

The World in Its Own Image

The Myth of Total Cinema

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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—such as his relation to either the Hegelian or the Platonic tradition—but instead to label his writings as politically retrograde or naïve, a bit like the use of the terms “terrorist” or “socialist” in American politics. In the ‘60s and ‘70s the term “idealist” was politically charged and a great many positions or approaches that could hardly be seen as adhering to either the German or Hellenic idealist traditions—such as phenomenology—were nonetheless denounced as idealist. I remember being told that investigating early cinema was politically suspect, since “the search for origins is an idealist project,” a claim that might have given pause to the author of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. It likewise might seem odd that a film theorist like Bazin who advocated a cinematic style based in a direct relation to reality rather than in images that convey authorial intention or communicate unequivocal significance would be understood as an idealist. Insofar as idealism has been understood as an aesthetic movement, it has generally been contrasted with realist modes.

Bazin’s relation to idealism poses an issue as complicated as defining the term itself and has a specific context in ‘60s French Marxism which I could not fully explicate here. While I oppose using the term as a shibboleth designed to prevent us from taking Bazin seriously, I do not deny that Bazin may himself have seen his view of cinema as related to idealism. He claimed at least once (in his essay “In Defense of Rossellini”) that he was not a philosopher and carrying on a consistent philosophic discourse was not the primary aim of his criticism, however fundamental we may find his theoretical texts.¹ Nor am I going to attempt a philosophical discussion here of Bazin’s relation to idealism. However I may flirt with it, I, like Bazin, do not consider myself a philosopher, even if some of my best friends are. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that attempting to rework Bazin’s insights into philosophical terms, as in Peter Wollen’s highly influential interpretation of Bazin’s analysis of the ontology of the photographic image in terms of Peirce’s concept of the index, entails ignoring important aspects of Bazin’s position, even if it illuminates others.² My goal remains modest: to investigate Bazin’s own account of the origins

of motion pictures, his essay “The Myth of Total Cinema,” which, in its claim that cinema existed first as an idea, may appear to constitute an argument for an idealist approach to cinema.³ But if there is an ideal described in this essay, it remains rooted in Bazin’s claim that cinema’s vocation lies in its relation to realism. Defining that realism remains the elusive task of any reading of Bazin. If we avoid explaining “total cinema” as simply indicating Bazin’s idealist project—a nearly metaphysical match between cinema and reality—the term becomes surprisingly complex. The myth of total cinema may seem to describe film as a simple duplication of the world in all its sensual qualities, but a myth always exceeds a concept, and Bazin’s essay examines one of the traditional tasks of myth, a tale of origin. Further, this essay draws me as a film historian, since it stands as Bazin’s principal discussion of early cinema. As such, “The Myth of Total Cinema” not only challenges traditional (and even subsequent) historiography but also highlights the fault line in Bazin’s realism: its relation to illusion and deceit.

Bazin perhaps comes closest to a confession of a more or less Platonic idealism when in this essay he states seemingly straightforwardly, “The cinema is an idealist phenomenon. The concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven . . .” (WC, 17). But Bazin’s use of “idealist” in this first paragraph of the essay, far from being straightforward, initiates a complex rhetorical inversion. Rather than simply an essay in either film theory (its main reception in discussions of Bazin thus far) or film history (possibly an equally important context, if less explored), the essay originally appeared in 1946 as a book review of the first volume of Georges Sadoul’s monumental history of international cinema, *Histoire générale du cinéma: L’invention du cinéma*, published that same year.⁴ Sadoul not only offered the first scholarly multivolume history of the cinema, but since the 1930s and his early association with the surrealists, he had been the more or less official spokesman on cinema for the French Communist Party. Thus Bazin opens his review with an ironic claim:

Paradoxically enough, the impression left on the reader by Georges Sadoul’s admirable book on the origins of the cinema is of a reversal [*inversion*], in spite of the author’s Marxist views, of the relations between an economic and technical evolution and the imagination of those carrying on the search [*chercheurs*]. The way things happened seems to call for a reversal of the historical order of causality, which goes from the economic infrastructure to the ideological superstructure, and for us to consider the basic technical discoveries as fortunate accidents but essentially second in importance to the preconceived ideas [*l’idée préalable*] of the inventors. (WC, 17)

In other words, Bazin doesn’t simply describe the cinema as an idealist phenomenon, a product of the imagination more than of economic and technical circumstances. He claims, somewhat perversely, to derive this view directly from Sadoul’s text, rather than from his own philosophical predispositions. He introduces this claim as both a surprise and a reversal, coming as it does from a reading of a bona fide Marxist historian. Indeed, Bazin assumes the canonical Marxist causality of deriving the cultural superstructure from a materialist base as the norm, a norm he claims that Sadoul’s account seems to reverse. Carefully read, Bazin offers in this essay a highly ironic approach to Sadoul’s book rather than simply offering a naïve idealist theory of the cinema.

Recent historiography of early cinema clarifies the complex nature of Bazin’s reading of Sadoul, as Sadoul’s highly empirical history of the invention of the cinema has been criticized

by revisionists as inherently teleological, presenting successive devices as stages in an interlocked series of inventions that seem to move inevitably toward the achievement of continuous projected motion pictures.⁵ Rather than this coherent narrative of technical progress, the revisionist historians have proposed new and broader models of the materialist base of cinema's invention (as in Michael Chanan's provocatively named and too rarely cited *The Dream That Kicks*), or placed within a broader conception of the modernization and disciplining of perception (as in the work of Jonathan Crary), or supplemented by more detailed and less teleological accounts of what is sometimes called the archaeology of the cinema (as in the research of Charles Musser, Laurent Mannoni, and Deac Rossell).⁶ All these approaches draw directly or indirectly on the historical methods of dialectical materialism. But Bazin does not offer this sort of revision of Sadoul's history, correcting or deepening its research or questioning its teleology. Rather than objecting to Sadoul's method, Bazin claims to be drawing out what he sees as the implications of his account. He finds in Sadoul's history of the invention of the cinema less a description of scientific and technological progress than evidence of an obsessive fascination with achieving a complex and "total" mimesis of the world. It is this mimetic vocation of cinema that functions like an ideal, arguably in Sadoul's history, and certainly in Bazin's understanding of cinema's origin.

In spite of his claim simply to be following Sadoul in his discovery of the idealist basis of the cinema, Bazin most certainly performs a deliberate act of what Harold Bloom might call a misreading, an appropriation and rerouting of Sadoul's account. Bazin's claim that neither science, technology, nor economics determined the invention of the cinema cannot be taken seriously as historiography (and indeed the revision of Sadoul's accounts in recent decades, rather than following Bazin's denigration of these factors, has instead deepened research into them). Bazin's approach dives under historiography to find the place where theory and history intertwine. From Sadoul's chronology of the invention of cinema, Bazin abstracts (and here lies what could be described as his idealist move) and formulates what he considers a more primary motivation, which he does describe as "an idea" (WC, 18). Cinema's actual technological development appears as a delay in the materialization of the already articulated idea ("... we must here explain, on the other hand, how it was the invention took so long to emerge..." [WC, 19]). If Bazin describes this delay in the invention of the cinema as "a disturbing phenomenon" (ibid.) this is because he finds the idea fully articulated in the imagination of cinema's inventors, and merely marking time until its material embodiment is actually achieved. But what was it that the inventor envisioned: animated photographs? The analysis of motion? An extension of the magic lantern? Rather than these technical goals, Bazin claims they are pursuing an idea. This idea constitutes the cornerstone of Bazin's myth of cinema: "In their imaginations they saw the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality; they saw in a trice [*d'emblée*] the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief" (WC, 20).

While Bazin's account of this "guiding myth" of the invention of cinema minimizes the sort of historical contextualization that has marked the revisionary history of early cinema offered in the last decades, it is both subtle and prescient of the more recent archeology of cinema. The post-Brighton scholars dealing with the invention of cinema have emphasized the history of projection to a degree Bazin does not (whether Musser's extensive history of "screen practice," or Mannoni's exploration of the centuries of the "grand art of light and shadow," especially of the magic lantern), but Bazin's discussions of the role of stereoscopy and of Villiers de

l'Isle-Adam's novel *Tomorrow's Eve* (*L'Ève future*, 1886) anticipate themes crucial to later scholars. Rather than offering more fine-grained research into the predecessors of film, Bazin's conception of cinema's origins takes a different tack, more synthetic than teleological. For Bazin, the *idée fixe* that drives the invention of cinema depends on fusing technical aspects that many histories of cinema tend to investigate separately. While most histories of the emergence of projected moving images focus primarily on the achievement of moving photographic images, Bazin not only adds in the factors of sound, color, and relief but also makes the totality of these the goal and the motivation for cinema's invention: "There was not a single inventor who did not try to combine sound and relief with animation of the image" (WC, 20).

Thus, Bazin's description of cinema's origin resembles the period in which he was writing (even anticipating the full scope of his career after this specific essay), the postwar era in which color processes and 3D (or other immersive effects such as Cinerama or Cinemascope) seemed poised to become the norms of cinema, rather than isolated special effects. As another salvo in his struggle against the canonization of silent cinema as a lost golden age, Bazin's account of the invention of the cinema posits decades of film history as a delay reluctantly endured in the realization of an ideal already fully glimpsed at the point of origin and on the verge of genuine realization as he wrote. Bazin brings his essay's rhetoric of reversal to a climax as he charts film's technological development not simply as a linear progression, but as actually circling back to fulfill the original ideal: "Every new development added to the cinema must paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!" (WC, 21). Twisting back on itself, film history not only finds its future in its past, but film's technological development also fulfills expectations inherent in cinema's original promise. Bazin's essay both opens and concludes with a radical gesture of rhetorical inversion whereby ultimately history becomes subsumed under theory.

Rather than practicing revisionist historiography, "The Myth of Total Cinema" discovers in cinema's origins a theory of its essence. Bazin shrewdly placed this essay right after "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" to open *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* Taken together, these two essays form the basis of a theoretical argument for the priority of realism in the cinema, although one could argue that his stylistic arguments for realism as a mode of film practice contained in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" and the essays on neorealism give this theoretical position its ultimate justification. Studies of Bazin so far give the "Ontology" essay more attention than "The Myth." This is understandable, since it is the more theoretically argued piece. That essay's discussion of the ontology of the photograph, and of cinema as an extension of photography, has primarily been read, following Peter Wollen, as based in the indexicality of the photograph (although Bazin never uses this Peircean term). While I do not question the relevance of this interpretation, elsewhere I have questioned whether the index supplies a complete understanding of Bazin's claim for the nature of photographic ontology.⁷ Whatever the outcome of this debate, it is striking that nothing in "The Myth of Total Cinema" seems dependent on indexicality or even necessarily on photography, as is made clear by Bazin's frequent reference in the essay to the painted or drawn animations of Reynaud's *Pantomimes lumineuses* (which are not even photographic).⁸

Bazin's essay emphasizes that Reynaud, along with Edison and even the Lumière brothers, had envisioned cinema as fully endowed with those aspects of realistic reproduction which would be specifically excised from the canonized image of silent cinema (precisely those aspects

whose absence Rudolph Arnheim at the end of the silent era had stressed—and valorized—as essential to film's role as art rather than mechanical reproduction: sound, relief, color).⁹ Bazin's *idée fixe* of total cinema extends beyond "mechanical reproduction" and signals a desire for an ideal which we recognize as his central theoretical claim about cinematic realism: "namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time."¹⁰ The myth of cinema's origin does not primarily concern artistic expression, as the theorists of cinema in the '20s (articulating the achievements of that decade's filmmakers) would claim. Rather, at the point of its invention cinema pursued not only the possibility of a complete mimetic presentation of the world but also the creation of an image beyond the manipulations and interpretations of artists, not a particular artist's image of the world, but the "world in its own image."

We find here the paradoxes that recur in Bazin's description of the cinema, which could be dismissed as unresolved contradictions, or as yet to be articulated complexities, but which I see as challenges not only to an ongoing reading of Bazin but also to our continued speculation on the nature of cinema and related media. Bazin locates the origins of cinema less in the progressive achievement of a scientific and industrial research project than in the obsessions of a handful of inventors. This may at first seem to posit a psychological basis for the origin of the cinema, close perhaps to what he describes in the "Ontology" essay as a "basic psychological need in man" to overcome death and time.¹¹ (Philip Rosen, in his discussion of Bazin's "mummy complex" emphasizes the important role obsession plays in Bazin).¹² But does Bazin's myth of total cinema simply historicize a metapsychology of the anxious subject reassured by cinematic illusion? Before linking Bazin's myth of the origin of cinema with the metapsychology of ideological illusion described by apparatus theory, one must stress certain differences. For Baudry, Metz, and other '70s theorists, the "cinema-effect" shored up the spectator's imaginary investment in a coherent subject. Bazin's myth moves beyond the subject, envisioning an image of the world not dependent on the expressive role of artistic subjectivity. Bazin may root the origin of the cinema in the obsession of its inventors, but the significance of this ideal cannot be reduced to subjective investment. Rather than subjectivity, Bazin's total cinema strives to achieve "the world in its own image." This unique image seeks precisely to overcome the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, and even between materialism and idealism.¹³

In "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin makes a distinction that has troubled me for years "between true realism, the need that is to give significant expression to the world both concretely and its essence, and the pseudorealism of a deception aimed at fooling the eye (and for that matter the mind); a pseudorealism content in other words with illusory appearances."¹⁴ Bazin stresses that realistic traditions in art combine these two tendencies, so we should not view them as mutually exclusive. But the opposition between them must bear on his myth of origins. Did the obsession with total cinema that haunted its inventors exceed pseudorealism, and in what manner does it attain what he calls true realism? The most likely answer would be that total cinema can partake of both aspects and that the challenge of cinema as an art form lies neither in expressing individual subjectivity nor in simply reproducing the traits of movement, color, sound and relief as components of illusion, but rather in presenting the world in its own image, a task that must be more elusive than it might first appear. As one of the most subtle (and crucially flexible and dialectical) critics of style, Bazin is dedicated to tracing the pursuit of this image through the interrelation of narrative structures and visual strategies.

While defining the nature of “the world in its own image” may demand reading and digesting Bazin’s full corpus, I believe that his attempt to read Sadoul’s history backward provides the best clue to emerging from this maze, especially his enigmatic claim that cinema has not yet been invented. Tracing the figure of total cinema involves not only a process of historical research but also an engagement with the future, so that the question, what is cinema? never becomes simply, what was cinema? but always asks, what will cinema be? If Bazin’s differentiation of a true realism from a pseudorealism constitutes more than a platitude, his comments on the “deception aimed at fooling the eye” might provide at least a negative way (in the sense of the *via negativa* of theologians defining God by describing what He is not) to grasping the nature of a true realism. According to Bazin, pseudorealism aims simply at “duplicating the world outside”; purely “psychological,” it satisfies an appetite for illusion, and illusory techniques such as perspective constitute its means.

It would be difficult to separate total cinema from this appetite for illusion, an appetite that Bazin seems to understand as ongoing, never thoroughly satisfied. The history of total cinema, then, seems not simply to chart a progressive course or realization of an initial vision (or a Platonic ideal), but rather to project a dialectical process in which achieving the ideal of the “world in its image” involves sublating the processes of illusion, absorbing its techniques, yet also transcending them. Thus Bazin’s ideal of total cinema might ultimately resemble Hegel more than Plato since it reveals itself in the unfolding of the history of film as one stage sublates rather than abolishes the preceding one, a history that has not yet reached its end.

The specter of pseudorealism raises the crucial issue of how Bazin’s theory of total cinema relates to the current fascination with immersive media, both as an ongoing technology and a historical tradition. Recent historical investigation of immersion (such as the fine work of Oliver Grau and Alison Griffiths) broadens the prehistory of cinema beyond the rather narrow track of the representation of motion which most archaeologies of the cinema have privileged, opening it to such traditions as the panorama as a predecessor and expanded cinema as a descendent.¹⁵ But from the panorama to virtual reality and other computer-generated environmental systems, the emphasis (at least in critical analysis) tends to be on sensation and physical effects. While Bazin never directly states this, I believe that it was precisely the stimulation (and simulation) of sensation that Bazin associated with pseudorealism, with *trompe l’oeil*, with that aspect of the image that he opposed to his ideal of realism and designated as a trick, an illusion—a deceit.¹⁶ I think a full reading of Bazin makes it clear that cinematic realism uses the devices of total cinema in the service of creating an image of the world—beyond individual expression, communication of information, or the representation of a single viewpoint, beyond, in essence, the simple trick of fooling the eye. However, if Bazin might warn against techniques of simulation, this essay makes clear that the total illusion that the cinema aspires to goes beyond any mere trick and offers something new. I believe that the novelty that Bazin finds in the myth underlying the invention of cinema consists less in the word “cinema” than in the modifier “total.” For Bazin, unlike most historians of technologies, the invention of cinema lies not in any particular technical aspect of the cinema—such as the photographic analysis of motion; the mechanical achievement of the synthesis of motion; the systems of projection; or the devising of a flexible continuous base, each of which has its own history and inventors—but rather in the ideal of their totality, their integration into a whole (each of these elements taken singularly poses simply a technical problem to be solved). In true

gestalt fashion this whole equals more than the sum of its parts, and it is the total pattern that drives the invention of cinema.

This totality should not be understood as a crowning synthesis—neither a *gesamtkunstwerk*, nor a technological system. If we take seriously Bazin's differentiation of a true and a pseudoreality, total cinema offers more than a complex process of duplication. Bazin calls this something more: "the world in its own image." I read this phrase as equivalent to the phenomenological concept (used by both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger) of the worldhood of the world. The worldhood of the world forms the ultimate referent of the myth of total cinema. Thus total cinema does not posit a Hegelian universal totality but rather the phenomenological image of the world as bounded by a horizon, and it is in the nature of a horizon to be expanded. The decades that have passed since Bazin's book review essay demonstrate the acuity of his grasp of the future as implied in his reading of the past. I firmly believe Bazin would view the ongoing development of new media not as the end of cinema but as a stage in its continuing invention. Rather than immersion, I believe the appropriate term for a Bazinian understanding of contemporary media would be "expanded cinema," to reappropriate a term from the '60s. Far from an outmoded idealist conservative, it may be that Bazin himself has not yet been invented.

Notes

1. André Bazin, "In Defense of Rossellini," in *What Is Cinema?* vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 99.
2. Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or Faking Photographs," in *Still/Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 23–40.
3. Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema" in *What Is Cinema?* vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 17–22. Further references to this article will be cited parenthetically as WC.
4. The essay was originally published in *Critique*, 6 (November 1946).
5. Among the revisionists, along with Charles Musser and myself, see André Gaudreault, *Cinéma et attraction: Pour une nouvelle histoire du cinématographe* (Paris: CNRS, 2008); see also "Les vues cinématographiques selon Georges Méliès, ou: comment Mitry et Sadoul avaient peut-être raison d'avoir tort (même si c'est surtout Deslandes qu'il faut lire et relire)," in *Georges Méliès, l'illusionniste fin de siècle?*, dir. Jacques Malhête et Michel Marie (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle/Colloque de Cerisy, 1997), 111–31.
6. Works that should be cited here are Michael Chanan, *The Dream that Kicks: the Prehistory and Early Years of Cinema in Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000); Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: the American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner, 1990); Deac Rossell, *Living Pictures: The Origins of the Movies* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998); and Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). Since this revisionary project was sparked by the 1978 FIAF colloquium at Brighton, England, these scholars are sometimes referred to as "post-Brighton."
7. Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or Faking Photographs."
8. Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," *differences*, 18:1 (Spring 2007), 29–52.
9. Rudolph Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).
10. Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," 22. Mary Ann Doane has drawn attention to the aspect of this quote that I leave untouched here, the significance of the "irreversibility of time." Although I do not follow her suggestion (its possible relation to indexicality), I do find it extremely provocative that Bazin, while he maintains the importance of the unity of space and time in the creation of a realist image in cinema, nonetheless

does not seem to think time must remain irreversible. However, I take this less as a reference to the literal of reversal of time (as in the cinematic effect of reverse motion) than as a reference to cinema's ability to replay a past moment so as to fix or capture the flow of time, snatching it out of its ephemerality.

11. Bazin. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?* vol. 1, 9.
12. Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), especially 10–14.
13. Rosen acknowledges this ambition to overcome the subject/object split, (see *ibid.*, 12), but denies its possibility, seeing all phenomenology as simply limited by subjective investment.
14. Bazin. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 12.
15. Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Allison Griffiths, *Shivers down your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). In contrast, C. W. Ceram's classic work *Archeology of the Cinema* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965) limits itself to tracing the history of the moving image.
16. Bazin's discussion of the *truc* (trick) in cinema is typically dialectical and complex; cinema cannot do without tricks, he claims, but must acknowledge their subordination to reality. See Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," in *What Is Cinema?* vol. 1, 43–47.