, "When the essence of a scene demands the simultaneous presence of two or more factors in the action, montage is ruled out."²⁹² What worries Bazin in this essay is the convention that cinema is editing (*montage*) and that meaning (reality) is a creation of the cutting room. Instead, reality stems from that which is before the camera, on the set. Reality is something that speaks directly to the mind of the viewer, something that is *under-stood*—something to which we subject ourselves as true. Again, this is not something that has to do with verisimilitude or naturalism: it does not matter if what we see in the image is materially real. It suffices that the *idea* (form) that the finished picture conveys what the director had in his mind while making it. Hence, when discussing a scene from *Crin-Blanc* (1953) in which the young protagonist is dragged by the horse, he says, "It is of no consequence that the horse we see dragging Folco in the long shot is a double for Crin Blanc, nor even that for that dangerous shot, [director Albert] Lamorisse had himself doubled for the boy."²⁹³

Peter Matthews says that the absence of academic strictness allowed Bazin to "free play in an atmosphere as yet unhampered by Jesuitical nit-picking,"²⁹⁴ thus making his thought "infinitely more concrete, nimble and flexible than the lucubrations of those obliged to flag each theoretical move with a sheaf of footnotes" (like this very essay); however, as I have quoted above, "his refusal to follow due process" made his realism amount to "little more than a loose patchwork of ideas that never coalesced into a stringent system but remained dangerously impressionistic." I fully agree with Matthews, though I do not think that his impressionism is the source of danger. The real danger is the double-sensed nature that his use of the word realism has, and that is not something necessarily impressionistic. It is worth reminding that Bazin is a mid-twentieth-century author; therefore, an author that on the one hand has a transcendent vision, but that takes immanence as a part of his thought. As we saw, Bazin equaled ontology to psychology, and thus slapped the nature of cinema to a purely human endeavor, even though it had cosmic consonances. It is metaphysics, sure—but in doubt of its own nature as metaphysics. An example of his psychologizing, for instance,

291 This is what he was working on at the time of his passing. See André Bazin, "Les Églises de Saintonge," *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 100 (1959): 55–58.

292 Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," *What Is Cinema?* 1:50.

293 *Ibid.*, 1:48.

294 Matthews, "Divining the Real."

is his constant use of the word “obsession”: he treats it almost as a value necessary to making art, paralleling it with man’s will to overcome time—a notion that continues to this day when researchers talk about Bazin and obsession in general.²⁹⁵ However, on closer examination, what he means by “obsession” is closer to the traditional notion of “intuition,” the perception of the “essential,” after which “the rest follows as consequences or as application of this perception to the various orders of contingent realities.”²⁹⁶ If we observe that to Bazin cinema has a sacred vocation, and that in archaic thought intuition is “the most immediate and the most elevated of all kinds of knowledge,”²⁹⁷ then it is natural that the drive of its “priests” inspire them to portray the symbols of the paradigm they intuit, a notion not very far from what Plato says about the rhapsodist in the *Ion*: they are *seized* (*kathekhomenai*) by a *drive* (*dynamos*) to bring out their art from within—or from above, for that matter.²⁹⁸

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If for one part his impressionism opens the door to misunderstanding (by himself and by others) about the meaning of his thought, it also leaves open the possibility to access a freer range of forms the image can convey realism. We can explore that by examining his relationship with neorealism and Roberto Rossellini. As he says in “Defense of Rossellini,” he has a “strong dislike for a notion of neorealism which is based, to the exclusion of all else, on what is only one of its present aspects, for this is to submit its future potential to *a priori* restrictions.”²⁹⁹ This has to do, of course, with the fact that for Bazin, neorealism (and realism as a whole) is “before all else a kind of humanism.”³⁰⁰ Neither of the two men ever framed neorealism in a purely materialistic or corporeal contingency. Rossellini himself stated that *Giovanna d’Arco al rogo* (1954) was “neorealism in the sense he always intended”³⁰¹—and Bazin and the *Cahiers* readily granted that.³⁰² But if we compare a picture like *Open City* (1946), one of the films that heralded the dawn of neorealism, with *Giovanna*, it would be hard to convince anyone that there are not aesthetic differences between the two of them—as there are differences between *Giovanna* and *Socrates* (1971). From what I have exposed so far, we cannot deny that Rossellini’s pictures are all *realist*, even if they do not partake of the same aesthetic principles. As Bazin himself said,

295 Cf. Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 21: “The existential desire to defeat death... can only continue to exist as an obsession not as a rational one.”

296 René Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 69.

297 *Ibid.*, 85.

298 *Ion*, 340A.

299 Bazin, “In Defense of Rossellini,” *What Is Cinema?* 2:95.

300 Bazin, “Évolution,” 138.

301 In interview to Maurice Schérer [Éric Rohmer] and François Truffaut, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 37 (1954): 12.

302 The association between cinema and morality, or at least with a certain ethical human posture, was not lost to the early Bazinian critics: Luc Moullet’s “tracking shot is a matter of morals” and Godard’s “moral is a matter of tracking shot” decline from Bazin’s moral vision of cinema. Rivette’s evisceration of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Kapò* (1960) is by its turn the application of that moral vision (“De l’abjection,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 120 [1961]: 54–5).

There is not one realism, but several realisms.³⁰³ The word “realism” as it is commonly used does not have an absolute and clear meaning, so much as it indicates a certain tendency toward the faithful rendering of reality on film. Given the fact that this movement toward the real can take a thousand different routes, the apologia for “realism” *per se*, strictly speaking, means nothing at all.³⁰⁴

Therefore, Bazin recognizes that realism is not a matter of visual graphy; but this does not neutralize his preference for the long take, deep focus, marginalized editing, and the prevalence of rational decoupage over montage. In other words, it does not rule out “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage.” Take, for instance, Bazin’s texts on CinemaScope.³⁰⁵

We are getting closer to the source of his Hegelianism. Why is the long take potentially more cinematic than Soviet- or even classic-style editing? As Gunning observed, one can deduce Bazin’s affinity with Hegel in his teleological and dialectical conception of the history of cinema:

Bazin’s ideal of total cinema might ultimately resemble Hegel more than Plato since it reveals itself in the unfolding of the history of film as one stage sublates rather than abolishes the preceding one, a history that has not yet reached its end.³⁰⁶

It is a good guess, but if we are to label Bazin as a Hegelian to any degree, we will not find the justification in his historical conception of cinema; we should rather single out his preference for the long take.³⁰⁷

As I quoted above, Bazin does not believe in aprioristic contentions to filmmaking or film philosophy. Realism has to do with moral postures, but not with dogmatic statements within the film itself. In contrast with the determinism of analytical (classical) or Soviet editing, in which each combination of shots has only one possible meaning (and here often he referred to the Kuleshov experiment),

303 “William Wyler; or, The Jansenist of Directing,” *Bazin at Work*, 6.

304 André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, ed. François Truffaut, tr. W. W. Halsey II and William H. Simon (London: W. H. Allen, 1974), 85.

305 Some of them collected in *André Bazin’s New Media*, ed. and tr. Dudley Andrew (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), Pt. 6.

306 Gunning, “The World in Its Own Image,” 124.

307 I am at variance with Gunning’s interpretation of Bazin’s conception of the history of cinema as Hegelian because Hegel did not think that the end of history will be spiritless. I think Gunning got it backwards: the current historical stage gets us a step closer to the end of history and of the final form of the spirit of history, a spirit that progresses with each historical stage. This is why, as Christopher Dawson observed, he is so important to the philosophy of progress in modernity (*Progress & Religion*, 33–5). In point of fact, Hegel thought that the final form of history was the Prussian State and he was the philosopher of Prussia. That was something he, and only he, could deduce. The gnosticist implications of this philosophy are clear and other writers have explored it at length. See Eric Voegelin, “On Hegel: A Study on Sorcery,” in *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, ed. and intro. Ellis Sandoz, *Collected Works on Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), and Jacques D’Hondt, *Hegel secret. Recherches sur les sources cachées de la pensée de Hegel* (Paris: PUF, 1986). The final form of the *spirit* of history was a thing that Hegel personally believed was revealed to him. To Bazin, the *idea* (mind the difference) of film was something expressly stated by cinema’s pioneers. Either way, there is no way to get around the fact that both Bazin and Hegel are teleological thinkers in some manner and to some degree.

Bazin preferred the tranquil liberty of the long take. That is because in the long take, the meaning of the shot was gradually produced with each revolution of the supply reel of the projector—or of the spinning hard disk. The projection of each still amounts to a new piece of revelation; it is a new manifestation of the spirit of the picture. The longer the take, the freer this spirit is. Each cut is deterministic because it curtails the progress of this spirit, a spirit that ultimately dominates the viewer. The late Brian Henderson said that

the odd quality of the intra-sequence cut that it *reflects back on the scene* (and on *mise-en-scène*) and defines it or qualifies it in retrospect. The cut which ends a long take—how it ends it as well as where—determines or affects the nature of the shot itself. Looked at oppositely, the *mise-en-scène* requires a certain kind of cut at a certain time. The two categories are strictly correlative. If one begins talking about the one, he ends talking about the other; and vice versa. The cut is the limit or boundary of the shot and this boundary enters into and determines the nature of the shot itself. Hegel says: “A thing is what it is, only in and by reason of its limit. We cannot therefore regard the limit as only external to being which is then and there. It rather goes through and through the whole of such existence.”³⁰⁸

I guess the implications are clear. Even though Bazin admits cinema is a language, he does so cryptically and at the twilight of his life.³⁰⁹ In his mind, the ideal director lets reality be, so naturally reality will let itself be captured by the camera, as if it were some kind of unicorn approaching a virgin unaware of the hunters behind her. This is why continuity and flux are the best manner to portray reality. A picture is something historical; each picture is a complex whole, made of the historical progression of each shot, and every shot has its own spirit. It is only when the picture is over that its supreme spirit reveals itself. On the other hand, as I stated, Bazin admitted that there are other ways to render realism. Here is his archaism, at odds with his Hegelianism. In archaic aesthetical realist thought, immanent existence declines from the *eidōs* of that individual thing. In Hegelianism, the *eidōs* (in reality, the spirit; we cannot talk about *eidōs* in Hegel) is something that unravels itself only a posteriori.³¹⁰

The progress of Bazinian film criticism eventually squared “reality” with “emotion.” The emergence of the *politique des auteurs* (an idea to which Bazin had his reservations) is an element in the development of this thought. Realism is the natural vocation of cinema. Though we do not know exactly what it is, we know that there are a number of directors who time and again made effective realist pictures without resorting to didactics. The *Cahiers* canon of working Hollywood-based directors in the fifties is a good indicator of the general understanding of what was realism and auteurism up to that time: Allan Dwan, John Ford, Samuel Fuller, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock,

308 Brian Henderson, “The Long Take,” *Film Comment* 7, no. 2 (1971): 9. Hegel’s quote comes from the *Shorter Logic*.

309 He added the famous “On the other hand, cinema is a language” line in 1958, but the essay itself dates from the mid-1940s (Dudley Andrew, Foreword, *What Is Cinema?* 1:xiv).

310 Or, as he liked to say after Sartre (who said it after Heidegger), “existence precedes essence” (Bazin, “Pour un cinéma impur,” *Cinéma ?* 102).

Henry King, Fritz Lang, Joseph Losey, Otto Preminger, Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk, King Vidor, Raoul Walsh, and Orson Welles. What do these directors have in common? Running themes in their works, certainly; but what else? *An honest use of emotions*. Not “cheap emotions,” not “shock” (which would be the *Cahiers* equivalent to *art pour l’art*), but an intelligent and articulate use of emotions in service of a general idea of cinema. As a matter of fact, Godard made Fuller say as much in *Pierrot le fou* (1965) in the “Film is a battleground” monologue. For one reason or another, Bazinian critics eventually chose to zero in on the “emotional” aspect of this intelligence, until the emergence of the gnosticist group of Bazinian or soft-Bazinian critics I singled out earlier.

Conclusion

We have seen how Bazin’s diffuse use of the word “realism” led to a myriad of possibilities and interpretations of his thought. While I may grant that it indeed made the debate richer and while I admit the “epiphenomenal” nature of his thought made him more open to various kinds of possibilities in cinema, it also led critics to misuse the art or to ends that are contrary to its nature. Worse, this sparse and non-rigorous use of the word could not prevent authors from seeing cinema as a lesser art that needs the furnishing of other disciplines to become intellectually and philosophically rich, or as a merely emotional or aesthetic art form that can survive purely in the beatitude and placidness of its visual delights.

To demand rigor from an author that wrote for the most part in magazines and journals might strike as too much. It may be our job to unpin whatever treasures there might be in his writings and explore his perceptions about an art that still is, now in its second century of existence, in its infancy, even though many declare that it is already dead.

Not only we might gain many insights about cinema and its relations to the other arts and with reality itself, knowing, studying, and researching about Bazin can make us refocus the situation of philosophy and the intellectual condition in the twentieth century. As I argued above, at the center of the theater of his mind there were two blatantly different beasts: archaic, or traditional, thought and Hegelianism. Many other authors, oftentimes far removed from cinema, also had this duel going on in their minds. A good example is none other than Martin Heidegger, as some recent studies revealed.³¹¹

In relation to the cinema, Bazin’s almost Medieval and Scholastic vision of art as an integral art in which images point out to substantial wholes may help us to position cinema in a more heightened place than it currently holds in relation to more ancient art forms. By conferring it the same objective value that traditional civilizations conferred to painting, sculpture, music, and drama (in virtue of their relations to ritual and religion), not only can cinema escape from its merely commercial

311 David Walsh, “Voegelin and Heidegger: Apocalypse without Apocalypse,” in Lee Trepanier and Steven F. Maguire, eds., *Voegelin and the Continental Tradition* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

value to which it was almost immediately associated with at the time of its birth, but we can also see films in a more traditional light, even though most of the cinematographic canon was produced under the spell of commercialism or capitalism. If a picture such as Raoul Walsh's *Saskatchewan* (1958), one of the great works of classic Hollywood cinema, has to make concessions to *topoi* of commercial cinema—especially concerning its decadent love story—this has more to do with our current historical cycle than with its association with the romantic genre it belongs to, where love stories swarm, but not in the decadent and almost misplaced style *Saskatchewan* displays.³¹² There is no reason why the arts cannot be synchronic to each other and Bazin might help us to reach that synthesis.

Arhaizam i Hegel u kolutu filmske vrpce

Filozofski pogled na realizam Andréa Bazina

Sažetak

Stav Andréa Bazina o filmskom realizmu ili je ocrnjen kao "naivan" ili je deformiran kako bi odgovarao linijama mišljenja u filmskim studijama koje su u suprotnosti s prirodom njegove misli. Međutim, kao što ovaj članak pokazuje, postoje snažni utjecaji onoga što bismo mogli nazvati "arhaičnom mišlju" u Bazinovoju koncepciji realizma. Međutim, postoji još jedan utjecaj na njegovu misao: supstrat hegelijanizma, koji se često ignorirao u recepciji njegova djela, pridonoseći njegovom pogrešnom predstavljanju. Na kraju zaključujemo ako se odrekemo ovog zaostalog hegelijanizma, ne samo da možemo bolje razumjeti što je zapravo realizam, nego možemo imati i sinkronijski odnos između kinematografije i drugih umjetničkih oblika.

Ključne riječi: *André Bazin, filozofija, filozofija medija, filozofija filma, Hegel, Platon, arhaizam, francuska filmska kritika.*



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³¹² "Romantic" here is understood in Northrop Frye's sense of the word. See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 186–206.