

**(NEO)BAZINIAN REALISM:
EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY
AND THE IMAGE-BODY**

by

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Abstract

French critic-cum-theorist André Bazin remains a central figure in discourse concerning cinematic realism. A prolific film commentator during the postwar period, Bazin advanced a theory of realism that took resemblance to be the apogee of film aestheticism, a radical departure from the then-dominant views held by Soviet film theorists that cinema's "essence" as an art form hinges on techniques that dissociate it from reality (via montage, for instance). A one-time favoured approach, in the 1960s and 1970s Bazin's theories were lambasted in the wake of an intellectual paradigm shift that came to view cinematic realism as an ideological subterfuge, lulling passive viewers into accepting bourgeois "realities" driven by inequalities and capitalist motivations. More broadly, Bazin's perceived faith in the objectivity of the image was labelled naïve and empirically dogmatic, an antiquated notion founded on Catholic mores that had no place in the modern, secular world. Today, the residual negativity from these criticisms still mar the reception of Bazin's realism, resulting in facile summations that neglect or misrepresent the more sophisticated, nuanced version he presents.

Situated within the larger reappraisal of Bazin's work taking place in film studies – known collectively as "neo-Bazinianism" – this thesis acts as a much-needed corrective to the near-ubiquitous view of Bazinian realism as being ontologically contingent upon the photographic medium, and "indexically" connected to an antecedent reality. I argue that, given his proximity to the leading figures of French existentialist and phenomenological thought – namely, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – Bazin advances a theory of realism based, not on the objectivity of the camera's gaze, but the intersubjectivity of embodied experience, having recognized in the image a perceptual engagement with the world analogous to our own. It is the concept of the "image-body" that is crucial here, a self-coined term that anchors

the thesis around the central assumption that, if Bazin's realism offers us recognizable representations of the world onscreen, and it is our perceptual bodies that make manifest this world, then the "realistic" image must in some way share with us an embodied, enworlded state.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Shaun Inouye.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Yeiji and Caroline Inouye (aka, Grandpa and Grandma).

1 Introduction

"Because we need him now" – this pronouncement adorns the cover of *Film International's* 2007 special issue dedicated to French theorist and film critic André Bazin, the subject of this thesis. Borrowed from the title of Jeffery Crouse's lead essay, it reads as an ardent reply to an invisible question, perhaps one imagined asked by obstinate scholars wondering why, forty years after his theories first reached Anglophone audiences in Hugh Gray's translated collection *What is Cinema?* (1967),¹ Bazin is being read anew. Why now? Though brought back into topicality in the mid-1980s after Gilles Deleuze opened his influential *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985) with an affirmation of Bazin's aesthetic pursuit of the real,² it is only within the last decade that a renewed interest has surfaced in film studies, and only within the last five years that a so-called "neo-Bazinianism" has risen to the fore.³ In 2008, for instance, a conference held jointly at Yale University and Université Paris Diderot set about "Opening Bazin / Ouvrir Bazin," bringing together some of the most distinguished film scholars from both sides of the Atlantic to reassess the figure who, for years, had been designated a "museum piece" (Crouse 6) of classical film theory, of interest only to those seeking historical or ideological ways of looking at cinema, but not gaining knowledge of it (Williams, "Bazin on Neo-Realism" 67).⁴ The following year, Timothy Barnard and his Montreal-based Caboose Publishing released a long overdue, newly

¹ *What is Cinema?* is, henceforth, *WC*.

² See Deleuze 1-13.

³ Justin Horton believes this moniker may have caught on following the 2010 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Los Angeles, where a feature panel entitled "The New Bazin" made use of it. See Horton 26n13.

⁴ Resulting from this transatlantic conference is the thirty-three-essay anthology *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory & Its Afterlife* (2011), referenced throughout this thesis.

translated edition of *What is Cinema?* (2009)⁵ culled from Bazin's original, four-volume French edition, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (1958-62), offering an alternative rendering of some of Bazin's most representative works that excise much of the religiosity of Gray's translation, and holds in tact those more arduous concepts – like *découpage* – that demand further study.⁶ And in 2010, Bazin biographer and perennial defender Dudley Andrew published *What Cinema Is!: Bazin's Quest and its Charge* (2010),⁷ an advocacy of Bazin's "quest" and continued relevance in an age of digital media, something deemed detrimental to his medium-specific ontology. Even famed scholar Colin MacCabe, whose tirades against Bazin in the pages of *Screen* in the 1970s established him as the leading detractor of the theorist (at least, until Noël Carroll's notorious takedown in the 1980s), felt the need recently to recant his longstanding views, admitting in the title-tells-all essay "Bazin as Modernist" (2011) that, in the past, he regretfully "treated [Bazin] as a theoretically naïve empiricist, a kind of idiot of the family" (66); now, removed from the hostility and political urgency that accompanied much of post-1968 Grand Theory,⁸ he recognizes Bazin to be "unsurpassed as a writer on cinema . . . his commitment to the real [being] anything but a naïve empiricism" (66).

⁵ Henceforth, *Caboose WC*.

⁶ Indeed, the newly translated work includes a twenty-page footnote by Barnard unlocking Bazin's particular use of the term *découpage*, which has been problematically translated as "editing" or "montage" in the past. See Barnard 261-281.

⁷ Henceforth, *WCI*.

⁸ "Grand Theory" is a term David Bordwell uses to identify the various theoretical frameworks that came to prominence in Anglo-American film studies during the 1970s: "Lacanian psychoanalysis, Structuralist semiotics, Post-Structuralist literary theory, and variants of Althusserian Marxism" (xiii). For a complete overview, see Bordwell.

But why *now*? Thomas Elsaesser, in his reflective essay "Bazinian Half-Century" (2011), looks to the ongoing crises in film studies surrounding cinema's ceaseless "deaths" and resurrections:

the death of early cinema brought about by classical narrative in the '20s, the death of silent cinema by sound in the '30s, the death of the studio system by television in the '50s, the decay of cinephilia by the closure of neighborhood cinemas in the '70s, the death of the projection by the video recorder in the '80s, the death of celluloid by digitization in the '90s . . . Every film theory may be a funeral as much as a birth announcement. (3)

Today, still in earshot of analogue's death knell, Elsaesser asks us to consider not what cinema *was* (which was clearly always in contention), but what cinema can now *be*, opening up new possibilities of discovery and disclosure that, retroactively, redefine the way we think about it.

We return to Bazin as a contemporary, Elsaesser argues, because he already addressed and resolved these issues in his own epoch, in his inspired ability to define cinema in ways that recasts its own history while, at the same time, looking beyond the closures of crises that prematurely put it to rest – Bazin deemed erroneous, for instance, the rupture that separated sound from silent cinema, and tackled head-on the question of cinema's artistic legitimacy, perhaps its greatest plight. As film studies once again searches for new ways of negotiating "cinema," Elsaesser and the neo-Bazinians suggest that, in opening Bazin anew, overlooked, underappreciated, and increasingly prophetic answers will appear.

Yet, despite this groundswell of reappraisal, the "idiotic" version of Bazin that MacCabe embarrassingly recounts remains, for most, the Bazin of classroom study – though not without some loudly trumpeted concessions. For example, Bazin is still that luminary critic who canonized a string of filmmakers – Renoir, Welles, Rossellini, Bresson – that are still in the

pantheon of greatness today; that passionate cinephile who co-founded the hugely influential *Cahiers du cinéma*, which cemented *auteurism* as the dominant framework for French (and then international) film criticism for much of the 1960s, and brought the vanguard *nouvelle vague* into being.⁹ This is Bazin as historic trailblazer and admirable agitator, who openly denounced the suspicions of intellectuals who refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of cinema as a modern – albeit populist – art form and, thus, neglected to record its history.¹⁰ He looked forward to a time when cinema would be taught in universities – "who then would dare maintain that the subject cannot be taken seriously?" (*FC* 56) – but did not live long enough to witness its eventual happening.

But this is merely one side of Bazin's Janusian place in film studies. The other, far more nefarious, paints Bazin as MacCabe's "naïve empiricist" who remained fascinated by cinematic realism throughout his short-lived career (1943-1958), believing (or so the story goes) that the impassive camera is capable of stripping away the subjectivity plagued by other arts, leaving the world "in all its virginal purity" left bare onscreen (Bazin, *WC* 15). This is Bazin as guileless ontologist, the philosopher of film that missed the mark and let his antiquated notions of objectivity blind him to the ideological mechanisms really at work. Following his untimely death, a new guard of film theorists backed by Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Barthian semiotics cried out in unison: "You fool! What you call realism is not a window open to the world, but a mimetic construct swindling you into accepting bourgeois 'realities'

⁹ Bazin died from leukemia in 1958, a mere year before his acolytes at *Cahiers du cinéma* announced the *nouvelle vague* to the world at Cannes. Jim Hillier has noted the influence of Bazin's theories and humanism on Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups / The 400 Blows* (1959), the film that initiated the short-lived new wave. See Hillier 25.

¹⁰ In his early article "Let's Rediscover Cinema!" (1943), Bazin repeats the reply given by famous French critic Paul Souday when asked if one can take an interest in cinema: "No, a serious critic cannot take an interest in cinema because cinema is less than goat dung" (*French Cinema of the Occupation and Resistance* 25). Henceforth, *FC*.

driven by inequalities (gender, race, class, etcetera) and capitalism. You have been duped by a mere 'reality effect!'"¹¹ Indeed, the echoes from these barbs still reverberate in lecture halls today.

And so, credited posthumously with helping usher cinema into academia, the discipline's first order of business was, ironically, to expel Bazin from it. As film scholar Bert Cardullo puts it: "It might almost be said that the whole Byzantine edifice of contemporary theory sprang out of an irresistible desire to prove Bazin wrong" (*Cinematic Illusions* 23). Perhaps nowhere was this more evident than in the Anglo-academic journals of 1970s, where the feminist-leaning *Camera Obscura*, increasingly psychoanalytic *Screen*, and Marxist/Socialist *New Left Review* all shared "anti-realists" views that charged cinematic realism – especially narrative realism – with being mendacious, "working in such a way as to blind the spectator into a false (though 'natural') conception of 'the real'" (Williams 152). The work of aforementioned *Screen* contributor Colin MacCabe is exemplary in this regard. In his influential essay "The Classic Realist Text" (1974) – which became a lightning rod for anti-realists sentiments of the day – MacCabe argues that the template for cinematic realism does not, in fact, differ from the outmoded literary realisms that flourished in the 19th century, since both depend upon underlying "metalanguages" that assumes problematically *unproblematic* representations of the world by denying their own fictional status.¹² In order to combat this falsity, MacCabe, alongside fellow *Screen* writers Peter Wollen

¹¹ "Reality effect" is Roland Barthes' name for a textual device in literature that serves no other function than to legitimize the "reality" of a fictional event. In its approximation to cinema, it refers to those techniques that give the illusion of "objectivity" where there is, in fact, none, by making it appear as though the signified (the representation) is giving way to the referent itself (reality). See Barthes.

¹² MacCabe uses the example of Victorian author George Eliot, whose prose include a so-called "unwritten text" that sets characters' fallible knowledge against the "true" state of things in the world. He sees this invisible discourse continued in realist cinema, where the camera presents what is ostensibly real against the characters' opinions and misrepresentations about it. See MacCabe "The Classic Realist Text."

and Laura Mulvey, called upon more progressive forms of expression that might dismantle the mechanisms behind the artifice and reveal the conditions of representation itself – a counter-cinema that would expose the contradictions that the medium, in fact, rest upon. This "political modernism," as it came to be known,¹³ set about burying Bazin and the orthodoxy of realism under the weight of the cinematic apparatus, and in large part succeeded: "Most of us can remember a time when displaying a sympathy for, or even a particular interest in, the ideas of André Bazin encountered the objection that he was an 'idealist.' The term was seldom used to open a serious discussion of the philosophical context of Bazin's thought . . . but instead to label his writings as politically retrograde or naïve" (Gunning, "The World in Its Own Image" 119).

Today, despite the waning of structuralism and post-structuralism as the preeminent lenses in film studies, the residual negativity from these criticisms still mar the reception of Bazin's theories, resulting in facile summations that espouse the "indexical" nature of his realism – a semiological term never adopted by Bazin – rather than the more sophisticated, nuanced version he presents. Thus, as with other works that share the "neo-Bazinian" designation, I am faced with the challenge of reading Bazin *against* Bazin (so to speak), so widespread and entrenched in film studies are the layman versions of his theories.¹⁴ However, unlike those recent essays that aim to reveal a "neo" Bazin existing in the sea of overlooked, unturned articles (he is

¹³ D.N. Rodowick is the most well known proprietor of this term. His *The Crisis of Political Modernism* (1994) provides an excellent overview of the discourse during its heyday in 1970s and 1980s, as well as reasoning for its continued relevance today: "the discourse of political modernism marks the emergence of contemporary film theory as a discursive field in which we still live and think" (viii). See Rodowick.

¹⁴ Hervé Joubert-Laurencin touches on this in his co-written preface for *Opening Bazin*, noting that in the 1970s a certain *doxa* started to take hold that substituted Bazin's actual prose with the "lazy summary" routinely recycled in film studies: "And so it was that Bazin, the greatest writer in the history of our art . . . has been constantly referred to yet betrayed" (xiv).

estimated to have wrote some 2,600 articles), I set my sights on the bedrock of Bazin's infamy and abiding scorn: his ontology of the photographic image and theory of cinematic realism.

I am certainly not alone in these efforts: Ivone Margulies, Daniel Morgan, and Richard Rushton have all contributed valuable re-readings of Bazin's realism in recent years, finding new and unexpected ways of interpreting and demystifying the "real" in his writing. In "Bodies Too Much" (2003), for instance, Margulies uses Bazin's lesser known, late-career essay "Death Every Afternoon" (1958) to explore how cinema is uniquely capable of registering moments of "contingency" – those singular, one-time events (like the death of the matador in *La course de taureaux / The Bullfight* (1951)) that confound concepts like "profilmic" meant to hold unmediated truths at bay. For Margulies, Bazin confirms what she calls the "epistemological promise of referential images" (1), and the subscription to this philosophical precept frames her own concept of realism that "does away with verisimilitude as a working category" (5). Morgan and Rushton adopt more or less compatible views, vastly opposed to Margulies': for both, Bazin's conception of realism amounts to a cinematic reality without referent; that is, a reality onscreen that need not represent an antecedent reality existing beyond or behind the image, but which "presents its own sufficient reality" (Rushton 44) that participates in, or contributes to, the reality that already *is*.¹⁵

For my part, I come to conclusions of a different sort, adopting methods of enquiry untapped by the scholars above. Though I, too, engage in close, textual analysis of Bazin's work that, on its own, yields unexpected and occasionally revelatory results – especially concerning the legitimacy of Bazin's ontological argument – I look to the larger, intellectual context of Bazin's thought to understand the complexities and apparent discords in his theory of cinematic

¹⁵ See Morgan; Rushton 42-78.

realism, exhuming from under his words the network of ideas and thinkers that made an indelible impression upon him during his formidable Occupation years in France. In turn, I discover that Bazin's proximity to, and acknowledged admiration for, epochal French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty influenced his pursuit of cinematic "authenticity," resulting in notions of filmic reality based, not on the objectivity of the camera's gaze, but the intersubjectivity of human perception. As we shall see, the aesthetic tenets of Bazin's realisms are driven by the conviction that, when cultivated by the will of the *auteur*, the image is capable of expressing the existential ambiguity of embodied experience, having recognized in the medium a perceptual engagement with the world in the likeness of our own. This is made possible via the image's two-fold state of perception, which simultaneously experiences and expresses the diegetic world in human-like ways by being, like us, both a visual and visible body, an object of perception that is, itself, perceivable. It is the concept of the suggested "image-body" that is crucial here, a self-coined term that anchors the thesis around the central assumption that, if Bazin's realism offers us recognizable representations of the world, and it is, according to Merleau-Pontian thought, our perceptual bodies that make manifest this world, then the "realistic" image must in some way share with us an embodied, enworlded state.

As it is my intention to have each chapter build upon the last, we shall start at the foundation of Bazin's thought with his oft-misunderstood ontology of the photographic image, venturing to sever the Gordian knot that bounds Bazin to problematic concepts like "objectivity" (which he uses) and "indexicality" (which he does not). I contest that it is only with an understanding of the medium's ontology *vis-à-vis* the "myth" that motivated its development that an ensuing understanding of cinema, and distinctly *film art*, can occur. This will be followed by two chapters drawing on key philosophical influences – the first, Sartre's existentialism; the

second, Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology – that interrogate Bazin's vocation for a realist film art by tracing the ways his aestheticism links to larger metaphysical questions, and proposed answers, of the day. Here, the idea of the cinematic "image-body" is introduced and expounded upon, buoyed by Bazin's writings on the cinematic "witness," media scholar Vivian Sobchack's theories of cinematic embodiment, and Merleau-Ponty's own rare address to cinema. The conclusion will include a brief *précis*, as well as a consideration of these findings further implications, not only for Bazinian scholarship proper, but wider understandings of filmic realism both new and old.

2 The Ontology

The premises for Bazin's ontology of cinema can be found most fully formed in two essays published a year apart during the earliest stages of Bazin's career: "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1945) and "The Myth of Total Cinema" (1946).¹⁶ The former, written for a literary collection dedicated to the perceived crisis in aestheticism entitled *Problèmes de la Peinture*, surveys the history of the plastic arts and locates in the photographic medium a degree of realism unprecedented in earlier pictorial art forms – apropos of the publication's aim. The latter, written for the French cultural magazine *Critique*, is a response to Georges Sadoul's Marxist account of film history in *Histoire du cinéma mondial* (1946), in which Bazin offers an alternative, psychologically-driven account of cinema's impetus that brackets economic frameworks in order to illuminate humankind's innate fascination with representation. These works, suitably read in tandem, have provided the foundation for most major critiques of Bazin's theories, as they deal most directly with his philosophical views on cinema *tout court*, free from the evaluative dimension of his film criticism. As a consequence, however, they have often been unfairly received in isolation (as is routinely the case with canonized texts), divorced from the corpus of Bazin's writing that nourishes and develops the concepts hereto presented. Hence, it is with attention paid to other, seemingly peripheral works that we turn now to those seminal essays, and map out a succinct groundwork for Bazinian realism.

¹⁶ Both essays are also collected in the posthumously published *What is Cinema?* (1967), where they occupy an introductory position as the anthology's first two essays.

2.1 Embalming Time

Both "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" and "The Myth of Total Cinema" take as their starting point humankind's compulsion to "recreate . . . the world in its own image" (WC 21). Bazin attributes this condition to what he terms the "mummy complex," a sought after "insurance" that our continued existence, even after death, could be achieved by "the preservation of life by a representation of life" (9-10) – a document, if you will, of our lived experience. As it is the irreversible passage of time that brings us ever closer to death, and it is our existential burden to be cognizant of such, we seek remedy in creating resemblances of life "embalmed," preserved in a timeless, and thus immortal, state. This impetus, according to Bazin, explains the evolutionary-like track of mimetic representation in art, which, despite the variance in aesthetic forms, moves centripetally towards this common core. He writes: "If the history of the plastic arts is less a matter of their aesthetic than of their psychology then it will be seen to be essentially the story of resemblance, or, if you will, realism" (10).

The crisis in painting, with which "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" is principally concerned, emerges in response to the invention of photography, which usurps from painting the laurels of representation it heretofore held. A mimetic plastic *par excellence*, Bazin believes that the photographic medium is capable of unburdening painting from its irreconcilable ambition to both faithfully document *and* artistically transcend the perceptual world, since with photography, "for the first time, an image of the world is formed automatically, without the intervention of man" (13). Granted, Bazin notes that the photographer selects and situates the object(s) to be photographed, and thereby orchestrates the becoming of the photograph, but the process that realizes it is wholly mechanical. Since painting is, according to Bazin, "always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity" (12) – the hand of the artist being irremovable from the

artwork itself – it will never achieve the realism supposedly granted photography by its very nature: "an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist" (21). Thus, photography forces painting to reassess its own ontology, redirect its *telos* away from realism, and recover an aesthetic autonomy "whose relation to something in nature has ceased to be the justification for its existence" (16).

With the photographic medium, then, we have an apogee of realism in a lineage of plastic realisms dating back to the terra cotta statuettes that substituted for the corporeal body in ancient Egypt. Still driven by the primordial desire to halt the flow of time, cinema was born, not out of economic infrastructures – as George Sadoul's Marxian reading would have us believe – but idealistic preconceptions derived from the mummy complex,¹⁷ aiming to achieve with the camera "a total and complete representation of reality . . . a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief" (20). Bazin calls this fantasy the "myth of total cinema," and he credits to its inescapable allure the creation of photography and, in turn, cinema.

What is important to keep in mind, however, is that the myth of total cinema is just that: a *myth*. The developments in technology that enabled photographs to be rendered in motion, then imbued with sound, colour, 3D, etcetera – all the advances that "little by little made a reality out of the original 'myth'" (21) – paradoxically bring cinema ever closer to its nonexistence. "In short," Bazin quips, "cinema has not yet been invented!" (21), for if the myth of total cinema was somehow dispelled and perfect realism achieved, we would be left with reality itself, apart from the illusion. Hence, Bazin likens the course of cinema to a mathematical asymptote, perpetually seeking contact with an impossible plane that, remained untouched, necessitates cinema's very existence. In an elucidating but oft overlooked passage in his 1948 essay for *Esprit*, "An

¹⁷ Bazin later calls this the "resemblance complex" (*WC* 13), though the implications remain the same.

Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," Bazin writes: "Let us agree, by and large, that cinema sought to give the spectator as perfect an illusion of reality as possible within the limits of logical demands of cinematographic narrative and the current limits of technique. . . . But realism in art can only be achieved in one way – through artifice" (*What is Cinema? Vol. 2*¹⁸ 26). This recognition of a necessary "artifice" in achieving realism, similar in consequence to his address of the "myth" in total cinema, reminds the reader (and likewise viewer) that, though cinema may strive for ever-greater resemblances to the perceptual world, it does at arms-length of reality: "To produce the truth, to show the reality, all the reality, nothing but the reality is perhaps an honourable intention, but stated in that way, it is no more than a moral precept. In the cinema there can only be a *representation* of reality" (emphasis in orig., "William Wyler" 41). It is this paradox, this "fundamental contradiction which is at once unacceptable and necessary," that, according to Bazin, the art of cinema lives off (*WC2* 26).

Yet how does cinema transcend its photographic nature to become an art form? If the myth of total cinema is driven by a continued faith in the medium's ability to recreate the world, and that faith lies in the effacement of its creator, how can cinema be art? Was not painting freed from the affliction of realism precisely because of cinema's natural inclination towards reality, enabling painting to achieve an aesthetic freedom cinema never could? To answer these questions, it is worth returning for a moment to consider the implications of Bazin's ontology as a site for artistic potentiality. This will provide an opportunity to address his notion of "objectivity" in relation to the photographic medium, and cement his views on photography *proper* before moving onto cinema itself; that is, photography at its essence – "a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part" (*WC* 12).

¹⁸ Henceforth, *WC2*.

2.2 The Myth of Objectivity

For Bazin, the ontology of the photographic image is not, as it would first appear, anything inherent to the image itself; rather, it is the *process* by which the image comes into being. It is at this ontological level, he holds, that we engage with photographs, looking through the representational image to the mechanical operation underlying it. Unlike art, which reveals in its aesthetic the will of an artist, photography derives its psychological power from the perceived absence of human intervention, coaxing the mind into "accept[ing] as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re-presented*, set before us, that is to say, in time and space" (13-14). That is why, "No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, *by virtue of the very process of its becoming*, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction" (emphasis added, 14). In other words, our conviction in the faculty of the photographic process enables us to see in the image the model re-presented, though we need not *see* in the image its re-presentation. Bazin fittingly describes this as "an hallucination that is also a fact" (16), and I believe this description aptly prioritizes the place of the perceptual-subject in the nature of the photographic image.

It is in this context that we consider one of Bazin's most contested and oft quoted claims from "The Ontology of the Photographic Image:" that "the photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it" (14). Noël Carroll takes especial issue with this in his seminal *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (1988), arguing that Bazin commits a glaring identity-fallacy that is "incoherent and results in a formal contradiction" (134). Whether taken as a hard theory of re-presentation, whereby the image presupposes a direct, existential import from the model, or a soft theory that likens re-presentation to resemblance (which, as demonstrated above, could not be the case), Carroll finds

logical holes and theoretical contradictions that remove, piece by piece, Bazin's ontological framework. Or rather, *his* empirical reading of Bazin's ontology, for what is missing in Carroll's account, and which he considers only as an addendum, peripheral to the crux of his argument,¹⁹ is the psychological impetus that shapes Bazin's theory.

When Bazin concedes that "the photographic image is the object itself," he is not, despite appearances, making a truth-claim about objectivity. Rather, he is attesting to the psychological need – a "psychological fact" (*WC* 12) – kindled by the promise of total cinema: to see in the image a perfect replica of the world. Bazin alludes to this conditional premise in the proceeding sentence: "Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer" (14). Though he employs metonymic terms like "decal" and "transfer" – and later "tracing" (96) – to analogize the image's shared identity with the world,²⁰ the "kind of image" that the photographic lens gives us is, ironically, predicated on our *need* for the photographic lens to provide it, to assuage our desire for substitution. The above quote does not declare that the photographic lens gives us a substitute for the object in the image (at least, not in any concrete sense), only that it satisfies in us a *want* for its substitution. Bazin's conclusory statement then, "the photographic image is the object itself," should not be removed from the predicating subject-perspective that frames it. Properly stated, we experience in the image the object itself because it satisfies in us a *need* to see it. It is, Bazin admits, the "irrational power" (14) of photography.

¹⁹ See Carroll 165-169.

²⁰ These terms also refer to a causal process that, like the photographic image, need not uphold any fidelity to the originating object in the resulting image or impression. For instance, a poorly executed tracing or unrecognizable transfer does not fundamentally change the existential link between the object and its image/impression.

What should be made clear by Bazin's continual return to the subject – and more so, the collective-subject "we" – is that the ontology of the photographic image is subject dependent; that is, what it *is* to be a photographic image is posterior to what it *is* to be a perceiving subject. Though we strive for access to an objective world freed from the fetters of mortality and temporality, and seek emancipation in the mechanical process that removes our own subjectivity from the image, we return always to the self in Bazin's account: the mummy complex, the want for total cinema, even his notion of photographic transference is offset by a footnote urging readers to "examine the *psychology* of relics and souvenirs which likewise enjoy the advantages of a transfer of reality" (emphasis my own, *WC* 14n).²¹

In Bazin's usage, then, the term "objectivity" should be understood more as an "irrational" commitment to the real than an affirmation of it – the subject *willing* objectivity in the image, not witnessing it. Philip Rosen, in his elucidating essay "History of Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin" (2003), corroborates this view, insisting that "any reading of Bazin on the image should begin from Bazin's view of the subject" (43). He writes, "Bazin can almost always be read as analyzing the status of the objective *for* the subject. That is, 'objective' here can be put in quotes with greater clarity, for 'objective' is always inflected by the 'subjective,' never available except through the processes of the latter" (emphasis in orig., 44-45). And further:

Bazin generally assumes a 'subjective' assigning of significance to the concrete real, an activity that is inevitable and abstract with respect to the concrete. But the opposite term

²¹ This example is especially cogent considering how abstract a concept "transfer of reality" is when applied to a souvenir, since a souvenir's resemblance to a person, place, event, etcetera is based solely on the memory it evokes for the individual(s) to whom it *is* a souvenir, and not a physical likeness to that which it is a souvenir of, nor a process (like tracing) to which it is existentially linked. That is to say, if Bazin asserts that photography's transference of reality is like a souvenir's, it can only be in the most subjective sense.

of this abstraction from the real is not an absolute concrete objectivity that cinema can somehow make immediately available; it is rather a subjective striving, the subject projecting itself, a subjective investment in the image precisely as 'objectivity.' (46)

Rosen, then, comes to the same conclusions as I do: that though Bazin suggests an "objective" world made present in the photographic image, its credence as "objectivity" is predicated on the subjective intentionality we bring to it. That is why, without contradiction, Bazin can regard the image as a re-presentation of the world "in all its virginal purity" (*WC* 15) while at the same time admitting the objects it re-presents to be "phantomlike and almost undecipherable" (14). The difficulty in Bazin's writing is that he oscillates between subjective intentionality and the resultant effect in such a way that the photographic image *itself* appears to gain the objective status we confer unto it. But Bazin tempers this view when he re-situates the subject as the binding referential, admitting that the image is a re-presentation "if not of natural reality at least of a plausible reality of which the *spectator* admits the identity with nature as he knows it" (emphasis added, 108).²²

Though this reading has gained some recognition in recent years,²³ it remains an undoubtedly alternative approach to Bazin's ontology, which is otherwise dominated by accounts of the medium's indexical nature held over from semiological frameworks advanced in the late 1960s and 1970s by, among others, Christian Metz in France and Peter Wollen in Britain.²⁴ Here, Bazin's ontology is taken as being synonymous with semiologist Charles Sander Peirce's concept

²² Similarly, in his early essay "For a Realist Esthetic" (1943), Bazin proposes that, before we can analyze what cinema is, we must first "study the psychology of the spectator's perception of the photographic image" (*FC* 37). This suggests that the image's ontological status is as a result of the viewer's *perception* of it, a field of continual study for Bazin.

²³ Richard Rushton, for instance, in *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality* (2011) argues similarly that Bazin's ontology is based on a "consensual real" that is limited by human subjectivity. See Rushton 60-63.

²⁴ See Metz 3-28; Wollen 125-141.

of indexicality, whereby an existential bond between a sign and its referent attests to the necessary existence of the referent in the sign's formation – in this case, the photographic image as proof of the objective world. This view is shared by detractors and advocates alike. For instance, critic-cum-filmmaker Eric Rohmer, who wrote alongside Bazin at *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s and whose films are widely regarded as upholding a Bazinian commitment to the real,²⁵ believed objectivity to be the axiom of Bazin's theories, writing that, "Without a doubt, the whole body of Bazin's work is based on one central idea, an affirmation of the objectivity of the cinema in the same way as all geometry is centered on the properties of a straight line" (qtd. in Gray 5). Yet, the analogy Rohmer here draws between cinema and geometry is, I believe, a misconstrued one, taken from Bazin's own analogy between cinema's forlorn path and a geometric asymptote, which he utilizes to demonstrate the tautological *impossibility* of cinema's objectivity, not to affirm it. If objectivity remains a central idea for Bazin, which I agree with Rohmer it does, it is because he credits to its psychological pull the development of the medium and the various iterations to follow, not because he believes it grounds the medium itself. Indexicality, a term Rohmer does not use but whose meaning amounts to roughly the same (albeit without the structuralist baggage), is thus misapplied, since it presupposes a causal bond between the image (sign) and the world (referent) that Bazin does not specifically subscribe to.²⁶

²⁵ In fact, Rohmer would succeed Bazin as editor of *Cahier du cinéma* in the mid-1950s.

²⁶ Interestingly, even those that maneuver Bazin's theories away from more "empirical" notions of realism succumb to similar ends. Bert Cardullo, for instance, characterizes Bazin as a devout Christian whose faith provides the inspiration for his ontology. He writes, "At the heart of Bazin's strictures on cinematic realism lies the conviction that the movie camera, by the simple act of photographing the world, testifies to the miracle of God's creation" (14). However, despite its theistic origins, the implications amount to the same: "Since Bazin's general idea was to discover in the nature of the photographic image an objectively realistic feature, the concept of objective reality as a fundamental quality of the cinematic shot in fact became the key to his theoretical and critical work" (15). See Cardullo, *Cinematic Illusions* 12-24.

2.3 The Durational Image

It is thus with an awareness of Bazin's *conditional* ontology that we now shift our attention to cinema proper and approach the still-hanging issue of cinema's artistic potential. His earliest and most salient views on cinema appear in the latter half of "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," following his survey of the photographic image and its effects on the subject. Widening the framework that governs the photographic image, Bazin declares: "cinema is objectivity in time. The film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant . . . Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified if you will" (*WC* 14-15). Yet, we must be mindful that "objectivity" here amounts to a kind of "investment" in the image (to borrow a useful term from Rosen), not a resultant from the image somehow exhibiting objectivity. Bazin intimates this in his reuse of the embalment metaphor to account for what the cinematic image is – "change mummified if you will" – retracing cinema to its provenance in the mummy complex that, via the myth of total cinema, now welcomes duration as a petal of reality added to the image. In other words, he returns us to the site of the subject as purveyor of meaning *for* the image – a site, we must admit, Bazin never really abandons.

Duration, in this regard, is merely one more experiential factor we divorce from ourselves and try to make present in the image, furthering the camera's mythological ability to re-present the world in an existential state. But Bazin would agree that, in fact, we submit the image to duration in accordance with our experience of time, that "things change" in relation to a perceptual schema we set forth. This is especially true when one considers the practical means by which we record and exhibit film, the credibility of the "moving" image determined by the rate of photographic frames exposed during filming and projected during screening, both of which

are consensually decided upon by us, based on how time *looks* to us; that is, how movement (our gauge for visual temporality) is viewed in and in relation to things and others in the world. If we experience onscreen a "flow of time" recognizably alike our own, it is because we have made it so, at 24 photographs a second. In "The Myth of Total Cinema," Bazin gestures towards this when, in his account of John Plateau's early stroboscopic experiments, he acknowledges the discovery of synthetic motion through human's persistence of vision as being perhaps *the* precursory innovation in cinema's formation, a "cause for some astonishment that the discovery somehow precedes the technical conditions necessary to its existence" (19). And elsewhere, he prioritizes our reception of cinematic duration more overtly, writing in a 1951 essay for *Esprit* that "The cinema *offers us* effectively only a measure of duration" (emphasis added, 98), relinquishing the "cinema *is*" position that permeates his earlier writing.

What is important to stress in Bazin's transition from the photographic to cinematic image is how surprisingly little our engagement with the image changes despite the altering of the medium's format and exhibition. Though he later comes to depreciate photography's representational ability, calling it "a feeble technique in the sense that its instantaneity compels it to capture time only piecemeal" (96), this is not as a result of the photograph's sudden forfeiture of "objectivity" for the viewer. If, as Bazin asserts, "The realism of the cinema follows directly from its photographic nature" (108), it is because the "realism" he is here referring to is, apropos of its photographic nature, derived from the same mechanical process that first satisfied in us our appetite for objectivity; namely, the effacement of the photographer as intervening artist. For cinema to uphold its ontological realism then, it must subscribe to the same preclusive tenet that barred subjectivity from the photographic image: it must negate the artistic will of the filmmaker and allow a transparent reality to unfurl onscreen. This, Bazin suggests, assures our continued

commitment to the real in the image. Or, moreover, *as* the image, for just as the photographic image becomes the object itself, mummified in a moment, so too does the cinematic image become the temporal world itself, mummified in motion. He writes: "The world of the screen and our world cannot be juxtaposed. The screen of necessity substitutes for it... For a time, a film is the Universe, the world, of if you like, Nature" (108-109). By virtue of its photographic pedigree, then, cinema compels us to see "an open space in place of the universe rather than as a part of it" (110): this is the affecting nature of the medium, what differentiates it from the plastic arts that came before it and what, crucially, prevents it from being an art form unto itself.

2.4 Cinema's Recourse

Yet Bazin writes profusely of the *art* of cinema, of the *artists* that cultivate it as such. If we return now to the question that commenced this inquiry and ask how cinema can achieve artistic ends – which, to be sure, Bazin believes it capable of – we arrive at an answer at once obvious and unexpectedly profound: that for cinema to be art in Bazin's estimation, it must extricate itself from the guiding myth that shapes it; it must disrupt the psychological investment that facilitates its realism; it must remove from the image the "objectivity" we confer onto it. In sum, it must subvert the ontology Bazin has heretofore presented: the ontology of the photographic image.

On first pass, this artistic turn seems wholly at odds with what Bazin has, thus far, set-up the medium to be specially suited for: a realism that follows from its objective character, even if that character is subjectively conditioned. Indeed, most accounts of Bazin's realism hinge on just this assumption, a preservation of the medium's "objectivity" taken to be the precept for how cinematic realism is achieved. Brian Henderson, for instance, in *A Critique of Film Theory*

(1980), claims that "film art [for Bazin] has no overall form of its own, but that of the real itself" (27). He argues that, unlike Eisenstein's axiom of montage, which equates film art with the editorial arrangement of film-pieces, Bazin "begins with the real but . . . does not go beyond it; he never breaks with the real in the name of art" (27). Yet surely this is a conjecture that ignores how Bazin conceives of "the real" operating in the image, since it is precisely because of cinema's impassivity – that is, its artistic veto – that we experience the real at all. Though Bazin may not endorse an aesthetic that constructs meaning through montage (in fact, he vehemently opposes it), he does recognize art as being a fundamentally aesthetic form, one that must break with reality in order to achieve its autonomy; hence his assertion that, "in art, at the source of all realism, there is an aesthetic paradox that must be resolved. The faithful reproduction of reality is not art" (*WC* 64). Realism, then, if utilized within the context of film art, must derive its "ism" from a source outside "objectivity," since cinema qua cinema – that is, cinema taken at its ontological level – evinces a realism that is, rather, reality *itself* for us, "a natural image of a world we neither know nor can know" (*WC* 15).

What becomes clear upon admission of Bazin's psycho-historical account of cinema, especially the impasse to which it finds itself as a documentary format unable to accept its own epistemological limitations, is that Bazin seeks a recourse for cinema, a rupture that can reveal the subjective framework governing its realism. Cinema has, thus far, been an account of the medium's beguiling effect on us since its earliest inception, with objectivity being the impossible palm we allow ourselves to see in the image. The art of cinema, by contrast, "aims to go beyond reality, not reproduce it" (Bazin, *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism*²⁷ 107). Through artistic intention, Bazin believes cinema can allay our want for objective reality and re-engage us with

²⁷ Henceforth, *IN*.

the only world we can know: the world *for us*, which he has held as foundational from the outset. This it does, not by perpetuating the myth that buoys its ontology, but by granting the artist access to its photo-durational aesthetics, whereby the image is received *as* image, rather than as the automatic product of indexical processes. In its artistic import, realism is *necessarily* aesthetic, a truism recognized by Bazin when he asserts: “there has been no realism in art that has not basically been profoundly aesthetic” (*WC2* 25).²⁸

In retrospect, it appears Bazin was anticipating this rupture all along, developing his ontology in opposition to art's subjective character precisely so that art could emancipate cinema from its forlorn, and thus asymptotic, *telos* and allow us to experience the image as the already mediated, subjective form it is. Indeed, I believe this to be the crucial caveat in Bazin's theory, neglected by those like Carroll, Henderson, and Rohmer who hold objectivity to be the root of Bazin's realism: that he conceives of an ontology, based on our commitment to "the real," that was always intended on being upended by film art. For Bazin, cinema's exceptionality as a medium was never its ability to convince us of the *noumenal*, but its unique ability to share with us a perceptual-engagement with the *phenomenal* – to present us with images that, when tailored by the will of the artist, resemble the inter-subjective world that manifests before us. In this view, realism is as much a philosophical position as an artistic one. And the critical dimension of Bazin's writing, to which we will now turn, gravitates around those exemplars of the art form that evince in their realism the key cultural movement that informed Bazin's subjectivism and, on a grander scale, came to define the intellectual milieu of the post-war period: French existentialism.

²⁸ And further: "There is nothing more false or absurd than to set '*realism*' and '*aestheticism*' in opposition to each other" (emphasis in orig., *RC* 40).

3 Bazin and Existentialism

During Bazin's ascent as a film critic in the 1940s, existentialism became the philosophy *en vogue* in France. Less a cohesive school than a label ascribed to loosely overlapping revolts against traditional philosophy, as Walter Kaufman has argued,²⁹ existentialism gained prominence in France through the writings of self-ascribed existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, whose proximity to Bazin as director of the philosophical journal *Les Temps modernes* was direct (*Les Temps modernes* having published some of Bazin's most lauded essays in the late 1940s).³⁰ Building on the foundations laid by German phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, who developed philosophies rooted in human consciousness and the world of lived experience (what Husserl coined the *Lebenswelt*), Sartre shaped a philosophy that retained the primacy of human reality but diverted from the more analytic systemizations of consciousness proposed by Husserl, focusing instead on the ethical implications of our existence as subjectivities without pre-determination or purpose, encapsulated by his oft contested claim in the lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946) that "*existence* comes before *essence*" (emphasis in orig., 348).

For Sartre, an outspoken atheist, existentialism begins with an affirmation of Dostoevsky's musing that "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted" (qtd. in Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism"³¹ 353); yet, he develops from this premise a call for agency and culpability of actions since, without universal values or commands defining human nature, we are at liberty to define ourselves. He writes, "If . . . it is true that existence is prior to essence,

²⁹ See Kaufmann 11-51.

³⁰ Bert Cardullo speculates that it was Sartre who commissioned Bazin to write for *Les Temps modernes* after having read his early film criticism in *Le Parisien libéré*. See Cardullo, "Defining the Real" 2-3.

³¹ Henceforth, "EH"

man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders" (349-350). This is not, however, to ignore or diminish the trappings of social, economic, racial, or gender castes into which we are born; what Sartre is expounding upon is pre-ideological, the very being of our shared existence: "man may be born a slave in a pagan society," he argues, "or may be a feudal baron, or a proletarian. But what never vary are the necessities of being in the world, of having to labor and to die there" (362). We are, in his quotable phrase, "condemned to be free" (353), and it is from this condition that existentialism offers an ethics of agency and commitment that can help alleviate the absurdity of our meaningless existence.³²

In François Truffaut's introduction to Hugh Gray's translated selections for *What is Cinema? Vol. 2* (1971), he remarks that, "Only in the articles of Sartre, whom Bazin particularly admired, does one find a comparable intelligence and similar intellectual honesty" (vi). Yet, most agree that Sartre was more than just an admired intellectual contemporary for Bazin; rather, alongside Maurice Merleau-Ponty (to whom our attention will turn in the following chapter), Sartre can be credited with influencing Bazin's philosophical subscriptions during his formidable, Occupation years in France.³³ Indeed, one need only look to the co-opting of the title of Sartre's 1947 essay "Qu'est-ce que c'est la littérature?" for Bazin's four-volume anthology

³² Sartre characterizes the absurdity of existence as an inescapable nausea, which debilitates the narrator Antoine Roquentin in Sartre's aptly titled *Nausea* (1936).

³³ In fact, sometime later Truffaut would single out Sartre as the figure who exerted the strongest influence on Bazin at the onset of his career. See Truffaut, *Cinema of Cruelty* xi.

Qu'est-ce que c'est le cinema? (1958-1961) to attest to Sartre's enduring influence.³⁴ Though other figures from the existentialist movement have been duly credited with informing Bazin's theories, especially those of the co-called Personalist movement that married Christian faith with existentialist thought,³⁵ Sartre's influence remains the most prominent; and, for the most part, the tenets of his ontology provide the through-line that holds these factions together.

3.1 Realism as Authenticity

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre's principle philosophical work, he discusses the concept of authenticity, the ethical ideal of being. Adopting the term from Heidegger, who uses it to describe a mode-of-being whereby the *Daesin* (Heidegger's term for a conscious existent) becomes aware of itself as a being-in-the-world – that is, as a subjectivity inextricably bound to a phenomenal world – Sartre alters its usage to account for his notion of "nothingness," which he believes, ontologically, human existence *is*. For Sartre, there is nothing beneath or in consciousness that constitutes our being; rather, our existence is itself a lack of being, what Sartre terms "being-for-itself," which brings nothingness – precisely *no-thing-ness* – into a kind of positive absence. This is derived, at least in part, by Sartre's upholding of the

³⁴ Bazin was already preparing the second volume of the collection at the time of his death, and the first volume hit bookshelves the month of his passing. Thus, despite being published posthumously, Bazin had already envisioned *Qu'est-ce que c'est le cinema?* to be ongoing project under the decidedly Sartrean title. See Andrew, *WCI* 110-112.

³⁵ This includes Christian existentialists like Emmanuel Mounier, Roger Leenhardt, and Gabriel Marcel. Dudley Andrew, for instance, has called Mounier "the single most important influence on André Bazin's world view" (*André Bazin* 33), though this influence is no more self-evident in Bazin's writing than Sartre's or Merleau-Ponty's. Indeed, Andrew's claim is revealed to be a rather hyperbolic one when elsewhere he accredits the same amount of influence to the latter two philosophers, respectively. For Andrew on Mounier's influence, see *André Bazin* 29-37 (henceforth *AB*). For the influence of Marcel, see Shaw 68-70.

phenomenological principle fostered by both Husserl and Heidegger that consciousness is always conscious of something, that it arises *as* consciousness precisely in its awareness of phenomenal things (what Sartre calls, in the singular, "being-in-itself"). He writes: "From the moment the world appears qua world it gives itself as *being only that*. The necessary counterpart of this apprehension then is indeed the emergence of 'human reality' in nothingness" (emphasis in orig., 52). Authenticity, or "good faith," occurs when we acknowledge the nothingness that *is* human existence and conduct ourselves in accordance with the freedom this permits – often abridged as "being true to oneself." Inauthenticity, or "bad faith," occurs when we deny what we are and submit ourselves to ideological conformity, supplanting what it *is* to be human with the roles we play, or are expected to play, in society. Though Sartre does not explicitly state the maxim of existence preceding essence until his famous 1946 lecture – the same year "The Myth of Total Cinema" is published – the rationale for it is clearly set out here, and one can view his notions of authenticity in accordance with either the acceptance or refutation of this basic tenet.

For Bazin, "existence before essence" frames the entire realist project in film art. In the last section, we concluded that Bazin's ontology is characterized by a subjective striving towards objectivity in the image, based on the perceived impartiality of the mechanical-chemical process and the psychological need to recreate the world in its *own* image. Film art, by contrast, subverts this ontology by aestheticizing the image, enabling the artist – namely, the director – to reveal in his or her handling of the medium the subjective lens that governs the image and, to a larger extent, the phenomenal world alike. Yet, this establishes only the potential for cinematic art in history, not the realization of it. In his composite essay "Evolution of the Language of Cinema," (1950-1955), written over five years and representative of some of Bazin's most lucid views on film aesthetics, Bazin traces what he sees to be the historical divide in film art, which, despite

claims to the contrary, does not cleave at the coming of sound technology in the late 1920s, nor any other technological advances that superficially determine the form: "it is less a matter of setting silence over against sound than of contrasting certain families of styles, certain basically different concepts of cinematographic expression. . . . I will distinguish, in the cinema between 1920 and 1940, between two broad and opposing trends: those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality" (*WC* 24). Already in the concept of dichotomizing "faiths," one can feel the influence of Sartre.

Of those directors who put their faith in the image, it should be clarified that, by "image," Bazin means those elements that somehow *add* to the filmed object or event, thus promoting the plastics of the image over the representational quality of the image itself. In this camp, Bazin places those directors who overtly manipulate or distort their *mise-en-scène* – for instance, the German Expressionists – and/or those who employ the resource of montage, an editing technique that creates "a sense or meaning not proper to the images themselves but [is] derived exclusively from their juxtaposing" (25) – the proponents of Soviet montage being the obvious referents. For Bazin, these stylistic approaches, which he elsewhere umbrellas under the singular label "expressionism,"³⁶ divest the images of their inherent meaning *as* images by imposing metaphoric or symbolic relations over them, projecting what he calls "a priori significance" onto the consciousness of the viewer (*WC* 28).

The use of the term "a priori" here is of especial consequence, since it conveys a sense of predetermination or premeditation in the *way* the images are tailored and received, as though we arrive to the images already in a state of fixed meaningfulness. Of course, all directors bring intentionality to their images, regardless of where their "faith" lies, but for Bazin the

³⁶ Bazin gives an account of this historical divide being the relation between expressionism and realism in his 1951 essay "The Stylistics of Robert Bresson." See Bazin, *WC* 125-143.

expressionists' aesthetic ideologies *overpower* the image, masking its content with abstract signification brought from outside the image. For example, in Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* / *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), perhaps the exemplary film of the German Expressionist movement,³⁷ the inner psychosis of the narrator and protagonist (Francis) spills outward onto the *mise-en-scène*, distorting cinema's ties to phenomenal reality by fabricating a perverse mental world marked by the director's own hyperbolic aesthetics. In turn, we engage not with the image but with what Bazin deems to be the violence done *to* the image (*WC* 26). Similarly, Lev Kuleshov's experiments in montage in the late 1910s and early 1920s, which revealed cinema's capacity for juxtaposed meaning,³⁸ influenced a wave of formalist films in Soviet Russia that utilized disjunctive editing techniques to stimulate meaning *between* images, creating what Bazin figuratively terms the "shadow of the image" (26) that alludes to, but refrains from providing, profilmic objects or events. An illustrative example occurs at the close of Sergei Eisenstein's propaganda-film *Stachka* / *Strike* (1925), when images of Bolshevik workers being executed *en masse* are crosscut with images of a bull being slaughtered. The resultant metaphor, that the suppression of the Russian proletariat is comparable to the treatment and expendability of butchers' cattle, is contained in neither episode alone, arising only from the sequencing of images in their back-and-forth succession.

Though both these strains of expressionism claim to ignite agency in the viewer by putting the onus of abstract meaning on them – which, for the practitioners of Soviet montage,

³⁷ Bazin has nothing but disdain for Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which he views as an utter failure. See Bazin, *WC* 108-110.

³⁸ The most famous experiment being the juxtaposing of Tsarist-era actor Ivan Mosjoukine's expressionless face with an image of a child in a coffin, a bowl of soup, and a woman lounging on a divan. Depending on the ordering of images, the actor's face appears to evince emotions derived from the proceeding image, be it grief, hunger, or desire. Meaning thus emerges from the unique coupling of images, rather than from the solitary images themselves.

was the basis for cinema's revolutionary potential – Bazin contends that this meaning is, rather, coerced, limiting rather than liberating the viewer's interpretational faculties by diminishing the freedom fostered by the cinematic image itself, which, when presented unadulterated – that is, without profilmic perversions (expressionism of the image) or juxtaposed meaning (expressionism of montage) – retains the weight of pure, phenomenal appearance. In turn, we experience the image *first*, only later deriving meaning from its artistic intentions. This characterizes the kind of cinematic style exhibited by those directors who put their "faith" in reality over the image, who acknowledge the perceptual kinship the camera has with our engagement with the phenomenal world and allow their films to lay human reality bare in the image. This does not, Bazin stresses, rely on the advent of sound – which, if it did, would implicate him as upholding the "myth" as the barometer of film achievement – but the preservation of time and space in the recording of profilmic events. Thus, though Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is a silent film, it demonstrates for Bazin a heightened level of realism in its treatment of time itself as an object of attention: "What matters to Flaherty, confronted with Nanook hunting the seal, is the relation between Nanook and the animal; the actual length of the waiting period. Montage could suggest the time involved. Flaherty however confines himself to showing the actual waiting period; the length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true object" (27). Likewise, F.W. Murnau, though "superficially" affiliated with the impressionistic-side of German Expressionism, achieves with his cinema a "reality of dramatic space" (27) by respecting the unity of spatial-location in the shot: "The composition of his image is in no sense pictorial. It adds nothing to the reality, it does not deform it, it forces it to reveal its structural depth, to bring out the preexisting relations which becomes constitutive of drama" (27). In both these examples, it is the directors' faith in a human reality

that guides their aesthetic choices, resulting in a realist cinema of the silent era that can be evaluated "not according to what it adds to reality but what it reveals of it" (28).

Though Sartre is not acknowledged outright in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," it is through a decidedly Sartrean lens that Bazin conceives of film history along an axis of bifurcated "faiths" – rather than, for instance, the more commonly accepted division of forms (silent cinema; sound cinema) – with "existence before essence" serving as the philosophical gauge against which he measures the artist's credence. And while it goes without saying that Bazin endorses those directors who put their faith "in reality" as opposed to "in the image," it is to the influence of Sartre's ontological-ethical system that I believe this choice registers as an act of "authenticity," despite the obvious disparity between cinematic aesthetics and ethical conduct.

Take, for instance, Bazin's objection to the expressionists' vein of film art: it is aimed, not at their aestheticization of the image – which is necessary for *all* film art – but the evincing in their aesthetic of a preconceived *essence* for the image, one that diminishes the freedom accorded to the representational image itself. Like the existential subject who acts in "bad faith" by denying the freedom that *is* human existence, allowing ideological influences to shape his or her actions, the expressionists act in "bad faith" by denying the image its naturally vested freedom *as* image, bringing a priori meaning to the image that inhibits the viewer's own, unique engagement with it.

This view is furthered by the notion that cinema is, essentially, nothing without the image; again, *no-thing*. Though Bazin admits that it is the medium's mechanical processes that dictate our "investment" in the image, allowing us to see "objectivity" where this is, in fact, none, it still requires the image – the *some-thing* onscreen –to receive this conferment. Bazin

biographer Dudley Andrew offers an interesting complement to this idea in *What Cinema Is!: Bazin's Quest and its Charge* (2010). He recalls that some years ago, he was given Bazin's personal copy of Sartre's *L'Imaginaire* (194) by Bazin's late widow Janine Bazin,³⁹ and discovered folded in its pages a series of hand-typed notes by Bazin concerning Sartre's distinction between "the photograph as a transparent *nothing*, a vehicle rendering the analogon of its object directly to consciousness, versus the photograph as a black and white *something*, whose material feature (marks of lighting, shade) cause us to see it momentarily as an object like any other, like a carpet or piece of wallpaper" (emphases in the orig., 13). To clarify, in the latter case it is the materiality of the photograph *itself* that becomes the visible object, the some-thing to be viewed – similar (I cannot help but assume) to the viewing of a bare filmstrip run through a projector. According to Andrew, this receipt of photography was of no consequence to Bazin.⁴⁰ Rather, it was the former, the situation wherein the object of the material photograph becomes no-thing in the presence of the image that occupies the viewer and photograph's attention alike, that was of particular interest. This is made plain, Andrew's shares, by Bazin's continual emphases on the photographic image as an "analogon," a term Sartre uses to indicate the process by which an object or image comes to substitute for an absent thing *in the subject's imagination*, an act of mental association set-off, so to speak, by the representation.⁴¹

³⁹ A notable figure unto herself, Janine Bazin continued her husband's film legacy by co-producing the unparalleled French television series *Cinéastes De Notre Temps / Filmmakers of Our Time* (1964-1972), which featured many of *Cahiers du cinéma's* critics-cum-filmmakers.

⁴⁰ Nor was it of any interest to Sartre. See *The Imaginary* 21-25.

⁴¹ Sartre uses the example of a photograph of his friend "Pierre" to demonstrate. He notes that when he looks at the photo, he is put in the presence of Pierre as though Pierre were almost there in-person. This is because his consciousness is no longer directed at the object of the photograph itself, but has been taken up by his imagination, making Pierre, and not the image of Pierre, the object of attention. See *The Imaginary* 6-8.

There are two important observations worth making here. The first and most significant for our understanding of Bazin's ontology, is that, if we follow Andrew's lead and hold that Sartre's theory of the analogon was pivotal to Bazin's conception of the photographic image,⁴² then the image is in no way evidentiary to an objective reality: the true object of the photograph exists in the imagination of the viewer *wanting to make present* that thing that is absent, which is why Sartre considers in tandem a photographic portrait and a "caricature" drawing.⁴³ Where I believe Bazin departs from Sartre on this account, however, is in his recognition that the photographic image's automatic becoming coaxes the viewer into believing that an existential bond between the "real" and the medium is taking place, that the viewer is not merely imagining a correlation between the image and the absent thing, but witnessing a transference, an actual *re*-presentation – something that is wholly absent in our reception of the "subjective" drawing. This is why Bazin contests that the artist must take up the camera and, as it were, *create* the image by evincing their hand, frustrating cinema's "objectivity" by making it an artistic medium.

This brings us to the second observation, more pertinent to our current point of attention: that if Bazin believes the "authentic" artist abides by the dictum set out by Sartre and enables "existence before essence" to inform his or her handling of the image, then in some way cinema must share something with the existential subject. Andrew touches upon this in his fortuitous discovery that Bazin acknowledged and indeed favoured Sartre's view that the photograph is no-thing without the image.⁴⁴ As we are, in Sartre's philosophy, no-thing without consciousness

⁴² Andrew even mentions that one of the hand-typed notes had the heading: "analogon (Sartre)." See Andrew, *WCI* 12-13.

⁴³ See Sartre, *The Imaginary* 17-19.

⁴⁴ In a peculiar passage in his review of Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne / Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), Bazin admits that it is in the final shot of the film, when the screen is silent and "free of images," that a "triumph of cinematographic realism" is achieved (*WC* 141). Though at first rather perplexing, I believe Bazin is

(and consciousness is always conscious of some-thing), it seems Bazin conceives of a kind of *ontological symmetry* taking place between our own state of no-thing-ness and cinema's, with the conduct of the image, like our own conduct in the world, subject to degrees of "good" or "bad" faith. Film aesthetics, by this accord, become more a matter of existential responsibility than artistic license,⁴⁵ suggesting that Bazin's cardinal question – *Qu'est-ce que le cinema?* – is perhaps as much an ethical question as an ontological one.⁴⁶

3.2 Freedom In-Depth

Perhaps the most compelling example of Sartre's influence on Bazin can be found in Bazin's championing of depth-of-focus cinematography as made popular by Orson Welles and William Wyler in the early 1940s, but which had its precursor in the films of Jean Renoir in the late 1903s.⁴⁷ He attends to this cinematographical innovation – what he calls a "dialectical step

here recognizing that the greatest artistic rendering of human reality must come from an acknowledgement that our existence is precisely no-thing without the world of appearance. An empty screen, thus, offers the purest representation of being-for-itself.

⁴⁵ The idea that film style could exist merely *for* itself, rather than being of service to a particular end or "faith," is for Bazin a deplorable act. He writes: "Our intention is certainly not to preach the glory of form over content. Art for art's sake is just as heretical in cinema as elsewhere, probably more so" (*WC* 30).

⁴⁶ One is reminded here of Jean-Luc Godard's famous statement that refuses to distinguish filmic form from moral conduct: "tracking shots are a matter of morality" (62). See Godard, et al 59-70.

⁴⁷ It is worth noting here that Orson Welles and William Wyler share the cinematographer Gregg Toland, who is widely recognized as having advanced depth-of-focus cinematography to the level admired by Bazin in Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Wyler's *Little Foxes* (1941). On Toland's contributions to Wyler's realism, Bazin quotes Wyler himself: "'We decided to strive for as simple a realism as possible. The gift of Gregg Toland has for moving without difficulty from one shot of the scene to another ... allowed me to develop my own technique of direction. Thus I can follow through a piece of the action and avoid cuts. The resulting continuity makes the shot more alive; more interesting for the spectator, who studies each character *as he pleases* and makes his own cuts'" (emphasis in orig., *RC* 43).

forward in the history of film language" (*WC* 35) – in the latter half of "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," marking 1941 as the beginning of a new period in film realism led by the voracity of Welles' aesthetic convictions in his brazen first feature, *Citizen Kane*. Of course, seemingly in contradiction, Sartre famously denounced *Citizen Kane*, believing its flashback structure and overall fatalism upset cinema's singularity as an art of the present-tense, and thus, of potential.⁴⁸ But Bazin was enamored with Welles' use of *style*, not his narrative or thematic tropes. Since depth-of-focus enables multiple planes of the image to be in-focus simultaneously, allowing action to be observed *within* the spatial-grounds of the image at once, in a single shot (rather than, for instance, the abstract spatial-relations suggested by montage), Bazin believed it encourages "a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress" (35-36). This is because, rather than being coerced by directorial meaning via montage or soft-focus cinematography,⁴⁹ the image *in-depth* calls upon the viewer to "exercise at least a minimum of personal choice. It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives" (36). On Welles' contribution to realism, Bazin writes:

Orson Welles restored to cinematographic illusion a fundamental quality of reality – its continuity . . . Whereas the camera lens, classically, had focused successively on different

⁴⁸ These views appear in a 1945 article about *Citizen Kane* in the left-leaning film magazine *L'Ecran Français*, after Sartre had screened the film in New York. See Andrews, *AB* 123-124.

⁴⁹ Bazin believes that soft-focus cinematography emerged as a logical consequence of montage, which sought the same kind of ideological influences over the images as was implemented between them. He imagines a Kuleshov-inspired, psychological edit in which a shot of a hungry tramp cuts to a close-up of a bowl of fruit. The obvious inclination for the director, Bazin argues, is to isolate the fruit in the frame to reinforce the tramp's desire. Soft-focus cinematography enables the object of attention – in this case, the fruit – to be in-focus while reducing the unimportant *mise-en-scène* to a hazy background. It is, thus, the continuation of montage's effects onto the image itself. See Bazin, *WC* 33.

parts of the scene, the camera of Orson Welles takes in with equal sharpness the whole field of vision contained simultaneously within the dramatic field. It is not longer the editing that selects what we see, thus giving it an *a priori* significance, it is the mind of the spectator which is forced to discern, as in a sort of parallelepiped of reality with the screen as its cross-section, the dramatic spectrum proper to the scene" (WC2 28).

As with the realists of the silent era, who exhibit "authenticity" by eschewing ideology in (or over) the image, Welles acts in "good faith" by deepening the spectatorial freedom fostered by the realist aesthetic, developing a cinematographic approach that retains the spatial density and temporal continuity of *perceptual* reality. Once again, it is not technology that drives the image towards realism, but what Bazin calls the director's "search for a style" (WC 30) – an expression of faith *through* aestheticism.

Moreover, in the essay "William Wyler, or the Jansenist of *mise en scene*" (1948), Bazin widens the existentialist implications of this technique beyond Welles' (admittedly) exemplary usage, considering in tandem the "realist ethic" evinced in the works of Wyler and Renoir as well. He argues that, far from a mere tool in their filmmaking repertoire, these artists' common use of deep focus springs from a humanist desire to liberate the viewer from the ideological control exerted over the image by the director in "bad faith." This amounts to a veritable call-to-arms for the image in-depth, the act of film spectatorship being analogous for Bazin to the self-governed actions of oneself in "real life:"

The event, in its entirety, is there all the time, demanding to be looked at; it is we who decide to choose such and such aspect, to pick this rather than that one according to the demands of action, of feeling or reflection, but someone else would perhaps choose differently. Whatever the circumstances we are *free* to do our own *mise en scène*: there is

always another possible choice which can radically modify the subjective aspect of reality. Now, the director who chooses for us, exercises, in our place, the discrimination which we are faced in real life. We unconsciously accept his analysis because it is consistent with the laws of attention, but it deprives us of the privilege . . . which we abandon without realizing it, and which is, at least virtually, the freedom to modify our method of selection at every moment. (emphasis in orig., "William Wyler" 42)

The image in-depth, thus, liberates the viewer from the discriminatory choices already made by the expressionist director, enabling us to experience the image as we too experience – or *should* experience – "real life" as free subjectivities.

In *European Film Theory and Cinema* (2001), film theorist Ian Aiken takes heed of Bazin's Sartrean influence as well. He posits that, in defending an aesthetic that generates "forms of self-motivated spectatorial activity," Bazin upholds Sartre's insistence that the subject "defines him or herself through action, free choice and a quest for meaning" (Aiken 180). He writes:

It is the realistic film which enables the 'long hard gaze' to emerge, as the spectator sees, and makes correspondence between, the complex, structurally dense content of the film's image. It is also by virtue of this empirical and structural density that the spectator is able to overcome the manipulative aspirations of ideology, as the ideological discourses within the film lose their identity in the face of a plethora of empirical information. (184)⁵⁰

It is, thus, by retaining the weight of pure, diegetic *presence* in the image that the viewer is able to engage with the image free of ideological impediment, reinforcing the kind of subject-agency

⁵⁰ The "long hard gaze" is a term used by Dudley Andrew to describe how realist filmmakers facilitate meaning in the image by "waiting for the moment when a flood of correspondence may be revealed" (*AB* 122). It is, he argues, more akin to a biologist's observations than a poet's lyricism. See Andrew, *AB* 122-123.

advocated for by Sartre.⁵¹ Yet, it is Aiken's use of the term "empirical" here that is most telling: it speaks not only to the status of the viewer as experiencer of the image – the "information" onscreen made available to our senses, to *be* experienced – but to the contents of the image as having, in essence, already *been* experienced, as though the camera already attests to the information's empirical-ness. In the context of Bazin's subject-centric view of realism, this makes a lot of sense: if Bazin believes the camera is capable of sharing with us a perceptual engagement with the world, and the directors he champions recognize and pursue this end – hence the foremost preservation of time and space in their films, "Our experience of space [being] the structural basis for our concept of the universe" (Bazin, *WC* 108) – then we experience in realist cinema the image *in itself* experiencing in a human-like way; or rather, we experience the camera experiencing the diegetic world as we would the phenomenal one. In turn, we are put in the *presence* of what the camera sees, as though present ourselves: "What we lose by way of direct witness," Bazin contests, "do we not recapture thanks to the artificial proximity provided by photographic enlargement? Everything takes place as if in the time-space perimeter which is the definition of presence" (98).

This bi-fold facet of film experience is, I believe, crucial in understanding how Bazin is able to read existential thought *into* film art, how an ontological-ethical system can be applied to film aesthetics. For if "existence before essence" acts as the precept for how realism is achieved in the image, then *the image must in some way surrogate for the perceptual subject*. In order to

⁵¹ Philosopher William Pamerleau agrees. In *Existentialist Cinema* (2009), he notes that by aspiring to portray the *experience* of human life as realistically as possible, which includes an emphasis on freedom "at least from the point of view of the spectator," Bazin approaches cinema in a similar way to how the existentialists approach philosophy; that is, as a "descriptive enterprise" (54). However, Pamerleau finds Bazin's realism too restricting for existentialist purposes, for he believes it concentrates too much on the "physical world" and not enough on the inner life of the existential subject. See Pamerleau 52-55.

explore this concept further, it is necessary to look to Bazin's other major philosophical influence, French existential-phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose theories on embodiment and the ambiguity of the perceived world prove central to Bazin's critical appreciation of Italian Neorealism. a movement born from the wreckage of war-torn Italy that Bazin recognizes foremost as "a kind of humanism and only secondarily as a style of film-making" (29).

4 Bazin and Existential Phenomenology

In Dudley Andrew's seminal *André Bazin* (1978), a critical biography that sought to rehabilitate Bazin's theories after a near-decade of denigration in film studies,⁵² he notes how, in his education at Ecole Normale Supérieure in St. Cloud, France in the late 1930s, Bazin was exposed to the influential (and wholly uncategorizable) philosophy of French philosopher Henri Bergson and, in essence, “the handing of the Bergsonian torch to phenomenology” (20). According to Andrew, Bergson's theories of the world *experienced* – at odds with the then-dominant, positivist view of the world as fact-based and, thus, calculative – provided the heritage for French phenomenology's conviction that “reality is not a situation available to experience but an ‘emerging-something’ which the mind essentially participates in and which can be said to exist only in experience” (106). For Bazin, a young intellectual arriving to Bergson a quarter-century after his theories first sparked controversy in France,⁵³ the presence of a Bergsonian line-of-thought in the emerging school of phenomenology was, not surprisingly, met with fervent interest and enthusiasm. Indeed, Andrew surmises that, having observed first-hand the passing of the “Bergsonian torch” to phenomenology, “His entire life was thus led amid the light and shadow cast by that torch” (20).

⁵² This biographical study situates Bazin's theories within the cultural-context of their development, exposing the network of influences that inform, and thus help elucidate, his ideas. Regarding the importance of this contextualization when reading Bazin, film scholar Hunter Vaughan goes so far as to argue that, “Bazin's insights into film form in fact exist *only* within the historicization of the sociopolitical place of cinema in the world around it” (emphasis in orig., 103). See Vaughan 100-108.

⁵³ Andrew stresses that it is difficult to overestimate exactly how influential Henri Bergson was to French philosophy at the turn of the century, and how lasting his impression remained decades later. Upon Bazin's entry into the intellectual sphere of the late 1930s, Andrew comments: “Bergson was present to Bazin in the air he breathed everyday” (18). See Andrew, *AB* 18-21.

Of these nascent phenomenologists, perhaps no one exerted more influence on Bazin – or proved more influential to Continental philosophy as a whole – than Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who shared with Sartre, his colleague and collaborator, the moniker of "existentialist" during the movement's cultural ascent in the 1940s. Again, it is interesting to note that, like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty had direct contact with Bazin through *Les Temps modernes*,⁵⁴ which Merleau-Ponty co-founded with Sartre at the close of WW2 and who acted as its editor-in-chief for its initial years.⁵⁵ Of course, this connection does not, in itself, necessitate Bazin's espousal of a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology (nor, for that matter, a Sartrean existentialism), it does assume, at least, compatibility of thought, *Les Temps modernes* being the flagship journal and idea-house of French existentialism, with its writers generally grouped under that amorphous banner. Sharing credits with the leading proponents of existentialism (including Simone de Beauvoir, who first published her feminist treatise "The Second Sex" [1949] in the journal's pages), Bazin's theories were, thus, knowingly received *within the context* of existentialism, as a new voice contributing to an existing discourse that, driven by Merleau-Ponty's opus *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), was now squarely phenomenological, rather than just peripherally so.

For Merleau-Ponty, the neglected task of phenomenology should be to make us aware of the "primordial bond between the human being and the world" (Langer xv), what he tellingly

⁵⁴ In his biographical research, Dudley Andrew states matter-of-factly that Bazin had "actual encounters" with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in the 1940s. See Andrew, "Binocular" xi.

⁵⁵ It is worth noting that, for reasons unclear, Merleau-Ponty chose not to have his name appear alongside Sartre's on the journal's masthead. In the introduction to Merleau-Ponty's *Sense and Non-Sense* (1964), the translators recall that, at the time, Sartre believed this was an "escape-hatch" set-up by Merleau-Ponty in case the journal's political or philosophical direction took a compromising turn, which indeed it did in 1952, when Sartre began endorsing the French Communist Party. See Dreyfus and Dreyfus ixn1.

terms a "philosophy of ambiguity."⁵⁶ Taking from Husserl the methods by which to describe experience *itself* without resorting to epistemological assertions – phenomenology being, foremost, "a matter of describing, not explaining or analyzing" (*The Phenomenology of Perception*⁵⁷ ix) – and from Heidegger the notion that meaning is housed in experience, from our "being-in-the-world," Merleau-Ponty advances a phenomenology that takes *perception* to be the originating modality of consciousness, rejecting the Cartesian concept of a transcendental "I" (or ego) that passively observes experience from outside it. Like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty believes that there is no "essence" to human existence, no a priori *something* that sets-about perceiving or bringing meaning to the world before being situated in it⁵⁸ – "our existence," Merleau-Ponty conceded, "is too much locked up in the world to know itself at the moment when it plunges into the world" (qtd. in Kwant, "Merleau-Ponty" 382-383). Yet, unlike Sartre, who derives from this absence an ontology in nothingness, Merleau-Ponty insists that the cogito cannot be divorced from its perceptual constitution: if consciousness arises in pre-reflective perception, as Merleau-Ponty agrees with Sartre it does, then "The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence" ("The Primacy of Perception" 13). In turn – and herein lies the originality of Merleau-Ponty's thought – we are our perceptions, or

⁵⁶ In fact, Merleau-Ponty did not originate this descriptor, but came to adopt it after numerous writers applied it to his philosophy.

⁵⁷ Henceforth, *Phen of P*.

⁵⁸ This is, in large part, due to Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the Husserlian technique of eidetic reduction, which seeks to reduce phenomena to its barest components, distinguishing what is the true "essence" of the phenomena – that is, what it cannot exist without – from those elements that are only accidental. This reductive approach is, of course, classically applied to the thinking subject (the cogito), attempting to determine the "essence" of human existence by removing what is *not* consciousness from consciousness itself, something both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre deem impossible. Merleau-Ponty scholar Remy Kwant explains: "The pure essence does not exist. We have only provisional expressions of our coherent experience. There is no absolute vision of an essence transcending our experience. There is no absolute essence, no absolute vision of an essence" ("Merleau-Ponty's Criticism" 403).

rather, the *coherence* or *synthesis* of our perceptions, and we perceive via the faculty of a body inhered in a world perceived: "The perceiving mind," he famously states, "is an incarnated mind" ("An Unpublished Text" 3).

We are, then, embodied subjectivities, what Merleau-Ponty calls "body-subjects," navigating a phenomenal world that arises in experience, not *to be* experienced. This is an important distinction to make, for it delineates a world that exists in tandem with us, without brackets or phenomenological *epoché*.⁵⁹ On the existence of an objective, un-perceived world of things-in-themselves, Merleau-Ponty writes:

The perceived thing itself is paradoxical; it exists only in so far as someone can perceive it. I cannot even for an instant imagine an object in itself. As Berkeley said, if I attempt to imagine some place in the world which has never been seen, the very fact that I imagine it makes me present at that place. I thus cannot conceive a perceptible place in which I am not myself present. ("The Primacy of Perception" 16).⁶⁰

For Merleau-Ponty, the world is the "totality of perceptible things and the thing of all things" (16), an inexhaustible field of possible perceptions. It is also inherently ambiguous and nonsensical, not because we lack the ability to fully comprehend it (which we *do* lack), but because we are "caught up" in it as such (*Phen of P* 5); that is, we are primordially interwoven with a world that *is* ambiguous and nonsensical, and know no other. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a cube to demonstrate. He explains that our belief in a cube as a geometrical, six-sided object is a fiction, since we only ever perceive sides of a cube, never *the* cube. The

⁵⁹ *Epoché* is a Greek term that Husserl uses to describe the act of suspending judgment about an external world in order to concentrate on the appearance of phenomena without prejudice.

⁶⁰ And elsewhere: "We must not...wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phen of P* xviii).

unwarranted prejudice is that the cube exists as a determinate object in-itself, and while it remains static, our perception of it changes as we rotate or move around it. But this, of course, assumes that the cube exists independent of our investigation of it – that we cannot apprehend the cube *as it really is* due to the perceptual shortcomings of the body. As Dreyfus and Dreyfus note, "The basic task of phenomenology is to overcome this '*préjugé du monde*' by describing the way experience *develops* . . . It makes us aware that our experience is always meaningful yet always menaced by disorder and non-sense" (emphasis in orig., xiii). Phenomenology asks that we give up the conviction that the cube is, by nature, a geometrical, six-sided object that gives rise to our (deficient) perceptions of it, and instead, accept it as a positively indeterminate object that arises *only* in experience, *as* we experience it. Central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, then, is the recognition that "the indeterminate [is] a positive phenomena" of embodied experience (*Phen of P* 7).

This extends to the ambiguous alterity of human consciousness as well: we are, on the one hand, necessarily *other* than the world – we are body-subjects "directed" at the world from within it – yet on the other, irreducible acts of perception that are engendered by and indivisible from the world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "Our body is both an object among object and that which sees and touches them" (qtd. in Dreyfus and Dregfus xii). How, then, do we differentiate ourselves from the world that we discover only through ourselves? Sartre, we may recall, evades this conflation by predicating consciousness *on* existence, locating the "being-for-itself" in the void that spontaneously gives rise to our awareness of the world – hence the ontological freedom of human existence. But Merleau-Ponty rejects this two-tier schema of being, refusing to go beyond consciousness' incarnation in the body – and thus, refusing to go beyond the world, of

which we are perpetually in-contact – to find a self outside things.⁶¹ Rather than being problematic, however, this "ambiguous relation which we entertain with our body and, correlatively, with perceived things" is, for Merleau-Ponty, merely a concrete facet of human reality ("An Unpublished Text" 4). Consciousness and the world, he admits, "are mysterious, but their mystery defines them: there can be no question of dispelling it by some 'solution'" (*Phen of P* xxiii). In turn, though Merleau-Ponty does not subscribe to Sartre's *absolute* freedom of human existence, the ambiguous state of our being-in-the-world without predetermination or essence opens us up to the same kind of liberty and culpability of action promoted by Sartre. "Existence before essence," then, acts as the common ground for their shared existentialism, and the humanist lens for *Les Temps modernes'* wide-reach into politics, culture, and the arts.

In a 1973 article for *Film Comment*, Dudley Andrew attends to the then-routine claims to naïve realism Bazin supposedly espoused. Singling out Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as the framework for Bazin's particular address of the "real," Andrew writes (and here it is worth quoting at length):

Bazin would be obliged to say that the real exists only as perceived, that situations can be said to exist only when a consciousness is engaged with something other than itself. In this view reality is not a completed sphere the mind encounters, but an 'emerging-something' which the mind essentially participates in. Here the notion of ambiguity . . . is more than a result of human limitation. Here ambiguity is a central attribute to the real. For . . . Merleau-Ponty, there can be no complete knowledge of a situation, but instead a more and more sensitive response to the mysterious otherness which consciousness

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty here abides by the principal of Ockham's razor, whereby in explaining a phenomenon, expository entities should remain limited by necessity. In the case of Sartre's "being-for-itself," the ontological necessity of existence outside consciousness is, for Merleau-Ponty, unnecessarily redundant, and therefore, excised.

engages. Thus ambiguity becomes a value, a measure of the depths of the real. ("Critics"
64)

For Andrew, this receipt of ambiguity as an ontological value of reality is critical in understanding the philosophical dimension of Bazin's realism and, consequently, the rationale for his well-known lauding of Italian Neorealism, which for Bazin "tends to give back to cinema a sense of the *ambiguity* of reality" (emphasis added, *WC* 37). Once again, we return to the major essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" to direct our discussion, Bazin having considered Italian Neorealism alongside Welles' *Citizen Kane* as a seismic turn in filmic realism in the 1940s, following the lineage of "good faith" evinced by the realists of the silent era (which, besides Murnau and Flaherty, also includes Erich von Stroheim and Carl Theodore Dreyer), and the "glorious and retrospectively prophetic" cinema of Renoir from the 1930s (38). Still framed then, by the outlook that existentialism informs (if not wholly directs) Bazin's conception of realism for film art, an overview of his critical appraisal of Italian Neorealism⁶² allows us to now consider the necessary embodiment of the image in achieving an aesthetic of reality *perceived*, a position both Andrew and I agree is profoundly influenced by Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity.

⁶² I should note that, for the remaining thesis, I capitalize as proper nouns "Neorealism" and "Neorealist" so as to indicate my referring to the historical Italian film movement and its directors, and not a generalized style, socio-political approach, or genre. This will, I hope, keep Neorealism within the era and context of Bazin's original reception of it. For a consideration of "neorealism" as a continued, global practice in cinema, see Giovacchini and Sklar.

4.1 Phenomenology as a Realism

At the close of "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," having placed substantial emphasis on Welles and the spectatorial freedom encouraged by depth-of-focus cinematography, Bazin shifts his focus to contemporary Italian cinema, which, he argues, "aim[s] at the same results by different methods" (*WC* 37). *Citizen Kane*, he holds, is merely an ideal marker for "a vast stirring of the geological bed of cinema" taking place during the decade, to which the Italian cinema of the immediate postwar period plays a crucial – if not *the* most crucial – part (37).⁶³ He identifies two directors in particular who, despite their differing styles from Welles, share with him the determination to "do away with montage and transfer to the screen the *continuum* of reality" (emphasis in orig., 37): Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica. These filmmakers, of course, are of considerable note, since together with screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, they became the preeminent spokesmen for Italian *neorealismo*, a term coined by critic Antonio Pietrangeli in 1942 but which came to signify the postwar movement that unofficially commenced with Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* / *Rome, Open City* in 1945, and that garnered international recognition, in part, due to Bazin's ardent praise of their collective pursuit. Though Bazin writes at length about its numerous contributors – indeed, the anthology *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (2011) is dedicated to just that – for brevity's sake, we will focus only on Rossellini and De Sica's involvement in, and awareness of, the movement they helped cement, for Bazin's

⁶³ He also includes here the turn to realism in Britain's Grierson-led documentary movement of the 1940s: "Already we were beginning to look toward England whose recent cinematic rebirth is likewise, in part, the fruit of realism: that of the school of documentarists who, before and during the war, had gone deeply into the resources offered by social and technical realities" (*WC* 48).

commentary on their work best exemplifies the existential-phenomenological dimension we wish to explore.⁶⁴

In a review for De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), viewed by many to be the film that concluded the historical movement,⁶⁵ Bazin refers to Italian Neorealism as the "invisible avant-garde" of the era ("Umberto D" 181). This is an apt description, for it recognizes the movement as a profoundly modernist cinema that, paradoxically, fulfills its aesthetic ambitions by effacing its artistic form, hiding its style *within* the philosophical directive that shapes it: "We were maintaining a moral position," Rossellini states, "more than a style" (qtd. in Gray 14).⁶⁶ A cinematic revolt against the studio-set, Cinecittà films of the Mussolini era (known colloquially as "white telephone" films due to the ever-presence of telephones in their opulent *mise-en-scène*, symbolizing the upper-class status of the characters), the Italian Neorealists were determined to bring social reality to the screen, locating narrative in the everyday lives of Italy's marginalized underclass struggling to exist in an indifferent, secular world – an existentialist worldview wholly acknowledged by Bazin when he remarks (in a particularly Sartrean tone): "The drama lies in this: God does not exist, the last office in the castle is empty" (*WC2* 73). Though not without inconsistency, this approach is typified by the use of non-professional actors, on-location filming, duration shots, and contemporary settings that foreground the socio-economic impact of

⁶⁴ Italian Neorealist Luchino Visconti is the notable figure absent from our discussion, mostly because Bazin's praise of his work, especially his use of depth-of-focus cinematography in *La terra trema / The Earth Trembles* (1948), retreads territory already covered in our survey of Welles' contribution to realism. See *WC2* 40-45.

⁶⁵ There are numerous reasons for the demise of Italian Neorealism in the early 1950s. Among them, the intervention of a new conservative government that regarded the movement as a pessimistic cinema that portrayed the rehabilitating nation in a negative light, resulting in the loss of funding and export for films of that ilk; and a societal shift following the nation's newfound economic stability that found the working class no longer rallying behind the social thesis advanced in Neorealist cinema. See Cardullo, "What is Neorealism?" 25-27.

⁶⁶ And of his own practice in particular: "It is primarily from a moral viewpoint that I look at the world, only later does it become an aesthetic viewpoint" (Rossellini qtd. in Gray 14).

wartime and postwar Italy on the protagonist(s). Events tend to unfold organically without dramatic formalities or contrivances, and quotidian, seemingly "irrelevant" actions – like the famous scene in *Umberto D* when the maid prepares coffee – are "reported to us with meticulous temporal continuity" (Bazin, *IN* 119), the grandeur of cinematic spectacle bestowed upon the banalities of daily life.

Perhaps the best example of these principles at play is in De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* / *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), the story of a poor father and son searching in vain for a stolen bicycle, the father's sole form of employment in an impoverished, postwar Rome. Shot entirely on-location with non-actors (the father, a factory worker; the child, a flower merchant), the film eschews more extravagant, plot-driven events in favour of subtler, more credible-to-life ones that seemingly develop outside the action, or indeed, in spite of it: Bruno (the son), whilst in mid-chase, suddenly has to pee, so he does; rainfall forces Antonio (the father) and Bruno to seek shelter, so we wait in real-time for it to subside. "Nothing happens," Bazin argues, "that might just as well not have happened" (*WC2* 68). Discussing the virtues of this kind of realism in his enthusiastic 1949 review, he writes:

It takes care not to cheat on reality, not only by contriving to give the succession of events the appearance of an accidental and as it were anecdotal chronology but in treating each of them according to its *phenomenological* integrity. . . . The events are not necessarily signs of something, of a truth of which we are to be convinced, they all carry their own weight, their complete uniqueness, that *ambiguity* that characterizes any fact. (emphases added, 51-52)

The employment of "phenomenological" and "ambiguity" here to describe the way De Sica upholds reality in the film is, for obvious reasons, of especial importance for us, their coupling

acting as a virtual flag for Merleau-Ponty's unique strain of philosophy in use. In fact, it is not uncommon for Bazin to employ either term in relation to Italian Neorealism, the most forthright being his declaration in "De Sica: Metteur en Scène" (1952) that "Neorealism knows only immanence. It is from appearance only, the simple appearance of beings and of the world, that it knows how to deduce the ideas that it unearths. It is a phenomenology" (64-65). Elsewhere, he clarifies this usage: "we shall call 'phenomenological' realism which never 'adjusts' reality to meet the needs imposed by psychology or drama. The relation between meaning and appearances having been in a sense inverted, appearance is always presented as a unique discovery, an almost documentary revelation that retains the full force of vividness and detail" (87).

Lest we stray too far from matters of aestheticism, it is worth noting here that Bazin's description of "phenomenological" already *implies* a kind of realism (albeit not realism itself), making redundant the need for "phenomenological realism" to be specified in text. This semantic detail is, I believe, crucial in keeping our discussion of phenomenology aesthetically-based, as something the filmmaker does *to* the image, rather than something the image does of its own accord or in lieu of artistic mediation. For if realism is an artistic expression of faith in human reality, then phenomenology, as a kind of realism (a *neorealism*), remains aesthetic even as it seeks forms of "self-effacement before reality" (*WC* 29).⁶⁷ This is why, in his commentary on De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, Bazin writes that:

Though [the] *mise-en-scène* aims at negating itself . . . it would be naïve to conclude that it does not exist. Few films have been more carefully put together, more pondered over, more meticulously elaborated, but all this labor by De Sica tend to give the illusion of

⁶⁷ Acknowledging the paradox of a style *without* style, Bazin notes that Neorealism's verisimilitude results from "an ever-present although invisible system of aesthetics" (*WC* 58).

chance, to result in giving dramatic necessity the character of something contingent.
(WC2 68)⁶⁸

It is, thus, not by eschewing or abstaining from aesthetics that a cinematic phenomenology is made possible (and I labour this point because Bazin, on occasion, gives the impression that it is); on the contrary, it is an aesthetic that conceals its style *as its style* in order to achieve a filmic reality that emerges from the phenomenological sphere of "appearance only, the simple appearance of beings and of the world."

It is also worth noting that, in his description of "phenomenological," Bazin makes explicit the Sartre-like inversion of essence ("meaning") and existence ("appearance") that has, thus far, framed Bazin's wider-concept of realism in film art. This points to an appropriation of phenomenology that is, necessarily, of an *existentialist* ilk, something already suggested by his empathic use of "ambiguity" in characterizing the integrity of Neorealism's "facts." He elaborates on this overarching precept in his review of Rossellini's *Paisá / Paisan* (1946),⁶⁹ when, discussing his preference for the self-coined term "image-fact" over "shot" in describing the aesthetic makeup of Rossellini's realism, he explains that its usage denotes "a fragment of reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity, whose meaning emerges

⁶⁸ Elsewhere, Bazin qualifies the "disappearance of the set" in *Bicycle Thieves* by adding that "De Sica's film took a long time to prepare, and everything was as minutely planned as for a studio superproduction" (WC2 57).

⁶⁹ The second installment in Rossellini's so-called war trilogy (*Rome, Open City* being the first; *Germania, anno zero / Germany, Year Zero* [1948], the last), *Paisan* is an omnibus film comprised of six isolated episodes set during the Allied campaign in Italy at the close of the war, with each episode written by a different screenwriter (Rossellini himself being one), tackling different aspects of day-to-day life under the duress of Occupation: xenophobia, prostitution, beggary, partisanship, faith, among others. In the essay "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism" (1948), Bazin labels the film one of the two most significant events in the history of cinematic realism since 1940 (the other, not surprisingly, being *Citizen Kane*). See WC2 16-40.

only after the facts, thanks to the imposed facts between which the mind establishes certain relationships" (*WC2* 37).⁷⁰

I bring this to attention in order to emphasize that though Neorealism's phenomenology may, on first pass, seem incongruous with Welles' more opulent, studio-bound *mise-en-scène* and depth-of-focus cinematography, for Bazin they both share an evolutionary-like role in the development of realism because they both call for the same kind of spectatorial agency fostered by the image *sans* ideology: it is the viewer's *mind* that cultivates meaning from and between image-facts, just as the viewer's *mind* determines what to address in the image in-depth.⁷¹ The difference, however, is in the way Neorealism's image-facts move centrifugally outward to inform narrative – indeed, to "make the narrative possible" (*WC2* 37) – something Welles' cinematographical realism remains cordoned from.⁷² Since each image-fact is, according to Bazin, "just a fragment of reality existing before any meaning" (again, existence *before* essence), the sequencing of these images in the formation of scenes and, consequently, in the formation of the film itself, upholds the same density and ambiguity of fact afforded the solitary image (37). That is why Bazin contends that Rossellini and De Sica's stylistic technique "is almost completely identical with their narrative technique" (31), the sense of "contingency" in their stories being a natural corollary of the phenomenology achieved, first, in their aesthetic. In other

⁷⁰ Although *Paisan* is the film that Bazin singles out to introduce the concept of the "image-fact," he does mention that, though exemplary in *Paisan*, it applies to varying degrees to all Neorealist films (*WC2* 38). In his review of Visconti's *La Terra Trema* / *The Earth Trembles* (1948), for instance, Bazin is hesitant in using the term "shots" to describe Visconti's unusually long takes, questioning whether "one is justified in retaining the term" (*WC2* 43).

⁷¹ This is in keeping with Bazin's general view of realism as a resultant end rather than a particular set of means. In his 1949 review of Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero*, he provides the following definition of realism for film art: "to force the mind to draw its own conclusions about people and events, instead of manipulating it into accepting someone else's interpretation" (*IN* 60).

⁷² Bazin notes that Welles' cinematographical realism calls for a complexity of technique that, as a result, rules out the naturalism of Neorealism's documentary-like approach. See *WC2* 27-30.

words, the primacy of appearance that typifies Neorealism's images is representative of the ensuing drama told with those images, giving, in the case of De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, the impression of "events observed haphazardly as the hours roll by," or even, "the disappearance of a story" (58). In turn, Bazin writes of the spectatorial freedom encouraged by Neorealism's "invisible" style as being near synonymous with the freedom encouraged by its "invisible" narrative. Again, the exemplarity of *Bicycle Thieves* proves useful: "The marvelous aesthetic paradox of the film," Bazin argues, "is that it has the relentless quality of tragedy while nothing happens in it except by chance . . . Not one gesture, not one incident, not a single object in the film is given a priori significance derived from the ideology of the director" (68). And further, in regards to its socioeconomic setting without polemics: "events and people are never introduced in support of a social thesis – but the thesis emerges fully armed and all the more irrefutable because it is presented to us as something thrown into the bargain. It is our intelligence that discerns and shapes it, not the film" (52-53).

We find, then, that just as Welles' depth-of-focus cinematography motivates the viewer to make personal choices in discerning what to attend to in the image – all grounds of the image being in-focus and, thus, open to alternative vantages – Italian Neorealism, by achieving the impression of dramatic contingency through its assemblage of image-facts, motivates the viewer to bring his or her own ideology to the images *a posteriori*, to find the "social thesis" that the film does not explicitly state. If *Bicycle Thieves* "unfolds on the level of pure accident" (WC2 59), as Bazin argues it does, then the onus is on the viewer to determine why these accidents occur, and what *meaning* can be drawn from them. Yet, let us not diminish their significant differences either: though Bazin discovers in Welles and the Neorealists a shared, evolutionary-like advancement in realism's guiding, *existentialist* principles – namely, the precedence of

appearance over meaning and the agency this imparts to the viewer – Welles' expression of faith is unquestionably *not* the Neorealists'; that is, though they may subscribe to the same faith in human reality (an inter-subjective, lived reality), the methods by which they make their faith *known* differ markedly. Welles' realism, for instance, is dedicated to the perceptual structuring of the image in a realistic way, but remains divorced from its contents and narrative form,⁷³ while the Neorealists' phenomenology achieves a more holistic form of realism that envelopes both style and story into a singular *film-fact* (so-to-speak), but remains aesthetically curbed due to scarcity of funds and equipment.⁷⁴

It is advantageous, thus, to speak of multiple *realisms* in film art that do different things, rather than a singular *realism* that all realists partake in, but in distinct ways. Commenting on this very notion in his aptly titled, "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism" (1948), Bazin argues that, given the parameters of cinema as a representation art form unable, of course, to represent the multifarious nature of human reality in its entirety, directors wishing to achieve some degree of

⁷³ Apropos of this, in the new translation of "An Evolution in the Language of Cinema" offered by Timothy Barnard for the 2009 Caboose edition of *What is Cinema?* (here translated as "An Evolution in Film Language"), Barnard clears up an otherwise difficult passage translated thusly by Hugh Gray: "That depth of focus brings the spectator in closer relation with the image than he is with the reality. Therefore it is correct to say that, independent of the contents of the image, that its structure is more realistic" (*WC* 35). The obvious question is: why would depth-of-focus' structure be more realistic if it provides the spectator with a closer proximity to the *image* than he or she is with reality? Would not the structure be less realistic? Here, now, is Barnard's translation: "Depth of field creates a relationship between the viewer and the image which is closer to the viewer's relationship with reality. It is thus accurate to say that its structure is more realistic, whatever the contents of the image itself" (Caboose's *WC* 101). This clarification helps remedy the view that, despite Bazin acknowledging in Welles' *mise-en-scène* an "over-fondness for the baroque" (*WC* 34), his use of depth-of-focus enables the viewer to experience the diegesis in a realistic way, regardless of whether or not the diegesis *is* realistic.

⁷⁴ Direct, on-location sound recording, for instance, was not an option for the Neorealists in postwar Italy, and Bazin admits that, as a result, some level of realism is compromised in their cinema. However, the mobility this affords the camera, uninhibited by microphones and cords, allows the "field of vision" to grow and, in turn, take in more of the realistic, profilmic world. Bazin calls this loss-and-gain effect the "reality coefficient" (*WC* 2 30).

realism in the image must inevitably "choose between one kind of reality and another" (WC2 29), one *aspect* of reality to uphold mimetically. For Robert Flaherty, we may recall, it was his treatment of time; for F.W. Murnau, his treatment of space. In turn, we locate throughout Bazin's writing the view that realism is a "spectrum" (30), a range of means capable of bringing "added measure[s] of reality to the screen" (27), apropos of the artist's aim. Certainly his most explicit comment regarding this appears in the essay "William Wyler, or the Jansenist of *mise en scene*," writing: "There is not one but several realisms. Each era looks for its own, that is to say the technique and the aesthetic which can best capture it, arrest and restore whatever one wishes to capture of reality" ("William Wyler" 41).

Though I do not believe Bazin intends to actually preclude multiple realisms from coexisting in a single era – how could he without risking conflating the realisms of, say, the interwar period into one – the view that realism can be a historicized, epochal marker does bear relevance to Italian Neorealism as a film movement inextricably bound to a particular time and place: the aftermath of the Second World War in Italy. Indeed, Bazin remarks that in 1948 Italy, "the war is felt to be not an interlude but an end of an era," and that the postwar era has, in essence, started the country anew: "In one sense," he writes, "Italy is only three years old" (WC2 20).⁷⁵

⁷⁵ WW2 is, of course, the same historical rupture that enabled the "time-image" to come to full fruition in philosopher Gilles Deleuze's similarly twofold account of film history. Indeed, in the opening sentences of *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985), Deleuze credits Bazin with identifying a new kind of image – what Bazin calls the "fact-image [*sic*]" – emerging in Italian Neorealism, the first cinema emblematic of the new era (1). Moreover, Deleuze's *auteurs* of the time-image clearly follow the lineage of Bazin's *auteurs* of realism, most patently Renoir and Welles, whose cinema presages the "pure optical situations" that transpire after the crisis of the "movement-image" (2). I should note, however, that Deleuze's history is, like Bazin's, less a chronology than a bifurcation, with the time-image and the movement-image existing simultaneously but to varying degrees, as with Bazin's division of "faiths."

I would argue, then, that Neorealism's phenomenology presents Bazin with *the* new realism for a new era, a realism capable of "capturing" Italy's everyday social realities by upholding its everyday appearance in the image; that is to say, the appearance of beings and the world *as they are*, which is always historically fixed and subjectivity conditioned. This is why Bazin can assert that postwar Italian cinema is "first and foremost reconstituted reportage," that its action "could not unfold in just any social context, historically neutral," because its action depends upon a realism that is, itself, indebted to the present-day social realities it wishes to reveal – hence the illusory negation of its *mise-en-scène*, its dramatic structure, etcetera (WC2 20). "As a result," Bazin explains, "the Italian films have an exceptionally documentary quality that could not be removed from the script without thereby eliminating the whole social setting into which its roots are so deeply sunk" (20), its social setting being *the* subject towards which its realism is directed, that aspect of reality that occupies the artists' attention.⁷⁶ He writes:

If one does indeed consider neorealism . . . as a conversion of life into cinema – a way that the filmmaker has, no longer to imagine stories in the margins of everyday reality, but rather to throw light on that reality, to illuminate it from within in order to make of it an object to witness and to love – cinema, just like life, could exist only in the present tense of the indicative. Italian films (neorealist ones at least) thus never use the flashbacks that flourish in American, English, and French movies. (IN 142)

See Deleuze 1-24. For a recent consideration of Bazin and Deleuze's points of parallel on Italian Neorealism, see Horton.

⁷⁶ Film scholar John J. Michalczyk argues that, as a foremost sociopolitical film movement, "the purpose of the neorealists in filmmaking was *to witness* the ills of society and then *to state* them before the public in order to raise their consciousness" (emphases in orig., 14). It is as a reliable witness, then, that Neorealism fulfills its aesthetic promise. See Michalczyk 13-18.

Phenomenology, then, is a realism of the *now*. And though this need not bind it to the era of its inception – one can imagine, for instance, its "invisible" aesthetic applied to different social milieus in different present-tenses – Italian Neorealism, for one, could not exist without it. To reiterate one of Bazin's strongest proclamations: *it is a phenomenology*.

4.2 The Embodied Image

"Reconstituted *reportage*;" "exceptionally *documentary* quality:" while Bazin employs these labels largely to promote the testimonial candor of Neorealism's phenomenology – a realism that is, for this reason, always contemporaneous to the era that exercises it – it also draws attention to phenomenology as an aesthetic concerned not only with appearance, but with *observation* as well; that is, not only with the appearance of things *in* the image, but simultaneously with the image *as* observer of things.⁷⁷ As a fiction-based cinema courting non-fiction image-making practices, Neorealism's "air of documentary" (*WC2* 32), according to Bazin, underscores the human presence necessary for phenomenology's effectiveness as a realism dedicated to the world *perceived*. He writes: "The Italian camera retains something of the human quality of the . . . newsreel camera, a projection of hand and eye, almost a living part of the operator, instantly in tune with his awareness" (33). This human vantage, in which "everything is shot from eye-level or from a concrete point of view, such as a roof top or window" (33), enables the viewer to not

⁷⁷ For instance, in discussing the Florentine-set episode of Rossellini's *Paisan*, in which an American nurse (Harriet) ventures into a German-occupied war zone in search of her partisan fiancé (Lupo), Bazin describes the way the camera simply follows her, "as if making an impartial report" (*WC2* 37); and in his appraisal of De Sica's *Umberto D*, a film that exhibits "complete fidelity to the aesthetics of neorealism" (Bazin, *IN* 112), he remarks: "We are dealing here with a 'cinematographical 'report,' a disconcerting and irrefutable observation of the human condition" (113).

only access the profilmic word visually – indeed, any vantage would do this – but bear witness to it in a first-person manner; in fact, our very understanding of "image-facts" is contingent upon this human quality already being in effect, since the life-like resemblance of things in the image can only be life-like if depicted from the perspective of a resolutely human subject, our perspective being the *only* perspective from which the world is made present.

We return, then, to the concept that initiated our inquiry into existential phenomenology and its influence on Bazin's receipt of Italian Neorealism: that in order for realism(s) to be existentialist in nature, the image must in some way surrogate for the perceptual subject. As we have just acknowledged, Bazin's aestheticization of phenomenology makes plain this "human quality" by likening the cinematic apparatus to an extension of the living body, resulting in images that not only see what we do, but see *as* we do. Moreover, having spent some time mapping the ways in which Neorealism converges with and diverges from our existing notions of realism in film art, it is clear that, although unlike what came before it, Bazin's appropriation of phenomenology *is* existentialist – at least, insofar as we have enabled appearance before meaning and spectatorial freedom to dictate this. Any doubts as to this import can, I believe, be put to rest by the following passage: "In truth, and it is a fortunate one, neorealism's existence has preceded its essence, as it were" (Bazin, *IN* 187).⁷⁸ Phenomenology, then, provides us with the most cogent example of the embodiment of the image that *all* Bazin's realisms must partake in, vast though their kinds may be.

⁷⁸ This quote appears in the late-career essay "Neorealism Returns: *Love in the City*" (1957). Here, Bazin is addressing the so-called "neorealist dogma," largely perpetuated by critics like himself, that continually equate Neorealism with a well-worn set of characteristics or criteria. The multi-directed, experimental omnibus *L'amore in città* / *Love in the City* (Antonioni, Fellini, Zavattini, et al., 1953) challenges this notion by owing its successes to the ways it deviates from these norms; hence Bazin's Sartrean assertion that, thankfully, Neorealism's existence preceded its essence. See *IN* 187-191.

However, what is most fascinating about this concept – a concept that is, to reiterate, absolutely pivotal if we are to maintain Bazin's subscription to a reality alike those of his *Les Temps modernes* colleagues – is that it is *not*, in fact, Bazin's.

In a lecture entitled "The Film and the New Psychology" given in March of 1945 at l'Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (IDHEC), Maurice Merleau-Ponty addresses (for what appears to be the first and only documented time) the unique analogousness that exists between the cinematic image and the embodied subject. He posits that, since cinema is a perceived object that is, itself, perceptual, it shares with us a kind of duality of perception that is "particularly suited to make manifest the union of the body and mind, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other" (*Sense and Nonsense*⁷⁹ 58): it presents us with minds *as* bodies (both perceived and perceiving) that coexist in a diegetic world of things that they are in perpetual contact with. Films can be philosophically meaningful, he argues, because they have the capacity to remind us of our "special way of being in the world" (58), and it is *because* they are perceptual that we inherently understand them, since they are exemplary of a way we too perceive (unlike, for instance, the novel, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, gives us only thoughts).

Existential phenomenology, then, is especially suited to cinema – it is, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "movie material *par excellence*" (emphasis in orig., *SN* 59). But, while Merleau-Ponty admits to what is a "basic realism" (57) in cinema derived from its subject-like state of perception, he believes that it requires an artist – and "aesthetician," in his terms (54) – to realize its phenomenological potential, to share with the contemporary philosopher a particular subscription to human reality *in* the image, aesthetically. He contends that, for a film to achieve

⁷⁹ Henceforth, *SN*.

this (or at least, to share a compatible viewpoint with the philosopher), "actors should be natural, [and] the sets should be as realistic as possible" (57); and that, rather than portraying the so-called interior landscapes of a character – by, for instance, trying to represent his or her mental states onscreen – a film should present the conduct or behaviour by which those states manifest publicly.⁸⁰ For if, according to Merleau-Ponty, we are embodied subjectivities made available to others through our visible bodies, then we are expressive subjectivities that articulate emotions *on* the body, as *acts* of emotion. This is in keeping with the then recent findings in Gestalt psychology (the "New Psychology" of the lecture's title) that discover in introspection "almost nothing" in regards to what emotions are (52). He writes:

We must reject that prejudice which makes 'inner realities' out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. [These emotions] are not physic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist *on* this face or *in* those gestures, not hidden behind them. (emphases in orig., 52-53)

Thus, to be in service to a perceptual reality alike our own, the aesthete should present us with characters that we come to know as do we people in life: through the "sign language of gesture and gaze" (58), those bodily attitudes and actions that, in a very existentialist sense, define oneself in (and of) the world.

⁸⁰ Merleau-Ponty here gives the example of a character in a film that is meant to be dizzy. He argues that, rather than portraying the inner landscape of the character by, for instance, trying to make the viewer *experience* their dizziness – one could imagine the image shifting in and out of focus, or being off kilter – the director should simply show the character dizzy; that is to say, the *behaviour* that is one's dizziness: "We will get a much better sense of dizziness if we see it from the outside" (Merleau-Ponty, *SN* 58).

What we have, then, is Merleau-Ponty's *criteria* for an existential phenomenology in film art, the means by which the philosophically-minded artist can harness cinema's perceptual faculties and make visible onscreen the world and others perceived; that is, as they are *as* perceived things. Though Merleau-Ponty acknowledges what is a basic, ontological realism in cinema owing to the medium's native perceptuality – "perception permits us to understand the meaning of cinema," he notes (*SN* 58) – it is the will of the artist that dictates whether or not this realism will *flourish in the film itself*, by the way he or she conducts the image. Hence the preference for naturalistic acting, "realistic" *mise-en-scène*, characters as behavioural bodies: all facets that evince in the director's aesthetic an upholding of reality made possible by our perspective bodies.

But there is an important caveat that still needs to be addressed, for although Merleau-Ponty observes in the medium a perceptual state analogous to our own – we are both, recall, objects *to be* perceived and objects that *do* perceive – the conditions of our object-ification are crucially different: while we can see perceiving bodies but not their perceptions, the object of the cinematic image *is* its perceptions; that is, we see as its body the visible and visual perspective it adopts. What this means – and herein lies, I believe, the philosophical cachet for Merleau-Ponty – is that the image has the unique ability to present us with a perceptual point-of-view that is not our own, a way of perceiving via another body's perceptions; essentially, access to that which we *cannot* access in the Other. If existential phenomenology is, according to Merleau-Ponty, "an attempt to make us *see* the bond between the subject and the world, between subject and others, rather than to *explain* it as the classical philosophies did by resorting to absolute spirit"⁸¹ (emphasis in orig., 58), then cinema has the privileged ability to literally *show us* this bond by

⁸¹ By "absolute spirit," Merleau-Ponty is referring to the transcendental ego resulting from Cartesian dualism, whereby the mind exists (and therefore, can be explained) as something distinct from the body.

enabling the image to surrogate for the perceptual subject, making manifest our embodied condition by expressing *as its experience* the image's perceptual engagement with a diegetic world and others in it.

Vivian Sobchack, perhaps the most well known scholar engaging with Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology and its applications for cinema, articulates this situation best in the following two passages from her seminal *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992):

More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflectively felt and understood . . . Cinema thus transposes, without completely transforming, those modes of being alive and consciously embodied in the world that count for each of us as *direct* experience. (emphasis in orig., 3-4)⁸²

And further:

As a communicative system . . . what is called the 'film experience' uniquely opens up and exposes the inhabited space of direct experience as a condition of singular embodiment and makes it accessible and visible to more than the single consciousness who lives it. (9)

For Sobchack, this transposition of perceptual modes – what she calls the "modes of embodied existence" (4) – affords cinema with an already *embodied* state of being: it is, as we are, a gestalt

⁸² Alternatively, Sobchack calls this reversibility of perception cinema's "viewing view," which recognizes cinema's act of viewing as itself a viewable act. This concept steers her article "The Active Eye: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Vision" (1990), an excellent primer for her thought.

of visual, aural, and kinetic experience, only "turned inside out and towards us as expression" (12).⁸³ In this way, regardless of what is communicated in (or *on*) the image, cinema's mutuality with the body-subject makes it phenomenological *tout court*, by virtue of its very ontology.

But Merleau-Ponty's lecture emphasizes (as I too have emphasized in my account) that there are, rather, ways of making cinema phenomenological, that the potential lies in the hands of the philosophically adroit "aesthetician" to recognize and, thus, utilize the medium's capacity to *bring us to awareness* to the embodied state of our being, and the world and others in it. Though cinema may share with us the structural basis for experience – that is, those perceptual modes through which we both encounter and constitute the world – Merleau-Ponty would contest that this alone cannot entail cinema's phenomenological register, nor indeed its embodiment, because it is the perceptions *themselves* that we must take heed of. For just as our ability to perceive is inseparable from what it is we perceive – we cannot somehow bracket experience from the contents of our experience, lest we resort to a Husserlian *epoché* that Merleau-Ponty explicitly denies – what it *is* cinema perceives has to make a difference if cinema is to perceive like us. This is why for Merleau-Ponty cinema must be "taken up by an artistic will and, as it were, re-invented before one can succeed in making real films" (SN 59) – "real" being the operative word in distinguishing those films that experience-cum-express a diegetic world in the likeness of our own, a world to which the perceiving image is concretely situated (or *enworlded*) and in view of things and others as they are in, so to speak, "real" life. Only then can we be reminded of our "special way of being in the world." Only then can cinema be embodied.

⁸³ Sobchack writes: "Insofar as a film is revealed as a similar communicative system and performs similar ontological functions in constituting the experience of consciousness and the consciousness of experience, it can be said to be 'embodied'" (*Address* 162).

To put it otherwise: cinema cannot be phenomenological *in toto*, as Sobchack claims it to be, because cinema is for Merleau-Ponty "first and foremost a technical invention in which philosophy counts for nothing" (SN 59). It is, rather, a matter of the artist making cinema phenomenological by *facilitating* its embodiment, articulating a "realistic" diegesis that allows the image to substitute for our somatic point-of-access and make visible, via its *image-body*, a phenomenal world alike our own. This means the image is embodied only when the artist fashions it to be so: when the image perceives, is perceived, and participates in the film world in a human-like way – something, to reiterate, the image does not do of its own accord.

In a statement that anticipates Bazin's own regarding the epochal status of phenomenology in film art, Merleau-Ponty concludes his lecture by stating that, "if philosophy is in harmony with the cinema, if thought and technical effort are heading in the same direction, it is because the philosopher and moviemaker share a certain way of being, a certain view of the world which belongs to a generation" (WC2 59). Yet, I would concede that, while Merleau-Ponty observes this generational trend occurring in modern cinema in general (this being, notably, the decade of realism's evolution for Bazin), it is in the films of the Italian Neorealists that Bazin discovers the heights of this philosophical harmony for himself, the cinema to which he equates "phenomenology" itself.

4.3 The Artist as Creator of the Image as Witness

In Annette Michelson's exceptional 1968 book review of *What is Cinema?* for *Artforum*, she posits that, given the profound similarities between Bazin's philosophical notions of realism and Merleau-Ponty's, it is likely that Bazin attended (or at least, acquired notes from) Merleau-

Ponty's 1945 lecture on cinema at the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC).⁸⁴

She argues that, while much of Bazin's writing exhibits a Sartrean existentialism developing more or less coextensively in France,⁸⁵ it is in Bazin's upholding of film as a correlative to perceptual consciousness that the influence of Merleau-Ponty is most assuredly felt. She writes: "In [Merleau-Ponty's] somewhat prescriptive view Bazin found support for his rejection of the aesthetic heresy, for his 'non-manipulative' cinema which, in its . . . projection of 'reality' seemed to allow for an isomorphic relation to the structure of consciousness itself" (27).⁸⁶

For Michelson, it was Bazin's desire for a "theoretical sanction" for his realism that brought him to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and, most markedly, his lecture on cinema (27).⁸⁷ It was there, she argues, that Bazin discovered the criteria for the "aesthete" to observe

⁸⁴ This is because "The Film and The New Psychology" was not published until the November 1947 issue of *Les Temps modernes* (and subsequently, the 1961 anthology *Sens et non-sens*). Michelson, however, observes the influence of the lecture on Bazin's theories prior to this. Indeed, Bazin's attendance at this lecture is near-certainly a fact. Dudley Andrew, for instance, remarks in the recently revised edition of *André Bazin* (2013) that in 1944, when the IDHEC relocated to Paris from Nice, Bazin was nominated as their first director of cultural services and "gave lectures and arranged for films and speakers, such as Merleau-Ponty who lectured there in March 1945" (75). This connection only magnifies Bazin's proximity to, and clear admiration for, the philosopher during his early career. It also reflects a growing interest in the intersection between Merleau-Ponty's thought and Bazin's in recent years, as this detail was either omitted or overlooked in Andrew's original publication.

⁸⁵ She admits that Bazin's indebtedness to Sartre is "immediately and almost everywhere apparent" (26). My own views on Sartre's influence are detailed in Chapter 2.

⁸⁶ By "artistic heresy," Michelson is pointing to Bazin's well-known rejection of expressionism, which "did every kind of violence to the image" by trying to represent abstract, inner states of reality (*WC* 26). This finds its counterpart in Merleau-Ponty's critical rejection of "interior landscapes" in cinema, which compromise the image's ability to perceive-cum-express the outward state of emotions as behaviour.

⁸⁷ This is because Bazin had already been writing about cinematic realism dating back as far as 1943 (see instance, "For a Realist Esthetic"). Thus, though it is not possible that the lecture influenced Bazin's bias for realism, it very well could have provided the philosophical foundations he was pursuing. This does not, I should note, discredit Andrew's view that Merleau-Ponty was influential to Bazin from his earliest days in academia, only that the lecture's particular intersections between film and phenomenology could not have been influential to Bazin's writing prior. One wonders if it was, perhaps, a reciprocal influence.

an "aesthetic or style in the knowledge that the style reflects the structure and dynamics of human consciousness itself" (27), the meeting of mind and manner that Merleau-Ponty deemed necessary for a modern philosophical cinema. Yet, she believes it was not until the emergence of Italian Neorealism in the latter half of the decade that Bazin witnessed the "apotheosis" of this form, "something far more than a style, [but] the privileged mode of *ontologically focused consciousness itself*" (emphases in orig., 24).

Though Michelson stops short of recognizing Bazin's need for realism's embodiment if it is to uphold a Merleau-Pontian ontology of consciousness – what is a fundamentally an *incarnated* consciousness – she is clearly but one step away. Indeed, Michelson skirts closest to this idea in her claim that for Bazin, the director fulfils his or her role as an artist by acting as *witness* to the (profilmic) events – the "Artist as Witness," as she puts it (25). This is, of course, the same idea that turned our attention to the human-centrism of the image in Bazin's receipt of Italian Neorealism, the cinema to which he first uses the term "phenomenology." But Michelson risks obscuring the fundamental artifice of this act by assuming that for Bazin, the "Artist as Witness" demands what she calls "the effacement of style, of the 'shadow' intervening between the eye and an Ultimate Spectacle" (25). As I have emphasized throughout this chapter, the "effacement of style" that typifies Bazin's phenomenology is wholly acknowledged by Bazin to be a style in itself, every bit as aesthetic as the expressionism he so openly opposed. If Michelson likens the artist's hand to an intervening "shadow" – which, I might add, presumably refers to Bazin's derogatory "shadow of the image" (*WC* 26) resulting from montage, *not* film aestheticism – then it is less a matter of removing the artist's shadow than casting it differently. I would alter this claim, then, by stating that for Bazin, as for Merleau-Ponty, the artist fulfills his or her role by being the "Artist as Creator of the Image as Witness," admittedly not as pithy but

far more accurate. This identifies not only the *sine qua non* of the artist in the image's creation, but the image itself as the experiential subject, as that which enables us to see what is being witnessed.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, Michelson's review is a compelling and, I believe, tenable account of Bazin's realism(s) by way of Merleau-Ponty's lecture – this despite being a rather unfavourable one.⁸⁹ Indeed, hers is the rare reading that acknowledges "realism" to be an artistic pursuit of perceptual consciousness in the likeness of our own, with Italian Neorealism situated at the evolutionary crest of the aesthetic. That she should use the term "consciousness" is especially telling, for it identifies what is an increasingly important and purposed term in Bazin's writing on Neorealism, much like "phenomenology" and "ambiguity" (to which we will turn our attention shortly). For instance, in a published letter addressed to the editor of *Cinema Nuovo*, an Italian film journal that, in the 1950s, notoriously criticized *neorealismo* of being a regressive film form, Bazin defends the movement by impressing upon its aesthetic a *human* significance,

⁸⁸ It may be contested that it is not the image that is the witness, but the *camera*, which is physically present at the (profilmic) event and records its happening. Thus, it should rightly be the "Camera as Witness," or even, the "Artist as Director of the Camera as Witness." However, we do not experience a camera when we watch a film; we experience an image. That is to say, our only knowledge of the camera's presence is derived from the image it produces, which, in our present study, is as a result of artistic design. If the director intends for us to observe an event as though witness to it ourselves, then it is via the image's expression of the event that this is made possible. Thus, we witness what it is the *image* is witnessing when watching a realistic film. This view is made all the more relevant in our contemporary digital age, when attributing the image to a particular "recording" device has become near impossible.

⁸⁹ She believes that Bazin's aspirations for an ontological cinema were too great, limiting cinema's wider possibilities and squelching the imperative of much of modernism in film art. She attributes this to his Christian piety, from the "strains involved in the accommodation of a religious sensibility to a secular culture" (21). Indeed, this is taken-up by many critics, though I believe it to be problematic, or adverse to his theories of realism, only if one takes his ontology to be in evidence of an *objective* reality, which I dismiss in Chapter 1.

writing that "Neorealism is a description of reality conceived of as whole by a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole" (*WC2* 97).⁹⁰

What is particularly telling in this definition is that, unlike Bazin's former description of Neorealism as a phenomenology of appearances – which implies but does not make explicit a "seeing" consciousness – here he puts the emphasis on consciousness itself, which, in the context of the realistic image, perceives-cum-expresses reality "as a whole" by retaining the spatio-temporal integrity of perceptual experience – what Bazin calls the *continuum* of reality. This is furthered by his definition elsewhere that "neorealism is more an ontological position than an aesthetic one" (66), an observation that does not discredit the aesthetics involved, but places primacy on the ontological "isomorphism" (to borrow one of Michelson's choice words) of the image's consciousness with our own. It also acts as a revealing alternative to Bazin's afore-quoted claim in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" that "neorealism is primarily a kind of humanism and only secondarily a style of film-making" (*WC* 29), making it clear that the "kind of humanism" Bazin refers to is concerned not only with human issues (social, political, etcetera) but, more essentially, human *being*, which the artist conveys by enabling the image to assume that being onscreen.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Although Bazin later speaks of the director's consciousness being the one that "filters" reality through the image, this is not at odds with the consciousness made manifest in the image itself. He writes: "[Neorealism] always presupposes an attitude of mind: it is always reality as it is visible through an artist, as refracted by his consciousness" (*WC2* 98).

⁹¹ In fact, in "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," Bazin states that humanism is Neorealism's "chief merit" (*WC2* 21). He expands on this idea in a footnote, clarifying that by "humanism" he means, not a collective view of humanity as a social force, which is rarely portrayed in a positive light (for instance, the angry mob safeguarding the epileptic thief in *Bicycle Thieves*), but a "certain consideration for the individual" (22n1). I take this to be true both of the Neorealist narrative, which typically follows the happenings of a single protagonist, and the Neorealist image, which presents a single point-of-access to the diegetic world.

Like Michelson, then, I believe that Italian Neorealism is "realistic" for Bazin by virtue of its symmetry with human consciousness, a concept traced back to Merleau-Ponty's influential lecture. I add to this, however, the necessary embodiment of consciousness, so pivotal to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, that calls upon the artist to facilitate the image's experience of the diegetic world in a human-like way, in order that we may experience via its *image-body* a world alike our own, and be reminded, in turn, of our "special way of being in the world." This is by no means limited to Italian Neorealism – as I have emphasized earlier, the embodiment of the image is necessary for all film aesthetics Bazin deems "realistic," albeit to varying degrees – but Bazin's writing on Neorealism is the most representative of this "humanism" in the full, the realism to which the Image as Witness is most articulately expressed by the Artist.

Given these established areas of overlap, it should come as no surprise to learn that Bazin, in the way he discusses Neorealism, adheres most diligently to the criteria set out by Merleau-Ponty in his address to cinema: *mise-en-scène* observant to the everyday appearance of the world, naturalistic acting, and the outward appearance of characters as behavioural bodies. For instance, of the profound naturalism exhibited by the non-professional actors in De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, Bazin writes: "we should talk today of a cinema without acting, of a cinema of which we no longer ask whether the character gives a good performance or not, since here man and the character he portrays are so completely one" (*WC2* 56). And extending the implications of phenomenology's image-facts to the actor's performance: "it calls upon the actor to *be* before expressing himself" (emphasis in orig., 65), meaning that the actor must first exist as an

existential body in (and of) the diegetic world before "emoting" a particular character, a demarcation Bazin sees transcended by the casting of non-actors.⁹²

This naturally carries over to the actor/character's body as an object of profilmic attention, something already emphasized by the observational nature of Neorealism's phenomenology. Again, to cite Bazin's review of *Bicycle Thieves*: "For De Sica, Bruno was a silhouette, a face, a way of walking" (WC2 65) – in other words, a *body* before all else.⁹³ This is furthered by his assertion in "In Defense of Rossellini" (1955) that somatic traits like "Gesture, change, [and] physical movements constitute for Rossellini the essence of human reality" (100), an ontological claim that recognizes "human reality" to be rooted in the perceptible actions of the body, rather than the mental landscapes of the mind. Indeed, the intonation of these ideas is revealed to be exceedingly Merleau-Pontian (even explicitly so), when, in discussing the demands of characterization in Neorealism's image-facts, Bazin argues that "characters are never defined by their 'character' but exclusively by their appearance . . . We know them by many other signs, not only their faces, of course, but by the way they move, by everything that makes the body the outer shell of the inner man" (88).⁹⁴

⁹² Bazin, for instance, returns often to the example of real fishermen being cast as fishermen in Visconti's *La Terra Trema*. He writes: "In *La Terra Trema*, the actor, sometimes on camera for several minutes at a time, speaks, moves, and acts with complete naturalness . . . If festival juries were not what they are, the Venice festival prize for best acting should have gone to the fishermen of *La Terra Trema* (WC2 44). See WC2 41-46. Elsewhere, Bazin argues that the key reason to employ non-actors is because "The public should not be burdened with any preconceptions" (WC2 23-24). It is, thus, more about the absence of a "star concept" than, perhaps, the intrinsic authenticity of the "real-life" person. See WC2 22-25.

⁹³ In his preface to the anthology *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory & Its Afterlife* (2011), Dudley Andrew shares his suspicions that Bazin "rode the back of cinema" in his pursuit of varied interests, including a fascination more so with the human body than the actor's screen persona ("Binocular" x).

⁹⁴ Further to this, Bazin writes of De Sica the actor, who "possesses the gift of being able to convey an intense sense of the human presence, a disarming grace of expression and of gesture which, in their unique way, are an irresistible

Moreover, just as Merleau-Ponty looks to a modern philosophical film art to reveal the primordial *bond* existing between the subject and world, Bazin discovers in Neorealism a corresponding bond taking place. He argues that too often in films, the diegetic world exists merely to the convenience or ends of the character(s), who impress upon the world but are rarely impressed upon by it. In Rossellini's *Germania, anno zero* / *Germany, Year Zero* (1948), however, this biased relationship is uniquely inverted: "characters are more apt to be affected by the setting through which they move than the settings are liable to be affected by their movement" (*WC2* 100). A description of Edmund's walk through the bombed-out rubble of Berlin in the film's final minutes, for instance, is filled with matter-of-fact observations of the landscape's influence on the young protagonist before his suicide: "The boy hops on one leg along the edge of a broken-up sidewalk;" "He picks up among the masses of stone and twisted steel a piece of rusted metal;" "He aims through a hole in the ruins;" "He climbs to the top floor of a bombed-out building;" "an iron beam sticks out sideways though the devastated floor . . . he slides down it" (*IN* 59-60). In these examples, it is the environment that guides Edmund's actions as he draws closer to death, demonstrating the concrete *enworldment* of the boy in a devastated, post-WW2 Germany.

Indeed, this act of enworldment proves to be an overarching precept of Neorealism (as it is for existentialism), with Bazin insisting that Neorealist actors "take care never to dissociate their performances from the décor or from the performance of their fellow actors. Man himself is just one fact among others, to whom no pride of place should be given *a priori*" (*WC2* 38). Of course, Neorealism *does* place pride on its characters, something I doubt Bazin would truly deny; but what Bazin is here emphasizing is the object state of man among other objects in and of the

testimony to man" (*WC2* 73). In turn, Bazin believes De Sica, the director, transfers this gift onto his actors, who exhibit this same bodily "presence" in their performances.

world – the way Neorealism's phenomenology treats, with equally density, the body *as* appearance traversing a world of appearances to which it is intrinsically connected.

Bruce Jenkins shares many of these views in "Structure of Perceptual Engagement in Film: Toward a Technology of Embodiment" (1977), albeit with a stronger emphasis on the phenomenological aspects of space fostered through movement. He writes:

Subject movement articulates (and concretizes) the space of the image; especially if the subject is human, the space is comprehended in terms of a human point of reference . . . The character in the film becomes the percipient's "surrogate in the world." It is by reference to and identification with the actor's bodily motion in its displacement of space, his dynamic involvement with the environment, that the space within the film image becomes articulated. (142)

While I agree that this can be an important component of the viewer's phenomenological engagement with the image, observing onscreen the like-bodied character "articulating" space through his or her physical movements, it overlooks the image's *own* body as the preeminent point-of-access to the world perceived, since it is by virtue of the image's "isomorphic" consciousness that the realistic diegesis and its character are made manifest. In other words, it is only *after* the image-body experiences-cum-expresses the world in a situated, "surrogated" manner that the character's involvement in that world can express a recognizable sense of space through the body. Movement, in turn, is an act either witnessed by the image (as when a character moves) or performed by it (as when the image *itself* moves), with the displacement of space defined by the resulting interplay between the two.

It is worth noting, then, that though I have spent some time underscoring the ways in which Bazin, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, points to the object-ivity of the subjective body in

Neorealism, we must not forget that it is the image's *own* embodiment that first makes this possible. This it does by seeing and showing via cinema's twofold state of perception a recognizable, human world to which the character is, like the image, *enworlded* – at least, when cultivated by the philosophically-minded artist. To this end, Bruce Isaac in *Toward a New Film Aesthetic* (2008) is correct when he argues that, in imagining the filmmaker to be not only an artist but a purveyor of reality, Bazin raises the *auteur* to the level of philosopher (28). Indeed, nowhere is this more apparent than in his reverence for the Italian Neorealists, who in a sense teach us how to experience reality anew by enabling the image to articulate a world made manifest through its body, "The body [being] our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phen of P* 169).

4.4 The Ambiguity of the Image-Body

But Bazin goes further than even Merleau-Ponty in developing an existential phenomenological film art, moving past "The Film and The New Psychology" to the greater breadth of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to bolster his theories on cinematic realism. This philosophy is, might I remind, a philosophy of *ambiguity*, that looks to reality as an always in-flux and emerging experience of embodied subjectivity: "Ambiguity," Merleau-Ponty contends, "is not some imperfection of consciousness or existence, but the *definition* of them (emphasis added, *Phen of P* 38). As we have already identified, Bazin employs the term "ambiguity" often in his writing on Neorealism: recall, for instance, his explanation of the image-fact as "a fragment of reality in

itself multiple and full of ambiguity" (*WC* 37); or the way he describes events (or non-events)⁹⁵ in Neorealist cinema as being true to "that ambiguity that characterizes any fact" (52). Notice that these are ontological claims about *reality*, not realism per se; that is to say, our understanding of Neorealism's phenomenology can only be understood in its appreciation of what Bazin already deems "reality" to be: an ambiguous and multifarious fact. In turn, Bazin's affirmation in "De Sica: Metteur en Scène" that not one image in *Bicycles Thieves* is "false to the ontological ambiguity of reality" (68) proves to be a significant one, as it provides not only the clearest indication of Bazin's espousal to a Merleau-Pontian ontology of reality, but the chief reasoning as to why the film is for Bazin "without a doubt the ultimate expression of neorealism" (67), its phenomenology being the most observant to that ambiguity that defines our (embodied) lives.

Yet if it is true that Bazin, aligned with Merleau-Ponty, subscribes to a reality rife with ambiguity and nonsense, should not this be found throughout Bazin's writing on realism? Or rather: if realism is an expression of faith in human reality, and that reality is ontologically imbued with ambiguity, should not *all* realisms reflect this, not just Italian Neorealism? The answer, thankfully, is yes. Though Bazin earmarks Neorealism as the movement that "tends to give back to cinema a sense of the ambiguity of reality" (*WC* 37), it is not alone in its efforts to

⁹⁵ For instance, De Sica's *Umberto D* is a key example of a Neorealist film that eschews typical events or sudden turn of events that characterize traditional film spectacle, thus "destroy[ing] drama at its very basis" (Bazin, *WC* 81). The film, perhaps the closest screenwriter Zavattini came to achieving his cinematic ideal of ninety minutes in the life of a man to which nothing happens (an anecdote Bazin returns to often), exists "as much in the moments when 'nothing' happens as in the dramatic sequences . . . De Sica devotes more than one reel to showing Umberto D in his room, closing the shutters, tidying a few things, looking at his tonsils, going to bed, taking his temperature" ("Umberto D" 181). These "concrete instances of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than another" (*WC* 81), are the *raison d'être* of the film for Bazin, and the chief reasoning for its artistic triumph. For a further consideration of *Umberto D* and the quotidian narrative in cinema, see Margulies.

do so. In fact, if we return to the years-spanning essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," we discover that the concept of ambiguity plays a pivotal role in defining the afore-discussed realisms of the wartime and interwar eras, bolstering the view that the "authentic" artist brings not only a Sartrean existentialism to the image, but a Merleau-Pontian embodiment as well.

Let us consider depth-of-focus cinematography, that evolutionary aesthetic evinced in the works of realists Welles, Wyler, and their forbearer Renoir. As we observed in Chapter 2, deep focus enables the viewer to experience the diegetic world both in-duration and in-depth, preserving the spatio-temporal continuity that Bazin considers a "fundamental quality of reality" (*WC2* 28). This fosters a kind of spectatorial freedom that counters the *a priori* meaning solicited by montage, which fragments and juxtaposes perceptual reality in such a way that profilmic objects and events become symbolic stand-ins for abstract ideas brought *to* the images, not derived from them. With the image in-depth, however, the viewer is, at least in part, free to choose what aspect of the image to engage with, all planes of the image being equally in-focus and thus open to alternative vantages. In turn, meaning develops *a posteriori*, from the viewer's unique dialogue with the image. I have argued that Bazin sees this to be an extension of Sartre's "existence before essence" applied to the image, with the artists who cultivate it acting in "good faith" by acknowledging the freedom we inherently possess as beings without predetermination or purpose. Yet, it also assumes that, in some way, the image is *like* the existential subject, open to its own ethical imperatives and responsibilities: we are, for instance, no-thing without consciousness of the world, just as the image is no-thing without the visual representation of the world. Likewise, ideological (societal, political, etcetera) meaning should not obscure what the image itself is, just as ideological meaning (societal, political, etcetera) should not obscure who

the individual is. Similar to Neorealism's phenomenological image, then, it seems the image in-depth takes on certain ontological qualities of the "authentic" subject, though the matter of its embodiment remains, thus far, untouched.

This changes in the latter half of "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," when, discussing what he refers to as the "metaphysical" modality of depth-of-focus versus montage, Bazin makes explicit the *incarnation* of the image in-depth. He writes:

In analyzing reality, montage presupposes of its very nature the unity of meaning of the dramatic event. Some other form of analysis is undoubtedly possible but then it would be another film. In short, montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression . . . On the other hand, depth of focus reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image if not of necessity . . . at least as a possibility. (*WC* 36)⁹⁶

Earlier, Bazin had written that depth-of-focus "creates a relationship between the viewer and the image which is closer to the viewer's relationship with reality" (Caboose *WC* 101), and later, that Welles' aesthetic shares with the Neorealists' "a sense of the ambiguity of reality" (*WC* 37). The "ambiguity of expression," then, which Bazin denies the montagists in the example above,⁹⁷ is not merely an indication of choice being afforded the viewer (though it certainly is that), but the

⁹⁶ This recognition of ambiguity as a *possibility* of depth-of-focus, not a requisite, is an important caveat to address, for it acknowledges Bazin's resistance in blanketing the aesthetic "ambiguous" *tout court*, without consideration of how it is used or cultivated by the artist.

⁹⁷ Bazin returns here to Kuleshov's famous experiment to illustrate montage's inability to convey ambiguity. He argues that the effect of interspersing different images with the same face proves *ad absurdum* that montage assigns "precise meaning to the expression on a face" (*WC* 36), since with each juxtaposed image the ambiguity of expression is furthered diminished. By contrast, Bazin looks to Rossellini's handling of Edmund's enigmatic visage in *Germany, Year Zero*, which preserves the "mystery" indicative of human reality (37).

image in-depth expressing that fundamental ambiguity of embodied consciousness;⁹⁸ as such, it is an ambiguity *of* expression for Bazin because it is simultaneously an ambiguity *of* experience, our somatic state of being being the condition for reality's abstruse nature. As with the Neorealists' image-body, here the image serves as both perceiver and perceived, expressing what Bazin calls the "immanent ambiguity of reality" ("William Wyler" 42) while, so to speak, living through it as well.⁹⁹

Thus, the claim that deep focus reintroduces "ambiguity into the structure of the image" is, rightly understood, an adding to this structure "realistic" aspects of our embodied condition, an indication for Bazin of the artist's espousal of an existential-phenomenological view of reality. In "William Wyler, or the Jansenist of *mise en scene*," Bazin expands on this idea when, discussing the "metaphysical" implications of film aesthetics, he draws clear parallels between the "authentic" artist's impulse to shoot both in-depth and in-duration, and his or her "standpoint on reality" (42), which is "more serious" – that is, more ethically consequential – than those dramatic choices he or she makes (43). This helps to explain why, despite their vastly different styles of storytelling and thematic enquiry, Renoir, Welles, and Wyler remain for Bazin "of the same mind in their frequent use of deep focus" ("William Wyler" 43), their shared aesthetic resulting from the common belief in reality as an embodied – and thus, ambiguous – state of being. It is from this deep-seated humanism that an ethical space emerges, since it is only via the image's surrogation for a human perspective that an existential *freedom* can be made possible.

⁹⁸ Indeed, as does Bazin, Merleau-Ponty, considers together the ambiguousness of reality and the freedom of interpretation that results from this: "ambiguity is the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings" (*Phen of P* 196).

⁹⁹ One is reminded here of Merleau-Ponty's claim that "there cannot be any consciousness of ambiguity without some ambiguity of consciousness" (*Phen of P* 223), an ontological reversibility that finds its cinematic equivalent in the image's expression of ambiguity that is, itself, an ambiguity of expression.

Moreover, in his posthumously published manuscript *Jean Renoir* (1971),¹⁰⁰ Bazin writes of Renoir's use of deep focus in a way that anticipates what the Neorealists' achieve with the phenomenological image-fact, substantiating the view that the image in-depth is imbued with the same ambiguity of experience made present in the image-body. He writes: "the function of depth of focus is not only to allow more liberty to the director and the actors. It confirms the unity of actor and décor, the total interdependence of everything real" (90). This "interdependence," I have argued, is Bazin's acknowledgement of our object-bodies' inextricable connection to an object-ive world both in and outside ourselves, a world to which we are at once *other* yet indistinguishable from; indeed, this is Merleau-Ponty's rationale for ambiguity as an existential fact of being. In the case of the phenomenological image-fact, we are reminded of this "interdependence" thanks to the diegetic world's inescapable presence and affect on the character(s), as when we, via the experiential image-body, witness Edmund traverse the desolate landscape of Berlin in *Germania, anno zero* / *Germany, Year Zero*. In the case of the image in-depth, however, "interdependence" is realized via the unity and intrinsic sameness of "everything real" – everything sharing, as it were, "reality." By bringing the entire visual field into clarity, the image in-depth treats with equal density the character(s) and the world as objects of perception *made* perceivable through the image-body, itself a perceivable thing.¹⁰¹

Perhaps the best example of the image in-depth's embodied state arrives in Bazin's appraisal of Renoir's *La règle du jeu* / *The Rules of the Game* (1939), a film he considers to be exemplary of the auteur's aesthetic. Discussing the pivotal scene at the masquerade ball that

¹⁰⁰ Henceforth, *JR*.

¹⁰¹ Further to this, Bazin applauds Renoir's ability to reveal the most "intimate" aspects of his characters by being "faithfully enamored of their appearance" (*JR* 90). It is this same dedication to "appearance" – "the simple appearance of beings and of the world" (*WC2* 64) – that constitutes Neorealism's phenomenology.

concludes the film, Bazin likens Renoir's camera to an "invisible guest wandering about the salon and the corridors with a certain curiosity, but without any more advantage than its invisibility. The camera is not noticeably any more mobile than a man would be" (*JR* 87). Bazin calls this "a sort of personification of the camera" (87), an acknowledgement that the camera – and moreover, the image we experience – is not an omniscient observer, but a resolutely human one, confined to experience the world as we too experience it: "it is a way of seeing which, while free of all contingency, is at the same time limited by the concrete qualities of vision: its continuity in time and its vanishing point in space" (88).¹⁰²

Bazin repeats this view in his critical study of Orson Welles, the realist most indebted to Renoir's experimentations in depth. Arguing that Welles' "lateral," multi-focused image is motivated by the need to bring the shot "close to that of the eye's normal vision" (*Orson Welles* 74) – so that we may experience "the illusion of being present at real events unfolding before us as in everyday reality" (77) – Bazin concludes that the image in-depth enables "the spectator [to] perceive the ontological ambivalence of reality directly, in the very structure of its appearance" (80). This makes two points plain in regards to the image in-depth: first, that it is "realistic" because it preserves human ways of seeing the world; and second, that the "ambivalence" of reality – here an alternative to "ambiguity" – is as a result of this humanness, for it is only by rendering reality through "human eyes" that the ambivalence of reality can be structured into it. In her essay "From Bazin to Deleuze: A Matter of Depth" (2011), French scholar Diane Arnaud misconstrues this revelation when she concludes that, because of Bazin's emphasis on the

¹⁰² Bazin also discusses how, during the climatic murder scene, the personified camera "takes it upon itself to turn its back on the action" (*JR* 88), revealing not only a resolutely *embodied* image – and, in turn, image – but an independence from the events unfolding diegetically as well. "Only in the works of F. W. Murnau," *Bazin* writes, "can one find similar examples of a camera movement so liberated from the characters and from traditional dramatic geometry" (88-89).

spectator's involvement in the image in-depth, "A function of vision is therefore more sought after than a function of reality" (88). In turn, Arnaud proposes a re-conception of realism that turns away from aestheticizations of reality and towards functionalities of perception instead, the sense of being "being totally present at the event" taking precedence over the "reality" of the event represented (88). But this, of course, creates a dichotomy where there is, in fact, none, since the pursuit of perception *is* the pursuit of reality for Bazin, and vice versa.

Hunter Vaughan offers a more tempered view in his entry on Bazin for *Film, Theory and Philosophy: Key Thinkers* (2009). Seeking philosophical cause for Bazin's formalist systems, Vaughan argues that what he calls the "crux of the phenomenological" for Bazin rests on his "praise of ambiguity as a virtue of the real, and [the] acknowledgement of our place not as distant observers of the world, but as being implicated in it" (106). This surfaces for him in Bazin's analyses of Renoir and Welles' stylistics, but also the Neorealists', since Bazin similarly attributes to them the ability to render on film "the sense of ambiguity inherent in our experience of the real" (106) by virtue of their "metaphysical" aesthetic, or realism.¹⁰³

For Bazin, the image in-depth relies upon an underlying embodiment that, like the phenomenological image, surrogates the existential subject with the image, experiencing-cum-expressing ambiguity in its concrete actuality. Though it may not perceive a realistic diegesis – as does, for instance, Neorealism – the nature of its perception remains dependent upon an image-body able to articulate experience in a human-like way. The notion of Bazin's cinematic

¹⁰³ To wit, in the essay "Theatre and Cinema – Part One" (1951), Bazin discusses the virtues of Jean Cocteau's cinema in tandem with realists Welles and Wyler, to whom he "joins ranks" (*WC* 93). He argues that, although Cocteau remains dedicated to classical forms of editing, he excises the character-point-of-view shot so popular in mainstream cinema. There remains, instead, only the witness: "The subjective camera finally becomes a reality but in an opposite sense, that is to say not as in *The Lady of the Lake*, thanks to a puerile kind of identification of the spectator and the character by means of a camera trick but, on the contrary, through the pitiless gaze of an invisible witness. The camera is at last a spectator and nothing else" (92).

realism, then, in all its various guises, continues to represent a fundamental faith in human reality made present via the body, a witness unto the world that, when cultivated by the philosophical artist, brings the viewer into awareness of the inter-subjectivity we resolutely share. In 1957, close to the end of his abbreviated life, Bazin wrote that "the director's art lies in the skill with which he compels the event to reveal its meaning – or at least the meaning he lends it – without removing any of its ambiguity" (*WC2* 87). Still captivated by reality's ambiguous nature, this statement attests to Bazin's on-going belief that the "authentic" artist can achieve something "real" in the image, that the artifice onscreen can reflect something meaningful in its resemblance to a world we both constitute and are constituted by.

Conclusion

I commenced this study with a headline pulled from the cover of *Film International's* dedicatory issue to André Bazin: "Because we need him now." As a figure of classical theory deemed obsolete in an era of post-photographic cinema – after having already been ousted by the paradigmatic intellectual shift of the 1970s – the widespread reappraisal of Bazin that has proliferated film studies over the last five years prompted me to use this declaration as a possible answer to an invisible question, one I imagined asked not only by contemporary film studies as a whole, but by the particular reader of this thesis: Why Bazin? Why now? Well, *because we need him now*.

Of course, this answer requires honing, clarification, and due exposition, its amorphous connotations allowing for the myriad of ways Bazin has been reopened in recent years. For my part, the Bazin we need is Bazin the realist, who discovered in cinema a propensity for resemblance that, when cultivated by the hand of the artist, could render experiential a world in the likeness of our own. This Bazin, as I hope to have made plain, is not a naïve positivist swindled by the guise of cinematic objectivity (criticisms that have and will continue to be levied against him); rather, he is a sophisticated theorist that conceives of an art form in opposition to its belying ontology, that calls upon the philosophically-minded *auteur* to take aim with the medium's spatio-temporal aesthetic and construct an image that, like us, experiences reality via the body. In the tenor of his admired contemporaries Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bazin held onto the guiding *telos* that art is about humanism, and the canon he creates, of both films and filmmakers, attests to this by reminding us of our shared way of being in (and of) the world by literally *showing* us this world on the body of the image made to see it.

Today, trends in independent world cinemas seem to be returning to recognizable forms of realism in search of renewed ways of "witnessing" the world and our inextricable place in it¹⁰⁴ – approaches that, now divorced from the critical consensus that buried "transparent" realisms in the past, are able to present images without overt reflexivity or apparatus-revealing winks. In turn, I believe the reduced version of Bazinian realism I here propose can elucidate the emphases on the body in and *as* the image in these works, quite apart from the underlying media they employ; that is, regardless of how the image is created.¹⁰⁵ As many of these films hearken back to the aesthetic candor achieved by the Neorealists in the 1940s,¹⁰⁶ seeking honesty (not beguilement) in their roving, personified images, it is with a greater and more patient understanding of Bazin's realisms that a contemporary discourse can take place using the texts and questions – *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* – already on hand. Moreover, as we are witnessing a burgeoning field in film studies that welcomes more affect and haptic-based theories of spectatorship through the moving image – led by Vivian Sobchack, as well as Deleuzian-based theorist Laura U. Marks¹⁰⁷ – I contend that it is Bazin we must return to, since our collective

¹⁰⁴ For instance, Belgian filmmakers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne have maintained a remarkably consistent aesthetic firmly within the Bazinian tradition I propose. Indicative of the image-bodies they create, their camera is tellingly labelled "*corps-caméra*," or "body-camera." For a first-hand account of their aesthetic-cum-ethical approach, see Dardenne. For insightful interpretations of their *oeuvre* and their place in contemporary realist cinema, see Mai; Mosely. For an overview of other contemporary realisms, see Inouye.

¹⁰⁵ To wit, Daniel Morgan makes light of Bazin's near-inclusion of animation under the aegis of "realism" in his review of the documentary *Le mystère Picasso / The Picasso Mystery* (1956). Animation, of course, is the forbearer of digital media in cinema. See Morgan 480.

¹⁰⁶ The so-called "Neo-Neo Realism" debate between *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott and *The New Yorker's* Richard Brody is a good example of a hot-button topic sparked by recent trends in American cinema. Kelly Reichardt remains a key figure in this "movement." See Lattimer. For a consideration of contemporary global neorealisms, see Giovacchini and Sklar; Nagib.

¹⁰⁷ See Marks.

understanding of what realism is is based on a philosophical underpinning already observant to the corporeal nature of the image and its unique observance to the perceptual body.

In his contribution to the seminal anthology *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and its Afterlife*, the publication born from the 2009 conference that reignited Bazin in popular (academic) culture, Tom Gunning understatedly observes that "defining realism remains the elusive task of any reading of Bazin" (120). Yet, I hold that, despite its elusiveness, it is a task of paramount importance that simply cannot be avoided, not only for our understandings of Bazinian thought, but understandings of cinematic representation *tout court*. Though Bazin, over the course of his prolific but short career, dedicated himself to a spectrum of subjects relating to cinema – far too numerous to consider in this slim study – the infrastructure sustaining these subjects depends upon a philosophical subscription to reality evinced in his theories of cinematic realism, upon which I hope to have shed new light upon.

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