

André Bazin: Film as Social Documentary

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Introduction

When the notion of truth encounters that of cinema, the first name that comes to mind is André Bazin. In the past decades, this French film critic and theorist has been generally seen as a naïve realist, someone for whom the essence of cinema lied in its mechanical/photographic ability to bring the truth on screen without the all too partial and non-objective human intervention. “Bazin held that the image from a film was an objective re-presentation of the past, a veritable slice of reality” (Carroll 78). Noël Carroll was by no means alone in identifying Bazin as a partisan of the objectivity of the imprint that empirical reality leaves on film. Jean Mitry, Christian Metz, 1970s *Screen* magazine theorists and generally most scholars belonging to semiological or cognitivist approaches have dismissed this supposedly ontological bond, which granted film an immediate access and correspondence to empirical reality. In more recent times, casting a retrospective glance on that almost unanimous rejection, Philip Rosen stated that diffidence towards Bazin was a veritable collective obsession that allowed and helped the then new Film Studies to be founded and formed as a consistent discipline in its own terms. In other words, Bazin’s dismissal was a kind of founding act (Rosen 8–9).

Nowadays, it is perhaps easier to look back and fully understand what the writings by *Cahiers du Cinéma* journal’s co-founder were actually about (Vaughan 100–01). These writings are still basically unknown to date. Between 1943 and 1958, André Bazin published nearly 2600 articles (mostly in newspapers, reviews and film magazines), only 6% of which have been republished in anthologies or edited essay collections. Only in recent years, Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin revived scholarly interest in this extensive body of widely neglected writings. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Bazin’s death in 2008, they organised two international congresses on the topic: one at Yale University (Opening Bazin) and the other at the Université Paris VII-Diderot (Ouvrir Bazin). Two and a half years later, an edited collection (*Opening Bazin*) was published, gathering most of the papers given at those venues.

Reading the remaining 94% of articles leaves no doubt: Bazin was not a naïve theorist. His was not a shallow and simplistic faith in some magical transubstantiation of reality directly on screen. This paper will focus on a specific Bazinian feature, in order to open up the possibility for further explorations of Bazin’s regained corpus of writings: the photographic ‘umbilical’ link between the filmic image and

empirical reality is not the point. The author of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* has often been accused of being an idealistic critic. This is not incorrect—Bazin shares the philosophical perspective of idealism in many ways—, but not correct enough either (Après XIV), since one should assume the full range of due consequences from that premise. The most obvious consequence, which is also the least negligible, is that, precisely as an idealist, Bazin's notion of reality is by no means simple. It cannot be merely limited to 'what we find out there'. In fact, Bazin paid a lot of attention to social, cultural, national and economical contexts. If cinema is for him the quintessential realist medium, this is because it can grasp different realities, among them social and culture realities. In other words, cinema's ontological realism is not a matter of reproducing empirical reality as such. Reality means much more than this: "The cinematic esthetic will be social, or else will do without an esthetic" (Bazin, "For a Realistic Aesthetic" 37). Indicatively, one of his earliest and most important article is titled "Tout film est un documentaire social", "Every Film is a Social Documentary" in the 2008 English translation. This enquiry will focus primarily on that specific article, with occasional references to widely unknown Bazinian articles, in order to better understand which kind of truth Bazin is really interested in. In other words, a close reading of "Tout film est un documentaire social" will be an opportunity to introduce some of the theoretical features that arise from an in-depth exploration of the hundreds of Bazinian articles that have never been republished.

Film as Social Documentary

Valid theoretical dismissals of the standard opinion according to which Bazin advocated cinema's photographic ability to reproduce reality have already been formulated on various occasions by several scholars. One of the most interesting attempts to do so is Daniel Morgan's "Rethinking Bazin", a careful review of all the excerpts in Bazin's written works that talk about cinema's photographic dimension. On this basis, Morgan noticed that they all say slightly different things. Whatever definition of cinema can be inferred from Bazin's writings, photographic objectivity has no essential place in it.

[Bazin] begins with an understanding of cinema, and then, since he knows that cinema is comprised of individual frames and therefore that it must have a photographic base, extracts an account of photography from it. Bazin lacks an independent account of the earlier medium: photography is just cinema minus duration. [. . .] My sense is that to best understand what Bazin thinks about the ontology of cinema it is necessary to stay away from the topic of photography. Photography functions as a rhetorical device he employs at a certain moment in his theoretical framework, nothing more—cinema itself is his primary concern. (Morgan 130)

Bazin himself repeatedly stigmatised the so-called photographic objectivity being at stake. His articles are replete with warnings such as: "L'artifice et le mensonge peuvent tout aussi bien courir les rues que hanter le studio, car la réalité n'est

pas seulement dans l'apparence des choses, mais dans le cœur de l'homme, et elle est aussi, en dernière analyse, affaire de scénario"¹ ("Un grand film de René Clément" 2) ["Artifice and lie can walk down the streets as well as they can haunt the studios, because reality is not just in the appearance of things, but in man's heart. Ultimately, it is also a matter of screenplay"]. The examples could go on. One of the most surprising is found at the very beginning of Bazin's essay:

The realist destiny of cinema—innate in photographic objectivity—is fundamentally ambiguous, because it allows the "realization" of the wonderful. Precisely like a dream. The oneiric character of cinema, linked to the illusory nature of its image as much as to its slightly hypnotic mode of operation, is no less crucial than its realism. ("Every Film" 40)

Thanks to the effect on the viewer provoked by cinema, we can believe (to some extent) that what we see on screen is true. This does not mean that cinema can reproduce truth—on the contrary, its innate realism cannot be separated from the possibility to create effective illusions. Hence, cinematic realism is not a naïve acknowledgment of what reality actually is, but rather it is dialectically linked to illusion—it is its own fundamental condition. In his one and only essay explicitly revolving around photography, Bazin defines it as intrinsically surrealist because it is "a hallucination that is also a fact" ("Ontology" 16). Reading carefully, no serious contradiction arises between the essay in question here and his most famous and frequently quoted one: just as a photograph is at the same time hallucination and fact, so is a dream. The content of it may be false, but the fact that a dream is dreamt is true as such. Besides, it points to some kind of unconscious truth embedded in ourselves.

Being a dream, cinema hides its ultimate reality behind appearances that are nothing but symbols. As in a dream, nothing in cinema is completely accidental, and at the same time nothing is completely fake either. It isn't true that French or American people enjoy lives free of work, living in sumptuous apartments, decked out with three flights of marble staircase, where telephones, which you and I have trouble finding, are made of white bakelite at the very least. But it's true that some secret demon keeps the shameful hope for such a social paradise alive in each of our hearts. ("Every Film" 40)

Every film is a social documentary because it documents the desires of the collective unconsciousness. "American secretaries don't marry the sons of their billionaire bosses, but the Cinderella myth occupies a dominant position in American culture", hence the high frequency of Prince Charming-like figures in films (40). Dreams are not real, but the desires behind them are. In this sense, "cinema cannot lie" (40).

¹Throughout this article, all quotations from articles by Bazin for which there is no published English translation are transcribed in the original French, followed by my translation.

Dream Holes

These ideas are in fact less banal and old-fashioned than they may appear. “Every producer who has made a film that pleases knows how to fill the type of imaginary void within which his film took shape. In commercial terms, good producers detect within the public any ‘dream holes’ still unfilled and hasten to fill them in” (40). *Hole* is the keyword here. Bazin seems to emphasise that this desire is essentially a kind of void (his term). The hidden desire of the public that a producer needs to guess is not some repressed instinct waiting to be expressed, but a sort of hole. It has no existence of its own, but rather comes into being together with the formal work of shaping it. This work lies in the codification through symbols as well as in their illusory transparency (the fact that they look real and seem to belong to ordinary reality) at the same time. Again this is the paradox of realism as and through illusion.

The ideas expressed by Bazin in “Every Film is a Social Documentary” are quite admittedly Freudian, so we can certainly read this codification in terms of condensation/displacement: desire is some kind of nothing in itself, an empty hole that gains a texture only when it is betrayed by some symbolic/linguistic imaginary formulation. In dreams we do not find a substantial, instinctual, primal desire that became previously repressed in reality, only to pop up again in disguise: desire consists in the very way it is masked, it coincides with its own disguise.

The fundamental point of psychoanalysis is that desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed—and it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject’s desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: *through fantasy, we learn how to desire.* (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 6)

Accordingly, fantasies must be handled with care. Producers and film-makers have a great responsibility: they literally hold people’s desires in their hands, since desire is not inside people, but rather in the outside form of its patent formulation. They do not have to guess what dreams could fit people’s desires better: they invent people’s desires instead. Hence the attention paid by Bazin to pedagogy. Himself an aspiring teacher, who failed to pass the final State exam after which he would have become one, for Bazin film criticism should help the audience form its own critical conscience, rather than providing a ready-made one or merely judging films. A film critic should educate the moviegoer to responsibly and consciously deal with the dreams that are offered to him/her as his/her own. And this is possible only by getting to know how those dreams work, that is, every formal, technical, social and aesthetic aspect of cinema. Not surprisingly, the last paragraph of Bazin’s article (which overtly refers to psychoanalysis) similarly displays the aim of postwar film culture:

To defend the public against this form of abuse of consciousness, to wake the audience from its dream, to pull back all the veils, right down to the seventh

veil that masks the viewer's own unconscious desire, to help the audience in this way to prioritize its pleasure according to what it contains, to teach it at the same time how to reject what consciousness could not admit, were it to fully understand that; to make the public sensible to the needs or illusions that were created in it as a market, for the sole purpose of providing the opium sellers with an outlet for their drug [. . .] (41)

Elsewhere, Bazin clarifies the same point with a simple example. Both Preston Sturges's *Christmas in July* (1940) and Jacques Becker's *Antoine et Antoinette* (1947) revolve around a winning lottery ticket. "Antoine et Antoinette ont eu de la chance, le héros de Preston Sturges : sa chance. Une chance théologique, à la fois gratuite et méritée, comme la grâce, selon Bossuet" ("Le film en filigrane. L'art et la manière" 14) ["Antoine and Antoinette were just lucky [*avoir de la chance*], Preston Sturges's hero had his own chance [*avoir sa chance*]. A theological chance, gratuitous and deserved at the same time, like grace according to Bossuet"]. In the American film, luck is something personal, a kind of predestination that the individual must face as a challenge. So the same narrative device (the lottery ticket) gives birth to two different social dreams. This distinction is precisely one of those "implicit statements" that "the social, political, moral, and lastly aesthetic value of a film depends on" ("Every Film" 40): an ideological fantasy that coincides with the very way it has been formulated, and thus requires vigilant viewers, aware of the connections between a certain formal configuration and the underlying desires.

The Resistance of the Subject

Psychoanalysts explain to us that our dreams are the very opposite of a free flow of images. Whilst these express some fundamental desire, it is by necessity in order to cross the threshold of the super-ego, hiding behind the mark of a twofold symbolism, one general and the other individual. But this censorship is not something negative. Without it, without the resistance it offers to the imagination, dreams would not exist. (Bazin, "De Sica" 71)

The keyword here is *resistance*. The shape fantasy assumes can never fully correspond to the subject's intimate desire, for the simple reason that the latter does not exist. This censorship is not something negative precisely because it does not really deny anything. As a result, there is a fundamental discrepancy between the fantasy and the desire it should embody: fantasy structurally resists its own configuration, since the latter just cannot be reduced to zero. Fantasy bears a trace of it in the guise of formal inconsistencies and/or contradictions that affect its formulation. On the one hand, these blots derive from the impossibility to force desire into a proper symbolical shape; on the other hand, they are a decisive form of faithfulness with regard to the nothing that the desire of the subject is. In other words, these inconsistencies signal the direct presence of the subject (as a void) inside the fantasy: his/her own factual involvement in it. This ultimately means that the truth of fantasy which fiction films can document is twofold: on the one hand, they illustrate certain social-ideological orientations actively influencing people's lives; on

the other hand, they can do so only bearing traces of their involvement, by means of these breaches (symptoms) in the filmic communicative texture. The subject cannot identify completely with his/her fantasies, but at the same time s/he cannot really consider them something foreign to him/herself. They are the subject's most intimate (and void) self, but they do not really belong to him/her (they cannot own a void). And this is why a pedagogy of cinema is all the more needed: audiences should learn to manage the distance that divides them from their own ideological fantasies.

This also explains why, as Philip Watts has rightfully pointed out (221), Bazin's critical approach had nothing to do with demystification. It is not a matter of taking off the imaginary ideological mask and unveiling the truth. On the contrary, fantasy has a truth of its own that one has to deal with: the way it responds to the void of our intimate desires through its own inconsistencies. To say that "it is only an illusion" would mean to avoid the core of this paradox. Bazin himself was well aware of it: he was highly suspicious of those films attempting some kind of demystification, i.e. to unveil fantasies as illusions, neglecting the secret link with the void of the subject's desire. With regards to this, he was relentlessly strict even towards indisputable masterpieces such as Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). He accused the film of mocking an ideological system it still was part of: it dismissed Hollywood's past glamour while still taking part in it. In other words, it fooled the spectator by making him/her believe s/he was looking at Hollywood from a cynical and objective distance, but this was just another illusion, since *Sunset Boulevard* is totally a Hollywood product.

Cette sorte d'autopsychanalyse du cinéma doit aboutir comme toute psychanalyse aux résistances du sujet. Il faut encore au cinéma quelques illusions sur lui-même pour en faire un film. Aussi bien son interprétation de la star déchue a-t-elle valu à Mme Gloria Swanson . . . l'Oscar de l'interprétation féminine. ("Boulevard du crépuscule" 2)

[This kind of cinema's self-psychoanalysis must lead to the resistance of the subject, just like any other sort of psychoanalysis. Cinema still needs some illusions about itself in order to make a movie about itself. Similarly, her interpretation of the fallen star gained Mrs. Gloria Swanson . . . the Oscar as Best Actress.]

There is no "résistance du sujet" here because fantasy does not resist its own formulation. Wilder's depiction of early Hollywood glamour merely describes it, without coming to terms with its own contradictions and inconsistencies.² *Sunset Boulevard* cannot be the cinema's self-psychoanalysis it aspires to be, because it shows the viewer a false distance from a certain ideological frame. The truth of a fantasy cannot run smooth for a subject. Otherwise it is just untrue, since it misses

²Actually, in another article Bazin wrote on the same film, he did spot one of these symptoms: the scene when some old footage is projected showing the main character played by Gloria Swanson as a young diva. Bazin's reproach is that the film did not quite confer to such moments their due importance ("Hollywood").

the irrational connection between the fantasy and the subject. One cannot be completely awake, but always on the edge between dream and wakefulness. This is also why Bazin so frequently sets himself against certain movies influenced by vulgar psychoanalysis. What he despises is the tendency to mistake psychoanalysis for a linear and determinist explanation of human unconscious, reduced to a mere cause-effect chain. According to Hollywood, if ever there is such a thing as a gangster in America, this can only be because he must have hit his head when he was a child (Bazin, “Le diable n’est pas américain”). And this is also what he means when he writes: “it is a sociological psychoanalysis rather than a critical analysis that can best reveal cinema’s secret reality” (“Every Film” 40). Film criticism should not simply unveil how a cinematic text and the grand cinematic machine work. It should help the moviegoer to inhabit the limits of what s/he can consciously assume—including inter-subjective (social) constructions of any kind. It should investigate how social myths are foreign and intimate at the same time for him/her. Indicatively, a few lines later, Bazin confirms that film is always a social documentary in that it is “the recognition of our collective dreams, illusions, and, I daresay, *worst* thoughts” (41; my emphasis).

Jacques Lacan’s name for this domain of what cannot be fully and consciously assumed and symbolised is the *Real* (as opposed to the *Symbolic* and the *Imaginary* in his famous triadic classification). It would not be inappropriate to affirm that Bazin reads Freud in ways that appear to be significantly close to Lacan’s, in that the latter decisively radicalises (compared to Freud) and emphasises the (already Freudian, to a lesser and more ambiguous extent) fact that this Real does not exist in itself, but only has a negative existence, i.e. it signals a basic void that consciousness somehow bangs its head against (Lacan, *The Seminar, Bk. XI* 17–64). In the article which is being analysed here (as in many other pieces by Bazin), social myths and ideological formations, albeit illusory, are ‘true’ because they concretely affect the life and feelings of people, who act accordingly—but they are true also in a different, perhaps more important, sense that is closer to the Lacanian Real: they are there regardless of the subjects’ intentions and beyond their deliberate control. The existence of such fantasies is independent from what the viewers consciously think and understand.

As a matter of fact, ever since Bazin’s death and since the *Cahiers du Cinéma* special issue that was dedicated to him shortly afterwards, his attachment to filmic symptoms has always been unanimously acknowledged (Leenhardt 16). As a rule, Bazin’s social psychoanalyses through film were generated by a relevant, enlightening but barely discernible detail detected in the film’s texture, and taken as an input to develop a more general diagnosis: “Je peux assurer le lecteur que je m’efforce toujours de discerner dans les spectacles qui me font perdre mon temps le petit quelque chose par quoi rattraper, ne fût-ce que d’un cheveu, le film que l’on devrait laisser se noyer” (Bazin, “Fric-frac en dentelles” 2) [“I can assure the reader that I always strive to discern, in each show that wastes my time, that little something thanks to which even a film deserving to be drowned can be pulled back, if only by one single hair”]. The aforementioned example regarding the lottery ticket

is fairly eloquent in this respect. All the theological significance of Jean Delannoy's *Dieu a besoin des hommes* is extracted from an absolutely marginal scene when a few sacred Hosts fall down on the ground (Bazin, "Cinéma et théologie" 243).

Bazin was fully aware of the theoretical implications of such a method, and of what it means to set in place the dialectics of the margins. While speaking precisely of certain films whose meaning had to be detected through the sideways and ultimately unintentional traces on their surface, he gives us an extraordinary definition: they are like cannon, "composés de vide avec du bronze autour. Mais c'est ce vide qui est leur vraie substance. Et les images plus ou moins intéressantes qui cernent ces lacunes sont là pour les authentifier et leur donner, comme on dit justement des canons, une âme" (Bazin, "Avec *Naufrage volontaire*" 4) ["made of emptiness with bronze all around. But their substance is that very emptiness. And the more or less interesting images surrounding these gaps are supposed to authenticate them and give them a soul [*une âme*], precisely as cannon are said to have"]. The French word for cannon tube is *âme*, meaning also 'soul'. This has everything to do with the Lacanian Real: the inner core of a human being is nothing in itself; one's own most intimate core must be paradoxically located outside oneself, in the marginal, eccentric remains of one's failed attempt to rationalise it through language; in other words, in the symptoms. The dream holes (Bazin's words) are nowhere to be found, except in those little shakes on the surface that show the imagination's irreducibility to its own explicit formulation, although it cannot really be anything else. Not surprisingly, the last sentence of Bazin's most famous essay recalls the well-known slogan by Lacan according to which "unconscious is structured like a language" (*The Seminar, Bk. III* 167): "on the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language" (Bazin, "Ontology" 16). The unconscious is ultimately to be located in the strong bond connecting language with its own inherent limits (the Real). In other words,

in a first move, the Real is the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly, but only through the lenses of a multitude of symbolic fictions, virtual formations. In a second move, this very hard core is purely virtual, actually nonexistent, an X which can be reconstructed only retroactively, from the multitude of symbolic formations which are 'all that there actually is'. (Žižek, *The Parallax View* 26)

Slavoj Žižek has repeatedly pointed out that this (along with countless other similar traits) suggests a fundamental convergence between Lacan's and Hegel's perspectives (see, e.g., *The Parallax View* 16–67). The Hegelian relationship between essence and appearance follows exactly the same path: the essence is entirely exhausted in (and fully manifested through) what supposedly blocks the access to it, that is, appearance. In other words, the essential is embodied in the residual, something ultimately synthesised in the Hegelian formula "the Spirit is a bone" (8). "It is not only that the universal Essence articulates itself in the discord between its particular forms of appearance; this discord is propelled by a gap that pertains to the

very core of the universal Essence itself” (Žižek, *The Parallax View* 33). According to Žižek, the problem is not how to reach reality beyond appearance, but “How could—in the middle of the flat, stupid reality which just is there—something like appearance emerge?” (*The Parallax View* 29). And this is also Bazin’s fundamental question facing cinema. In some particular occasions on the screen, the superficial appearance of phenomena seems to reveal its own hidden essence at the same time while it shows that there is no possible beyond. There is only appearance, and a superficial gap opening within it between appearance and appearance itself. This gap (the Lacanian Real) is the only possible essence. Bazin’s sociological psychoanalysis is an attempt to investigate the emergences of these gaps on the surface of films, as moments in which social myths and ideological fantasies are revealed. The reason why he calls these revelations truths is not only the fact that they unveil some hidden and latent authentic presupposition, but also (and foremost) their manifesting on the surface something that resists the subject and his/her conscious adhesion, and as such binds him/her all the more strongly.

The Hegelian-Lacanian line of thought should not sound inappropriate in relation to Bazin. Not only was Lacan very influential throughout the fifteen years of Bazin’s writing activity (1943–58), but also the two significantly shared part of their respective intellectual influences, that is, the French side of phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty in particular, as documented by Dudley Andrew’s biography *André Bazin*), heavily marked by the Hegelian lectures by Alexandre Kojève (one of whose pupils was Lacan himself). Not to mention that Andrew’s biography also testifies that the young Bazin was very fond of Hegel’s philosophy.

Behind and before the Camera

A kind of psychological truth, like the one described so far, might in fact be at stake, but what about empirical reality? What about the several indications in Bazin’s famous anthology collection *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* (1958–62) suggesting that, in cinema, reality “lays itself bare like a suspect confessing under the relentless examination of the commissioner of police” (“Evolution” 27)? In fact, there is no real contradiction here. In Bazin’s writings, empirical reality by all means plays a key role. However, cinema is not supposed to provide an exact copy of it; that is, empirical reality is not supposed to be passively transferred on screen. On the contrary, it is a potential site for revelations. Cinema does not merely document empirical reality, but (if used properly) is capable of seizing those exceptional cases where empirical reality manifests the essence (Bonitzer 128) in the not-so-metaphysical sense described above. In other words, they are those occasions when something more than the sheer appearance of empirical reality seems to emerge, even if, strictly speaking, nothing supernatural occurs. Bazin repeatedly points towards such an essence beyond cinema’s apparent objectivity, as the following extracts from his writings demonstrate:

L'objectivité infaillible de la caméra a ce privilège paradoxal de nous révéler l'inépuisable grouillement de métaphores qui fait la vie du monde. ("Sables de mort" 14)

[The camera's infallible objectivity has this paradoxical privilege to reveal to us the inexhaustible swarming of metaphors that makes the life of the world.]

Bresson, donc, s'attache avec raison aux mille détails de la vie de prison qui permettent d'expliquer et de justifier le projet de son héros et de sa réussite. Mais le spectateur sent pourtant très vite que cette accumulation de faits vrais n'a rien de documentaire. A travers eux ce n'est pas la vraisemblance matérielle, mais une vérité plus profonde que Bresson cherche à atteindre et qui est quelque chose comme le secret spirituel de cette invention et de cet entêtement hors du commun. Je dis "spirituel" car c'est évidemment au delà de la psychologie qu'est située la source de ce courage [. . .]. Il ne veut pas que l'action de son héros nous captive par l'incertitude, la surprise ou l'angoisse, mais exclusivement par le rayonnement moral qui se dégage de chaque geste et qui éclaire comme de l'intérieur les objets mêmes qui y sont mêlés. ("Un condamné à mort" 14)

[Thus, Bresson rightfully sticks to the thousand details of prison life which allow an explanation and justification of his hero's project and success. Nevertheless, the viewer feels very soon that this accumulation of real deeds has nothing documentary about it. Through them, Bresson does not try to attain material verisimilitude, but a deeper truth, something like the spiritual secret of that invention and of that uncommon stubbornness. I say 'spiritual' because the source of this courage is placed clearly beyond psychology. He does not want the actions of his hero to captivate us thanks to incertitude, surprise or anguish, but exclusively by the moral irradiation that emanates from each gesture, and that shine from the inner side of the objects involved.]

Une intensité dramatique toute intériorisée, comme imprégnée dans les apparences volontairement discrètes des choses. Jean Gremillon a retrouvé dans l'île d'Ouessant la poésie nostalgique qui faisait déjà la beauté de ses premiers films muets. ("L'amour d'une femme" 135)

[A wholly interiorised dramatic intensity, as if soaked within the willingly discreet appearances of things. On the isle of Ouessant, Jean Gremillon has found again the nostalgic poetry that had already made his first silent movies so beautiful.]

When he [Boudu] comes up on the bank, an extraordinary slow 360-degree pan shows us the countryside he sees before him. But this effect, by nature banally descriptive, which could indicate space and liberty regained, is of unequalled poetry precisely because what moves

us is *not* the fact that this countryside is once again Boudu's domain, but that the banks of the Marne, in all the richness of their detail, are intrinsically beautiful. At the end of the pan, the camera focuses on a patch of grass where, in a close-up, one can see distinctly the white dust that the heat and the wind have lifted from the path. One can almost feel it between one's fingers. Boudu is going to stir it up with his foot. If I were deprived of the pleasure of seeing Boudu again for the rest of my days, I would never forget that grass, that dust, that dust, and their relationship to the freedom of a tramp. This has been a rather long and lyrical treatment of a scene in which nothing happens. I could choose many others, each of which would bring out Renoir's feeling for the appearances of things, or at least the important role that these appearances play in his art [. . .]. A thousand examples could illustrate this marvelous sensitivity to the physical, tactile reality of an object and its milieu; Renoir's films are made of the surfaces of the objects photographed, and his direction is frequently but a caress, a loving glance at these surfaces [. . .]. The most visual and most sensual of filmmakers is also the one who introduces us to the most intimate of his characters because he is faithfully, lovingly fond of their appearance, and through their appearance, of their soul. ("The French Renoir" 85–90)

Clearly enough, empirical reality is definitely involved, but so that the reality of appearance can break through, i.e. the essence of phenomena letting itself be viewed on the surface of things. Re-reading (at least) "Ontology of the Photographic Image" according to this perspective would make perfect sense. Sentences like "Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction" (14) acquire a new and truer meaning if the reality of appearance is reputed to be at stake instead of the supposed naïve transplant of empirical reality on screen.

Furthermore, many times in his writings Bazin suggests that this reality of appearance stems from some kind of apparent surplus being produced within appearance itself. He frequently mentions a *surcroît* (increase) ("David et Bethsabée" 67) or a *supplément* (supplement) ("La Strada" 114) of meaning over sheer empirical reality through appearance.

Given the fact that this movement toward the real can take a thousand different routes, the apology for "realism" *per se*, strictly speaking, means nothing at all. The movement is valuable only insofar as it brings increased meaning (itself an abstraction) to what is created. ("The French Renoir" 85)

On reconnaît les grands metteurs en scène à ce que la réalité dépasse chez eux la réalité. ("Lola Montès" 26)

[We recognise great directors when in their films reality exceeds reality.]

We would define as realist, then, all narrative means that tend to bring an added measure of reality to the screen. ("An Aesthetic of Reality" 27)

On the contrary, André Cayatte and Charles Spaak are blamed because their screenplays “need a very different reality, a reality ‘without rest’ that is exactly divisible by its initial ideas”, whereas “what distinguishes reality from abstraction, the event from the idea, the credible character from a mere psychological equation, is the portion of mystery and ambiguity therein that resists any attempt at analysis. The only true fiction hero is in a way more than what he is” (Bazin, “Cybernetics” 99). In other words, cinema sets a special contact with reality, but not by offering a 1:1-scaled copy of it. Cinematic reality stems from a fundamental unbalance with regard to sheer empirical reality. In this sense, Bazin is more Cavellian than one would think (Cavell 23–25): the umbilical link between cinematic image and the empirical world is such that the ambiguous unbalance (and not the plain correspondence) between the two binds them all the more to each other and can make it so to “let the world happen” (Cavell 25).

So now we have reached the very same conclusions that were found regarding the psychoanalytical realities of films as social documentaries: the coincidence between essence and appearance by means of some kind of remains. Thus, the question “Does Bazin’s notion of reality refer to empirical reality or psychological reality?” can now be answered: both, indifferently. The philosophical importance of cinema, for Bazin, is precisely that the metaphysical dyad of subject-object is defused and discarded, replaced by something more fundamental: the surface manifestation of essence thanks to a non-assimilable remnant, that can take place either at the level of empirical reality, or in wo/man’s mind. Truth for him is this kind of coincidence, regardless of its being before or behind the camera, on screen or in the audience’s heads (Elsaesser 9–11).

Two films in particular provide us with a striking confirmation: *Los olvidados* (1950) and *Susana* (1951). Their author, Luis Buñuel, is famous for his “objectivity pushed so far that it penetrates its object through and through. It affirms this unmercifully at first, to better transcend its appearances, but by the same appearances” (Bazin, “El” 73). *Los olvidados* is almost a paradigmatic case of empirical revelations: on the surface of ugly and abject places and people, Buñuel’s ultra-objectivity detects something like a surplus, some grace and dignity mysteriously shining through (Bazin, “Los olvidados” 56–58). *Susana* is “the opposite of *Los olvidados* on all counts” (“*Susana*” 65). Yet, this oppositeness is too sharp not to hint at a substantial, paradoxical sameness.

Susana had escaped from a house of correction and is presented as incurably depraved. When, at the end, the police catch her and return her to the cell, the scriptwriter flashes back to an idyllic scene on the hacienda, where this demonic female had tried to wreak havoc.

But who could take this story seriously, if not someone who totally lacks humor? The story is so obviously pushed to the extreme of its conventions that one simply has to make fun of it. This apology for moral order espoused by the lower Mexican nobility at the expense of the “demon of flesh” is too systematic not to undermine its own purpose. Not that I am accusing Bunuel of cynical intentions or that I wish to make *Susana* into an exhibition of

black humor—quite the opposite. It is rather a cheerful film, as *Subida al Cielo* often was. The problem is not to try to understand the film from inside out, but to avoid taking it seriously in its intended sense, which is its implied meaning. Immoral because of the excess of its apologue, *Susana* remains immoral without a grudge or deep profound convictions. (Bazin, “Susana” 65–66)

In other words, *Susana* is a social documentary making us face our own ideological prejudices to the point that we cannot help but feel that they are something foreign, not really belonging to us. We are made to identify with our own fantasies, but this provokes a sort of rejection: the subject cannot come to terms with his/her own fantasy, and resists it.

Either at the level of empirical reality, or at the level of collective unconsciousness, *Los olvidados* and *Susana* manifest a reality that lies in a contradictory appearance, revealing their essence only by means of an ineffable remains, something that eludes and contrasts rationalisation. So these twin movies can be said to form a kind of chiasm in the very sense Merleau-Ponty (130–55) meant it: they witness a common basis granting the reversibility between perception (*Los olvidados*) and thought (*Susana*), between the visible and the invisible. Merleau-Ponty called this common basis *flesh*; for Bazin, it was definitely something less directly carnal, and rather closer to the Lacanian Real. The reality revealed by cinema is the reality of appearances, the spiritual epiphanies of empirical reality as well as the unconscious (or not entirely conscious) social myths that remain stuck in the throat of the subject. Both cinema and film criticism should then help the viewer to become familiar with the ways something more real than reality itself (notably something the subject cannot fully consciously assume) can be manifested within the images, and should provide him/her the skills to detect, decode and come to terms with the ways the (collective) unconsciousness can take shape through marginal, residual wrinkles (veritable *symptoms*) appearing on the surface.

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