

Realism and Eroticism: Re-Reading Bazin

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Abstract:

Bazin's distinction between different kinds of realism discriminates between an authentic mode of apprehension and mere sight, or between revelation and spectacle, as it were, where spectacle, significantly, is connected with the arousal of physical sensation. My argument is that this resonates in unexpected ways with a 'modernist' conceptual paradigm, specifically in relation to the persistent prioritization of the temporal over the spatial as the superior aesthetic register, itself based upon a residual resistance to the visual realm. To pursue this, I shall return to some of Bazin's most influential texts and concepts. In addition, a consideration of his more marginal discussions of cinema, sex and censorship will offer an oblique entry point into some of these broader issues at play in his work.

Keywords: André Bazin, Gotthold Lessing, realism, pseudorealism, modernism, film theory

There has been considerable discussion of Bazin of late. Given the widespread disillusionment with what can broadly be called 'film theory' (that is, those schools of thought heavily influenced by Saussurean linguistics, Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and focused on issues around spectatorship and 'the subject'), Bazin is being re-evaluated in terms of his relevance to not only the history, but also the future, of film studies. Attracted by the breadth and prescience of his thought as well as the elegance and ambiguity of his writing, scholars are finding in Bazin rich and diverse potential for critical renewal. The ensuing effort to recuperate his extensive contribution has included both the painstaking excavation of his numerous articles and reviews, hitherto considered lost to history,¹

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along with equally painstaking re-readings of those texts and concepts already identified as central to so-called 'Bazinian realism'.²

In this more conducive climate, Bazin's ontological approach to cinema is being reconsidered as providing a possible way out of the cul-de-sac created by the focus on 'film language' in film theory. Bazin's perspective may have more in common with subsequent—'modernist'—film theory than is immediately apparent, however. While differing from the foremost French film theorists of the 1960s and 70s in several very significant ways (as discussed below), what Bazin shares with his successors is a deep-seated anxiety about the image and what it might show. As I shall argue, this common critical thread becomes clearer when we situate Bazin's best-known writings on cinema and its obligation to reality in the context of what he considered his more 'marginal' reflections on cinema and its engagement with the erotic. Investigating Bazin's ideas about the proper limits of cinematic display in relation to more obviously taboo subjects such as sex and death can reveal the extent to which a subtly censorious attitude to the image itself supports his thinking about the proper remit of cinematic representation *per se*.

As it stands, the prevailing critical tendency is to situate Bazin in direct opposition to the so-called 'textual turn' in film theory in the 1960s and 70s. Certainly, the most extensive critiques of Bazin emerged in this context, when not only an overtly naïve realism but any attempt to elaborate on the relationship between the image and its referent was considered at best misguided and at worst deluded. Bazin's apparent delight in the referential properties of cinema, however ambiguous and nuanced this may be, was dismissed in favour of an emphasis on montage, understood as facilitating the transformation of film into a kind of 'writing'. The modernist aesthetics of Benjamin and Adorno and, most significantly, their shared interest in the potentially emancipatory properties of montage (freeing the audience from an uncritical investment in the image in the case of Benjamin, or liberating the image itself from the burden of realist representation in the case of Adorno) appeared to support this perspective.³ Bazin's investment in deep focus and the long take, on the other hand, appeared anti-, or at least, pre-modern, if we understand modernism in the sense elaborated by Gertrud Koch (amongst others), as a 'gnostic variant on the *Bilderverbot*', that is to say, constituted by a profound distrust of the image and figurative representation.⁴

As such, it is worth noting that Colin MacCabe, one of the most prominent of this cohort of critics, has since revised his opinion

regarding Bazin's position vis-à-vis modernism. In a recuperative gesture that condemns his own and others' inability to recognize Bazin's 'multiple understanding of the real', MacCabe argues that 'if we understand Bazin's realism not as a single relation between representation and reality but as a complicated series of relations between camera and setting, then it is evident that he is to be counted with the great modernists of the twentieth century' (*BM*, 71). According to MacCabe, Bazin's attention to the complexity of cinematic realism, as well as his open-minded enthusiasm for emergent media such as television, mark him as 'modern', in stark contrast to his critics whose infatuation with the 'Parisian theory' (67) of the 1970s defines them as hopelessly dated. In this context, Bazin's modernism can be understood in the general sense of an intellectual openness or innovation that looks forward rather than back. What follows here, however, locates what we might call Bazin's incipient modernism in a specific attitude towards time and space as aesthetic registers, an attitude itself imbued with a suspicion of the visual realm as potentially misleading.

It is certainly the case that a focus on Bazin's thinking around cinematic time is key to his critical resuscitation. From this perspective, points of contact have been established between Bazin and Benjamin (though their views were once considered quite contrary). Monica Dall'Asta, for instance, discusses their shared interest in the social agency of cinema, as well as their emphasis on an understanding of time and its passing as key to an elaboration of the 'aura' in Benjamin and the 'event' in Bazin.⁵ However, it seems that Bazin's thinking around time resonates most intensely with that of Deleuze and several scholars have identified a real or imaginary intellectual exchange between the two.

Recasting Bazin as proto-Deleuzian means recognizing that rather than being solely invested in the image and its mimetic relation to the real, Bazin's ontology of cinema is, as Thomas Elsaesser puts it, 'above all a theory about the inscription and storage of time'.⁶ Viewed from this perspective, 'The Bazinian phrase, "[the cinema] makes a molding of the object as it exists in time," now sounds remarkably Deleuzian' (*BHC*, 11). Diane Arnaud, on the other hand, traces this trajectory in the opposite direction, from Deleuze back to Bazin.⁷ Arnaud describes Deleuze 'as a visionary reader of Bazin' and credits his extensive references to Bazin (especially in *Time-Image 1* (1985)) as crucial to his critical rehabilitation. In her discussion of their shared interest in deep-focus or the 'sequence-shot', she argues that Deleuze's 'intelligence lies

in seeing that Bazin's view of depth of field encompasses the concept of duration' (*BD*, 88).

Lee Carruthers also draws our attention to Bazin and Deleuze's 'shared commitment to the phenomenon of filmic duration'.⁸ For Carruthers however, attending to the significance of the concept of duration (what we might call the subjective or lived experience of time as opposed to its objective measurement) in Bazin means moving away from an emphasis on 'indexical time' and embracing instead the experiential dimension of cinematic temporality. She argues that recent theorizations of filmic time all deploy the notion of the index, a term that Bazin himself did not use but that was influentially applied to Bazin's writing in Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969).⁹ Carruthers argues that this emphasis redirects Bazin's thoughts on time towards an understanding of its semiotic functioning and in so doing occludes those aspects that exceed such a categorization. In short, it 'replaces the immersive experience of filmic temporality with a detached assessment of it' (*BT*, 23).¹⁰

According to Carruthers: '[T]he phenomenon of temporal duration that cinema affords is held by Bazin as a meaningful opportunity: it shows us time, not as something we know in advance, or master retrospectively, but as something that is opened up in experience, that solicits our receptiveness and continued questioning' (*BT*, 16). Understanding Bazinian realism as something that 'shows us time' as opposed to something that shows us 'things' engages with important issues regarding the difficulties faced by contemporary film theory when it tries to attend to aspects of temporal experience entailed in cinema. More pertinent for our purposes, however, is the way in which emphasizing Bazin's investment in the temporal over the indexical can illuminate important aspects of Bazin's thinking in relation to the modernist tradition, most influentially articulated by Gotthold Lessing in the eighteenth century, where it is the aesthetic object's relationship to time and space rather than to some supposed 'reality' that determines its definition and evaluation.

D. N. Rodowick argues that one of the major obstacles to establishing film as an art in the classical sense is the way in which it complicated existing aesthetic categories of (temporal) succession and (spatial) simultaneity. He notes that:

Up until the emergence of cinema, most of the fine arts remained readily classifiable and rankable according to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1766 distinction between the arts of succession or time and simultaneity or space. (...) The

suspicion, or anxiety, that cinema could not be defined as Art derived from its hybrid nature as both an art of space *and* an art of time.¹¹

Rodowick credits Bazin's account of film 'as a unique spatial record of duration' (*VL*, 14) as an important departure from the strict segregation between the spatial and the successive. Similarly, Angela Dalle Vacche claims that Bazin 'ignore[s] all the standard modernist models', especially Lessing's insistence on aesthetic specificity.¹² Certainly, it is clear that Bazin abandons the aesthetic apartheid that sustains Lessing's system and embraces the radical hybridity of cinema as an art form. Yet, as I shall argue, affinities with Lessing's modernist conceptual paradigm remain, especially in relation to the idea that the quality of duration confers a superior distinction upon the aesthetic object.

As W. J. T. Mitchell argues, Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766) situates time and space within a hierarchical conceptual framework informed by implicitly gendered associative tendencies, where the temporal (masculine, immaterial) mode is prioritized over the spatial (feminine, figurative) mode.¹³ Language, being temporal and successive, belongs to the masculine sphere of reason, order and action. The image, on the other hand, being spatial and simultaneous, belongs to the feminine realm; its proper province is the display of visible beauty. These aesthetic categories support the important philosophical distinction between the sublime and the beautiful also, most famously elaborated by Burke and Kant and, more recently, by Jean-François Lyotard in his reflections on the distinction between the modern and the postmodern.

For Burke the sublime is that which cannot be represented; it can only be alluded to by language. Painting, on the other hand, shows us things and as such is confined to the feminine realm of the beautiful. Language, therefore, is inherently superior to the figurative arts, in that only language can allude to the ultimate sublime: God.¹⁴ For Kant, too, 'Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image'.¹⁵ Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) makes a connection between the proscription of images and the creation of the first alphabet, understood as motivated by the desire to uphold the *Bilderverbot*. The rejection of idolatry in favour of a blind faith in the word of an invisible God 'meant that a sensory perception was given second place to what might be called an abstract idea' (*MM*, 113).¹⁶ Crucially, this 'triumph of intellectuality over sensuality' (113) involves turning from a matriarchy to a patriarchy (in Freud's terms, 'an advance

in civilization', as maternity is proven by sensual evidence while paternity is based on an intellectual hypothesis (114)). Taking Freud as his starting point, Lyotard argues that this shift has had a formative influence on Western thinking and that Judaism and psychoanalysis are linked in their (psychotic) foreclosure of the maternal, which in turn is linked to their resistance to images.¹⁷

As mentioned above, many critics and commentators have identified the proscription of images and the related 'triumph of intellectuality over sensuality' as a decisive influence on twentieth-century modernist thinking and aesthetic practice and, as I argue elsewhere, so-called 'film theory' has been profoundly informed by this bias.¹⁸ The combination of Saussurean semiotics, (primarily) Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism conspired to create an academic culture whereby, much like the pagan worship of idols, the 'visual pleasure' of cinema was viewed as inherently misleading to the uninformed masses.¹⁹ As such, liberating spectators from the snare of specular identification required exposing the 'cinematic apparatus' and turning film into a kind of politicized 'writing' via the critical potential of montage.²⁰

At first glance then, Bazin seems at odds with this modernist 'variant on the *Bilderverbot*', what Martin Jay has called the 'antiocularcentrism' of twentieth-century thought.²¹ Bazin's realism seems to stand apart from this tendency, according to Jay most prevalent in recent French thought, and informed by a profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era. On the contrary, Bazin's ontology appears to admire film precisely for what it can reveal to us. It may seem inevitable therefore that Bazin's ideas quickly lost currency in this anti-visual context and that his realism was sacrificed on the altar of semiotics.

The popular perception of Bazin as directly opposed to the anti-visual rhetoric endemic in subsequent film theory is not completely accurate, however, as it sets aside the important distinction in Bazin's thinking between what he called 'true realism' and the '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'.²² So, while French film theory from the early 1960s on clearly rejects Bazin's investment in pro-filmic 'reality' (not least in terms of what Jay calls its debunking of the 'priority of perception over signification' (*DE*, 463)), my suggestion is that Bazin's discrimination between different kinds of realism resonates in unexpected ways with the 'triumph of intellectuality over sensuality' cited by Freud and

endemic to modernism as argued by Koch, Lyotard *et al*, and returns us to the persistent privileging of an aesthetic of time over space, itself connected to a long-standing ambivalence towards the image.

Bazin discriminates between an authentic mode of apprehension and mere sight, or between revelation and spectacle, as it were, where spectacle, significantly, is connected with the arousal of physical sensation. This important nuance returns us to a consideration of his thinking around time, space and duration. To pursue this, I shall return to some of Bazin's most influential texts, such as 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' (1945), 'Evolution of the Language of Cinema' (1950; 1952; 1955), 'Theater and Cinema, Part 1' (1951) and 'Theater and Cinema, Part 2' (1951).²³ This discussion may be deepened however, by considering some of Bazin's less well-known essays that have received little critical attention so far, namely 'Entomology of the Pin-Up Girl' (1946), 'The Outlaw' (1948) and 'Marginal Notes on *Eroticism in the Cinema*' (1957).²⁴ Bazin's consideration of cinema, sex and censorship offers an oblique entry point into some of the broader issues at play in his work; specifically, the implicit assumption that the aesthetic is sustained by abstraction and that in cinema this abstraction is complicit with the uninterrupted observation of time.

In much the same manner as Lessing's *Laocoön* defines the difference between the visual arts and literature, Bazin's comparative analysis of theatre and film is articulated in terms of presence and absence, and '[p]resence, naturally, is defined in terms of time and space' (TC2, 96). In cinema, our relationship to time and space is reorganized through editing, camera distance and camera movement and we are freed from the limitations on human perception inevitably imposed by theatre. Put simply, in cinema drama is 'freed by the camera from all contingencies of time and space' (103). Moreover, whereas in theatre the human takes precedence, in cinema the human does not necessarily hold an *a priori* privilege: 'In other words, it is a matter of an aesthetic that is not concerned with the actor but with decor and editing' (107). The displacement of the human from the centre of the represented world is inscribed in what Dalle Vacche describes as the camera's 'indifferent gaze, where it is easy for the lens, or *objectif*, to displace a human being from the center and make a person appear as an object like any other included in the field of vision' (DC, 150). In short, while the human can be at the heart of cinema, it does not constitute its essence. On the contrary, 'cinema's anti-anthropocentric status' (DC, 144) encourages Bazin's belief 'that the cinema exists to discover or create a new set of dramatic facts' (TC1, 79). This new set of dramatic

facts has to do primarily with the aesthetic treatment of time or, more correctly, of duration.

This is where cinema most obviously exerts its authority over theatre and indeed, as we shall see, over photography. Bazin's 'Ontology' essay summarizes the history of the plastic arts in terms of our psychological need to defend ourselves against the inevitable passage of time. Before photography and cinema, portraiture was the principal intermediary between life and death, or presence and absence, and its primary function was mnemonic. We may no longer believe in the ontological identity of model and image, but 'the image helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death' (O, 10). Photography introduces a whole new potential for recollection, however; it is not just a memory that is preserved but an actual moment in time: 'It is no longer a question of survival after death, but of a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny' (10).

The invention of perspective, the first form of mechanical reproduction if you will, is pivotal in this history, as henceforth art is torn between two tendencies, one primarily aesthetic, a spiritual form of expression whereby the symbol transcends its model, and the other psychological and nonaesthetic, concerned with the duplication of the physical world. Little by little, the appetite for illusion consumed the plastic arts until painting became obsessed with achieving a perfect likeness of reality. The importance of photography is thus in part to do with the way it 'has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness' (12). But photography does much more than simply reproduce reality and in so doing relieve painting of that particular burden of responsibility. Its extraordinary quality is that it shares in the properties of the object 'after the fashion of a fingerprint' (15) and, much like an insect trapped in amber, preserves it in time. Hence what Bazin calls the 'charm', or what we might consider the uncanny quality, of family photographs:

Those grey or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not, however, by the prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption. (14)

If photography's extraordinary achievement is to 'embalm time', cinema is an even greater advance in the history of art. Unlike

the photograph that can only preserve an instant, cinema introduces the quality of duration: 'Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were' (15).

It is significant that while the 'Ontology' essay asserts that photography is the most important development in the history of art, in 'Theater and Cinema, Part Two' Bazin establishes a hierarchy of film and photography based on their respective abilities to preserve the organic unity of time. In this context, photography is 'a feeble technique' in that 'its instantaneity compels it to capture time only piecemeal' (TC2, 96). Bazin compares the photograph to an essentially spatial mapping with light or a 'mold'. While this elevates the photograph above mere resemblance to a kind of identity with the object, it falls far short of the achievements of the cinema. Not only does cinema make a mold of the thing as it exists in time, it 'makes an imprint of the duration of the object' (97).

Bazin approaches a number of key moments in the history of cinema in terms of their respect for the temporal integrity of the pro-filmic event. As is well known, the filmmakers and film styles that Bazin most admires are those that allow time to unfold uninterrupted, quite distinct from its often subordinate role to narrative momentum. The techniques that are most enabling in this regard are of course deep focus and the long take. Considering Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), for instance, Bazin says:

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. (...) [T]he length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true object.²⁵

Similarly, Jean Renoir's genius is 'based on a respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, its duration' (AR, 34). Likewise, what distinguishes the Italian neorealists is their determination 'to transfer to the screen the *continuum* of reality' (37) and, in so doing, to approach 'what a truly realist cinema of time could be, a cinema of "duration"'.²⁶

Unlike montage that plays 'tricks with time and space' (ELC, 36), true realism is predicated upon a fidelity to spatial and (especially) temporal reality. Nonetheless, its achievement is not confined to the use of deep focus or the long take; its guiding principle is a kind of aesthetic honesty or truthfulness. As such, despite its theatrical settings and the emphasis on close-ups rather than deep focus, Carl Theodor

Dreyer's *Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) qualifies for this distinction. Its realism is primarily an effect of an accumulation of what Bazin refers to as 'secondary details', seemingly incidental elements that nonetheless appear to have an intrinsic authenticity: for instance, the 'documentary of faces' (TC2, 109) in the interior scenes and their singularity of expression and physiognomy (their 'pockmarks' and 'red patches'), or the fact that the exterior scenes are lit by sunlight and the 'gravedigger throws a spadeful of real earth into the hole' (110). According to Bazin, 'It is these "secondary details", apparently aesthetically at odds with the rest of the work, which give it a truly cinematic quality' (110).

We could argue that the device of the 'secondary detail' is not really specifically cinematic. It could be situated within the longer history of literary realism where the telling detail (such as the descriptions of wallpaper in Balzac's *Old Goriot* (1835) or the drops of sweat on Emma's shoulders in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856)) lends a textural quality to the narrative that augments the vividness of character and setting for the reader. We can suppose, though, that what Bazin is isolating here is a focus on the singular as opposed to the general that is supremely facilitated by the cinema. This demands an attitude towards reality that Bazin describes as a kind of tenderness or love. Consequently, the 'true merit' of De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) resides 'in not betraying the essence of things, in allowing them first of all to exist for their own sakes, freely; it is in loving them in their singular individuality' (DS, 69).

Importantly though, these details are singular but also significant; they serve to increase our insight into the lived reality of the film-world. On this basis we can distinguish between a true realism and a pseudorealism, the primary and reprehensible purpose of which is to deceive the eye:

[I]f cinema is committed to communicate only by way of what is real, it becomes all the more important to discern those elements in filming which confirm our sense of natural reality and those which destroy that feeling. On the other hand, it certainly argues a lack of perception to derive one's sense of reality from these accumulations of factual detail. (O, 110)

True realism encourages a kind of spiritual engagement with the world of the film, enabled by its unique elaboration in time of the singular reality of its material. Pseudorealism, by contrast, invites an uncritical investment in a credible optical illusion, often arousing unwelcome physical sensation in the process.

Tom Gunning gestures toward this aspect of Bazin's thinking when he writes:

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 he opposed to his ideal of realism and designated as a trick, an illusion — a deceit.²⁷

It certainly seems to be the case that implicated in Bazin's rejection of 'eye-deceiving trickery' (O, 16) is a distaste for the more sensational — both literally and figuratively — aspects of film and photography, especially when they engage with sensuous physical realities. As suggested already, Lessing describes the spatial arts as implicitly 'feminine' insofar as their primary purpose is display. In this context, what can be shown is always in danger of becoming vulgar or even obscene. Bazin's discussion of eroticism in the cinema betrays a similar concern that the erotic (that is, what is alluded to rather than made explicit) might tip over into 'ontological pornography' (MN, 173). This is most directly expressed in relation to the representation of women and sex on screen.

Though initially they may appear somewhat contrary to the ideas he expresses elsewhere, the ideas contained in Bazin's 'Marginal Notes on *Eroticism in the Cinema*' can be brought to bear on his more general thesis in suggestive ways. One of the essay's more startling assertions is that cinema is inherently erotic. Whereas in the other arts the erotic can always be admitted as a possibility — there is clearly a long history of literary erotica or of the female nude in painting — it is only ever a secondary characteristic: 'It is of the cinema alone that we can say that eroticism is there on purpose and is a basic ingredient' (MN, 170). Though Bazin allows this remark to remain ambiguous, his central premiss that the erotic occurs because and not in spite of censorship engages with his more developed thoughts around cinema and its vocation.

For Bazin, the connection between cinema and dreams lies in their mutual dependence upon censorship; what is common to both is their fundamental inability to show us what we really want to see. The consequence of this is that cinema, like dreams, has developed an extensive repertoire of symbols and codes whose job it is to disguise 'the impossible scenarios' (MN, 171) of our desires. Indeed, ingenious moments such as Marilyn Monroe's skirt being blown up by air from the subway grating in *The Seven Year Itch* (Billy Wilder, 1955)

would scarcely be possible without the ‘puritan stupidity’ of the Hays Code that paradoxically generates ‘an extraordinary refinement of the imagination’ (172).

This is not a straightforward defence of censorship as conceived by Hays, however. It is clear that the kind of censorship Bazin is really interested in is of a different order than that externally imposed by society or culture. Bazin makes the striking suggestion that ‘the one critical censorship that cinema cannot dispense with is imposed by the image itself’ (172). Further elaboration on this is regrettably absent and what follows is a series of unresolved observations that ‘one might explore further’. Accepting the invitation to do so, however, may lead us to a broader understanding of what we might call Bazin’s ‘erotics of the invisible’, a somewhat disconcerting twist in his thinking that resonates with a more persistent—and modernist—position, where it is precisely what cinema refuses to show us that elevates it to the status of art.

According to Bazin, of all the possible misapprehensions about cinema, perhaps the most mistaken is the idea that it exists to ‘show us everything’. On the contrary, according to Bazin, it is the duty of cinema to refuse to indulge in a kind of pornography of the real and instead to restrict itself to allusion in certain strategic instances. Certainly, Bazin’s consideration of Howard Hughes’s *The Outlaw* (1943) underlines his conviction that less is more when it comes to the eroticization of the female figure. Leaving aside the more obviously pre-Mulveyan elements of this essay (the automatic assumption that the spectator is heterosexual and male, for instance, and that the image is organized for his viewing pleasure),²⁸ what is of note once more is the extent to which the film’s eroticism is understood as a consequence of its censorship. Much has been made of the literal and figurative prominence of Jane Russell’s breasts in *The Outlaw*; what Bazin notes is their absence. While some viewers felt cheated—the film did not show them what they really wanted to see—for Bazin, it is censorship that elevates the film from being ‘just a daring film, violent and realistic’ (TO, 167) to the realm of the erotic: ‘Admittedly one does not “see” very much (. . .) But it is precisely upon the spectator’s frustration that its eroticism is built’ (166). On this basis, argues Bazin, Hays, and not Hughes, should be credited as the film’s real director.

In a similar fashion, although dismissive of the American wartime pin-up as the product of a commercial, industrial imperative, Bazin recognizes therein a sophisticated understanding of its own limitations, whereby it capitalizes on the censorship imposed on it to produce

an additional form of stimulation. Thus the strategic placement of items of clothing can be more effective than 'the most unmistakable anatomic affirmation' (*EPU*, 159). The idea that suggestion is more alluring than explicitness and that censorship itself can be a source of excitement is not unusual of course, especially when it comes to social and cultural discourses around the proper limits of female display. What is curious about Bazin's comments in this regard is the way in which they extend beyond the commonplace to a more conflicted consideration of the cinematic representation of taboo subjects (that is, sex and death) and from there to suggest the proper remit of cinematic representation itself. In this, as I shall demonstrate, Bazin's position is strikingly reminiscent of Lessing's belief in the need for censorship in the visual arts in order to preserve the integrity of the work of art and its spectator.

Lessing considers the marble sculpture of Laocoön and his sons being attacked by a monstrous sea serpent (circa first century AD) as a particularly persuasive example of the need for censorship in the visual arts. Literary signs, 'although consecutive, are still arbitrary' (*L*, 88); visual art, on the other hand, relies on a motivated relationship between the sign and what it represents. This means that while in Virgil's *Aeneid* Laocoön may be described as screaming in agony, the literary effect is such that it does not occur to us that his 'wide-open mouth makes the face ugly' (23). When represented in the visual arts, however, the suffering Laocoön is reduced to a 'repulsive figure'. For the sculpture to succeed, therefore, '[t]he scream had to be softened to a sigh, not because screaming betrays an ignoble soul, but because it distorts the features in a disgusting manner' (17).

As witnessing ugly things constitutes a potentially unpleasant, as opposed to an aesthetic, experience for the spectator, 'from which we gladly turn away' (17), Lessing insists that visual art must exercise a sort of internal censorship whereby it limits itself to alluding to those aspects of experience that are most likely to invite a visceral response from the spectator (17). The most obvious corollary to this in Bazin's own philosophy of aesthetics, as it were, is the problem of the proper representation of sex and death in cinema. Like Lessing on the visual arts, Bazin's concern is that the signs of cinema are too close to what they represent and therefore are capable of arousing the same emotions in the actors as well as the audience, the result of which is not art but pornography.

Like Lessing, who maintained that 'The closer the actor approaches nature, or reality, the more our eyes or ears must be offended' (*L*, 24),

Bazin believed that the proximity between the represented and the real is so close in cinema that '[i]f you can show me on the screen a man and woman whose dress and position are such that at least the beginnings of sexual consummation undoubtedly accompanied the action, then I would have the right to demand, in a crime film, that you really kill the victim' (*MN*, 173). Bazin supports this somewhat skewed logic by pointing out that until relatively recently death had indeed been a spectacle, citing a recent newsreel sequence showing suspected Communist spies being executed in the streets of Shanghai as exemplary of this sort of obscenity.

Thus it seems that for Bazin representations of sex and death, our origin and endpoint, exist on the same continuum and their visceral reality and consequent ability to arouse strong physical sensations in the spectator must be censored, if the debasement of the actors, the audience and the work of art itself is to be avoided. This proscription connects back to his distinction between the psychological and aesthetic impulse in art. If we are to pander to our psychology alone, then we would be satisfied by pornographic films. On the other hand, 'it is clear that if we wish to remain on the level of art, we must stay in the realm of the imagination' (*MN*, 174). As such, actual sexual excitement by the performers in front of the camera is contrary to the exigencies of art, as is the arousal of the audience member who should be able to witness all acts on screen 'with a perfectly cool head' (175). With echoes of Lessing, in this context the necessary resemblance between the cinematic sign and its referent, along with its ability to excite sensation, becomes profoundly problematic. Therefore, the means of representation must move further away from its material and our response to what we see must be relocated from the body to the mind.

Bazin maintains that nothing is intrinsically prohibited in cinema, 'but only on condition that one resorts to the capacity for abstraction in the language of cinema, so that the image never takes on a documentary quality' (*MN*, 174). A peculiar remark perhaps for the figure most associated with realism; but in a way, to think so misses the point. Bazin's insistence on the importance of allusion may assume its most direct expression in relation to the realm of women, sex and death ('the negative equivalent of sexual pleasure' (174)), but an aspiration towards the immaterial informs his thinking throughout. Rodowick suggests that 'implied in Lessing's distinction is a valuation of the temporal arts for their immateriality and thus their presumed spirituality or closeness to both voice and thought' (*VL*, 13). Similarly,

Bazin's 'true realism' may be rooted in perception, but it must be oriented towards abstraction if it is to achieve the status of art. Perhaps this is why Bazin can claim that 'It is of the cinema alone that we can say that eroticism is there on purpose and is a basic ingredient' (MN, 170).

There is a scene in Jean-Luc Godard's *The Caribineers* (1963) where a young soldier visits a cinema apparently for the first time. We watch him watch the screen in fascination, raising his arm in fear to shield himself from an advancing train (referring us back to anecdotal accounts of early audiences's reactions to Lumière's *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895)), or laughing as a parody of Lumière's *Baby's Lunch* (1895) descends into a food fight. He is most excited by the final film, however, showing a young woman undressing before taking a bath; our soldier wants to see more. He cranes his neck and then leaves his seat, disturbing the other patrons as he tries to find a better point of view. As this is impossible, he approaches the screen itself and jumps up and down in front of the image, trying to peer into the bath to see what is so teasingly out of sight. Finally, in frustration, he tears away the screen as if it were a curtain hiding everything from full view. His efforts are futile, of course, and the image remains unchanged, implacable, projected on the wall behind in a potentially infinite deferral of the desire to 'see it all'.

This scenario speaks to Bazin's understanding of the image and its properly erotic (that is to say, both allusive and elusive) character. Cinema does not exist to 'show us everything'; we may long to 'see it all' but in satisfying that desire the cinema only succumbs to obscenity. Thus, Bazin's consideration of censorship leads him to conclude that 'the cinema can say everything, but not show everything' (MN, 174). The prioritization of abstract over concrete — literalized here and elsewhere as that of word over image — is not limited to taboo subjects, however; it informs his thinking around the proper remit of cinematic realism itself. As such, when a filmmaker like De Sica approaches 'little sister reality' and allows her 'to talk', it is 'the true language of reality that we hear, the word that cannot be denied, that only love can utter' (DS, 69).

According to Dalle Vacche, 'the paradox of cinema', described by Bazin as 'the dialectic of concrete and abstract' (O, 110), is key to an understanding of Bazin's entire aesthetics; his interest in early medieval art, for instance, derives from the fact that 'like the cinema, [it] is both realist and abstract' (DC, 149). My suggestion here, however, is that the tension between the two does not always result in an

equilibrium; while in cinema the abstract is undoubtedly facilitated by the concrete, the movement entailed is one of transcendence. Bazin concedes that giving the cinema the right to say everything but denying it the right to show everything constitutes an unresolved critical contradiction in his thinking. This critical contradiction extends beyond the specific subject matter of this essay, however, and hints at an incipient modernism—in the sense elaborated above—in his thinking, manifest in the tension between his obvious investment in the perceptual possibilities of cinema and its commitment to duration, set against an entrenched resistance to what we might see.

For Lessing, a hierarchical distinction between the equivalents in literature of the ‘still life’ and the ‘moving image’ depends upon the quality of duration. A case in point is the way in which Homer describes the shield of Achilles as something in the process of being made rather than as a finished object. In so doing, Homer ‘makes use of that admirable artistic device: transforming what is coexistent in his subject into what is consecutive, (...) thereby making the living picture of an action out of the tedious painting of an object’ (*L*, 95). In Bazin’s own ‘system’, the movement from the coexistent to the consecutive is similarly transformative. The photograph is superior to the drawing as it is not simply a more realistic spatial representation, but because it is also the preservation of a moment in time. In these terms, film must be understood as an even greater advance in the history of art, as, by introducing the quality of duration, it brings what is weak or ‘feeble’ in photography to its fullest expression.

Bazin’s investment in the temporal dimension of cinema is remarkable in its innovation and Carruthers is correct when she challenges the ‘tendency of the critical literature [surrounding Bazin] to displace the experiential dimension of cinematic time’ (*BT*, 23). But there are other aspects of experience that are less easily accommodated by Bazin. Film shows us things as well as ‘showing us time’ and, within the context of the persistent bias towards the immaterial or invisible endemic in modernity, a bias forcibly articulated in relation to the arts by Lessing and arguably implicit in Bazin, what can be shown is always in danger of lapsing into the ridiculous, if not the obscene, especially if the depiction is likely to incite a sensuous response on the part of the spectator. The solution for Bazin is to censor those aspects of cinema—the spectacular, the sensational—that might distract from its more properly aesthetic, at times approaching ascetic, vocation. As such, contrary to the widespread perception of Bazin as wholeheartedly endorsing cinema’s capacity for direct

realist representation, he advocates instead a sort of erotics of the cinema — oriented towards allusion, not illusion — whose aspiration towards the aesthetic is, ultimately, sustained by abstraction.

NOTES

- 1 Colin MacCabe refers to his ongoing efforts to publish 'The Complete Works of Bazin' despite losing the initial funding for the project from the British Film Institute. See Colin MacCabe, 'Bazin as Modernist' in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and its Afterlife*, edited by Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 66–7, hereafter *BM* in the text.
- 2 See for instance *Opening Bazin* and Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema is! Bazin's Quest and its Charge* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
- 3 See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992 [1936]), 211–44 and Theodor Adorno, 'Transparencies on Film', translated by Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 24–5 (Autumn 1981–Winter 1982), 199–205.
- 4 Gertrud Koch, 'Mimesis and *Bilderverbot*', translated by Jeremy Gaines, *Screen* 34:3 (1993), 211–22 (218).
- 5 Monica Dall'Asta, 'Beyond the Image in Benjamin and Bazin: The Aura of the Event' in *Opening Bazin*, 57–65.
- 6 Thomas Elsaesser, 'A Bazinian Half-Century' in *Opening Bazin*, 3–12 (7), hereafter *BHC* in the text.
- 7 Diane Arnaud, 'From Bazin to Deleuze: A Matter of Depth' in *Opening Bazin*, 85–94, hereafter *BD* in the text.
- 8 Lee Carruthers, 'M. Bazin et le temps: Reclaiming the Timeliness of Cinematic Time', *Screen* 52:1 (2011), 13–29 (23), hereafter *BT* in the text.
- 9 Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Secker & Warburg/British Film Institute, 1969).
- 10 Carruthers discusses Philip Rosen's *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), Mary-Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002) and Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).
- 11 D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 13, hereafter *VL* in the text.
- 12 Angela Dalle Vacche, 'The Difference of Cinema in the System of the Arts' in *Opening Bazin*, 142–52 (142), hereafter *DC* in the text.

- 13 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 109–11, and Gotthold Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, translated by Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984 [1766]), hereafter *L* in the text.
- 14 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, edited by J. T. Boulton (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987 [1757]).
- 15 Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, translated by J. T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: California University Press, 1960 [1764]), 135.
- 16 Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 23, edited and translated by James Strachey (London: Vintage and The Hogarth Press, 2001 [1939]), 3–137 (113); hereafter *MM* in the text.
- 17 See Jean-François Lyotard, 'Figure Foreclosed' in *The Lyotard Reader*, edited by Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 69–110 and 'Jewish Oedipus' in *Toward the Post-Modern*, translated and edited by Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1998), 27–40.
- 18 See Paula Quigley, 'Undoing the Image: Film Theory and Psychoanalysis', *Film-Philosophy* 15:1 (2011), 13–32.
- 19 See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) in *Movies and Methods* Vol. 2, edited by Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 305–15.
- 20 See Jean-Louis Baudry, 'The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' (1970) in *Movies and Methods* Vol. 2, 531–42.
- 21 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), hereafter *DE* in the text.
- 22 André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 1, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 9–16 (12), hereafter *O* in the text.
- 23 André Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema' in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 1, 23–40, hereafter *ELC* in the text; 'Theater and Cinema, Part One' in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 1, 76–94, hereafter *TC1* in the text; and 'Theater and Cinema, Part Two' in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 1, 95–124, hereafter *TC2* in the text.
- 24 André Bazin, 'Entomology of the Pin-Up Girl' in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 158–62, hereafter *EPU* in the text; 'The Outlaw' in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, 163–8, hereafter *TO* in the text; and 'Marginal Notes on Eroticism

- in the Cinema*' in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, 169–75, hereafter *MN* in the text.
- 25 André Bazin, 'An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of Liberation' in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, 16–40 (27), hereafter *AR* in the text.
- 26 André Bazin, 'De Sica: Metteur en Scène' in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, 61–78 (76), hereafter *DS* in the text.
- 27 Tom Gunning, 'The World in its Own Image: The Myth of Total Cinema' in *Opening Bazin*, 119–26 (124).
- 28 See Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.