"IMAGES WITHOUT METAPHOR": RE-VISIONING FRENCH FILM THEORY

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ABSTRACT

ELENA GREAR OXMAN: "Images Without Metaphor": Re-visioning French Film
Theory
(Under the direction of Gregory Flaxman and John McGowan)

This dissertation traces a lineage of writings on the cinema that, I contend, forms a

counter-tradition to the linguistically-grounded French theory that ushered in film studies

as a field. While film theory of the 1960s and 70s exhibited a profound skepticism toward

the sensible qualities of the image, the tradition I assemble takes a decidedly aesthetic

approach to the cinema, considering its images as a sensible terrain that remains

irreducible to language. Far from suggesting a "naïve" embrace of the sensible in and of

itself, however, this tradition foregrounds the cinema's capacity to produce images that

challenge the clichés of common sense thought. Gilles Deleuze's two volumes on the

cinema, *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image*, have elaborated this approach most

conspicuously, but the genealogy I trace encompasses Jean Epstein's film-philosophical

writings on *photogénie*, André Bazin's phenomenological criticism, and Roland Barthes's

late writings on cinema and photography. In assembling this lineage of criticism, I aim to

revalue a body of writing liable to be dismissed as "impressionist," and to extract the

critical stakes of an aesthetically engaged film theory: a theory that does not subsume

films to known concepts, but explores the cinema's potential to produce new sensations

of thought.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CL	Barthes, *Camera Lucida*
M	Barthes, *Mythologies*
CV	Barthes, *Comment Vivre Ensemble*
GV	Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*
IL	Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture"
IMT	Barthes, *Image/Music/Text*
OC	Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes (Vol. I-V)*
PT	Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*
RF	Barthes, *Responsibility of Forms*
RL	Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*
TT	Barthes, "Theory of the Text"
CC	Bazin, *The Cinema of Cruelty*
WC	Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (Barnard translation)
WCI/II	Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (Gray translation)
Q	Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*
R	Bazin, *Renoir*
NP	Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*
N	Deleuze, *Negotiations*
TI	Deleuze, *Time-Image*
TR	Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness*

HI	Deleuze, "Having an Idea in Cinema"
B	Deleuze*, Bergsonism*
CD	Epstein, *Le cinéma du diable*
E1	Epstein, *Écrits sur le cinéma*, Vol. 1
E2	Epstein, *Écrits sur le cinéma*, Vol. 2
FL	Metz, *Film Language*
IS	Metz, *Imaginary Signifier*

Introduction: Wonder at the Cinema

> In its broadest sense, the fact of film is too often taken for granted – yet
> there is so much that remains to be said of it … the sense of wonder at the
> cinema has given us some of the most meaningful works devoted to the
> seventh art.
>
> <div align="right">– Christian Metz[1]</div>

Christian Metz's 1961 essay "On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema" both

pays homage to an era of "wonder" at the cinema and marks its passing. Over the

coming decade, Metz's writings would help to usher in a fundamentally new manner of

thinking about the cinema rooted in the structuralist methods of semiology. In one sense,

this new incarnation of film theory would remain indebted to a lineage of thinkers, from

Sergei Eisenstein to André Bazin, whose "wonder" at the medium led them to grapple not

only with the analysis of individual films but with the very "fact" of film —the question

of what cinema *is*;[2] indeed, Metz would locate the particular task of *theory*, as opposed to

the criticism and film analysis prevalent at the time, in this attention to the nature of the

medium.[3] And yet, if the new film theory bore witness to a continuity with the old theory

in this regard, it would also give rise to a radically new conception of the filmic "fact."

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[1] Metz, *Film Language* 4.

[2] André Bazin's 1958 collection of writings, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma* took this question as their title.

[3] Describing the "wonder" of classical theorists, Metz writes: "Today we tend to smile at this attitude; at any rate, we believe more or less surely that the criticism of individual films states all there is to said bout film in general. And certainly the criticism of films—or, better yet, their analysis—is an enterprise of utmost importance. . . . Still, there are other approaches." (*FL* 3)

Whereas the first generation of theorists had considered film primarily as an *art*, meditating on its specificity and its particular aesthetic potentials, the new theory would approach film above all as a cultural *object* to be grasped in its myriad social and ideological functions. [4] In this sense, the reinterpretation of the filmic fact coincided with a reinterpretation of the task of theory; it was no longer a matter of responding to film's aesthetic richness or marveling at its expressive capacities, but rather of applying precise methods to film in order to illuminate or explain its functions; it was no longer a matter of "wondering" at the cinema, but of demystifying the cinema's capacity to produce such wonder. As Metz would later explain, the intervention of theory in the 1960s consisted in "placing the cinema within the discourse of the human sciences, and not that of cineastes, cinephiles or critics" (Lowry 169).

The era of so-called "Grand Theory" that Metz's semiology gave rise to not only helped to usher film into the academy but produced a division between the scientific discourse of theory and the aesthetic impulses of criticism—a division that continues to hold sway. Whether under the auspices of historicism, cognitivism, cultural studies, or even aesthetics, film theory continues to define itself by the methods and frameworks that it brings to bear upon film in order to explain it, and by a discourse that suppresses wonder and evaluation in favor of methodological analysis.[5] And yet, film theory has

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[4] Edward Lowry has linked the structuralist theory of the 1960s to an earlier movement of "filmology," from which Metz adapted his particular conception of the filmic fact. Filmology, Lowry writes, was oriented by a "positivist belief in the scientific method coupled with an understanding of the cinema as an autonomous object" (45).

[5] In his recent article on the divide between academic theory and cinephile criticism David Bordwell defines the distinction between cinephile writing and academic writing as such: "The prototypical cinephile essay asks 'What distinctive qualities of this film can I detect, and how do they enhance our sense of its value?'" "The prototypical academic interpretation asks 'What aspects of the film are illuminated by my frame of reference?'" ("Never the Twain" 41).

never stopped being haunted by what it left behind. In 1973, Metz was attempting both to retain the wonder and "love" that had led him to the cinema while also judiciously monitoring it:

> To be a theoretician of the cinema, one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it…Not have forgotten what the cinephile one used to be was like, in all the details of his affective inflections… and yet no longer be invaded by him (*IS* 3).

Metz's act of splitting himself in two mirrors the fault line that has run through the field of film studies itself since its inception, and today more than ever, we are encountering its effects. Never before have we heard so many cries of a "lost sense of wonderment" in film studies, so many laments of a film theory that has become "programmatic and imperious," or so many calls to return to the "fragility and density of images" and the love they inspire.[6] And yet, the prospect of a restored sense of wonder in film scholarship can only return as a problem: where does this wonder lead? How does one begin to write out of sense of wonder? Where do the "cinephiliac anecdotes" and other forms of affectively engaged writing that some have proposed find their critical function?[7] In returning to films themselves, do we lose sight of their place in history, their imbrication

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[6] Mark Betz speaks of a "a sense of wonderment that film studies lost somewhere along the way" ("In Focus" 130); Dudley Andrew describes a theory that "seems too programmatic and imperious, whether driven by science in Althusser's sense (Grand Theory) or by models taken from natural and cognitive science" ("Core" 904). Nicole Brenez asks whether film theory might learn to undertake analyses that "begin with films themselves…the thickness, fecundity, fragility, density of images…and not from a terminological rule" (9). Also symptomatic of this return to wonder are the numerous books and collections on cinephilia that have appeared in recent years. See Keathley, *Cinephilia and History,* Rosenbaum, *Movie Mutations,* Balcerzak and Sperb, *Cinephilia in the Age of Digital Reproduction.*

[7] Keathley, in *Cinephelia and History* and Ray, in *How Film Theory Got Lost* both propose forms of cinepheliac writing.

in webs of ideology and culture? Can an aesthetic approach to film be reconciled with the theoretical concerns that have always energized the field, differentiating if from film criticism and cinephilia alike?

These questions, in one sense, return us to what Dudley Andrews calls "two nearly irreconcilable attitudes toward cinema and its study that have remained in tension in the academy ("Flow" 893). In this light, it would be easy to view the "return to wonder" in any number of oppositional terms: as a symptom of film theory's perennial nostalgia for the cinephilia it left behind, a swing of the pendulum from the scientific mind to its aesthetic counterpart, or a return of the repressed. And yet, instead of merely diagnosing these fluctuating terms, we might take the moment of their resurgence to put them into question. Was this division between aesthetics and theory, cinephilia and science, inevitable? What paths were foreclosed with this division? What other concepts of theory were effaced?

This dissertation excavates a lineage of writing on the cinema where aesthetics and theory, wonder at the cinema and its critical counterpart, never part ways but remain intertwined. In the classical film theory of Jean Epstein and André Bazin and the cinematic engagements of Roland Barthes and Gilles Deleuze, we encounter a lineage of thought on the cinema that takes wonder at the cinema as the basis of a decidedly critical practice. Specifically, these theorists all create concepts that articulate the aesthetic consequences of the cinema—why its forms might matter, and what they give us. Epstein's *photogénie,* Bazin's concept of realism, Barthes's "third meanings," and Deleuze's concept of cinematic thought (*pensée-cinema*) all register the cinema's

potential to challenge common sense images of thought and reality, and to generate new images of both.

The first half of the dissertation returns to the film theory of Jean Epstein and André Bazin in order to recover the critical value of their aesthetic theory. Far from the naïve or impressionist theorists they have been taken for, Epstein and Bazin both produce concepts of the cinema that capture its potential to "re-envision" the real. In particular, Epstein's concept of *photogénie* and Bazin's concept of realism both register the particular "shock" that the recorded image poses to thought, and give way to an aesthetic theory that affirms film's visionary power. The second half of the dissertation demonstrates that this engagement with the cinema's aesthetic specificity does not disappear with the advent of structuralist theory but rather goes underground. While the mainstream of theory turns towards questions of representation, considering film as a signifying "discourse," Barthes and Deleuze remain concerned with the specificity of film in its non-linguistic dimensions. In particular, their concepts of "third meaning" and *pensée-cinéma* address the non-signifying, figural power of images, while suggesting how the "sensible" might pose a challenge to the clichés of thought.

Finally, this dissertation aims to extract a concept of the image that restores its visionary power, and a concept of theory that thinks alongside films rather than submitting them to known frameworks. While film scholarship has continued to privilege what images represent over their sensible presences, and to subsume the visibilities of the cinema to what can be said of them, this lineage attends to what remains irreducible in

images, but not unknowable.[8] In this sense, the concepts that this lineage generates do

not come "in advance" of film but rather emerge through the encounter with film,

registering what Bazin calls the "shock of the work of art" (Andrew, *Opening* 215). In

responding to what films make possible to see and to say, they thus suggest an alternative

politics of engagement with art that forefronts theory's own powers of invention.

Revaluing Classical Film Theory: Jean Epstein and André Bazin

If film theory, as D.N. Rodowick writes, "not only acquires a name" in the 1960s

but "becomes a genre of discourse," this discourse does not appear as uniform or

unanimous, but instead bears witness to competing impulses and undercurrents (33). We

catch glimpses of these conflicting impulses in Metz's writings from this era, where his

"wonder" at the cinema remains in tension with his desire to master the cinema as an

object of knowledge. Thus, Metz's inaugural essay on the cinema's "impression of

reality" will on the one hand explain that the "secret" of motion pictures lies in our

manner of perceiving motion as "real;" but on the other hand, if his initial wonder at this

impression of reality is explained in this essay, it is not exhausted. In fact, it continues to

persist as an undercurrent or hidden dimension of his writings. It is not a matter of Metz

naïvely believing in the reality of cinema; rather, returning to his essays of the 1960s, we

begin to see that for Metz, the wonder of the cinema cannot be reduced to its illusionism

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[8] Film studies is increasingly seeking to conceptualize the irreducible or "figural" power of
images, reflecting a broader trend in studies of the image: we thus encounter the the "iconic" turn
in art history and a renewed interest in the "presence" of images (in the work of J.W.T. Mitchell
and George Didi Huberman, for instance), the burgeoning field of "figural analysis" in film
studies (Nicole Brenez and Adrian Martin), the increasingly visible vein of film-philosophy that
asks how films "think" according to their own visual means (John Mullarkey and James
Frampton), and a fascination with cinephelia as mode of viewing that privileges the image that
"escapes" discourse (Paul Willeman and Christian Keathley).

or its power to convince. There is some other "impression" that that cinema makes that remains unaccountable.

Metz's wonder returns covertly in his seminal 1964 essay, "Cinéma: Langue or langage?" where he announces the new project of film semiology. In this essay, Metz begins to build his concept of the image as an "utterance," and of film itself as a terrain of "syntagms," or larger structural units of meaning, that semiology must gather and analyze. And yet, there is a lingering sense in this essay that these terms do not account for something in the image, or for some aspect of its specificity. "An image is first and always an image," Metz writes (*FL* 75). But what is an image? He draws attention to the expressive qualities of the image: "It is not the indication of something other than itself," he writes (76). But it is precisely this intuition of the image's specificity that falls away to the benefit of a semiology that will understand film, if not *as* a language, then as comparable to one.

The question nevertheless persists through Metz's analysis: what is singular about the film image? In what does the "imageness" of the image consist? To the extent that these are the very questions that we find at the heart of classical film theory, Metz's essays bear witness to a hidden path that was never quite exhausted—a wonder that was never quite outstripped. The first part of this dissertation thus returns to the film theory of Jean Epstein and André Bazin to recover their seminal concepts of *photogénie* and *realism.* If these theorists were surpassed at the outset of theory, in subsequent decades they were subject to a critique. Specifically, scholars such as Noel Carroll dismissed

classical theory as a "naïve" from of medium essentialism.[9] On the one hand, the "error"

of classical theory was taken to lie in its naive investment in determining a timeless

"nature" of the cinema, and thus excluding questions of the cinema's history or its uses.

On the other hand, this essentializing was attributed to classical theory's primary concern

with justifying cinema as an art, but also with determining or prescribing an ideal film

aesthetic—the "pure" cinema of the avant-garde for instance, or Bazinian realism.[10]

Returning to the writings of Epstein and Bazin, there can be no doubt that both the

specificity of film and its potential as an art remain central to their concerns. And yet, for

both theorists, the cinema's specificity appears not as the site of a justification but rather

as the site of a *question.* Both Epstein's and Bazin's theories ask how "being able to

photograph, to film, brings a fundamentally different knowledge of the world, a

knowledge that causes an upheaval of values" (Rohmer 11). Specifically, they both

encounter in the cinema as a certain form of perception, a "génie" that produces a

disjunction with our habitual experience of the "real" and presents reality in a new light.

The concepts of *photogénie* and realism thus do not so much propose a timeless essence

of film but register something that film makes possible—in particular, the challenge it

poses to engrained images of the real, but also its potential to replenish and re-envision a

world that has become ever more rationalized and mechanistic. These concepts finally do

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[9] In some sense, the very label "classical" has sealed this theory within an era that more recent
theory has supposedly surpassed while "correcting its errors," as Noel Carroll would have it.

"Classical theory may be riddled with error," he writes, "yet the meticulous assessment of those
errors… will be beneficial—if only to demonstrate the dangers in certain strategies of
theorizing" (11).

[10] Casetti describes classical theories as seeking to "define the nature of the cinema in order to
exalt its peculiarity" (11). Dudley Andrews describes early theory as "lyric statements about the
uniqueness of cinema." (Andrew, *Major* 12).

not merely justify film as an art form but are inventive responses to the cinema that register both the aesthetic power of film and its ethical stakes.

Chapter one returns to Epstein's crucial term *photogénie* as an inaugural concept of cinematic specificity. A hallmark of early film theory, but also one of its most mystifying terms, *photogénie* appeared in the writings of Louis Delluc and other "Impressionist" film theorists of the 1920s, but it was Epstein who became its most ardent devotee. A filmmaker as well as a theorist, Epstein remained fascinated with the camera's power to transform the reality it records, and his early essays on cinematic movement and the close-up, for instance, celebrate those sublime images that thwart all description. "*Photogénie*.... the words have not been discovered… I hope there may be none. Images without metaphor" (Abel 243). It is little wonder that *photogénie* has been dismissed as a mystical and mystifying term. In the 1960s, Jean Mitry referred to *photogénie* as a notion of filmic specificity that belonged to the "narcotic properties of the poppy type" and most criticism has followed suit (Mitry, *Aesthetics* 48). Associated with the cinephile's fetish for the elusive filmic detail, or simply with the "beautiful image," *photogénie* has seemed to suggest little more than an aestheticist mode of pleasure or fascination with the image.[11]

And yet, turning to Epstein's overlooked body of later writings, including *L'intelligence d'une machine* (1946) and *Cinéma du diable* (1947), we encounter a definition of *photogénie* that can be reduced neither to impressionism nor aestheticism,

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[11] David Bordwell, for example, confines it to the "scrappy belletristic discourse of French Impressionism" (232).

but instead suggests a precise concept of cinematic "thinking"—a *génie* or "intelligence" of the machine. "The cinematograph is a *dispositif* that constructs, which is to say, *thinks* an image of the universe," Epstein writes (*EC*1 315). In particular, Epstein points to the cinema's potential to challenge a regime of "verbal thought" that dominates our habitual manner of experiencing the world. Thus, the photogenic power of the close-up, for instance lies in capacity to "de-nature" objects, extracting sensible presences that thwart the instrumental "names" under which they are usually thought, while movement presented on screen can transform the world into a fluid and dynamic universe, where our habitual, static values of thought no longer apply. In such moments of sublime encounter between the human intelligence and the inhuman intelligence of the machine, *photogénie* gives rise to precisely those values that we are not yet thinking.

If Epstein's books register the philosophical consequences of the cinema, his films experiment with the power of *photogénie* to release new aesthetic values. Rejecting the concept of *cinéma-pur* that had remained prevalent among the avant-garde in the silent era (and with which *photogénie* was often equated), Epstein carves out an avant-garde vocation within an "impure," narrative cinema. In contrast to the majority of narrative films where images are subordinated to a "verbal thought" that guides the story, however, Epstein seeks to discover a "visual thought," where images outstrip the narrative that contains them in order to discover their own "story-telling" power—"a *découpage* a thousand times more detailed than most films" (Abel 317). In films such as *Coeur Fidèle, La Chute de la maison d'Usher,* or *Le Tempestaire,* Epstein thus provides the sketch of a story, but it is the "intelligence of the machine" that opens another visual

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world within the story, where new and unforeseen meanings arise. Finally, the cinema

becomes a zone for experimenting with visibilities that emerge from another perception,

that "go head of us" in a sense, revealing unknown dimensions of the real.

It is precisely this notion of the cinema's revelatory power that lies at the heart of

Bazin's concept of realism, explored in chapter two. Writing in the 1940s and 50s,

Bazin's theories of the ontology of the image, and the aesthetic of realism that followed

from it, gave rise to his reputation as a "naïve" realist who located the cinema's

specificity in its power to produce an "objective" image of reality. And yet, we must

recover the sense in which cinema's "objective" power, its automatism, does not suggest,

for Bazin, a power to replicate the real but rather to disjoin it from our habitual views.

We must recover the sense in which photography strikes Bazin as something

fundamentally *surreal,* as it tears perception from the human subject but also gives

perception back to us in a new way. Bazin's thoughts on photography echo the

phenomenological thought of his time, which posits a world that comes to presence prior

to the mastery of representation; but rather than suggesting a naïve empiricism, the

concept of cinematic realism that he develops from this ontology remains deeply

modernist. That is, the realism of the automatic image for Bazin, like *photogénie* for

Epstein, remains connected to values of surprise, chance, and discovery rather than

confirmation; it shows us aspects of the real that had remained hidden but also presents

the real in an unfamiliar light, as we encounter a world that comes to presence "without

us."

Bazin sees this particular value of the image erupting in the modern cinema, and his theoretical project revolves around registering its force. Here too, we must throw off some engrained assumptions about what the style of realism entails for Bazin. That is, realism does not imply a gradual stripping away of style to the benefit of the objective power of the image, or the "annihilation of art," as some have suggested (Wollen 9). Instead, Bazin discovers in the "new avant-garde" of Welles, Wyler, and Rosselini a cinema that draws from the expressive power of the real to expand its own possibilities for expression. The increased realism of their cinema coincides with a discovery of new powers of stylization that both enrich the aesthetic possibilities of the cinema while also eliciting the real, allowing it to rise up. Finally, this cinema suggests an ethics of style that does "master" the real but rather "participates" with reality, giving it back to us in a new way.

In both Epstein and Bazin, we encounter meditations on cinematic art that remain deeply connected to a sense of cinema's critical vocation in the world. Their concern with the specificity of the image does not imply a wish to merely define cinema's uniqueness so as to distinguish it from other arts, but rather, gives rise to their meditations on how the cinema might intervene in a world increasingly receding beneath the horrors of war and a dogmatism of thought. In the midst of this world, they invest the cinema with the artful task of opening to the real, restoring its depth and density, and recovering its unknown possibilities. Finally, their theories bear witness to a poetics of the visible that does not reflect reality but re-envisions it, figuring it anew.

Theory's Other Names: Roland Barthes and Gilles Deleuze

The 1960s would witness the rise of a new problematic that would effectively

drive this idea of cinema as an "art of the real" underground. It was not only the new

structuralist methods that displaced the aesthetic discourse of classical theory with a

scientific one, but a cultural context in which film was increasingly viewed in light of its

ideological function, its prodigious repetition of codes and clichés that shaped a dominant

reality. This critique remained implicit in the theory of Epstein and Bazin, both of whom

located the aesthetic stakes of the cinema in re-visioning the real, rather than replicating

it, and were savy when it came to the ideological function of cinema.[12] And yet, the terms

"revelation" and "realism" would not survive the 1960s; despite their progressive

connotations in Epstein's and Bazin's theory, these terms ever more came to suggest the

very basis of the cinema's ideological power to naturalize a dominant social order. "The

deepest cultural codifications are experienced as the most natural," Metz wrote, and

through its illusion of realism, the cinema appeared to play a crucial role in this

transmission of "natural" meaning (*FL* 78).

The methods of structuralist-semiotics thus coincided with a new imperative to

decode the cinema, to search for the dominant structures through which it performs its

signifying functions. The task, as Metz wrote, was "to accomplish in the cinema, and

especially on level of large signifying units, the great Saussurian dream of studying the

mechanisms by which human significations are transmitted to society" (*FL* 91). And yet,

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[12] Epstein remains critical of film that merely replicates "la realité majeur" while Bazin frequently discusses the manipulative power of film (see "The Myth of Stalin," for example).

if Metz proposed a new concept of the cinema as a signifying discourse, and with it, a new task of theory as a method of decoding, once again, we can trace a kind of crack or fissure in his thought through which we see the glimmering of another possible path. Specifically, while the film theory that Metz helped usher in tended toward a view of the cinema as a grid of meaning, where "every inch of the screen is coded," in Metz's writings of the 1960s we see an allowance for a dimension of the image that resists, or "short-circuits" signification.[13] Indeed, Metz not only draws attention to those moments when a certain, non-signifying quality emerges through the image—"the exactness of an attitude, the inflection of a voice, of a gesture, of a tone"—but also describes them as the basis of the cinema's promise as an art (*FL* 197). "The richest and newest films slip through the mesh," he writes (*FL* 237). If the majority of cinema comprises a "vast genre" where codes are recycled and repeated, defining a realm of the "Plausible," the vitality of cinema, Metz suggests, lies in "those privileged moments when the Plausible is burst open by some new point, or when a new possibility makes its appearance in the film" (*FL* 247).

There is a latent aesthetic evaluation in Metz's theory, a certain *belief* in the cinema that persists between the lines of his semiological discourse, and that implies both an alternative conception of the image and alternative task for theory. "I will one day have to undertake the theoretical analysis of the cinema I support," he writes. But he would never return to these ideas, which remain suspended in his essays of the 1960s like so many unanswered questions. And yet, the question of the irreducible or non-signifying

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[13]Paul Willeman writes "every inch of the screen is coded" (37). See also Colin McCabe: "Film does not reveal the real in a moment of transparency, but rather film is constituted by set of discourses which … produce a certain reality" (182).

dimension of images—everything that "slips through the mesh"—did not disappear from theory but returned in the writings of Metz's teacher, Roland Barthes. Barthes's writings on photography and film in the 1960s, along with those of Metz, played an instrumental role in developing the semiological approach to the image. In essays such as "The Photographic Message" and "Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes had famously described the photographic image as a "message without a code" that nevertheless takes on the status of a code though its "connoted" meanings. Like Metz, however, Barthes was also attuned to a certain challenge posed by the image to signification, and it is precisely this "intractable" dimension that would increasingly come to the fore of his theory.

Chapter three traces a line from Barthes's early semiological writings to his later essays on film and photography ("The Third Meaning," *Camera Lucida*, and "Cher Antonioni") where he pursues those moments that seem to thrwart the semiologist's discourse, confronting him with a quality that can be sensed but cannot be described, that is infused with meaning and yet does not *signify*. Barthes finds that these are the very elements of images that inspire his "love," that he wants to "defend" *(IMT 59)*. And yet, these moments of the intractable cannot be reduced to a fetish or the site of pleasure alone. Instead, they become the vital terrain of a critique that Barthes carries out in relation to the dominant discourse of semiology—a discourse that subordinates sensible values to the requirements of meaning or representation. While this method "works" when images correspond to a realm of established meanings or cultural codes, it breaks down in the presence of anything new or singular. These singular moments thus

inevitably return to haunt semiology, suggesting a realm of sense that its meta-language cannot account for.

But how to write of the intractable? How to speak of what one loves? Barthes's later writings on the image revolve around this search for a new critical practice that can at once attend to the singularity of images and produce their "sense and value." Barthes imagines the task of "evaluation," a term he draws from Nietzsche, as just such a practice, and in *Camera Lucida,* but also in his little-read meditation on the cinema of Antonioni, Barthes produces evaluations that strive to extract the sense and value of images rather than their significations. Barthes's encounters with film and photography become the vital sites of a new idea of theory, where in preserving and responding to the intractable dimension of images he extends their force. This process of evaluation remains inseparable from a practice of writing (*écriture)* that "takes off" from images, seeking to invent itself in relation to a realm of sense that does not yet exist in discourse. It is here, finally, that Barthes proposes an alternative path for theory, or rather, ventures down a path that Metz had opened but never pursued. Film theory remains focused on what images signify or represent, and thus monitors the cinema's generalities and clichés; and yet, might there be another, equally vital "necessity" for theory—one that involves pursuing the rare, image, the unknown image, the image that thwarts existing discourse but that also opens new realms of sense? Moreover, isn't it precisely in this task that theory stands to reinvigorate its own language, going beyond its engrained meta-language in order to invent new styles of discourse?

If Barthes's critical practice in relation to images "proceeds by conceptual infatuations, successive enthusiasms, perishable manias," this discourse cannot be reduced to an impressionism or criticism of "taste," but rather carries out a crucial task of expanding the realm of discourse, expanding the possibilities of the sayable (*RB* 110). "I always set forth problems in terms of language," Barthes admits. "That's my particular limit. An intellectual cannot directly attack the powers that be, but he can inject new styles of discourse to make things happen" (*GV* 362). In his encounters with images, Barthes discovers a non-discursive realm that both remains irreducible to language, and *for this very reason*, propels language toward its own re-invention.

Gilles Deleuze's film-philosophy, the subject of chapter four, also remains concerned with how the realm of images might rejuvenate theory—in this case, by giving rise to the philosophical invention of concepts. Early in his career, Deleuze had suggested that philosophy must enter into relation with the arts in order to discover new forms of expression. [14] And yet, while his volumes *L'image-movement* (1983) and *L'image-temps* (1985) emerge from his particular philosophical concerns, they nevertheless mark an intervention on the terrain laid out by film theory, engaging directly with its problems and concepts. Specifically, in an era when semiology had receded as the dominant model of theory, Deleuze arrives on the scene as an "untimely" semiologist, describing his project as a "classification of images and signs" (*MI* xiv). And yet, the classification that he pursues bears little resemblance to the project that Metz had

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[14] "The search for a new means of philosophical expression… must be pursued today in relation to the renewal of certain other arts, such as the theater or cinema" (*DR* xxi).

initiated; if Deleuze intervenes on the terrain of semiology, he also carries out a radical violence to its existing methods and concepts in order to give birth to new ones.

In particular, Deleuze extracts a series of problems that had been suppressed by semiology, some of which we have encountered beneath the surface of Metz's essays of the 1960s. First, he releases the image from the form of the utterance with which Metz had aligned it, restoring its specificity as an *image* but also the central value of *movement* that he claims Metz had effaced. Second, he displaces the Saussurian notion of the sign indebted to linguistics with a non-linguistic concept of the sign that unhinges it form a logic of representation. Cinematic signs do not represent or signify but rather are characterized by "internal singularities"; they do not pre-exist but must be created (*N* 65, *RM* 286). Finally, he reconceives the semiologist's task of classification. If Metz had set out to classify "large signifying units" (or syntagms) of narrative cinema and thus privileged recognizable units of meaning, Deleuze's classification addresses singular signs from the point of view of their genesis. He thus envisions his task as one of analyzing the unique signs of cinema as they have been "created or renewed" by the cinema's great directors *(MI* ix).

Deleuze however, does not simply undertake a classification that would seek to "describe" the cinema or simply pay tribute to his favorite directors. If he radically reconceives the semiologist's task, this is because he approaches classification as a fundamentally creative act. His taxonomy of cinematic signs, which addresses everything from types of cinematic light to uses of color to means of constructing space, is also a creative terrain of invention. Moreover, his classification gives rise to a certain

interpretation of the cinema that will emerge as the arc of his books: namely, his thesis on the transition from the movement-image of the classical cinema to the time-image of the modern cinema. What does this transition entail? Above all, Deleuze locates the difference of the modern cinema in a new "image of thought" that it internalizes, giving it a fundamentally new vocation. In drawing this connection between cinema and thought, Deleuze once again intervenes on the terrain of film theory, this time by retrieving Epstein's thesis on the "thinking cinema;" and yet, he excavates this thesis only to revise it, or to pose it as a problem. That is, in the postwar era, the very possibility of cinematic thought has been undermined by the fate of cinema, which has become a tool of propaganda and a purveyor of clichés. Moreover, the postwar cinema undergoes a "sensory motor break" that throws into question how thought might "go on" in the wake of the war's catastrophe. And yet, Deleuze argues that it is precisely from this "impower" (*impouvoir)* that the modern cinema begins to undertake the task of discovering new powers of thought, and thus of resisting the clichés that continue to encroach upon it. Indeed, Deleuze defines this new capacity of cinematic thinking in terms of its power to "tear real images from clichés," and thus to produce new signs of thought (*MI* 214).

Deleuze's concept of the thinking cinema finally remains inseparable from a new concept of "thinking the cinema" and suggests an alternative to the dominant methods of theory. To the extent that theory remains beholden to a logic of representation, the most vital films not only elude it, as Barthes had shown, but they also "go ahead" of theory by outstripping it with a more vital image of thinking. Could theory learn something from

the cinema? In its quest to think beyond the cliché, could the cinema propose an alternative and perhaps even more strategic concept of theory? Deleuze's notion of "having an idea in cinema" proposes a theory that comes into relation with the cinema in order to undertake its own strategic act of concept creation, to thus think beyond the clichés of its own thought but also to "restore to language its part in the struggle against power" (*N* 40). The cinema gives theory visions to grapple with—moments where we cannot "say what see "—and it is precisely in these moments that language encounters a limit from which it undertakes its own struggle to give birth to the new. When Deleuze says that "an image is worth the thoughts it creates," he thus proposes a valuation of cinema as a terrain of living thought but also a concept of theory that no longer "reflects" upon its object, but instead, like the cinema itself, undertakes an act of positive creation: "for theory too is something which is made" (*TI* 280).

Finally, in this "re-visioned" lineage of theory, we discover a concept of cinema that affirms its visionary power – a cinema that might know what we do not yet know, and see what we do not yet see. At the same time, we discover a theory that does not so much think about film but alongside it, formulating concepts in relation to the images it encounters. In this sense, Epstein, Bazin, Barthes, and Deleuze do not adopt the traditional posture of theory as a "view" (*theoria*) that beholds cinema from a distance, subjecting it to given methods or frameworks; rather, they submit to the cinema's own view—its strange and sometimes beautiful manner of looking at the world—to see where it may carry them. It may be that this undertaking can no longer be called theory but something else – a film-philosophy? Nevertheless, to the extent that this lineage inscribes

itself within the terrain of film theory, flashing up among its main currents, it opens a new

view of what theory might become.

"Thinking Cinema": Jean Epstein's *Photogénie*

"No one, I think, makes films after theories, but sometimes, theories after films…"

– Jean Epstein[15]

Despite his status as one of the most prolific filmmakers and theorists of his generation, Jean Epstein spent much of his life working in relative obscurity. Epstein had made a name for himself during the 1920s when, at the age of twenty-four, he published his first volume of criticism, *Bonjour Cinéma!* (1921) followed by a string of critically acclaimed films, including *Coeur Fidèle* (1923)*, La Glace à Trois Faces* (1927), and *La Chute de la Maison Usher* (1928). Some of the most vibrant and innovative works of the era, Epstein's films and writings of the 1920s helped foment the avant-garde film culture that was building in Paris and along with it, the hope that the cinema might realize its potential as an art. For most of the avant-garde, this hope was definitely dashed with the arrival of sound, and during the following decades many of Epstein's fellow cineastes abandoned filmmaking and criticism all together. And yet, amidst this mass exodus, Epstein only became more prolific as a filmmaker and theorist, even as his books went largely unread and he struggled to finance his films. Out of step with a critical sensibility that increasingly sought to distance itself from the avant-garde of the 1920s, no less than an industry that had little interest in the experimental forms he favored, Epstein spent his

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[15] Jean Epstein, *Écrits sur le cinéma*, tome 1

final years trying, and failing, to raise funds for a sound version of *La Chute de la Maison*

Usher. At his death in 1953, the newly found *Cahiers du Cinéma* memorialized him with

an issue devoted to his work, but as his friend Henri Langlois noted bitterly in his tribute,

it appeared as little more than a token gesture to a filmmaker who had been largely

forgotten: "What is the use of paying tribute to the dead, if while living they were

buried?" (14).

Out of tune with the tenor of his own time, Epstein did not fare much better

posthumously. His writings, while eventually collected and published in 1974, emerged

at a moment when film studies, newly under the sway of Marxist, semiotic, and

psychoanalytic theory, was hardly poised to receive them favorably. Above all, Epstein

was remembered as classical theory's most impassioned proponent of *photogénie*–a term

that Louis Delluc had used in the 1920s to designate the particular "essence" of cinematic

art, and that Epstein had elaborated in a series of essays that celebrated the cinema's

singular and fleeting moments of beauty. Epstein's rapturous cinephilia could not have

been more out of place in the new climate of theory, embodying precisely those aspects

of classical theory that the new discipline sought to overcome; while Epstein celebrated

those "photogenic" images that elude all description, the new theory was committed to

deciphering the precise codes and structures that render the cinema intelligible. While

Epstein reveled in moments of affective intensity that overwhelm the viewer, film theory

sought to distance itself from the seductive immediacy of images so as to better

demystify their power.[16] When Christian Metz referred somewhat dismissively to those

"lovers" of the cinema capable of being swept away by "prophetic trances," he most

certainly had Epstein in mind (*IS* 52).[17]

Since the 1970s, Epstein has benefited from a historicist perspective that various

scholars have brought to his writings. David Bordwell, Stuart Liebman, and Richard

Abel, for instance, have all contextualized *photogénie* within broader currents of

"Impressionist" film theory, while more recently, Malcolm Turvey has situated him

within a lineage of early film theorists who celebrate the camera's capacity for

"revelation."[18] And yet, in the majority of scholarship on Epstein, *photogénie* continues

to appear as an elusive concept of little lasting theoretical value. In *French Impressionist*

Cinema, Bordwell argues that *photogénie* suggests the camera's access to a realm beyond

material reality and can only dead-end in form of subjectivism: how does this mysterious

"beyond" amount to anything more than "an entity existing solely in the minds of the

artist and the perceiver?" (110, 97) *Photogénie* ultimately strikes Bordwell as "an

impenetrable, quasi-supernatural enigma" that remains "unsupportable

theoretically" (108). Stuart Liebman, who has produced the most thorough study of

Epstein's early film theory, shares Bordwell's skeptical view of *photogénie*, arguing that

it recalls the attempts of "mystics and poets … to describe the sublime," while Ian Aitken

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[16] In his essay, "Magnification," Epstein writes of the close-up: "It overwhelms me. I have neither
the right nor the ability to be distracted. It speaks the present imperative of the verb to
understand" (Abel 239).

[17] Stuart Liebman has also speculated that Metz is referring to Epstein in this passage. 22.

[18] David Bordwell, *French Impressionist Cinema*; Stuart Liebman, "Jean Epstein's Early Film
Theory"; Richard Abel, *French Impressionist Cinema*; Malcolm Turvey, *Doubting Vision*.

describes it as "an elusive and ineffable phenomenon, which cannot be rationally conceptualized" (Liebman 276; Aitken 83). Paul Willeman has attempted to rescue *photogénie* from charges of irrationalism by situating it within the context of cinephilia, where he takes it to suggest a certain "excess" in the image that becomes the site of pleasure. And yet, even for Willeman, *photogénie* ultimately remains no less ineffable or elusive—a "quasi-mystical concept of cinematic experience" that he diagnoses as a "nostalgia for the pre-symbolic" (241).[19] Finally, while Turvey's recent study helpfully situates *photogénie* in relation to other concepts of the "camera-eye," he ultimately takes *photogénie* to embody the outdated, essentialist project of classical film theory that seeks to "differentiate the cinema from other arts" and thus to "provide a rationale for its existence" (109).

The enduring skepticism toward Epstein and *photogénie* in Anglo-American scholarship remains inseparable from the fact that only a handful of his writings, all drawn from the 1920s, have been translated into English.[20] And indeed, in Epstein's early essays, such as "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*" or "Magnification," we encounter a notion of *photogénie* that both elevates it to the "essence" of cinematic art and consistently locates it beyond language and conceptual thought: "*Photogénie:* one runs into a wall trying to define it," Epstein muses. "The face of beauty, it is the taste of

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[19] For a consideration of the relation between *photogénie* and cinephelia, see also Christian Keathley, *Cinephelia and History or The Wind in the Trees* 97-102.

[20] Epstein's later writings have drawn increasing attention in France. Most notably, a 1997 colloquium devoted to Epstein at the *Cinémathèque française* featured several essays devoted to this later body of work. See Jacques Aumont (ed.) *Jean Epstein: Cinéaste, Poete, Philosophe*. See also Ludovic Cortade's "Le Cinéma du diable: *Jean Epstein and the Ambiguities of Subversion*" for a consideration of his later work.

things. I recognize it as I would a musical phrase" (Abel 245). And yet, if Epstein

acknowledges the limits of language in accounting for *photogénie*, he does not take this

ineffability to consign it to the unknowable, nor does he confine it to a realm of

subjective appreciation. Instead, beginning in the 1930s, Epstein undertakes a remarkable

and largely ignored theoretical project centered on *photogénie*, where, rather than

stopping short at its mystery, he elaborates it as a specific concept of cinematic *thought*.[21]

Even in his earliest essays, Epstein suggests that it is the *génie*—the "intelligence" or

"brain" of the cinema—that *photogénie* quite literally invokes. "The Bell and Howe is a

metal brain," he writes in *Bonjour Cinema*, "standardized, manufactured, and marketed in

thousands of copies" (Abel 244). It is precisely this notion of a machine "intelligence"

that Epstein will continue to explore in his later writings, including *L'intelligence d'une*

machine (1946), *Le Cinéma du diable* (1947), and the unfinished manuscript *Alcool et*

cinéma. Over the course of these volumes, Epstein undertakes an exploration of the

cinema's subversive powers of thought— its capacity to envision the world in a manner

that challenges our most engrained perceptions. Indeed, if the cinema strikes Epstein as

"an unforeseen art… a new poetry and philosophy," this is because it bears the potential

to produce "thought-images" (*pensée-images*) that challenge, provoke, or unsettle our

habitual images of reality (Abel 241; *E*2 105). Finally, this philosophic potential of the

cinema coincides with what Epstein conceives as its most vital aesthetic vocation: neither

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[21] Jacques Aumont and Dominique Château have drawn attention to the question of a "thinking cinema" in Epstein's later writings. See Jacques Aumont, "Cinégénie, ou la machine à re-monter le temps" and Dominique Château, *Cinéma et philosophie*, 75.

to reproduce the real, nor to take us "beyond" it, but to mine the real for its unknown possibilities.

In tracing Epstein's engagement with *photogénie* beyond his early writings then, we encounter a concept that can be reduced neither to a vague impressionism nor to a naïve assertion of medium specificity. While Epstein's conception of *photogénie* remains inseparable from the unique capacities of the cinema, his later writings do not simply attempt to justify the cinema as an art, but rather register its "unforeseen" powers and reflect on their consequences for philosophy and film aesthetics alike. Meanwhile, Epstein's films, insofar as they experiment with the potential of *photogénie* to release new "thought-images" or "visual ideas," comprise a theoretical terrain as significant as his writings. Together, his films and texts give rise to a poetics of the image based on a surrender to the "intelligence of the machine" that carries his theory beyond his time. Indeed, we will see that if Epstein endows the cinema with an avant-garde vocation of re-envisioning reality, this is a vocation that, finally, "has no end" (*E2* 70).

Defining Photogénie

"…the words have not been discovered… I hope there may be none.

Images without metaphor." [22]

Even in Epstein's own time, *photogénie* remained one of the cinema's most mystifying terms. Jacques Aumont has traced the term to the early days of photography when it designated the "power certain objects had to give a clean contrasted

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[22] Epstein (Abel 243).

image" ("The Face" 135). Transported to the cinema, however, *photogénie* came to

suggest something far more elusive than an object's clarity on film. While the term

circulated widely in the nineteen-teens, it was Louis Delluc who brought it to the center

of critical discussion with his 1920 volume, *Photogénie*, where he declared it to be the

essence of cinematic beauty, even as he struggled to define it: "Few people understand

the importance of *photogénie*," he wrote.

> Moreover, they don't even know what it is. I would be delighted if a
>
> mysterious agreement between the photo and genius was assumed. Alas,
>
> the public is not stupid enough to believe that. No one will convince
>
> the public that a photo could ever have the unexpectedness of genius,
>
> since no one, as far as I know, is convinced of it. (Delluc 135)

Delluc's discussion of *photogénie* bears witness to a tension between two competing

definitions of the term that would persist through the 1920s. On the one hand, Delluc

invokes *photogénie* as a certain power or "genius" of the cinematographic machine,

evidenced by its "mysterious" manner of transforming ordinary appearances into scenes

of other-worldly beauty. In this sense, *photogénie* appears more as a product of chance or

accident than any deliberate labor, and can be found just as readily in the newsreel or

actualité as any self-consciously "artistic" film.

> Often…the best part of a night in front of the screen comes with the
>
> *actualités:* a marching army, flocks in a field, the launching of a ship, a
>
> crowd on a beach, a plane's moment of take-off, the life of signs or the

death of flowers – and every second gives us such a strong impression that

we treat them as the product of artistry. (34)

On the other hand, if Delluc speculates about a certain "génie in the machine," he

ultimately shies away from this definition of *photogénie*, seeking instead to anchor it in

the technique of the artist behind the camera. As much as Delluc would marvel at the

"impressions of evanescent beauty" that erupt through the pure power of photography, his

mission as a critic lay in guiding filmmakers away from the heavy artificiality that spoke

to the persistent influence of the theater in cinema, and introducing properly cinematic

principles of *mise-en-scene* (Abel 137). The first major statement on

photogénie thus appears as a manual of lighting, décor, acting, and "all the technique

necessary to an art" (Delluc 36).

The association of *photogénie* with a filmmaker's particular technique or "vision"

continued to be born out in the majority of Impressionist film theory. As many scholars

have noted, the Impressionist vein of film theory that developed in the 1920s remained

indebted to nineteenth century traditions of naturalism and symbolism, emphasizing "the

work of art's capacity for rendering the subjective vision of the artist through evocation,

symbolic allusion, and suggestion" (Aitken 81). In this sense, in addition to designating

certain "photogenic" techniques, *photogénie* came to suggest the mark of an artistic

sensibility that imprints "bare reality" with the stamp of an individual imagination ("The

image," Marcel L'Herbier writes, "is no more than the epiphany of an imagination")

(Abel 108). It is precisely at this point, however, that we must distinguish Epstein's

theory of *photogénie* from the mainstream of Impressionist film theory. It is not that

Epstein neglects the role of the filmmaker, or seeks to locate *photogénie* in the realm of

the accidental alone. But his concept of *photogénie,* and the particular idea of cinema it

implies, locates the filmmaker's *génie* as secondary to the "artistic temperament" of the

machine. "People talk of nature seen through a temperament," Epstein writes. "But now

there is a lens, a diaphragm, a dark room, an optical system" (Abel 244). "For the first

time, the camera introduces a subjectivity, a mechanical, automatic, inorganic

subjectivity, neither living nor dead, which is controlled by a crank and lies outside of

man" (Liebman 212).[23] Epstein describes the camera as a "consciousness," "subjectivity,"

"sensibility," "intelligence," or "brain," but in every case, it is the camera's unique and

above all *inhuman* powers of envisioning reality that captivate him and seem to hold the

key to the cinema's most significant aesthetic consequences.

Epstein's early essays are steeped in the affectivity of his encounter with the

cinema's transfiguring powers: "It overwhelms me," he writes of one of Griffiths's close-

ups. "I have neither the right nor ability to be distracted. . . . Everything quivers with

bewitchment. I am uneasy. In a new nature, another world" (Abel 239, 243). But

beginning with his 1936 essay, "L'intelligence d'une machine" (the title of his future

book), Epstein embarks upon a deeper exploration of the consequences of this cinematic

génie, in particular, its potential to produce what he calls "visual thought." Since his early

studies of poetry, Epstein had remained fascinated by sensual forms of cognition that

contrast with the rational, verbal order of thought.[24] He credits nineteenth-century

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[23] Stuart Liebman also emphasizes this distinction between Epstein and his contemporaries (237).

[24] In his 1922 volume *La Lyrosophie*, Epstein had developed a theory of what he called "lyrosophical" cognition—a manner of thought that is coextensive with feeling—that clearly bears something in common with his concept of *la pensée visuelle*. See *E1* 15-23.

experimental psychology and Symbolist poetics with increasingly discovering and giving

expression to "a mental life that is more intimate, less conscious, but extremely active,

and in which the image plays a role" (*E2* 101). While both psychology and poetry rely

upon the medium of language to communicate this hidden mental life, however, the

cinema, according to Epstein, has the power to externalize visual thought: "For the first

time we find a means of transmitting moving images that are extremely similar to

thoughts that vision sees, that memory conserves, that imagination composes in a certain

form of mental activity" (*E2* 195). And yet, if the cinema strikes Epstein as a certain

"substitute" or "annex of the brain," he does not subscribe to a "naïve" phenomenology

that would credit the camera with simply replicating perception (*E1* 309). The paradox of

the cinematic image, and its greatest power, according to Epstein, lies in its dual capacity

to both imitate human perception and simultaneously to dislocate perception from human

coordinates. While the cinema can act as an annex of the brain, it also comprises a

foreign subjectivity, a ghostly brain that releases strange views and inhuman perspectives.

We witness this capacity through certain operations—the close-up, slow and fast motion,

reversals of time—which open new dimensions of space and time "where our habitual

egocentrism, with its human proportions, finds itself disorganized," and we encounter

"individualities" that the human eye alone cannot perceive (*E2* 147; *E1* 252).

In this sense, Malcolm Turvey has associated Epstein with a lineage of theorists,

including Béla Balász, Siegfried Kracauer, and Dziga Vertov, who imagine the camera as

a "superior eye" that transcends the fallibility of human perception. In Turvey's reading,

photogénie suggests the camera's capacity to achieve a direct, supersensory knowledge of

reality" (26). And yet, while Epstein marvels at the camera's ability to reveal a new realm

of appearances—the formation of crystals, for instance, or the micro-physiognomy of the

human face—when we turn to his later writings, we see that he draws out far different

consequences from this revelatory capacity. That is, rather than revealing a "true" or

"objective" reality, the cinema's strange visions have the effect of splintering reality into

a multiplicity of perspectives where "truth" remains undecidable. The camera may

discover a realm of "new appearances," but these appearances produce a certain delirium

in thought. They are both "real" but also hallucinatory, unmooring thought from its

presumption of a true or single reality. Far from an objective eye that would reveal a

given world, then, the camera throws the very notion of the "true" world into question.

Epstein gives the example of a scenario in which, two boys, Pierre and Paul, may

appear on screen to be different heights at different moments in time. In the cinematic

world, "Pierre can sometimes be smaller, sometimes larger than Paul… and it is not

excluded that they are the same size" (*E2* 32). While the "true" world accommodates only

one of these scenarios, the cinema unleashes an "indetermination" of space, where "truth"

can only be defined by virtue of the relation between images. Lacking the "common

measure" of the human as a privileged perspective from which to determine a single, true

world, the cinema both disjoins perception from its "habitual egocentrism" and unleashes

"a system of moving relations that one cannot reattach to any fixed value" (CD 220).[25] In

a similar manner, Epstein claims that the cinema disjoins time from any single, privileged

perspective. Consider a leaf falling from a tree: in the cinema, this event "can last eight

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[25]In a 1950 article, Epstein writes of the "the habitual egocentrism, with its human
proportionality" that finds itself "disorganized" in the cinema (*EC2* 147).

seconds, but also twenty-four seconds or even 800 seconds. And which is the true event?"

Epstein asks (*E2* 220). "In the cinema there are thirty-six different space/ times—and

meanwhile, this universe is not incomprehensible…who knows the true sense in which

time flows, who can say that there is only one?" (*E2* 13). Thus, Epstein concludes,

> …one must ask if the error is not rather to believe that there exists only
>
> one measure and one truth; if the cinema's representations don't remind us
>
> that all measure is a relation, that there are an infinity of relations given by
>
> the relative frame in which they are established, and thus that no one is
>
> either absolutely true or false. (*E2*, 206)

Insofar as it provokes this uncertainty in thought, Epstein finds a philosophical

ally for the cinema in the "sciences of relativity," citing in particular the work of Einstein,

Heisenberg, and Poincaré, whose theories cast doubt on the possibility of a "reality that

exists anterior to all observation" (*E1* 333).[26] But it is Nietzsche, who, above all others,

influences Epstein's conception of the cinema's particularly subversive vocation.[27] In his

reading notes taken around the time of *L'intelligence d'une machine* (1946), Epstein

paraphrases Nietzsche's claim that "an objective philosophical knowledge is impossible,"

and that "every philosophical system has only an aesthetic value" (Tognolotti 42). It is

precisely this insight that Epstein sees born out in the cinema, as it presents new aesthetic

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[26] Epstein's extensive "notes de lecture," archived at the Bibliothèque du film (Cinémathèque française), show him to have been a prolific reader of philosophy, science, and literature.

[27] While Epstein rarely mentions Nietzsche by name in his published writings, his reading notes reflect an intense interest in Nietzsche during the 1940s. In her article on Nietzsche's influence on Epstein, Chiara Tognolotti points out that Epstein did not read Nietzsche directly, but immersed himself in several secondary sources, most notably Willy Barager's *Pour connaître la pensée de Nietzsche* (Paris, Bordas 1945). See Tognolotti, 37-53.

"interpretations" of reality that lay as much claim to the real as any philosophy. " 'It's only the cinematic world,' one says with contempt, 'it's nothing but a fictive world' " (*E1* 315); and yet, Epstein counters, "does there exist an experience or even an observation that is not an implementation of artifice?" (*E2* 217). Epstein recounts the familiar story of stars bursting into tears upon seeing their own faces in close-up for the first time. "'Who am I,' they ask. 'Where is my true identity'"? With the close-up, the subject undergoes a delirium and seems to be "thought" by another; "I do not think what I am" (*E1* 256). This delirium, however, does not remain confined to the "fictive world" of the cinema but persists as the subject attempts to re-locate him or herself in the "real" world: now, they ask, "who am I?" and answer: "nothing more than the *thought* that thinks myself as the aleatory product in a long game of possibilities…" (*E1* 395). If cinematic thought dissolves the subject through "artificial" means, then, human thought must employ operations no less artificial to reconstitute it. The "true" world, as much as the fictional one, is always a matter of framings, perspectives, *mise-en-scènes*; the "fictive has legitimacy" (*E1* 315).

Finally, it is this *aesthetic* value of thought that Epstein's conception of *photogénie* affirms—a thought that does not operate under the sign of truth but of art, that does not reveal a pre-existing world but produces new interpretations of the world. "It is not that man or his machine discover a pre-existing reality," Epstein writes. "Reality, the only knowable reality does not exist but becomes, or better yet, it must be made" (*E1* 333). It is precisely in this possibility of making reality anew that Epstein will locate the avant-garde vocation of the cinema, where the cinema's realities are not simply

deliriums, but the "real fictions" of a rival philosophy. Indeed, it is only to the extent that

philosophy has mistaken its interpretations of reality for *truths* that thought has become

affixed to dominant images of reality and thus has "lost is sense of conflict."[28] If the

"intelligence of the machine" strikes Epstein as a subversive force, then, this is because it

bears the potential to *restore a sense of conflict to thought*, to rival our dominant

impressions of reality with new interpretations, and to usurp a certain "common sense"

that prevails in the cinema and thought alike.

La Pensée Visuelle

We have seen that Epstein defines the cinematic *génie* not as an objective lens on

the world but as a capacity to produce "thought-images" or new interpretations of reality.

What then is the nature of these thought-images, and how do they challenge common

sense thought? Furthermore, how do they inform the particular avant-garde vocation he

assigns to the cinema? On the one hand, Epstein privileges those cinematic "deliriums"—

extreme close-ups, slow or fast-motion shots—that do not merely replicate ordinary

perception but instead "take us out of ourselves and the world in which we believed we

lived" (*E*2 223). Indeed, Epstein suggests that it is precisely insofar as the cinema resists

the temptation to produce "servile imitations" of "la realité majeur" in favor of producing

new interpretations of reality that it realizes its vocation as an avant-garde art (*EC2* 115).

And yet, on the other hand, *photogénie* cannot be reduced to a principle of cinematic

delirium or "novelty" alone. Rather, Epstein is interested in such novel images only

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[28] In his reading notes, Epstein cites Nietzsche's assertion that humanity becomes "sick" when
thought "loses its sense of conflict" (Tognolottie 41).

insofar as they unleash new forms of thinking. The aesthetic effects of *photogénie*, we will see, thus coincide with its *affects* to thought—its manner of infiltrating thought with new values and thus reinvigorating a thought that has lost its sense of conflict.

Above all, Epstein links this loss of conflict to an "excessive rationalism" that runs through both the mainstream of philosophy and common sense thought, finally acquiring "a pretension of absolute and ubiquitous superiority" (*EC2* 194). "After the first categorizations of Aristotle, after the syllogisms of the Scholastics and Descartes and Kant … Reason has become the true religion of all civilized people" (*EC2* 189). Most significantly, Epstein associates this dominant rationalist order with a privileging of what he calls "verbal thought" (*la pensée verbale*), suggesting both a thought that "crystallizes in words" and a manner of representing the world that remains rooted in a "verbal logic": "The rational order according to which the spirit represents the universe draws from a logic which resides in the assembly of words" (*E2* 190). Reason carves up the sensible world according to verbal forms, but moreover, it legislates the senses themselves by subordinating them to the "intelligible" realm of language. According to this logic, the senses may provide the material or data of thought (*les données*), but thought itself takes place at the level of words, which "order (it) according to their exactly arranged pieces" (*E1* 350). Indeed, so entrenched is the link between thought and language that "many people cannot conceive of an exercise of intelligence under another form" (*E2* 34).

Now, the cinema seems to challenge this dominant order of verbal thought merely by its existence in a visual modality. And yet, more often than not, Epstein suggests, the

visual image is "thought" through the rationalist regime; in particular, he points to a "verbal thought" that infects the image, subsuming it to language. "In most shots, visual expression tends to align itself with verbal discourse; the image is forced to acquire the heaviness, the isolation, the articulability of a word" (*EC2* 115). This priority of verbal thought is carried out through a certain privileging of plots and scenarios in the majority of films, which not only tend to make images signify as words but structure them according a "verbal logic":

> The feuilleton is rotten with logic, and its plots, however stupid they may seem, are structured like syllogisms. It is unusual indeed if the hero of a melodrama sneezes without his sneeze being the consequence or the premise of some important event. (Liebman 201)

But what, then, would be required for the cinema to throw off the verbal regime that "infects" it? This question lies at the heart of Epstein's concept of *photogénie* but also has drawn the greatest skepticism. Paul Willeman, for instance, diagnoses *photogénie* as a wish to return the cinema to "pure visuality" that lies before or beyond language, while Jacques Rancière suggests a naïve investment in "pure plastic form" that both contradicts Epstein's own use of narrative, and speaks to his repression of the very "fables" from which *photogénie* remains inseparable" (5; *FF* 124). And yet, not only is Epstein explicit about the integral relation between narrative and *photogénie*, he vehemently rejects the valorization of "pure plastic form" as the goal of cinematic art. In this regard, we must differentiate Epstein from his contemporaries in the avant-garde who privileged a notion of *cinéma-pur.* Recalling discussions at the cine-clubs of the 1920s, Epstein writes:

> In a club, one talks of the *photogénie* of movement when directors put the
> camera on a roulette, bring it higher, lower, incline it, carry it, balance it
> and turn it around…These militants of the cinematic avant-garde think, of
> course, that they are creating a new descriptive style, properly cinematic;
> but they ignore, more profoundly, the philosophic work (*l'oeuvre*
> *philosophique)*. (*E2* 211)

We must dwell upon this passage, since it both establishes Epstein's difference from the
mainstream avant-garde and leads us to his alternative conception of *photogénie*. What is
the nature of Epstein's critique of the "new descriptive style" pursued by the cinema-
purists? On one level, Epstein mocks the elitism of this project, which produces "work
by an elite for an elite—something conceived by intellectuals, snobs, aristocrats of
sensibility and thought" (*E1* 349). But on another level, and more profoundly, Epstein's
critique is aimed at a particular aesthetic logic whereby films are drained of verbal
content but resolve into little more than "pure plastic pleasure" (*E1* 190). Epstein
suggests that by producing images that are in service to nothing but themselves, *cinéma-
pur* merely collapses the image into pure "sensation"; while it thus may succeed in
"purifying" the image of language and narrative, the cost of this liberation is to evacuate
images of sense, and to produce an insulated and aestheticist art: "l'art pour l'art,
technique pour technique" (*E2* 81).

　　But how might the narrative form that Epstein favors, and indeed, uses in his own
films, lend itself to the "philosophic work" that he demands? After all, he laments the
manner in which plots and scenarios so often subject the visual dimension of films to a

verbal logic. And yet, *photogénie* does not entail a rejection of narrative or language but rather a critique of a particular *relation* between the visual and the verbal—that is, a relation in which visibilities are *assimilated* to verbal thought. The search for a cinematic means of undoing this logic thus remains inseparable from the struggle to free the cinema from the "rationalist" regime that so often "thinks" it and thus to discover the basis for a rival *génie.* In this case, we must look beyond Epstein's early polemics against plots and scenarios toward his own films, which are conspicuously narrative works. But to begin with, we can consider his own, more nuanced theorizations of the relation between narrative and *photogénie.*

"A story is indispensable," Epstein writes, "and an argument, even in the ideal film, is necessary to produce the image of feeling. The feeling cannot spring (*juiller*) except from a situation or anecdote" (*E1* 105). What is the "necessary" condition that a story provides according to Epstein? On the one hand, he suggests that a story takes the image beyond its status as pure sensation, investing it with a sense (*un sens*); thus, the images of racing train wheels in Abel Gance's *La Roue* do not simply amount to a chaos of sensation but are infused with the pathos of the train driver's story, while "in a close-up of a revolver, it is not just a revolver—it is the desire or the remorse of the crime, of the fatality, of the suicide" (*E1* 141). On the other hand, if these images spring from a narrative, they also provoke a rupture with the narrative's "verbal thought." That is, while most images, according to Epstein, remain in service to the narrative, illustrating its (verbal) meanings, the photogenic image produces a torsion with the order of verbal thought; it shines with a visibility that the story can not predict or contain.

And yet, *photogénie* does not suggest a "pure" visual quality that Epstein extracts

from the narrative, or even a visual remainder "outside" of the dominant order of the plot.

If *photogénie* tends to appear in the body of narrative films, this is because it erupts when

the image draws the story into itself and begins to "write" it according to its own visual

means.[29] In this sense, *photogénie* bears witness to a reversal: it is no longer a matter of

an image that illustrates the verbal thought of the story, but a story that becomes subject

to the figural force of the image. Epstein writes, "We must ask whether the clichés of

cinema might ever completely lose their proper sense . . . to the profit of their figural

sense" (*E*2 116). Here we begin to get a sense of a particular technique that *photogénie*

might imply. Rather than using images to narrate stories, Epstein suggests a manner of

submitting stories to the figural forces of the cinema so that they may be disfigured or

"re-written." Indeed, Epstein describes *photogénie* as a form of *découpage* or

schematizing that occurs on the side of the *image itself,* momentarily usurping the

"scripting" that would determine the image or subject it to pre-existing ideas.[30]

Finally, we can begin to extract not only a certain technique of *photogénie*, but

also a particular ethics of style. Epstein describes the cinematic *génie* as an "intelligence

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[29] The notion of "visual sketching" (*l'ébauche de cinégrammes)* or "*cinégraphie*" that Epstein
often employs also appears in the writings of Germaine Dullac. "Aesthetics, Obstacles, Integral
Cinégraphie" in P. Adams Sitney, ed. *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*
(New York: New York U P), 1978.

[30] In his recent translation of essays from André Bazin's *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma*, Timothy
Barnard offers a detailed history of the term *découpage*, which, while usually translated as
editing, was actually used to describe an earlier phase of the production process, involving the
process of "organizing the profilmic and visualizing the film's narrative and mise-en-scène…
before (or during) the shoot) and thus quite apart from editing" (264). When Epstein writes that
photogénie produces "a *découpage* a thousand times more detailed than that of most films" (Abel
236), he seems to invoke both senses of the term—both the "storytelling" that is associated with
"cutting" a film but also the process of scripting or conceiving it in advance of shooting. For
Barnard's detailed discussion of *découpage,* see his notes to *What is Cinema?* (261-280).

that human intelligence may borrow," but this does not go far enough in capturing the

relation at the heart of his aesthetics (*E1* 244). In contrast to both avant-garde and

commercial styles that would subordinate the image to a preconceived idea (whether

cinéma pur, or the requirements of narrative) Epstein proposes a certain sublime poetics

based on the submission of the human intelligence to the intelligence of the machine;

rather than suggesting the effacement of technique, *photogénie* suggests a certain

technique of effacement. "I want to make films as if I don't know where I am going,"

Epstein writes; and yet, Epstein's films do not embrace chance or randomness alone (in

fact, they always begin with a scenario), but rather suggest a submission of thought, no

less than the stories its conceives, to a certain disfiguring or re-writing. The aesthetic task

of the cinema thus coincides with a philosophic task: can we submit the clichés of our

own thoughts to the machine so that they might be disfigured? Can we discover a new

realm of sense within the common sense? Epstein's cinematic *recherches* always extend

from this demand: not to "think" the image too much, but to submit to its power to "think

us."[31] Only by surrendering our rights over thought, he suggests, can we open thought to

the incursion of new values: "the invisible in the visible, the inaudible in the audible, the

unthinkable in the thinkable" (*E1* 26).

The Cinematic Sublime

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[31] Godard writes that, "at the cinema, we do not think but are thought." Quoted in Richard Brody, *Everything is Cinema* (3).

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In a 1946 interview with Jean Mitry, Epstein expresses his "ideal" of *photogénie* in the form of a scenario:

> Imagine an automobile driver behind the wheel of a car that moves more quickly than his own brain…Imagine then the sudden appearance of an obstacle. The car arrives at the obstacle before the nervous impulses of the driver can transmit the command to his hands to turn the wheel. I think that we have found the means of accelerating mechanical speed to the point where it surpasses the speed of thought.[32]

Epstein had realized this particular scenario in his 1927 film *La Glace à Trois Faces*. Based on a novella by Paul Morand, the film tells the story of a young businessman who seduces three different women but commits to none of them, preferring the thrills of cruising around in his sports car. In the film's climactic scene, we witness the protagonist's final, fatal joy ride. Cutting between shots from the perspective of a camera mounted on the car and close-ups of the young man behind the wheel, Epstein captures a frenzy of movement as the car careens through the French countryside. Failing to heed the warnings of road signs, the young man revels in his mounting velocity. Finally, a bird descends from a wire and strikes him between the eyes, sending him off the road to his death.

In this scene, life quite literally "catches up" to the protagonist, who is out-sped by his own machine. But it is no less the *cinematic* machine that seems to out-speed human thought. This scene exemplifies what Epstein calls the "modification of the

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[32] Jean Mitry, "Entretien avec Jean Epstein," *1895* (0769-0959) v.Hors n.Serie, September 1988, 25.

nervous system" that the cinema confronts us with, inducing a powerless of thought to "represent" what it encounters (Abel 240). We "feel" this scene far more than we think it; and yet, the images do not comprise a frenzy of pure sensation, but bear witness to a certain *photogénie* of movement that Epstein extracts through the force of his montage. In this sense, we see how far Epstein departs from the technique of Eisenstein, another thinker of cinematic sublime. Epstein's montage, and the *photogénie* it releases, has nothing to do with the expression of a determinate or pre-existing "idea" (Eisenstein's "intellectual montage") but rather puts itself in service of the unknown powers of the image—ideas that remain as yet "un-thought."[33] It is as if Epstein, like the driver of the car, were surrendering to the speed of the cinematic machine, and pushing the limits of his control over his own film.

What then is the cinematic "idea" that we encounter, or undergo this scene?[34] Above all, Epstein's technique here—his rapid cutting and his mounting of the camera on the car—revolves around releasing the cinematic value of *movement.* Since his early essays, Epstein had drawn a strong association between movement and *photogénie.* "Cinema is all movement without any need for stability or equilibrium," he writes in *Bonjour Cinema*. "Of all the sensory logarithms of reality, the photogenic is based on movement" (Abel 234). But in his later writings, Epstein begins to elaborate what he sees as the particularly subversive potential of cinematic movement. For the first time,

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[33] Eisenstein discusses his concept of "intellectual montage" in "The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram" and "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," in *Film Form*.

[34] "It *looks* like an idea," Epstein writes of *photogénie* (Liebman 247) Germaine Dullac also develops her own concept of the "visual idea." See "The Essence of Cinema: The Visual Idea" (1925) in Sitney, *The Avant-Garde Film* 36-42.

Epstein suggests, the cinema confronts us with a "movement of movement," a "movement that realizes itself only by its proper change" (*E2* 29). But what are the consequences of this particular idea of movement? Drawing from Bergson, Epstein argues that philosophy and common sense thought are characterized by a "dominance of symbols of space over those of time" and thus demonstrate a tendency to privilege *form* ("the sign and means of permanence") over *movement* ("the sign and means of becoming") (*E1* 372). Insofar as verbal thought tends to favor spatial representations that designate, predicate, and thus secure the identity of objects, it remains beholden to a logic of stasis or permanence, elevating form over movement. Indeed, even when philosophy "thinks" movement, it attributes movement to forms, imagining "forms that move" rather than a "movement of movement" (*E2* 29).

If Epstein views the cinema as a philosophic rival, then, this is because it not only gives us a "direct" image of movement, but unleashes a violence upon the static values of thought: "our classifications undergo a delirium, the rules of our determinations dissolve" (*E2* 29). We encounter this disfiguring power of movement in the final scene of *La Glace à Trois Faces*, where form is dissolved under the force of movement, and the verbal thought that had infused the story to this point gives way to visual logic of becoming. The road signs that punctuate the countryside offer a powerful figuration of this rivalry between form and movement, or the verbal and visual orders. Echoing the titles cards that usually come between images and determine them (or tell us "what they mean"), these signs become subject to the force of the image in this scene; rather than an image that "passes through the logic of words" then, we encounter words that are

absorbed or folded into the sensation of movement, and thus pass through a logic of the image (*E2* 196). Unhinged from their static significations, the words verge on becoming smears of black, as the film consumes the world that they made recognizable. It is as if in achieving sufficient speed, the film passes through the verbal regime of thought and the world that it anchored.

It is precisely this subversion of form, identity, and stasis by movement, difference, and becoming that comes to the fore of so many of Epstein's films, where static worlds are invaded by the volatile forces of nature (*La Chute de la Maison Usher, Le Tempestaire)* or deliriums of machinic movement (*La Glace à Trois Faces*, *Coeur Fidèle*). None of these films, however, present us with the "symphonies of movement" that Epstein had found so tedious in the mainstream avant garde; rather, movement becomes an integral component of cinematic "writing" of these films, which appear as collaborations between Epstein and the cinematic *génie*.[35] In Epstein's 1947 film *Le Tempestaire*, the rivalry between forces of stasis and movement becomes a central component of the dramaturgy. The plot is simple: as a tempest begins to a brew in a small fishing village, a young girl waits anxiously at home, wondering whether her fiancé will return from a fishing expedition unscathed by the gathering storm. The film opens with a series of images that evoke stillness and calm: a port, some docked boats, the stagnant sea, old men staring out at the sea, and a young girl and her grandmother sitting at a spinning wheel. While a subtle movement is discernable in the shots of the sea, the rest of these images are photographic stills, expressing what Epstein describes in his treatment

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[35] Epstein writes of "symphonies of movement that, having been in fashion, have now become tedious" (*E1* 125).

as "a surprising immobility."[36] Finally, as a rising wind begins to ripple through the water and then the trees on land, Epstein cuts back to the shot of the women, who are now "brought to life" before their spinning wheel.

An image of the cinema's own animating power, the spinning wheel evokes the very apparatus which sets it in motion; just as the wind sends ripples through the stagnant sea, the cinematograph infuses still photographs with movement. This opening sequence thus establishes the counterpoint that serves as the film's major theme: namely, the juxtaposition between form and movement, stasis and becoming. On the one hand, we encounter a domestic world of objects or "symbols" of the sea (a toy boat, some sea shells) as well as the recurring image of an instrument panel that measures the force of the gathering storm. On the other hand, Epstein intercuts these images with the recurring image of the windswept sea: "an ocean of viscous movements" (*E2* 45). These two regimes of images comprise rival forces—a spatial representation that attempts to arrest or anchor the force of the tempest, and the "sublime mobility" of the sea that rivals form with movement and refuses identity with the markers and symbols that would represent it as an object.

Indeed, it is precisely the form of the *object* that Epstein claims the cinema "denatures" by subjecting it to the force of time. "In the cinema," he tells us, "there are no more objects, but only *events*" (*E1* 348). The object form, Epstein suggests, appears only when time or duration is subjected to the demands of representation—that is, when time serves as the static backdrop against which objects acquire their identity. Just as the

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36 Les fonds Jean et Marie Epstein, *Bibliothèque du film* (Paris, France) Box 78 B20.

cinema releases movement form its subservience to form, it releases time from its

subjection to the (spatial) logic of representation: "This machine for thinking time does

not transpose time into space, but represents the changing of time in time, the value of

duration…" (*E1* 370). It is this value of time as duration that produces a crack in the

identity of the object, which, henceforth can only *differ* from itself (and thus loses its

status as a self-same object). We can thus begin to grasp the role of slow-motion in the

creation of *photogénie*, since it wrests time from its familiar coordinates (the spatial time

of representation) and unleashes the differential force of the event. In *Le Tempestaire*, the

slowly undulating sea exists as a qualitative becoming, while the sonic slow motion

(*phonogénie*) that Epstein employs for the first time in this film "decomposes" the

familiar sound of the waves into "a more fine reality, a crowd of different noises, never

before heard… timbers and accents for which names don't exist" (*E2* 130). In the realm

of sound and vision alike, Epstein conceives of the cinema as a "new empiricism": a

sensible world that is no longer thought under the identity of objects but as supple

movements, gradations of feeling, singularities of sensation (*E1* 348).

It is not only the object world but also the *subject* that the cinema "denatures."

Epstein's descriptions of cinematic experience, where viewers are "overwhelmed" by

sensation, find a dramatic correlate in his films, where characters succumb to (and are

often marked by) forces beyond their control or comprehension: the driver in *La Glace à

trios faces* who is struck between the eyes by the bird*,* or the face of the young girl *Le

Tempestaire* that becomes a surface of fear and bewilderment as the storm gathers its

force. But it is Epstein's 1928 adaptation of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" that

offers the most powerful figuration (or de-figuration) of the subject. If *Le Tempestaire*

dramatizes a certain dissolution of the object world, *La Chute de la Maison Usher* presents a dramaturgy of a subject who can no longer *represent* what he encounters but is transformed by its sublime force.

Poe's story, in which the narrator repeatedly professes to "lack the words" to convey his uncanny experiences, itself calls attention to certain "failure" of representation.[37] But rather than attempt merely to "show" what Poe's language could not, Epstein makes this discontinuity between verbal representation and visual affect a central dramatic axis of the film. Thus, the film's climactic scene develops a counterpoint between Roderick Usher's face in close-up—a face that *sees* but does not speak—and a medium shot of the doctor who hunches over a book, searching for the meaning behind the events that transpire around him. On the one hand, Usher's rapt face, parted lips, and watery eyes suggest an "unspeakable" terror that can only be seen and a subject that can only look and feel; on the other hand, the doctor in the act of reading and the text that appears on screen suggest a subject that attempts to understand or interpret what befalls it. These two images of thought—a thought that remains in the possession of a subject (the doctor hunched over his book) and a thought that remains *subject* to what lies beyond it (the affective terrain of Usher's face)—form oscillating poles of this sequence. But finally, it is the image of Usher that becomes the locus of our absorption; the doctor fails in his quest for answers, and we are left with the silent landscape of a face.

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[37] Of Usher's paintings, the narrator tells us: "as vivid as their images now are before me I would in vain endeavor to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words." And of Usher himself: "I lack the words to express the full extent, or the earnest *abandon* of his persuasion" (Poe 117).

What do we discover in this image? Usher's face may strike us as an image of the sublime, of a thinker rendered "powerlessness" by that which he cannot represent, but it also entails a "re-thinking" of the sublime in the sense that Kant elaborates it. Here, the powerlessness of thought is no longer the occasion for the re-inscription of Reason as a supra-sensory power. Usher does not tremble with respect before the law of Reason but before the very absence of its legislation: there is no resolution, no assurance, as if the gap that had opened between what can be sensed and what can be represented (the painful dissension between imagination and understanding in Kant's terms) cannot be stopped (or given a "reason") but instead remains open, susceptible to an outside that thought cannot transcend. And yet, this outside *demands to be thought.* This is what Usher's face seems to tell us, as it becomes suffused with an out of frame that is both absent and present, vibrating across its surface. And is this image not, in some sense, also suffused with our own faces—faces that, in a strange doubling, look upon an image of looking? Indeed, what else is Usher's face but a face that is *at the cinema?*

We might say that Epstein's films finally propose narratives of the *cinema itself*; they are meditations on the cinema's own sublime power, terrains of "theory" in their own right. Can we discover in this image of Usher, then, a certain idea of cinema, the figuration of *photogénie* itself? But what might this image tell us of *photogénie?* From our vantage point, we can see how readily this face, powerless and possessed, might lend itself to theories of the passive spectator lulled into identification with the ideological realm of the imaginary—as if the theorist of "prophetic trances" were unwittingly offering an image of his own captivation. And yet, if we resist subjecting the image to

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this well-worn narrative, do we not discover another path that the image (that *images*) might take? Could this image propose another narrative of the cinema—a cinema that does not shut down thought but pries it open, suffusing it with new figures and values? It is no wonder that Epstein often claims to lack the words to describe *photogénie,* since, as he tell us, "the words have not yet been discovered" (Abel 242). If the visions Epstein encounters in the cinema are "without metaphor," this is not because they exist in the realm of the unknowable, but rather because they appear at the edge of the known, introducing into thought what we do not yet have words to describe. Nevertheless, it is precisely this realm of indescribable visions that Epstein's theory responds to, giving shape and voice to what comes to presence before his eyes. Finally, as much as a concept of the "thinking cinema," *photogénie* gives us a concept of "thinking about the cinema": a theory that does not come *before* films but *after* them, that thinks *with* the cinema rather than *about* it, that remains supple before all that that moves us, confounds us, makes us think.

Inventing The Real: André Bazin's Evolving Film Theory

No theorist has played as vital, or as conflicted a role in the evolution of film studies as André Bazin. Writing in an age when most scholars perceived the cinema as little more than a form of mass entertainment, Bazin not only championed film as an art form but also defended it as an object worthy of serious study, even predicting its emergence as a field of scholarship in its own right. Indeed, his 1958 volumes, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?,* published just months after his death, would eventually help usher film into the academy and serve as some of the field's foundational texts. If Bazin played an instrumental role in the rise of film studies, however, he also quickly became one of its most controversial figures. In particular, as the field adopted an increasingly radical agenda in the late 1960s and 70s, Bazin's poetic, auteur-driven criticism was considered naïve and out of touch with the political exigencies of film scholarship. But it was Bazin's abiding commitment to the concept of cinematic realism that drew the most sustained and intense critique. Positing the cinema's ontological connection to the real and a favored style of effacement before the "revelation" of reality, Bazin's film theory became firmly associated with a "naïve" realism that was, at best, regressive and, at worst, complicit with film's most ideological functions. During the 1970s, Bazin's name thus became a

shorthand for a certain "naïve" view of the cinema's realism—the very position that film

theory sought to outstrip with a demystification of film's codes and structures.[38]

Since the waning of "Grand Theory," Bazin has started to appear in a new and

more generous light. Even at the height of his repudiation, Bazin was consistently

recognized for his unsurpassed brilliance as a critic, and this aspect of his work has come

into ever sharper relief.[39] In recent years, the growing tide of appreciation has led to a

wholesale Bazin revival, consummated by the 2008 conference, "Opening Bazin,"

helmed by Bazin's longtime defender Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin. The

conference and its resulting book of essays centered on a remarkable excavation of

Bazin's lesser known writings, "90 percent of which have remained invisible and

unread" (Andrew, *Opening* x). This recovery of Bazin's archive and the subsequent train

of studies that have followed in its wake have loosened Bazin from his association with a

handful of canonical essays that had pegged him as a naïve theorist, reminding us of the

sheer abundance and diversity of his critical activity. In this newly "opened" Bazin, we

encounter a critic who wrote about everything from musical comedies to westerns to

television, and whose interests traversed the history and sociology of cinema as much as

ontology and realist aesthetics.

Yet, the opening of Bazin and the restitution of his diversity as a critic does not

lead us away from the core of his theory, but only brings it into renewed focus.

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[38] A major exception to this trend in Bazin reception was Dudley Andrew's 1979 biography, which offered a far more sympathetic reading of Bazin's theory.

[39] Both Brian Henderson and Noel Carroll, while critiquing Bazin's "naïve" theory, praised his criticism. See Henderson, "Bazin Defended against His Devotees" and Carroll's chapter on Bazin in *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory.* For more recent examples of Bazin's revival as a critic see the special issue of *Film International* devoted to Bazin (Jeffrey Crouse, ed., November *2007*).

Specifically, as we encounter fresh examples of Bazin's rigor, subtlety, and range as a critic, the engrained readings of his central concept of realism appear increasingly inadequate, or at least incomplete. Does Bazin's concern with ontology consist in no more than a naive belief in the credibility of the image? Does realism suggest a desire for an outdated essentialism or a rigid prescription for a particular style of art? Did the brilliant and incisive critic amount to a naïve and incoherent theorist? Or could his concept of realism enfold a depth and complexity that remains hidden beneath the engrained readings? Might it contain dimensions we have yet to discover?

Returning to Bazin's concept of realism involves tackling deep layers of interpretation surrounding this term, which has been one of the most vexed in film studies. We might say that the field established its identity around a certain *problem* of realism, which it equated on the one hand with the ideological illusion of film image—what Roland Barthes diagnosed as its power to naturalize the most conventional and mediated meanings—and, on the other hand, with a dominant mode of narrative cinema that, from classical Hollywood to the present, had effaced its operations through a transparent, "realist" style.[40] It is precisely these two aspects of realism that Bazin seemed to champion in his realist theory. In his seminal 1945 essay, "Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin argued for a unique, ontological connection between film and reality, while in "The Evolution of Film Language" (1953), he identified a realist lineage of filmmaking that put its "faith in reality" rather than in the manipulations of montage, thus realizing the ontological potential of the medium. In her 1970 review of

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[40] See Roland Barthes 1964 essay "The Rhetoric of the Image" in *Image/Music/Text* and Colin McCabe's 1976 article "Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure."

the English translation of *What is Cinema?*, Annette Michelson expressed the prevailing skepticism toward Bazin's theories, pointing to a profound anti-modernism at the heart of this thought that seemed to ignore the mediating role of film aesthetics in favor of "an exhausted, indeed, discredited presupposition of realism, reality as such" (70). Next to filmmakers such as Eisenstein and Godard who drew attention to the constructed nature of film, and, indeed, to "reality as such," Bazin seemed to betray a "latent distrust of art" and a quasi-religious faith in film's access to a transcendent reality (70).[41]

Even a cursory glance at Bazin's writings calls this engrained view into question. Hardly naive or indifferent to questions of film aesthetics, we are constantly reminded that Bazin was above all a passionate defender of film style, bringing questions of form to the center of nearly every article he wrote. Whether invoking the rigor of Eisenstein's montage technique or the subtle dramaturgy of Welles's deep focus, Bazin consistently drew attention to the range of aesthetic operations at work in the cinema, considering his task as a critic to lie no less in the "dismantling of a mechanism whose purpose is to create an illusion" than in the discernment of new and inventive styles (*CC* 141). Moreover, when it came to the cinema he called "realist," Bazin remained just as adamant about its deeply aesthetic nature, and he was always careful to qualify the potentially misleading term: "Realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice," he wrote. "There is no realism in art that is not, first and foremost, profoundly aesthetic" (*WC* 226, 227).

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[41] For other critiques of Bazin from this era, see Roy MacBean. *Film and Revolution*; Brian Henderson. "The Structure of Bazin's Thought"; Peter Wollen. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*.

But what, then, did the aesthetic of realism entail for Bazin? Here we confront a second layer of interpretation that, building upon the critique of Bazin's naïve ontological claims, has faulted him for an "essentialist" and "prescriptive aesthetics." In this view, Bazin's realism denotes a privileged style that brings us ever closer to reality itself, elevating certain operations such as the sequence shot or deep focus insofar as they imitate natural perception. Noel Carroll and Peter Wollen, among others, have thus seen Bazin as advocating a gradual effacement of art before reality, while legislating a certain style of film as ontologically cinematic.[42] "He wished to establish (realism) as the most important and the only legitimate cinematic style," Carroll writes, and in this sense, Bazin's theory appears as little more than "a thinly veiled brief in favor of a certain style of film" (142, 171).

Here, too, returning to Bazin's writings gives us a much different picture of both his conception of realism and its place in his theory. Bazin not only believed that realist techniques, such as deep focus, *enriched* film language and advanced its art in new directions, but he also adamantly rejected the idea of equating any single style of film with some immutable "essence" of cinema. Indeed, it was precisely this sort of prescriptive essentializing that Bazin found so problematic in the generation of theorists before him who had tried to extract an ideal or "pure" cinema:

> It is madness to see cinema as something isolated that can be set down on
>
> a piece of celluloid and projected on a screen through an enlarging lens.

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[42] See Carroll's discussion of Bazin in *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*, where we writes: "Spatial realism is the only legitimate realist film form because it corresponds to the way reality really is " (142) See also Wollen, *Signs and Meaning* pp. 125-134 and Williams, *Realism and the Cinema* pp. 35-54.

Pure cinema exists in a weepie just as much as it does in Oskar

Fischinger's colored cubes. Cinema is not some sort of independent matter

whose crystals must be isolated at all costs. (*WC* 67)

Against notions of an essential or timeless cinema—"Cinema with a capital C," as he

called it—Bazin opposed a deep critical pragmatism, considering the cinema as a rich and

evolving life form whose "existence" always "precedes its essence" (*WC* 133).[43]

Here we arrive at the central paradox at the heart of Bazin's theory, but also the

point at which a revised concept of realism begins to come into focus. That is, while

Bazin practiced a rigorous historicism in his theory, embracing the cinema in its multiple

stages, forms, and styles, no one has had a more supple or powerful *vision* of the cinema.

Indeed, Bazin's concept of realism suggests not only a particular vocation for the cinema,

but a particular valuation of what he considered to be its most profound potential as an

art. Far from rendering Bazin's theory incoherent, or putting it at odds with his criticism

however, it is precisely this paradox that is the animating principle of his theory and gives

rise to the richest understanding of realism.[44] That is, realism does not emerge in Bazin's

thought as a totalizing theory of film, or even a prescription for a certain style of film, but

rather as an evolving response to the cinema he sees emerging around him. Realism is a

discovery rather than a dogma; it is born of vital, moving encounters with a body of

cinema that strikes him as rich, new, and above all, without a theory. Realism does not

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[43] Bazin borrows Sartre's existentialist mantra, "existence precedes essence."

[44] Brian Henderson argues for a separation between Bazin's theory and criticism which he claims belong to two separate systems of his thought. See Henderson, "The Structure of Bazin's Thought."

circumscribe a certain timeless essence of cinema, but rather registers a particular power

of cinema that suggests, for Bazin, its most vital aesthetic vocation.

In this sense, we must return to realism as an evolving concept in Bazin's thought.

Just as Bazin does not profess to answer the question "what is cinema?" but rather is

guided by it toward ever new discoveries, he never defines realism once and for all.

Instead, Bazin's concept of realism takes shape over the course of his writing, gathering

force in different layers of development that communicate with each other across the

geography of his thought. In "Ontology of the Photographic Image," for example, Bazin

extracts realism as a particular value of the image, while in "The Evolution of Film

Language," he traces its historical emergence and its consequences for film style, while in

his studies of individual filmmakers such as Robert Bresson and Jean Renoir, he

formulates it as a concept of cinema's "art of the real." As we trace Bazin's thought

through each of these levels, we encounter a picture of realism far removed from its

engrained interpretations. In particular, we discover a concept of realism that does not

stand opposed to aesthetics, but rather suggests the cinema's most deeply aesthetic

function, and that rests on values not of *replicating* the real but of *renewing* it. Thus, in

Bazin's "Ontology" essay, we see that photography provokes a radical upheaval in

perception that introduces new values into the real, rather than merely confirming it.

Likewise, in "The Evolution of Film Language," realism deepens, rather than effaces,

film aesthetics and leads to a new concept of film style. Finally, in his studies of Bresson

and Renoir, Bazin develops realism as a certain ethic of cinema founded not on

replicating the real but giving birth to its unknown dimensions. At all of these levels, we

see just how far Bazin ventures from a naïve realism or anti-modernist conception of art,

and how much more his theory has to give us.

Ontology

> Bad cineastes have no ideas; good cineastes have too many. But the great
> cineastes have just one idea. Such an obsessive idea stabilizes them on
> their way, yet guides them into ever new and interesting landscapes. And
> what about great critics? The same would hold true for them.

– Serge Daney[45]

Bazin's 1945 essay "Ontology of the Photographic Image," while barely alluding

to the cinema itself, occupies a central place in his film theory. Bazin chose the essay to

open the first volume of his collected essays, and many have taken it as certain

cornerstone or axiom from which the rest of his film theory follows with the rigor of a

"mathematical proof," as Eric Rohmer suggested (95). Indeed, there can be no doubt as to

its significance to his overall theory of realism; Bazin himself affirms this significance

when he claims elsewhere that "the realism of the cinema follows from its photographic

nature" (*WC1* 108). And yet, the essay itself raises more questions than answers, and is

hardly the straightforward "ontology" it professes to be. Where we might expect a

compact declaration of the "essence" of the film image, we find instead a historical

analysis of the relation between painting and photography, a series of metaphors that

attempt to evoke photography's particular power, and a final sentence—"then again, the

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[45] Quoted in Andrew, *What Cinema Is!,* xii.

cinema is a language"—that seems to take off in an entirely different direction, perhaps

towards another ontology (*WC 10)*. If the function of ontological theories of film, as

Francesco Casetti defines them, is to "uncover an essence in order to define a

phenomenon, reach a global knowledge, and to measure themselves in terms of a form of

truth," Bazin's essay seems to leave much room for interpretation (Casetti 14).

Nevertheless, the essay takes shape around a core thesis—that photography differs

radically from other arts, and that this difference depends upon a certain relation it bears

to the objects it depicts. It is the precise nature of this relation that leaves room for

debate. A standard reading has taken Bazin to propose a relation of identity or direct

correspondence between photographic images and recorded objects, drawing support

from one of the essay's central claims: "The photographic image is the object itself, the

object freed from temporal contingencies. . . . It shares, by virtue of the process of its

becoming, the being of the model of which it is a reproduction; it *is* the model" (*WC* 14).

Now, this account of ontological identity between the photograph and model has been

dismissed as "incoherent" by some critics ("in what sense *is* the image the model? Noel

Carroll asks, before declaring the theory "dead in the water"), while others have made

sense of it by recourse to the semiotic concept of the index (56).[46] But in both cases, the

standard reading assumes that Bazin's ontology is "best understood in terms of a

commitment, via the mechanical nature of the recording process of the camera, to the

reproduction of an antecedent reality" (Morgan 2). Finally, this account of the identity

between image and object is seen to legislate a certain realist film style that interferes as

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[46] In *Signs and Meaning*, Peter Wollen reads Bazin's Ontology in terms of the concept of the index. See also Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time.*

little as possible with the natural being of the image and ultimately strives to replicate our perceptual experience of reality.

As Bazin's corpus has been resurrected in recent years, the standard reading has started to fracture. It has been noted, for one, that this understanding of the "Ontology" essay and the concept of realism that follows from it cannot account for the number of films that Bazin identifies as realist, many of which do not resemble or correspond to perceptual reality.[47] Moreover, Bazin's readers are beginning to discover new dimensions of meaning in the dense and fascinating prose of the "Ontology" essay that cast doubt on any straightforward relation of correspondence between photography and the world. For instance, Dudley Andrew has recently noted certain "shadowy" elements of the "Ontology" essay, which, rather than suggesting the camera's disclosure of a pure or unmediated "presence" of the world, evoke terms such as "trace," "fissure," or "deferral," and suggest how Bazin might bear more in common with Barthes or Derrida than the "naïve" phenomenology he has been linked to:

> Remember, Bazin claimed that photographic portraits don't represent their subjects; rather, they are "grey or sepia shadows, phantomlike… the disturbing presence of lives halted in a set moment in their duration." Cinema confronts us with something resistant, to be sure, but not necessarily with the solid body of the world. Through cinema the world "appears"; that is, it takes on the qualities and status of an "apparition." (*What Cinema Is* 9)

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[47] See Daniel Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics," Christian Keathley, *Cinephelia and History or The Wind in the Trees,* and Prakash Younger, "Rethinking Bazin through Renoir's *The River.*"

Daniel Morgan has likewise taken a more nuanced approach to the "Ontology" essay, arguing that the correspondence or identity theories do not capture what Bazin finds striking, and even "strange" about photographed images. Specifically, in his claim that photographs "free objects from their temporal contingencies," Bazin seems to suggest a certain manner in which "photographed objects are … outside their embeddedness in ordinary perception" (6). Morgan thus argues that for Bazin, photography does not so much replicate the world but "gives us the freedom to form new associations, to have different kinds of relations with the objects in a photograph than we do with the same objects in the world" (6). Finally, it is not film's correspondence to a given reality, but rather its capacity to "acknowledge" reality (a term Morgan borrows from Stanley Cavell) that determines its degree of realism for Bazin.

Both of these readings help to loosen this essay from its engrained interpretations and cast doubt on the conception of Bazin as a naive realist, suggesting that he does not, after all, locate the value of the photographic image in its replication of an antecedent reality. But where does photography's ontological significance lie for Bazin? What is the specific power of photography that he aims to evoke in this essay? While terms like *trace*, *apparition*, and *acknowledgement* help distance Bazin from any straightforward representational theory and capture the more subtle tones of this essay, I would suggest that Bazin's own language offers the most compelling account of how and in what sense photography strikes him as significant. Specifically, the function that Bazin highlights as being both the essence of photography and the heart of its aesthetic potential lies in the *revelation* of the real. Now in one sense, no term could better lend itself to a certain

correspondence theory of realism, where the camera is taken to "reveal" a truthful or given reality. And yet, we must return to the essay to see how the term evokes something quite different for Bazin—a revelation that, far from granting access to some pre-determined or transcendent reality, instead arrives with the force of a certain shock. Photography does not confirm or correspond to reality so much as present it in a fundamentally new way; it is a discovery rather than a pacifying disclosure, the revelation of a world that *reveals itself.*

Bazin begins the essay by situating photography within a certain psychological history of the arts. "If the history of the plastic arts is not only a matter of their aesthetic but in the first place a matter of their psychology, it is essentially the story of resemblance, or if you will, of realism" (*WC* 4). Following André Malraux, Bazin traces this value of realism to the Renaissance, portraying the "obsession with likeness" as a kind of affliction that took hold of the arts and maintained its dominance for several centuries. It is precisely this craving for resemblance that photography satisfies when it emerges in the nineteenth century. According to Bazin, the profound intervention of photography lies not so much in the realism of its images (since painting can achieve a high degree of perceptual fidelity) but rather in its means of producing them. "Photography completely satisfies our appetite for illusion by means of a process of mechanical reproduction in which there is no human agency at work. The solution lay not in the resulting work but rather in its genesis" (*WC* 6). While painting may leave a doubt as to the veracity of the reproduction, since its images are always "compromised by subjectivity," photography radically transforms the psychology of the image by

producing a credibility that "bears away our faith" (*WC* 8). It thus satisfies a craving for objectivity while freeing painting to explore the themes that would give birth to modern art.

It is perhaps not surprising that many readers have found grounds in this essay for proclaiming Bazin's naïve realism. So far, it would seem that Bazin credits photography with an essential objectivity, a capacity to reproduce the world without mediation, that might well lead to a certain vocation for rendering reality as it is. And yet, this value of reproduction comprises only one dimension of photography and in fact occupies a secondary and even disparaged place in Bazin's overall argument.[48] Specifically, Bazin suggests that the "likeness" or "resemblance" of the image amounts to a form of illusionism that could only give rise to a "non-aesthetic," "psychological," or "pseudo"-realism. But there is a richer, more significant sort of realism that Bazin invokes in this essay—one that depends no less on the camera's automatism but has nothing to do with values of "likeness or resemblance." What might this alternative value of realism entail? As the essay progresses Bazin begins to wander through a succession of metaphors, each of which, as Daniel Morgan points out " captures something important about what a photograph is" even as each "fails in some way" (5). He compares the image to a mold, to a phenomenon in nature like a flower or snowflake, to a fingerprint; but the elusive and essential aspect of photography appears not in what it *is* so much as what it *does*.

The crucial passage appears in the final section of the essay: "The aesthetic potential of photography lies in the revelation of the real" (*Les virtualities ésthetiques de*

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[48] In his essay, "Rethinking Bazin through Renoir's *The River*," Prakash Younger draws attention to the disparaged place of "illusory" realism in the Ontology essay.

la photographie résident dans la revelation du réel) (*Q* 16). What does Bazin mean here by the "the revelation of the real"? The term "revelation" suggests something stronger than rendering or reproducing reality, and indeed, we have seen that Bazin associates photography's mere reproduction of the real with a feeble form of illusionism—valuable historically insofar as it liberates painting from its realist vocation but hardly the basis of photography's own aesthetic potential. As Bazin continues, we get a better sense of his meaning:

> A reflection on a rainswept sidewalk, a child's gesture, these are things that do not depend upon me to perceive them in the fabric of the outside world. Only the impassive lens, stripping the objects of habits and preconceived notions, of all the spiritual detritus that my perception has wrapped it in, can offer it up unsullied to my attention and thus to my love. (*WC* 9)

We are beginning to see that what strikes Bazin about photography is not so much its reproduction of a pre-existing real but the manner in which it reveals reality in a new light. In the photograph, we encounter dimensions of reality that had remained hidden. We encounter, as Morgan points out, objects loosened from our habitual experience of them.[49] But Bazin implies something even more radical about the experience of photography: photography not only renews our perception of objects, *it dislocates the very ground of perception itself*. "A reflection on a rainswept sidewalk, a child's gesture,

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[49] Morgan points to the Kantian undertones at work elsewhere in this essay, but we encounter them here in the notion of a realm of appearances that does "do not depend upon me." If for Kant, our perception depends upon our conditions of perception, so that what we see always, in a sense, "depends upon me," photography seems to fundamentally alter this arrangement.

these are things that do not depend upon me to perceive them in the fabric of the outside

world." In photography and cinema alike, Bazin suggests, we perceive a world that

appears in the absence of a perceiving subject, the genesis of a visibility that *does not*

depend upon me. This is a real that persists in spite of me, that has been loosened from

my grasp, but that also returns as something at once alien and familiar, known and

unknown. There is something surreal in photography.

We might say that what we encounter in photography is a real that *reveals itself*.

Indeed, for Bazin, the particular *génie* of the camera lies not in its capacity to represent

the world but to register or "receive it"; the receptive surface of film serves as a sensitive

plate (*la plaque sensible*) upon which the real impresses itself and, in the cinema, unfolds

in time. This dimension of Bazin's thought comes into even greater relief when we

consider the discourse of existential phenomenology in which he was immersed. Thinkers

such as Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Mounier, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty all sought to

dismantle the notion of a Kantian subject who stands before a world in order to represent

it, conceiving instead of a world "before" representation, a "genesis of visibility" that

does not begin with representation but with "presencing" of the world.[50] It is not

surprising that a number of phenomenological thinkers were drawn to the cinema, since

no medium more vividly demonstrates what Merleau-Ponty calls "the unmotivated

upsurge of the world" or "a world is there before any possible analysis of mine," while

embodying values of receptivity as opposed to the "grasping" of representation

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[50] In his 1964 essay "Eye and Mind," Merleu-Ponty refers the "genesis of the visible" (53). See also Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception,* Gabriel Marcel's *The Mystery of Being*, and Emmanuel Mounier's *Personalism*.

(*Phenomenology of Perception* x, xi).[51] And yet, for Bazin, the significance of the

camera's *génie* is not primarily philosophical, but rather aesthetic, bearing consequences

for his conception of the cinema's status as an art:

> The time has come when we have discovered the value of the brute
>
> representation in the cinema. The celebrated aesthetic judgment of
>
> Malraux according to which cinema became an art with montage has been
>
> enormously fruitful but its virtues have been exhausted. The first authentic
>
> emotion tied to the cinema is the one that made the spectators at the Grand
>
> Café cry out "The leaves are moving." (qtd. in Andrew, *Film Theories*,
>
> 156)

Bazin's "Ontology" essay is both indebted to and in dialogue with the writings of André

Malraux, whose 1940 essay *"Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma"* remained the major

statement on cinematic art. Malraux's notion that the invention of montage or cutting

marked the crucial moment of film's birth as an art relies upon a more generally held

supposition that had persisted since the manifestos of the 1920s. That is, the cinema

becomes an art to the extent that it transcends its status as recording. "The means of

reproduction in the cinema is the moving photograph, but its means of expression is a

sequence of planes," Malraux writes (320). Against this common sense, Bazin will

propose another possibility: that there is an aesthetic value in the reproduction itself, and

that the image possesses a certain *génie* of its own. In another conception of art, there is

not only the framing of the image, the cutting, the sets, lighting, and makeup but the

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[51] See Gabriel Marcel's essay on the cinema, "Possibilites et limites de l'art cinematographique"
and Amédée Ayfre's "Neorealism and Phenomenology."

rainswept sidewalk, the child's face, the moving trees. These singularities cannot be separated from the aesthetic operations that surround them, and yet, Bazin suggests, their very self-presencing comprises an aesthetic operation of another order, shining through and even superseding the sequence of "planes" or the manipulations of the shot.

If Bazin is at pains to extract and articulate this potentiality of the image, it is because its value remains hidden or suppressed in the majority of films, which construct their meanings through the "intermediary of metaphor or the association of ideas" (*WC* 90). Bazin's ontology then comes as his own "revelation" of this value—a particular potential of the image that he attempts to grasp and register. Yet this potential does not suggest an ideal cinematic essence, nor does Bazin believe that it can exist apart from the aesthetic operations which give rise to it. Indeed, the final sentence of the essay—"then again, the cinema is a language"—reminds us of the evolving and historically situated existence of the cinema of which Bazin never loses sight (*WC* 10). Inserted with the irony of an afterthought, this sentence appears as a vital connective current to the rest of his work, suggesting that for Bazin, the ontological value of the image only emerges aesthetically in an evolving language of cinema, and that it is from the *existence* of cinema that any theory of film must take its starting point.

In this sense, Bazin's final sentence reminds us of his own starting point, the particular moment of cinema in which he was immersed. Indeed, 1945 was the climax of the period that he would later claim ushered in a certain "revolution in film language"— the cinema of Welles and Wyler and, above all, Italian neo-realism, which Bazin claimed infused the cinema with new aesthetic values and a new sensibility. The visual fragments

that play across the surface of this essay, then—the child's face, the rainswept sidewalk—

do no float free of time or history but rise up from the body of films that surrounded him,

a cinema that Bazin increasingly could not explain by recourse to the accepted theories of

film art. In this sense, the "Ontology" essay does not appear as a final word or a "truth"

of the image so much as a first word, the inciting moment of his critical path. Rather than

a prescriptive declaration of film's ideal essence, it is Bazin's revelation of a different

kind of beauty and power in the image that did not, as of yet, have a theory.

Evolution

> We must say of the cinema that its existence precedes its essence; even in
> his most adventurous extrapolations, it is this existence from which the
> critic must take his point of departure (*WC* 133).
– Bazin

If Bazin's "Ontology" essay attempts to grasp a certain value of the recorded

image, his 1952 essay, "The Evolution of Film Language," traces this value through its

historical emergence in film. The essay revolves around a central argument: Bazin

challenges the then-prevailing notion that the arrival of sound marked a central break

between two types of cinema. Instead, he argues, the fault line runs between two different

approaches to the image that have persisted from the silent era to the present. On the one

hand, he identifies a "faith in the image," which describes an aesthetic that favors the

plastics of image and the resources of montage—"everything that the depiction of thing on screen can add to the thing itself"—and can be found in the mainstream of silent cinema, from Griffith to Eisenstein, and in a different form in classical Hollywood cinema (*WC* 88). On the other hand, he identifies an orientation which puts "faith in reality," and which emerges in the "against the grain" cinema of Flaherty, Murnau, and Stroheim in the silent period and later in the cinema of Welles, Wyler, and Rosselini. In this concept of film art, "the image matters not for what it *adds* to reality but what it reveals of it" (*WC* 88). Finally, Bazin suggests that this latter orientation ushers in an era of "decisive progress in film language" auguring the arrival of the modern cinema (*WC* 103).

Like the "Ontology" essay, this essay has been subject to a certain standard reading that usually positions it as the second cornerstone of Bazin's "naïve realism." While the "Ontology" essay, in the standard view, identifies an essence of the image rooted in its correspondence to reality, the "Evolution" essay is seen to adumbrate the specific aesthetic criteria for the realist style that follows from it. Specifically, critics have taken Bazin's "faith in reality" as the designation of a certain ideal style that rejects the accoutrements of "art" in favor of an ever greater approximation of reality, culminating in the long take and deep focus of Wyler and Welles, and apotheosized in the stripped down neo-realism of Rosselini. According to this view, Bazin esteems these filmmakers insofar as they exemplify what Carroll calls "one legitimate form of film realism—a form whose legitimacy rests on a "correspondence to reality" (142). While this correspondence has been described in various ways—as bringing us "closer to perceptual reality" (Williams

8), a "complete adherence to reality" or "fusing with the world" (Casetti 32), even a "radical purity" where film "annihilates itself" in the face of reality (Wollen 9)—these conceptions of Bazin's realism rest upon a similar assumption: that Bazin views film as approaching reality with an ever greater degree of fidelity and that this approach is accompanied by a gradual stripping away of "art" in favor of the "real itself." Finally, Bazin is found guilty of a certain teleology in this essay, where his beloved post-war directors appear as the culminating point in a progression toward which the cinema has naturally and inevitably been tending, and where a single realist style is celebrated as the "trans-historical" essence of cinema: as Carroll writes, "just as truth in such theories is truth for all times, so realism will be trans-historical" (142).

We must continue to question these readings and the image of Bazin they generate by recourse to Bazin's own writings. As we have started to see, Bazin is deeply critical of the previous generation of theorists who had attempted to isolate a "pure" essence of cinema, and he is no less hostile to prescriptive forms of theorizing that would identify the cinema with a single aesthetic: "Experience has already shown that we must beware of equating cinema with a given aesthetic, or even with who knows what kind of style, as some sort of substantialized form that the filmmaker is obliged to use, at least as seasoning" (*WC* 67). In insisting that film theory begin from cinema's existence rather than any projected essence, Bazin embraces a view of the cinema as a living, breathing life form with different levels or stages of development, each vital in their own way. In fact, we might say that Bazin's intervention with respect to film theory is to shift the scale of value from an ideal to an evolutionary level, while dissolving any hierarchies that

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would confine "Cinema" to a certain era or limit its art to a certain set of stylistic parameters. For Bazin, it is not a matter of a better, or more ideal cinema, but rather stages of development, relative vitalities, and thresholds of health and decay. Bazin's Evolution essay bears this principle out, giving rise to a genealogy of style from the silent era to classical Hollywood to postwar cinema, where each stage is seen in light of the new and vital forms it creates.

But if Bazin resists the essentializing tendencies that plagued previous theories, he is not simply a "historian of style."[52] While deeply invested in film's stylistic history, Bazin's critical energy lies in the present—in discerning new forms as they come into view, but above all, to articulating the value of those films he finds aesthetically vital. The cinema of Welles, Wyler and Rosselini, we will see, strikes him as just such a vital cinema, but not because it realizes some pre-determined criteria that he is seeking, or because he simply finds these films moving or ingenious. Rather, these films suggest a cinema at the edge of its powers; they initiate a process of stylistic regeneration from within that will perpetuate the life of the cinema in new and unforeseen directions. Above all, we will see that realism introduces an increased power of stylization into the image that is the very opposite of a "stripping away" of aesthetics. In fact, Bazin credits realism with ushering an entirely new logic of style into the postwar cinema, which, rather than bringing it into closer contact with "reality" as such endows it with its most intensely aesthetic powers as a form of "cinematic writing." It is finally in this sense that we must see Bazin's elaboration of realism in this essay not as an end point or final "realization"

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[52] Henderson, for instance, tends to view him this way (see "On the Structure of Bazin's Thought")

of the cinema's essence but as a concept of film aesthetics that gestures beyond itself, suggesting cinematic powers that have yet to be discovered.

Bazin begins his evolutionary history of cinema in the silent era, where he identifies a dominant idea of cinema based on montage and the plasticity of the image. Citing the contributions of Griffith, Eisenstein, Gance, and others who created a "broad arsenal of techniques" for conveying cinematic meaning, he describes how cinema reached a certain stage of health or robustness: "it would seem that film language had all the means necessary to say what it had to say" (*WC* 90). With the coming of sound, however, the vitality of this cinema was thrown into question. The cinema that perished at the hands of sound, Bazin tells us, was in no way "*the* cinema," as so many early theorists proclaimed, but rather a certain *idea* of cinema. Bazin is clear that the techniques of montage and formal composition developed during the era of silent cinema didn't disappear, but rather were marshaled toward a different idea of cinema. Bazin locates this idea in the classical features of Hollywood cinema, consisting of:

> great genres with well defined rules capable of giving pleasure to the
> largest international audience and also of interesting a cultivated elite,…
> perfectly clear découpage and styles of photography fully in keeping with
> their subjects; complete reconciliation of sound and image. Today to watch
> such films as William Wyler's *Jezebel*, John Ford's *Stagecoach*, or Marcel
> Carné's *Le Jour se lève* is to experience an art which had found perfect
> equilibrium and its ideal form of expression…. we are in every sense in
> the presence of a "classical" art at its peak. (*WC* 93-94)

Here as elsewhere in his writings, we are reminded of Bazin's respect for the "genius" of Hollywood's system and the vitality that it expressed at its peak.[53] If his treatment of Hollywood is significant in this context, though, it is because it helps clarify what is at stake for him as a critic, and the extent to which his thought departs from the mainstream of film theory to this point. Ever resistant to some notion of a final essence of cinema, Bazin insists that values of inventiveness and adaptation lie at the heart of any adequate account of cinema's power. While technology and industry provided the infrastructure for the rise of Hollywood cinema, it was no less a prolific creation of new themes and forms that Bazin views as central to its ascendancy. Hollywood did not negate the contributions of the silent cinema but immediately dated it confined it to an era, as it surpassed it in inventiveness.

And yet, Bazin goes on to suggest, this period too met its own decline, or rather, a state at which it stopped growing. In one of his most rich and extended metaphors, Bazin compares the cinema at the end of the 1930s to a river that has reached its equilibrium profile:

> Once it has reached its equilibrium profile, a river flows effortlessly from
> its source to its mouth without further eroding its bed. But should any
> geological movement occur to raise the peneplain and modify the height
> of its source, the river's water sets to work again, penetrating the ground
> underneath it, eating away at, boring, and breaking through it. Sometimes
> it encounters limestone and hollows out a whole new and almost invisible

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[53] See, for instance, Bazin's essay "On the politique des auteurs"

course across the tableland, a course whose flow of water is twisted and

complex. (*WC* 96)

It is precisely this twisted and complex path that Bazin sees the cinema taking after 1940

as it enters a new phase of development. But how to define this new course? What are the

conditions of its emergence? While Bazin never refers directly to the Second World War

in this essay, there is little doubt he had it in mind when he spoke of the "geological

movement" that drew an end to the era of Hollywood's dominance. In his essay on

William Wyler, Bazin refers in a telling manner to "the war and the flood of reality, the

hurricane of reality that it unleashed on the world," and quotes Wyler's sentiment that in

this new context, "Hollywood seems a long way from the world" (*WC* 50-51). Indeed,

Bazin would have undoubtedly credited Hollywood's decline to the new demand for

films that addressed themselves to the "realism" of a radically changed world, and as

Dudley Andrew suggests, "were you to have asked Bazin about the source of the change

he could sense under way all around him… he would have pointed to what he called *le*

sujet: subject matter" (*What Cinema Is* 99). And yet, in this essay we see that Bazin is not

content to define the originality of the postwar cinema in terms of subject matter alone:

> I am quite aware of the argument that the originality of postwar cinema
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> compared to the cinema of 1939 lies in the rise of certain national
>
> cinemas, in particular the dazzling way in which Italian cinema caught fire
>
> and the appearance of an original British cinema, free from Hollywood
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> influences—and that we might conclude from this that the truly important
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> phenomena of the 1940s were the arrival of new blood and the exploration

of new topics. In short, that the real revolution took place more on the

level of subject matter than style: what cinema had to say to the world,

rather than its way of saying it…. But for each new topic a new form! (*WC*

94)

In drawing attention to matters of form, or film's new *way* of saying things after the war,

Bazin warns that he does not intend to "advance some mysterious pre-eminence of form

over substance" (*WC* 94). It is, nonetheless, crucial that he begins his elaboration of

film's new era of realism from the perspective of style, since it reminds us just how

imbricated he takes the terms *realism* and *style* to be. Amidst a certain commonsense that

may have seen postwar cinema as more "realistic" by virtue of its topics alone, Bazin

begins to stake out a concept of realism that is "first and foremost, profoundly

aesthetic" (*WC* 226).

Above all, Bazin locates the aesthetic originality of the postwar cinema in a

certain "realist rejuvenation of narrative" (*WC* 105). But what does this entail? We can

turn to Bazin's discussion of Welles and Wyler and, specifically, to what he sees as their

crucial departure from the classical style that preceded them. Bazin associates classical

cinema with what he calls "analytic or dramatic" découpage—a style that sets out first

and foremost to "match the reality it analyzes" (*WC* 226). While films of the 1920s may

have relied upon dramatic visual effects—the juxtaposed images of the stone lions rising

up in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, for instance—such "visual tricks" become

"unthinkable" with the 1930s-era analytic découpage, which remains entirely in service

to the script's formal logic. Classical cinema continues to employ cutting and camera

movement, but these formal elements "add nothing." They only depict reality more

effectively by making it possible to follow the action better and by placing emphasis on

the appropriate spots" (*WC* 97). In this conception of cinema, style approaches a kind of

ideal transparency, avoiding anything that would render the editing apparent, and

adhering to the formal logic the script.

Now, it is precisely this form of découpage that Bazin tells us is "thrown into

question" by the depth of field découpage found in the work of Orson Welles and William

Wyler" (*WC* 98). On the one hand, Bazin will oppose depth of field to the "artificial"

divisions of montage insofar as it restores the "integral unity" of duration and space. In

their use of deep focus and the long take then, Welles and Wyler revive the "faith in

reality" of the Stroheim-Murnau lineage, since they draw upon the unfolding of time and

space itself, rather that producing it analytically. On the other hand, these techniques in

no way bring their images closer to some "objective reality." While Bazin suggests that

the long take and depth of field may bear more in common with our perceptual

experience of reality than the highly formalized techniques of montage or the invisible

editing style of Hollywood cinema, this potential for fidelity is by no means where he

locates the central value of their realism. In fact, Welles's depth of field shots in *Citizen*

Kane, Bazin tells us, achieve quite the opposite of an adherence to perceptual reality: they

suggest a particular "sadism" that distorts space and perspective to the benefit of the

shot's dramatic tension. "Orson Welles tries at times to obtain a kind of tyrannical

objectivity, like that of John Dos Passos, and at others a kind of systematic stretching of

reality in depth, as if it were drawn on a rubber band which he takes pleasure first in

stretching, to frighten us, and then letting fly right in our face" (*WC* 56). If Welles achieves a certain realism or objectivity in his long shots and depth of field, this is hardly an "objective" correspondence to a known world but a stark externality to objects, an almost surreal intensification of reality. His depth of field shots do not suggest a stripping away of style but a deepening of style, even appearing at times as "aesthetic ends in (themselves)" (*WC* 65).

Wyler's use of depth of field also intensifies aesthetics. In contrast to Welles's sadism, Wyler's style revolves around a "science of clarity" achieved through a stripping down of form, where long takes and deep focus give a maximum priority to the actors and precise poles of action within each shot. This austerity or stripping down is precisely how Wyler invests his images with a maximum of dramatic intensity; they become sensitive surfaces that register "dramatic currents running across the screen as clearly as iron filings reveal a magnetic field" (*WC* 66). Thus, in the death scene of Herbert Marshall's character in *The Little Foxes,* a steady in-depth shot foregrounds Bette Davis while in the background, Marshall's movements become the "dramatic joints" of the scene: "When he moves away from the foreground he takes the entire dramatic field with him," Bazin writes, with "striking surges of tension when he twice disappears from the side of the screen and appears in soft focus on the stairs" (*WC* 62). Wyler's realism thus revolves around an "abstract austerity" where the increased realism of the image serves to maximize the dramatic intensity, such that "every dramatic joint is so sensitive that a shift of a few degrees in the angle of vision is … capable of shifting the balance of an entire scene" (*WC* 66).

We are beginning to see that Bazin's conception of realism does not consist in simply "showing" reality, but nor does it suggest a fabrication of reality that would manipulate images from "outside." The "faith in reality" that Bazin refers to instead draws upon a certain depth of the image, a reservoir of the reality that it contains, to create new aesthetic landscapes, such as the stretched space in Welles or the "dramatic checkerboard lacking no detail" in Wyler (*WC* 100). Indeed, even in his descriptions of the classical cinema of Flaherty, Stroheim, and Murnau, Bazin had emphasized how the realism of the image was valuable insofar as it remained in service to "the means of expression it enables the artist to discover" (*WC* 52). Thus, while Flaherty established a certain dramatic value of duration when he drew from the real time of the image in Nanook's hunt of the seal, Stroheim's "cruel" cinema develops a dramaturgy based on "looking at the world closely and insistently" and forcing "reality to confess its meaning" (*WC* 92). It is precisely this "aesthetic of reality" that is intensified and put to new use in the modern cinema, where shots accrue an even greater degree of density, ever more subtle layers of meaning that carry their own dramatic function. "*Citizen Kane* would be unthinkable without depth of field," Bazin writes. "Our uncertainty around the spiritual key to the film or how to interpret it is built into the very form of the image" (*WC* 102). Likewise, in *The Little Foxes*, each shot "follows closely the development of the dialogue and the action proper, but its cinematic expression adds a layer of dramatic development of its own" (*WC* 63).

It is in this sense that Bazin will speak of the "paradox" of realism, whereby the increased realism of the image opens it to greater forces of abstraction; realism does not

efface style but *begets* style, leading to ever more precise effects, ever more subtle layers of meaning, to a point that, in the modern cinema, we can speak of reality *through* style; a total imbrication of form of content. No cinema exemplifies this paradox at the heart of realism more vividly that Italian neo-realism. On the one hand, Bazin defines neo-realism in terms of a maximum adherence to "things themselves." Its particular "humanism" lies in drawing from the living fabric of a world that "expresses its own meaning" and is summed up in Rosselini's dictum: "Things are, why manipulate them?"[54] Yet Bazin warns against assuming that this realist ethic stands opposed to "aesthetic refinement," or amounts to simply "showing" reality. In his 1948 essay on neo-realism, he writes:

> We should be wary of contrasting aesthetic refinement with who knows what sort of coarseness and immediacy, like those found in the kind of realism that limits itself to showing reality. In my view, one of the greatest merits of Italian film is that it reminds us once again that there is no realism in art that is not, first and foremost, profoundly aesthetic. (226)

In his numerous studies of neo-realist directors, Bazin goes on to demonstrate the deeply aesthetic consequences of a certain "faith in reality" that above all, destroys a tradition of cinema based on character psychology. Thus he writes of Fellini that his hero is not so much a character as a "manner of being, a fashion of living," while in De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* the character of Bruno appears as "a silhouette, a face, a way of walking," and in Rosselini's *Europa 51*, "[Ingrid Bergman's] drama lies beyond any psychological nomenclature. Her face only outlines a certain property of suffering" (*WCII* 32, BW138).

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[54] quoted in Metz, *Film Language* 74.

In neo-realism, Bazin suggests, characters are not subordinated to the plot, to a logic of psychology, or even to the words that they speak, but rather appear as singularities of expression. Against the backdrop of ruined cities and emptied landscapes, their gestures and physiognomies comprise the neo-realist film's rhythm—the very language in which it speaks—to the point that film itself seems to evaporate: "No more actors, no more story, no more sets… no more cinema" (*WCII* 60). We should not, however, take Bazin's oft-cited statement to suggest that realism consists in a fusing with reality or an "annihilation of art" (Wollen 9); in fact, it is quite the opposite. For it is precisely at the moment that style has been stripped away to the benefit of "beings and things" that it paradoxically achieves its most intense point of concentration, the point, where there is no longer a distinction between style and content, but "what is presented immediately presents itself through style" (*BW* 106). It is as if style reaches a zero point where, at the limits of its own effacement it comes into contact with its deepest necessity. In this sense, Bazin will describe Rossellini's *Europe'51* as attaining "the most sophisticated stylization possible. A film like this is the very opposite of a realistic one 'drawn from life': it is the equivalent of austere and terse writing, which is so stripped of ornament that it sometimes verges on the ascetic (*BW* 139).

In the context of Bazin's evolutionary theory, then, we see the extent to which realism ushers in a deep and progressive expansion of cinematic language, enriching the possibilities of what cinema can say but also its *way* of saying it. Indeed, with the increased realism of the image, Bazin suggests, film takes on a new status as a form of *writing*, where style, far from begin effaced, becomes its paramount feature. We can turn

to the end of the Evolution essay where Bazin discusses Hitchcock to see just how far this principle extends:

> Only through the heightened realism of the image does supplementary abstraction become possible. The stylistic repertoire of a filmmaker such as Alfred Hitchcock, for example, ranges from the power of raw documentary images to superimpositions and extreme lose-ups. But Hitchcock's close-ups are not the same of those of Cecil B. DeMille in *The Cheat*. In Hitchcock they are just one stylistic device among many. In other words, montage in silent cinema *suggested* what the filmmaker was trying to say, while in 1938 *decoupage* was used to *describe* it. In our own time, we can say that filmmakers *write* directly on film. Because it relies upon a greater degrees of realism, the image—its visual structure, its organization in time—now has more means at its disposal to inflect and modify reality from within. Film directors are no longer merely rivals to painters and playwrights; they have finally become the equal of novelists. (*WC* 105)

Bazin credits realism with ushering into postwar cinema precisely this notion of cinematic writing where the "meaning of the scene is no longer given in the way it is 'described' but the way it is 'written'" (*BW* 170). Echoing Alexander Astruc's concept of the "camera-stylo," Bazin discerns a more free and flexible and, above all, personal cinema that confers a new status on the director and brings film closer to the modern

novel.[55] If in classical découpage the director rendered visible a certain logic of the script, in the modern cinema, "the script is integrated into the direction … as a novel is to its writing"; "images are immediately inflected with stylization, so that to record (the event) is to devise it" (*CC*128, *BW*173). Moreover, older techniques do not disappear in this cinema but are given new life, as in Hitchcock's superimpositions or Welles's rapid montage sequences, which, in contrast to classical Hollywood's invisible style, "makes no attempt to fool us but appear as another resource of style, a deeply abstract form of narrative (*WC* 102). In this sense, Bazin will write of Welles that "if he did not invent the cinematic devices employed in *Citizen Kane*, one should nevertheless credit him with the invention of their *meaning*. His way of 'writing' a film is undeniably his own" (*BW* 231).

Finally, the canon of directors whom Bazin elevates in the Evolution essay neither exhausts the possibilities of realism nor confirms it as a single or uniform style; rather, in the neutrality of Wyler, the sadism of Welles, and the humanism of Rossellini, Bazin discerns an opening of style *beyond any dogma*—a threshold that ushers cinema into the age of the auteur. Bazin would be a tireless proponent of this new cinema and of those directors who increasingly sought freedom from the constraints of studios and the standardization of scripts.[56] And yet, if he located the vitality of the cinema in the ever increasing enrichment of its style, Bazin's concept of realism was in no way reducible to style alone. We see this in his complex attitude toward Hitchcock, whom he admired for his inventiveness and ingenuity of style, comparable to a "well-oiled machine," but who

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[55] Astruc's 1948 essay "The birth of a new avant-garde: la caméra-stylo" described the camera as "a means of writing, just as flexible and subtle as written language" (18).

[56] Andrew note that Bazin did "everything he could to break up the institutional ice which he saw impeding the flow of a personal cinema" (*André Bazin* 188)

also, in Bazin's view, lost of sight of something—paradoxically, by keeping it too much in sight. Reflecting on Hitchcock's depiction of the apartment dwellers in *Rear Window* whose daily lives we witness through the binoculars of James Stewart, Bazin notes that:

> By the end of the film we know everything about the past and the future of these characters whom we have merely glimpsed. Nothing is kept in the dark, not even what might be ambiguous due to missing information. We aspire as if for a breath of fresh air to *not* knowing something about someone, to be left in doubt, which would allow these characters to have an existence beyond the scenario of the film." (*CC* 163)

In Hitchcock's films, Bazin seems to suggest, everything is subordinated to a stylization that calculates precise effects, but at the expense of a certain existence "beyond the scenario of the film"—a reality beyond the frame. If we have been considering Bazin's concept of realism from the perspective of the style it engenders, it is here that we encounter a certain limit to this definition, where realism goes beyond style, or rather, through it. Indeed, there is another term in Bazin's concept of cinematic realism—the real itself—which, while always in relation to style, is also never reducible to it. It is on the terrain of this relationship between style and a real that lies outside of it that Bazin will develop realism at another level, as a concept of the *art of the real*. Connecting his ontology to his aesthetics, this iteration of realism is neither a theory of medium specificity nor an auteurism, but rather a concept of the cinema's critical and aesthetic potential—a theory of what the image can do.

Art of the Real

Reality is not art, but a realist art is one that can create an integral aesthetic

of reality (*WC* 51).

-Bazin

Bazin's "Evolution" essay had a profound impact on the film culture of the time.

In excavating a canon of idiosyncratic filmmakers, from Flaherty and Murnau to Renoir

and Rossellini, Bazin's essay not only developed his thesis on the growing realism of the

cinema, but gave rise to the idea of an "auteurist" cinema based upon the individual style

of directors rather than the standardized conventions of the studios. This idea would

become increasingly influential, above all at Bazin's own journal, *Cahiers du Cinéma*,

and would eventually inspire the notorious "politique des auteurs," a position embraced

by many of Bazin's fellow critics at *Cahiers* that elevated personal style as the highest

cinematic value. Bazin himself, however, remained ambivalent about the position that his

ideas had inspired. Ever the historian, he remained skeptical of the notion that a work

could be attributed to the lone genius behind it. Not only did he view the cinema as an

industrial art, whose "genius" often lay in the system that produced it, but even in the

most highly personal work, he saw the artist as "setting himself to crystallize, to order the

sociological forces and the technical conditions in which he thrust" rather than creating

from a singular imagination (*CC* 142). There is always a "precarious moment of balance

between talent and milieu," Bazin wrote, and indeed, we saw this principle at work in the

"Evolution" essay, where if he identified a tradition of auteurs, he also situated them within a broader current of film history, never discounting the profound influence of preceding eras of film language or the surrounding historical landscape ("Politique" 253).

But Bazin's resistance to auteurism speaks to more than just his historicist approach; it speaks to the very nature of his engagement with the cinema, the particular slant of his interest. As Andrew reminds us, "at the most primary level he was fascinated by the photographic image 'in the making of which man plans no part'" (*What Cinema Is* 122). Indeed, when Bazin writes that "a work of art escapes its creator and goes beyond his conscious intentions in direct proportion to its quality," he gestures toward his deep appreciation for the *génie* of the machine and its revelatory powers (*CC* 142). Yet, this revelation, as we have seen, is not carried out by the machine alone, but always involves a certain artistry. Bazin's fascination with a cinema that goes beyond any conscious intention does not simply suggest a love for the "haphazard" moments of *photogénie*, but rather a particular ethic of filmmaking that he seeks to define, where style remains in collaboration, even in service, to the revelatory power of the machine, and where, in Bresson's phrase, *une mechanique fait surgir l'inconnu* (a mechanism gives rise to an unknown) (Bresson 32). Bazin did not define this particular potential of realism in any simple formula, but it nevertheless appears as a growing argument across his work. It celebrates neither the medium alone, nor the individual genius; instead, this value of realism emerges at the intersection of the two, defining a particular vocation for cinema as an "art of the real."

In order to lay out the stakes of his concept of realism, we can return to the "Ontology" essay, where we remember that Bazin defined the cinematic image, initially at least, in terms of its power of illusion. Unlike paintings, which we know to be rendered by a subjective hand, we experience images as "the thing itself," or what he will call a "factual hallucination." In this sense, the cinema does not just represent reality, it *is* reality, at least for the time. As he writes elsewhere, "the world of the screen and our world cannot be juxtaposed. The screen of necessity substitutes for it since the very concept of the universe is spatially exclusive. For a time, a film is the universe, the world, or if you like, 'Nature'" (*WCI* 108-9). Bazin is hardly naïve to the way that this illusory power is put to work in the cinema; "The cinema has never ceased to pretend that it shows us things as they are … it has always been founded on a material verisimilitude (*BW* 104). Now on the one hand, Bazin does not take issue with this function of film, at least not in the same way that later theory would. He takes this illusory realism as film's most obvious "mythology," the function to which we willingly submit as spectators. But on the other hand, this illusionism of the cinema forms the basis of another problem that he extracts from the cinema—a problem that centers around the cinema's effacement of what he calls "flesh and blood facts." As he writes in his review of Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series, "facts" in the cinema are "increasingly used toward certain ends of persuasion":

> Far from moving the historical sciences toward more objectivity, the
> cinema paradoxically gives them additional power of illusion by its very
> realism. The invisible commentator, whom the viewer forgets while

watching Capra's marvelously edited films, is tomorrow's historian of the

masses, the ventriloquist of this extraordinary propopoeia that is being

prepared in all the film archives of the world (*BW* 192).

Here, Bazin is not only describing the way that documentaries can manipulate facts

toward their own persuasive ends through editing or voice-over commentary, but how the

very flesh and blood facts of the world can disappear in the image or become

subordinated to an illusion. Indeed, this disappearance of facts happens in the vast

majority of films, where the realities behind images become totally absorbed in their

filmic representation; we lose sight of them, so to speak.

In this sense, it is shocking when facts suddenly burst through the image. No

longer subordinated to their filmic representation, they appear in a new light. This is the

"revelatory" power of film that Bazin intuited in the "Ontology" essay, but that he also

traces through a variety of cinemas that augur a potential of realism no longer founded on

the "illusion" of the real. In one sense, Bazin suggests that all films rely upon a certain

illusion of reality; but if the majority of films "induce a loss of awareness of the reality

itself, which becomes identified in the mind of the spectator with its cinematographic

representation," there is also the possibility of retrieving what he calls "the time of the

object" (qtd. in Andrew, *What Cinema Is!* 121).[57] A phrase that echoes his notion of "faith

in reality," the time of the object suggests a value that comes from the side of the object

—from reality itself, rather than its cinematic representation; it suggests an aesthetic that

keeps an opening to the reality outside of it, which thus persists in the image, or

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[57] Andrew credits Hervé Joubert-Laurencin with discovering this phrase in Bazin's original
version of the Ontology essay.

perseveres through it. As an aesthetic act, this retrieval of reality does not amount to recording reality or simply waiting for it to arise. Instead, it involves both an extraction and a creation, since to retrieve reality is also to create it anew, as an *aesthetic* reality. This is why Bazin writes of Georges Rouquier's realist film *Farrebique* that he "painfully undertook to rediscover reality…" and that neo-realism involved the most skillful and rigorous aesthetic of effacement (*BW* 104). In both of these cases, Bazin sees a certain radical and visionary potential in the cinema: to produce a "factual hallucination" which is no longer simply an illusion of the real, but what Bresson calls "the quality of a new world which none of the existing arts allowed to be imagined…" (Bresson 91).

We can turn to Bazin's writings on Bresson and Renoir to see how they each carry out this particular "art of the real." In his essay on Bresson's adapation of *Diary of Country Priest,* Bazin emphasizes a certain art of reduction at the heart of Bresson's realism. "One does not create by adding but by taking away," Bresson writes in his *Notes on a Cinematographer* (96), and indeed, he bears this out in his film through a stripping down of the original text, which the actors speak throughout the film in a monotone delivery: "Bresson does not ask his cast to act out the text … or even to live it, but only to speak it" (*WC* 148). The text thus takes on a certain material reality of its own, becoming a "raw aesthetic fact," which the images of the film in no way "illustrate" but rather accompany as their own visual order. In particular, Bazin focuses on the human faces in the film, which are subject to the same reduction as the text: "the actors faces are stripped of all expressive interpretation and reduced to (their) epidermis" (*WC* 151).

They reveal to us not a psychology but an existential physiognomy… their features do not change: their inner conflicts and stages of battle with the Angel are not plainly conveyed by their appearances. What we see, rather, is closer to painful concentration, to the incoherent spasms of a reptile moulting or an animal dropping its young. When we speak of Bresson stripping his characters bare, we mean it literally. (*WC* 148)

Bresson's art, like that of neo-realism, lets faces and features carry out their own revelation; the *génie* of the machine produces a stark externality that captures their animal surfaces with no reference to psychology or conventions of dramatic acting. In this sense, Bazin will compare Bresson to Dryer, whose *Passion of Joan of Arc* he describes as a "documentary of faces."[58] But this stripping down of faces is only the first step of Bresson's reduction; there is also a depth born into the face, that builds from the surface inwards and does not restore a psychology but rather gives rise to a searing realism, what Bazin calls a "renewed dignity of the human face" (*WC* 153).

Bresson's discovery of this realism of the face comes about through a certain disjunction between the two "orders" of the film: the spoken words on the one hand, and the faces on the other. It is part of Bresson's art that "the images never "supplant" the text, or even illustrate it," Bazin says, and "it is mistake to see in (the film) either an illustrated text or a commented upon image" (*WC* 153-4). Instead,

we realize that this once removed reality of the pre-existing work and the reality directly captured by the camera cannot be made to nestle inside

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[58] Qtd. in Wollen 136.

each other, to follow one another, or to merge. On the contrary, the very

fact of bringing them together reveals their heterogeneous essences. (*WC*

151)

Bresson's adaptation is thus paradoxically founded on an "ontological disagreement

between two concurrent orders of events" (*WC* 151). And it is precisely through this

disjunction that the film's images are increasingly emboldened, and that the face begins

to build its singular power. The spiritual struggles expressed in the spoken words have no

equivalent on the faces of those who endure them, but because of this, the face appears

with an ever greater necessity, bearing witness to that which can only seen. Bazin

describes this effect as a "color printed just outside the edge of a drawing," where the

intensifying realism of the face bleeds beyond the text, but also beyond the film itself,

which ultimately cannot contain it (*WC* 155). By the end of the film the "image builds to

a maximum of intensity and could have said no more than by disappearing," and indeed,

the last shot of the film—the imprint of a black cross on a white screen—is the mark of

this disappearance (*WC* 156). This mark does not displace the face with an idea of

salvation that would negate its struggles, but rather remains as a trace of what cannot be

fully contained by the image—a reality that comes from elsewhere, beyond the frame.

Renoir's realism emerges in a different but related manner. Specifically, Bazin

locates Renoir's method in a conception of découpage where filmed realities are not

subject to the story but, as in Bresson's film, "bleed" over the edges and take on a vital

life. "Characters, objects, light all must be arranged in the story like colors in a drawing,

without being directly subordinated to it. At times the very interest of the finished product

may be in the fact that the colors do not fit nearly within the colors of the drawing" (*R* 32). "Renoir does not construct his films around situations and dramatic developments but around beings things and fact" (*R* 83). But Renoir's realism is carried out in an even more specific manner, which Bazin attributes to his particular understanding of the frame.

> Directors tend to conceive their images as boxed within a rectangle as do the painter and the stage director. Renoir, on the other hand, understands that the screen is not a simple rectangle but rather the homothetic surface of the viewfinder of his camera. It is the very opposite of a frame. The screen is a mask whose function is no less to hide reality than it is to reveal it. (*R* 87)[59]

What is at stake in this conception of the frame as a mask? On the one hand, the mask does not box in reality, but allows it to rise up. It does not submit the surfaces of the world to the ordering of the frame but receives them in an open space. Indeed, Bazin writes that "Renoir's films are made from the surfaces of the objects photographed, and his direction is frequently but a caress, a loving glance at these surfaces" (*R* 87). On the other hand, the mask's crucial gesture is toward an off-screen space, such that "the action is not bounded by the screen but merely passes through it." (*R* 89) In this sense, in Renoir's cinema we never lose sight of a world that is concealed, the world beyond the frame; he establishes the origin of his images outside of the frame. In Bazin's description of the final scene of Renoir's, *Boudu Saved from Drowning,* where Michel Simon's

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[59] Bazin writes elsewhere that "(Renoir) understands the true nature of the screen, which is not so much that it frames the images but that it masks out what lies outside of it" (*Renoir* 107)

character splashes and plays in the waters of the Marne, it is precisely this world both beyond the frame and within it that he invokes:

> The water is no longer "Water" but more specially the water of the Marne in August, yellow and glaucous. Michel Simon floats on it, turns over, sprays like a seal; and as he plays we begin to experience the depth, the quality, even the tepid warmth of that water. When he comes up on the bank, an extraordinary 360 degree pan shows us the countryside he sees before him. But this effect, finally descriptive, which could indicate space and liberty regained is of unique 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. (*R* 86)

Here, Renoir creates a landscape that is neither in service to the story nor in thrall to the image of a "beautiful landscape." The landscape's "intrinsic beauty" flows into the image from beyond the frame, so that we encounter not just an image of a landscape but the world that it came from, which both perseveres through the image and is born anew in the image. Renoir thus achieves for the landscape what Bresson achieved for the face: he makes an opening in the image where the real comes to presence. He retrieves reality through the image, which is also to usher it into being.

Finally, if this art of the real strikes Bazin as a vital task, it is because the real has become increasingly impoverished, increasingly hard to find. Indeed, in the background of Bazin's theory of realism is a condition of life where, in the aftermath of war, the

world is both saturated with more and more reality but also stripped of depth and meaning, in some cases by film itself. In a remarkable passage on the newsreel, Bazin describes the way that reality increasingly reaches the world:

> We live more and more in a world stripped bare by film, a world that tends to peel off its own image. Hundreds of thousands of screens make us watch, during the news broadcasts, the extraordinary shedding performed each day by tends of thousands of cameras. As soon as it forms, history's skin peels off again. (*BW* 188)

The "colossal mise-en-scene" of war, Bazin tells us, in one sense, has obviated any need for the creative art of film, since the war, "with its harvest of dead bodies, its immense destructiveness, its countless migrations, its concentration camps, and its atomic bombs, leaves far behind the creative art that aims at reconstituting it" (*BW* 188). But in another sense, isn't it in such a world and amidst such a reality that an art of the real is most needed? How to recover a world that has receded beneath the image of its own destruction? How to reconnect the skin of the image to the flesh of the world? Only through a tremendous love, Bazin suggests, do we discover the genetic elements of the real through which it might be reborn. Only through an art of the real do we find those delicate openings where the real begins to rise up, coming back to us anew. It is precisely this idea of cinema that Bazin's concept of realism finally articulates and defends: a cinema that both discovers the real and creates it, as only an art can.

Sensing the Image: Roland Barthes & the Affect of the Visual

There is a well-worn narrative, perhaps even a "mythology," according to which Roland Barthes undergoes two distinct phases as a theorist. In the first phase, he is the mythologist-semiologist who crusades against the "pseudo-physis" of culture, unmasking its myths and decoding its signs. In the second phase, he retreats to the immediacy of his moods and passions, more interested in desire than demystification, in pleasure than politics. At first glance, these opposing tendencies play out nowhere more emphatically than in Barthes's writings on cinematic and photographic images. While his early semiological texts strive to demystify the apparent immediacy of images by showing how they operate as signs, his later writings celebrate precisely those elements of the image that elude signification—the *punctum* of the photograph, the "obtuse meaning" of the film—dimensions of the image that can be seen but not described, sensed but not linguistically signified.

It is perhaps not surprising that Barthes's later writings have been diagnosed as a theoretical regression—the "belletristic musings" of someone who seems to have forgotten his own lessons, or perhaps regrets them.[60] Indeed, Jacques Rancière recently explained Barthes's retreat from semiology as a "drama of repentance," wherein he "expiates his sin of … having wished to strip the visible world of its glories, of having

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[60] David Bordwell describes Barthes as popularizing "a vein of belletristic musing" (*Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* 31).

transformed its spectacles and pleasures into a great web of symptoms and a seedy

exchange of signs" (*FI* 11). As compensation, Rancière suggests, Barthes "bends the stick

in the other direction by valorizing … the utter self-evidence of the photograph … the

purity of an affect unsullied by any signification" (*FI* 15). Rancière's assessment of *La

Chambre Claire* speaks to a certain tendency in the reception of Barthes's later texts,

which have been celebrated for their literary merit but which are no less criticized for

having regressed to a naïve, quasi-phenomenology. Hence, in his opening remarks for the

2001 symposium titled "Back to Barthes," Jonathan Culler declares that if Barthes is to

have enduring value for contemporary critical theory, it is "the early and middle Barthes

and not the late, nostalgic or sentimental Barthes" to whom we must return (439).

And yet, there is a different angle from which we can return to Barthes, and

specifically, to his writings on film and photography, which follow a critical trajectory

that cannot be reduced to regression or repentance.[61] No doubt, Barthes's writings after

1970 seem to venture away from the critical project of his semiological work, and at

times they may strike us as surprisingly naïve. For instance, when he devotes his 1970

essay "Le Troisième Sens" to the "obtuse" aspects of several Eisenstein stills—those

"touching" points in the images that cannot be described since they extend outside

"culture, knowledge, information"—he seems to be falling prey to the very mythology of

the image that his early work had taken such pains to expose (*IMT* 55.) Similarly, when

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[61] For revaluations of Barthes's later writings on the image, see Nancy Shawcross, *Roland Barthes on Photography* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997) and Jean Michel Rabaté, ed., *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997). For more general considerations of the critical value of Barthes's later writings, see Steven Ungar, *Roland Barthes: The Professor of Desire* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) and Diana Knight, *Barthes and Utopia: Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977).

he begins *La Chambre Claire* by asking, "What does my body know of photography?" it

may seem that the consummate critic of Nature has nostalgically returned to Nature, to

what Annette Lavers deems the "mindless yet meaningful depths of the body, with a

mythical hope of translating them into words without the mediation of language" (31).

Yet it is precisely those points where Barthes seems naïve or "forgetful" that must be

reconsidered and ultimately revalued. After all, Barthes makes *forgetting* a productive

force—the gesture that augurs the extension and intensification of his theoretical project

rather than its waning. Discussing his shift away from semiology, Barthes recalls: "I

undertook to let myself be borne on by the force of any living life: Forgetting.

Unlearning, yielding to the unforeseeable modifications that forgetting imposes on the

sedimented knowledge, culture, and beliefs one has traversed" (*IL* 478). Barthes's later

writings must be viewed in the light of this critical practice of forgetting, and, what's

more, as a critique of the scientific assumptions that had driven his early work. The later

writings must be viewed, in Nietzschean terms, as an "attempt at self-criticism."[62]

Indeed, Barthes's later writings owe a great deal to Nietzsche, to whom he refers

with frequency after 1970 and who becomes his most important interlocutor after

Saussure.[63] Specifically, it is Nietzsche's concern with the problem of Science—"Science

considered for the first time as problematic, as questionable" (*Birth of Tragedy* 18)—that

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[62] Nietzsche added his "Attempt at Self-Criticism" to the beginning of the 1886 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy.* Barthes's invocation of "forgetting" also owes something to Nietzsche, who, as Deleuze points out, treats forgetting as a "plastic regenerative, and curative force" (113).

[63] In his biography of Barthes, Louis-Jean Calvet notes that Barthes had been reading Nietzsche as early as 1935, and indeed, Barthes's first published article, "Culture and Tragedy" (1942), centers on Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. But as Andy Stafford suggests, it was only in the late 1960s that Barthes began to "engage systematically with Nietzsche's ideas" (289). See also Calvet, *Roland Barthes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 33.

drives Barthes's critique of the structuralist-semiotic project that he had helped to found.

Following Nietzsche, Barthes launches a critique of the "will to truth" that drives the

seemingly objective science of semiology; and yet, in returning to his own "pinnacle of

particularity" in his later writings, Barthes does not merely retreat to a form of

subjectivism, but instead charts a path away from the scientific commitment to what

Nietzsche calls "Method."[64] At the outset of his 1977 course at the Collège de France,

Comment Vivre Ensemble, Barthes describes how the science of semiology, in proceeding

according to Method, follows a "protocol of operations to obtain a result: to decipher,

explain, or describe exhaustively ("I myself was lured," he adds) (33). Method thus

requires a "pre-meditated decision" concerning the "right path" (*chemin droit*) of thought

(*CV* 33). Against the pre-scriptions of Method, however, Barthes notes the potential for a

"violence undergone by thought," a "training" of forces that act upon thought and that

comprise what Nietzsche calls "Culture" (*CV* 33).[65] Only by opening thought to these

forces, Barthes tells us, by "stumbling between different snippets, stages of knowledge

(*savoir*), of taste *(saveur)*,"does thought escape the generalities of Method and arrive at a

particular place (*CV* 34).[66]

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[64] In his essay, "*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure …,*" Barthes writes, "Perhaps it is finally at the heart of this subjectivity, of this very intimacy which I have invoked, perhaps it is at the 'pinnacle of my particularity' that I am scientific without knowing it …" (*RL* 290).

[65] Barthes had first invoked the Nietzschean opposition of method/culture in his final course at the École pratique des hautes études (*Fragments d'un discours amoureux*). He credits Deleuze with bringing this opposition to light in his 1962 volume *Nietzsche et la Philosophie*, and quotes Deleuze in this passage. See *NP* 123–126.

[66] Barthes's play upon *savoir* and *saveur* recalls Nietzsche's relation of *sophos* to the Latin *sapio* (meaning both "I taste" and "I am wise"), suggesting the relation between knowledge and "taste"—a relation which the "generalized knowledge" of Science no longer retains. See Christian Emden, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness and Body* (University of Illinois Press, 2005) 17.

It is precisely this "force to thought" that we encounter in Barthes's writings on film and photography—media that initially strike him as the consummate realm of ideology, but that also thwart the semiological methods he brings to bear upon them, unleashing new adventures in thought.[67] Barthes's final book, *La Chambre Claire*, exemplifies this turn away from Science that the image provokes, but even in his early writings on the image—in his canonical early essays on photography and his little known writings on the cinema—we witness a bourgeoning challenge to the science of semiology and its discursive practices of interpreting, decoding, and deciphering. This challenge emerges form the sensible domain of the image, a "this side of language" (*en deça de langue*) that comprises the image's most mystifying power (its supposed "naturalness"), but also a field of affects or "emotion-values" (*emotion-valeurs)* that cannot be subsumed to the language of semiology (see *IMT* 30, 59). Far from suggesting a mythical realm "beyond" language, this affective dimension of the image becomes the terrain of a rival critical practice—what Barthes, following Nietzsche, will call *evaluation*. Rather than signaling the exhaustion of critique—much less of discourse—how might Barthes's affective encounters with images both extend and renew his critical practice? In tracing Barthes's writings on film and photography, we encounter an approach to the image where the *sensibility* of images forms the basis for a renewed aesthetic criticism—a criticism where the link between knowledge (*sophos*) and taste (*sapio*), of which both Nietzsche and Barthes remind us, might be recovered.

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[67] In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the "attraction certain photographs exert upon him" as an "adventure": "this picture *advenes*, that one doesn't" (19).

"Broken Signs"

Describing his motivation for *Mythologies*, the 1957 collection in which his earliest writings on film and photography appear, Barthes recounts:

> In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *What-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there. (*M* 11)

The cultural phenomena that Barthes sets out to demystify in his various "mythologies" range from professional wrestling to the Eiffel Tower, but among the ranks of "what-goes-without-saying," he attributes a special mystifying power (*un pouvoir mystificateur*) to photographic and cinematic images (*OC* I 722). In various articles (on a photography exhibition, film *noir*, and Kazan's *On the Waterfront*, to name a few of his photographic and cinematic subjects), Barthes emphasizes the potential of these media to produce "true signs (with) a false meaning," to appear as natural emanations of the real and obscure the moment of their cultural production (*OC* I 945). Yet it is not until Barthes encounters Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in the late 1950s that he discovers a means to theorize the "pseudo-physis" of the image in terms of its function as a particular sort of sign, and thus, to approach both photography and cinema under the banner of a structuralist science.

In his 1961 essay, "The Photographic Message," Barthes famously describes the photograph as a "message without a code," a concept that he will continue to develop in his 1964 essay, "Rhetoric of the Image" (*IMT* 17). The photographic image, Barthes

contends, is a unique kind of message in that it bears an analogous (rather than arbitrary) relationship to its object; "there is no need to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image" (*IMT* 17). Far from suggesting a "pure" image, this "denotative" power of the photograph serves an ideological function, working to naturalize the culturally coded connotations for which it acts as a "support." This naturalizing power is particularly evident in advertising images, where the denoted image "innocents the semantic artifice of connotation" and "seems to found in nature the signs of culture" (*IMT* 37, 45). Thus, in the *Panzani* poster that Barthes analyzes in "Rhetoric of the Image," the photograph's denoted level effectuates "a kind of natural being there of objects; nature seems spontaneously to produce the scene represented" (*IMT* 45).

The thrust of Barthes's discussion of denotation in these early essays is to demystify the notion of a "pure image" divorced from signification by showing that denotation is always imbricated with connotation. The denoted level of the image not only naturalizes the connoted level but is *itself* always connoted (precisely as the truth, objectivity, or "naturalness" of the message). And yet, at the end of "The Photographic Message," Barthes briefly wonders whether this relation between denotation and connotation might ever be undone, whether the image might ever elude a connotative meaning and exist in its "pure," denotative form:

> Is all this to say that a pure denotation, a *this side of language* is
>
> impossible? If such a denotation exists, it is perhaps not at the level of
>
> what ordinary language calls the insignificant, the neutral, the objective,

but, on the contrary, at the level of absolutely traumatic images. The

trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning. (*IMT* 30)

We should pause here to consider Barthes's curious invocation of a "this side of

language" (*en deça de langue*), since it seems to posit a realm "beneath" or "before"

language that Barthes is simultaneously at pains to deny, or at least to chalk up to a

"mythology" of the image. And yet here, Barthes associates the *en deça de langue* with a

traumatic effect that works *against* the mythological function of connotation. "One could

imagine a kind of law," he writes: "the more direct the trauma, the more difficult is

connotation; or again, the 'mythological' effect of a photograph is inversely proportional

to its traumatic effect" (*IMT* 31). This subversive function of the traumatic image

portends Barthes's later theories of the "obtuse" meanings and the *punctum*, which he

opposes to the connotative meanings (or *studium*) of culture. And yet, if Barthes does not

dwell upon the traumatic image in this early essay, this is because he proposes an image

that evades connotation only through a total foreclosure of meaning. The traumatic image

is "by structure insignificant," he tell us; confronting it, "there is nothing to say" (*IMT*

30).

Barthes has more say about this challenge to connotation in his 1960 essay, "Le

Problème de la signification au cinéma."[68] In contrast to the tone of confidence in the

photography essays, this essay is permeated by a sense of uncertainty—a disarmament

before the film image that prompts Barthes to ask: "to what extent does semiology have

rights (*les droits*) over the analysis of film?" (*OC* I 1044). To be sure, there are many

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[68] See also Barthes's essay from 1960 titled "Les Unités traumatiques au cinéma." (*OC* I 1047–1056).

filmic images that do fall under the jurisdiction of semiology, comprising a "rhetoric" of the filmic sign. These images produce a relation of "equivalence," where an image (the turning pages of a calendar, for instance) actualizes a concept ("time passing").[69] And yet, Barthes points to a "peripheral zone" of meaning in the cinema where visual and acoustic signifiers do not find a signified value—where the "analogy between signifier and signified is in some sort of disjoint, unattended" (1040). These "broken signs" (*signes décrochés*) elude determinate meaning and yet they remain intelligible. Moreover, Barthes associates this realm of "uncertain signifiers" with a particular *aesthetic* vocation: "The art and originality of the film director is situated in this zone (of broken signs); one could say that the aesthetic value of a film is a function of the distance that the *auteur* knows how to introduce between the form of the sign and its content without leaving the realm of the intelligible" (1040). As he does in the photography essay, then, Barthes raises the possibility of an image that eludes connotation; and yet, rather than a foreclosure of meaning, here, Barthes invokes what he will call the "suspension of meaning"—an aesthetic tactic that he first recognizes in the theater of Brecht but increasingly associates with the cinema.[70] In a 1963 interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, he speculates that the cinema is,

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[69] Barthes notes that *l'analyse sémiologique* is founded when "a relation of equivalence is posed between two terms where one actualizes the other" (*OC* I 1049).

[70] While Barthes seems to privilege the cinematic image as the site of suspended meaning in these early essays, nowhere does he foreclose the possibility of photography achieving this same effect. Rather than sketching a strong line of division between photography and cinema, Barthes seems to be interested in two tendencies or potentials of the image that, as will become clear in his later writings on images, traverse the realms of photography and cinema alike: on the one hand, a tendency to adhere to the form of the sign, where signifiers correspond to determinate conceptual values, and on the other hand, a potential to unleash signifiers without signifieds, to form a sensible surface that eludes determinate meaning. The photography essays, dealing primarily with the institutional images of advertising, clearly concern themselves with the former tendency.

> … by its material and structure, much better prepared than the theater for a
>
> very particular responsibility of forms which I have called the technique of
>
> suspended meaning … The best films (to me) are those which best
>
> withhold meaning … To suspend meaning is a very difficult task,
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> requiring at the same time a very great technique and total intellectual
>
> loyalty. That means getting rid of the parasite meanings, which is
>
> extremely difficult (*GV* 19).

Barthes cites Luis Buñuel's film "The Exterminating Angel" (1962) as an exemplary

vehicle of suspended meaning, claiming: "It is not at all an absurd film. It's a film that is

full of meaning; full of what Lacan calls *signifiance.* It is full of *signifiance*, but it doesn't

have any *one* meaning, or a series of little meanings" (*GV* 21).[71]

The concept of *signifiance* will play an increasingly important role in Barthes's

thought, reappearing in relation to the image in his 1970 essay "Le Troisième Sens."[72] Yet

even in these early essays, Barthes gestures towards the "suspension of meaning" as a

critical potential of the image. How then does this critical potential, this "responsibility of

forms" that Barthes assigns to the image relate to the critical task of semiology? I would

suggest that while Barthes's early essays approach the image as a "privileged plane for

semiology," they also raise the question of semiology itself as method that favors the

determination of meaning rather than its suspension, and that thus must be called into

question (*OC* I 1039). Indeed, how does semiology establish its "rights" over the image?

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[71] In addition to Lacan, Barthes references Benveniste and Kristeva in relation to the term
signifiance. See Stephen Heath's introduction to *Image/Music/Text* for a discussion of the term.

[72] See also *PT* 61–65.

What is the nature of the will or desire that takes the image as something to be deciphered or explained? Considering an advertisement that includes both text and image, Barthes notes that:

> … the language clearly has a function of elucidation, but this elucidation is selective, a meta-language applied not to the totality of the iconic message but only to certain of its signs. The text is indeed the creator's (and hence society's) right of inspection over the image; anchorage is a control, bearing a responsibility—in the face of the projective power of pictures—for the use of the message. (*IMT* 48)

This passage seems to be concerned with the ideological operations of advertising. But I would suggest that it no less concerns the ideological operations of *semiology itself*. After all, even as semiology works to decipher the operations of power and ideology at work in the "image-repertoire" of culture, does it not simultaneously deploy its own forms of power—subjecting the image to its "rights of inspection," "anchoring" images in its desires? In the late 1960s, Barthes's critique of the "will to truth" that lurks beneath the meta-language of semiology will rise to the surface of his writings;[73] yet even at the height of his semiological period, we see fault lines in his practice begin to emerge through his encounters with images. Finally, we might say that while Barthes seeks to illuminate the images he considers in these essays, those images simultaneously throw their light upon his language, casting into relief the very "signs" through which science of signs carries out its operations.

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[73] Most accounts locate Barthes's "break" with the scientism of semiology between 1966 and 1970. See Rabaté, 4–5, and chapter four of Ungar's *Roland Barthes: Professor of Desire*.

"A new, rare practice … "

Barthes's mounting critique of the semiological science that he had helped to
found is inseparable from his increasing engagement with the writings of Nietzsche in the
late 1960s.[74] In his "Attempt at Self- Criticism," Nietzsche identifies the "problem of
science" as central to his philosophical project:

> What I then got hold of, something frightful and dangerous, a problem
>
> with horns but not necessarily a bull, in any case a new problem—today I
>
> should say that it was the problem of Science itself, Science considered for
>
> the first time as problematic, as questionable (18).

For Nietzsche, the category of Science (*Wissenschaft*) encompasses both the human and
social sciences and designates, above all, a paradigm of knowledge production that
conceals its own values and biases under the mantle of "objectivity." It is precisely this
tendency that Barthes recognizes in semiology, which carries out its "science of
language" through the lens of a meta-language without investigating the values and
desires embedded in its own discourse. "Any interpretation is based on a positing of
values," Barthes writes, echoing Nietzsche, and the seemingly "indifferent" language of
science is in fact driven by a *will to truth* so prevalent that it is no longer recognized as
such (*RF* 278). Barthes locates the will to truth of semiology in its desire to fix or arrest

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[74] Douglas Smith notes the increasing interest in Nietzsche during this period in France, due
largely to the publication of Deleuze's *Nietzsche et la Philosophie* (1962) and Pierre Klossowski's
Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux (1969). Barthes was familiar with both texts. See Smith,
Transvaluations: Nietzsche in France 1872–1972 (London: Clarendon, 1996), 152–162. For
discussions of Nietzsche's influence on Barthes, see Ungar's *Roland Barthes*, 58–63, and Arkady
Plotnitsky's essay, "Un-*Scriptible*," which appears in Rabaté's *Writing the Image* and examines
Barthes's concept of the "writerly" (*scriptible*) in relation to Derrida, Nietzsche, and Bataille.

meaning and its attendant commitment to the form of the sign. "We are beginning to

understand now that the sign is a historical concept, an analytic (and even ideological)

artifact," Barthes writes in 1973 (*TT* 33). The "civilization of the sign" commits us to

certain values: identity, closure, determinate meaning. While modern literature begins to

explore the disjunctions of meaning, semiological criticism remains wed to a series of

operations that attempt to arrest meaning, to "prevent it from trembling or becoming

double or wandering" (*TT* 33). Specifically, criticism confines itself to "two types of

operation, both intended to repair the holes which a thousand causes (historical, material,

human causes) can punch in the integrity of the sign: restoration and interpretation …

This conception of the text (the classical, institutional and current conception) is

obviously linked to a metaphysic, that of truth" (*TT* 33).[75]

   In once sense, semiology represents the culmination of this "metaphysic of truth";

yet semiology also bears the potential to fracture the uniformity of its own discourse,

since as a science of signs, it occupies a unique position from which to "reopen the

problem of the linguistic status of science" (*RL* 10). To do so, semiology must subject the

"language by which it knows language" to the force of a critique (*RL* 7). It must

recognize the "neutral, transparent" language of science as a moral language, bespeaking

a desire so general that it often escapes notice: a desire to ask the question "what does it

mean?" above all others, and in doing so, to secure the *identity* of its objects. More than a

critical reflexivity, Barthes demands an excavation and destruction of the values that

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[75] "Theory of the Text" also owes a debt to Derrida's trio of 1967 books, *Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference,* and *Speech and Phenomena.* For discussions of Derrida's influence on Barthes see both Rabaté's "Introduction" and Plotnitsky's "Un-*Scriptible*" in Rabaté's *Writing the Image*.

underwrite the semiological project, a "semioclasm" where the task is no longer "to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning … not to change or purify the symbols but to challenge the symbolic itself" (*IMT* 167). While Barthes had tentatively begun to explore the "fissuring" of meaning in the realm of images, it is not until his 1970 essay "Le Troisième Sens," that he confronts the possibility of *semiology's* own fissuring in relation to the image, and finally, the prospect of a rival critical practice.

"The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills" thus extends a line of inquiry that Barthes had opened in his early essays on film and photography, considering a level of the image that resists determinate signification (a level he will designate as the "obtuse" or "third" meaning as opposed to the "obvious" meaning). Yet while in the early essays, Barthes describes this resistant factor as a sort of sensible alterity within the image—here, the obtuse meaning erupts as a "tear" within semiology itself. In the wake of Barthes's critique of semiology, then, we will see that the obtuse meaning poses a challenge not only to the "obvious meaning" of the image but to the obviousness of the *desire* for meaning. Barthes dramatizes his own relation to this desire for meaning by beginning the essay in a familiar mode of "reading" the images, only to suggest how this reading falters in the presence of a rival desire.

Considering a still from Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* of "two courtiers … raining down gold over the young czar's head," Barthes identifies two levels of meaning: communication and signification. The first level, he tells us, is informational, including "everything I can learn from the setting, the costumes, the characters, their relations, their

insertion in an anecdote with which I am (even vaguely) familiar," and thus demands a semiotics of the "message" (*IMT* 51). The second level, that of "signification," requires a "mode of analysis … more highly developed than the first," since it contains symbolic, referential, diegetic, and historical references demanding an expanded repertoire of approaches (psychoanalysis, economy, dramaturgy) (51). Barthes proceeds to read both of these levels of the image, to "understand" the image in a sense, only to discover that this understanding is insufficient, somehow disappointing: "for I am still held by the image" (53). What in the image continues to hold him? Barthes ventures a description: "a certain compactness of the courtier's make-up, thick and insistent for the one, smooth and distinguished for the other; the former's 'stupid' nose, the latter's finely traced eyebrows, his lank blondness, his faded pale complexion, the affected flatness of his hairstyle suggestive of a wig …" (53). At first, Barthes is not sure how to "justify a reading" of these details:

> Not situated structurally, a semantologist would not agree as to their
> objective existence … and if to me (the third meaning) is clear, that is *still*
> perhaps (for the moment) by the same "aberration" which compelled the
> lone and unhappy Saussure to hear in ancient poetry the enigmatic voice
> of the anagram, unoriginated and obsessive. Same uncertainty when it is a
> matter of *describing* the obtuse meaning. (60)

Scientifically "disarmed," Barthes pursues the obtuse meaning as a sort of anomaly within his research that nonetheless demands to be classified—but how? It is as if the obtuse meaning can be *seen* but not *named*: "I do not know what its signified is, at least I

am unable to give it a name, but I can see clearly the traits, the signifying accidents of which the—consequently incomplete—sign is composed" (53).

Like the broken signs that he had encountered in Buñuel, the obtuse meanings appear as signifiers without signifieds, occupying a realm not of signification but of *signifiance. Signifiance*, Barthes tells us in *Pleasure of the Text*, is "meaning insofar as it is sensually produced" (*le sens en ce qu'il est produit sensuellement*); it is "value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier" and not signification (*PT* 61, 65). And yet, *signifiance* is not simply "sensation"; it is not reducible to a physiological effect, for in making it such, we have already signified the sensation. Instead, it is sense that hesitates or "shudders" at the level of the signifier without correlating to a signified value.[76] Thus, in the still from *Battleship Potemkin* of an old woman crying, the closed eyelids, the taut mouth, the hand clasped on the breast signify the obvious meaning of "grief," but the *signifiance* of the image arises "somewhere in the region of her forehead" (*IMT* 57). While the signifiers of "grief" can be correlated with their signified value, the obtuse meaning is visible but not namable. It "cannot be described because in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything—how do you describe something that does not represent anything?" (*IMT* 61). Here, Barthes points to a logic of *repetition* as the condition of signification—a condition to which the obtuse meaning, by definition, will not submit. "The sign is a follower, gregarious," Barthes writes several years later. "In each sign sleeps that monster: a stereotype" (*IL* 461). Indeed, while the obvious meanings in the image refer to stereotypes, existing cultural meanings that Barthes claims "seek

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[76] In *Roland Barthes*, he writes: "Meaning, before collapsing into insignificance shudders still: *there is meaning*, but this meaning does not permit itself to be 'caught'; it remains fluid, shuddering with a faint ebullition" (97–98).

(him) out" (the word "obvious," he reminds us, means that which "comes ahead"), the obtuse meanings seem to come from nowhere (they are "utopic" in this sense) and correspond to nothing: "Everything that can be *said* about Ivan or Potemkin can be read of a written text (entitled 'Ivan' or 'Potemkin') except this, the obtuse meaning. I can gloss everything in Euphrosyne, except the obtuse quality of her face" (*IMT* 54, 64).

At this point, we must confront a paradox at play in Barthes's discussion of the obtuse meanings thus far: while he insists on their singularity, he nevertheless categorizes them, precisely as the "obtuse" or "third" meanings. He extracts them from one economy of repetition (the sign as a "stereotype") only into insert them into another (the *topos* or type he designates as the "obtuse meaning"). And yet, while the sign functions as a repetition founded on the value of the copy, the obtuse meanings appear as repetitions that are different every time. We find this typology throughout Barthes's work after 1970; whether the "obtuse meaning," the "grain of the voice," the "text of bliss" or the *punctum*, Barthes defends the visibility, voice, or phrase that "eludes the peace of nominations" and that thus will not submit to semiological analysis (*IMT I62).* And yet, is their an alternative means of "arriving at" this unnamable element? We have arrived at the central problem of "The Third Meaning," a problem that takes us from the image to the realm of writing, or rather, which germinates along the seam where image and writing come into contact: namely, how to *write* the obtuseness of the image without subsuming it to the realm of the obvious? How to avoid, the moment one writes, signifying and thus entrapping those elements that called out to one precisely insofar as they resisted signification? This question is not so much answered as *posed* by this essay, where the

"obtuse meanings" augur the eruption of a new practice of writing, which is also a new

desire:

> Finally, the obtuse meaning can be seen as an accent, the very form of an
>
> emergence, or a fold (a crease even) marking the heavy layer of
>
> informations and significations … it is a gash razed of meaning (*of the*
>
> *desire for meaning*). It outplays meaning, subverts not the content but the
>
> whole practice of meaning. A new –rare—practice, affirmed against a
>
> majority practice, that of signification. (*IMT* 62)

The obtuse meanings, then, do not simply suggest the eruption of difference

within the process of signification (the "deferral" of meaning).[77] Nor do they serve

merely as markers of Barthes's singular experiences of Eisenstein's images that remain

impossible to convey in language.[78] Instead, the obtuse meanings signal the arrival of a

new "rare" practice of writing. But what form will this practice take? The difficulty of

this essay lies in the fact that while Barthes dramatizes a certain exhaustion of the meta-

language of semiology (which must be "discarded, like a booster rocket"), he is less clear

on what might replace it (*IMT* 65). Not submitting to signification, the obtuse meanings

seem to require a language of pointing (of "That! That's it!") or of the haiku (Barthes, in

fact, translates one of Eisenstein's images into haiku form). And yet, halfway through the

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[77] While the obtuse meaning evokes the "deferral" of Derrida's *différance*, for Barthes, this deferral always suggests the positivity of a new desire, and thus, of a new possibility for discourse.

[78] In his essay "Roland Barthes's Obtuse, Sharp Meaning," Derek Attridge argues that the "obtuse meaning," like the "grain of the voice" and the *punctum* suggests the "impossible" task of doing justice to a "singular response that resists or exceeds what can be discursively conveyed" (80). I would add, however, that while Barthes often refers to the impossibility of "naming" that which he loves in art, music, or images, this impossibility only signals the exhaustion of a certain practice of writing (description, predication) in favor of another (evaluation).

essay, Barthes briefly gestures toward another approach to the obtuse meanings, another way of "writing" the image. Considering several details from *Battleship Potemkin* (a woman's oversized bun of hair, the "rounded caps" of two workers), Barthes writes simply: "I believe that the obtuse meaning carries a certain *emotion.* Such an emotion is never sticky; it is an emotion that simply *designates* what one loves, what one wants to defend: an emotion, a value, a valuation" (*c'est une émotion-valeur, une évaluation*) (*IMT* 59). Here we have the strangest, arguably the most "obtuse" moment of the essay, as Barthes's fairly sober account of the obtuse meaning is "blunted" by what seems like a naïve, perhaps sentimental (if not "sticky") declaration of love. Yet it is precisely the *sentiment* that erupts here ("we savor, we love the two rounded caps in image X" he writes), auguring the arrival of a new critical practice—a practice that Barthes, following Nietzsche, will call "evaluation."

"To evaluate is not a subsequent but a founding act," Barthes writes in 1973; he specifies that evaluation must be "understood in the critical sense that Nietzsche gave it," as a rejection of the *adiaphoria* or indifference of science (*RL* 119). Indeed, while science requires a subject who "abdicates that which he does not know of himself, his irreducibility, his force," Barthes's assertion of the "emotion-value" carried by the obtuse meanings constitutes a founding act of evaluation, since it signals the eruption of a point of view, a *desire*, within the discourse (*CV* 33). What do I love? What do I want to defend? These are the questions that come to replace the semiologist's "indifferent" question of "what does it mean?" and that at the same time open writing to the forces that seize it. Indeed, when writing becomes evaluation, it no longer thinks *about* the texts that

it encounters, but rather in *conjunction* with them, succumbing to the adventures of thought and language that they provoke.[79]

Finally then, we might say that the obtuse meanings do not so much elude language but demand a different language, where words no longer engage in the tasking of naming, identifying, or decoding (the obtuse meanings signal the exhaustion of precisely these activities), but rather become steeped in "emotion, value, and valuation." And yet, while "The Third Meaning" gestures toward this "new, rare practice," the evaluation itself remains undeveloped in this essay. In fact, the passage we have been considering in which Barthes momentarily expresses his "love" for Eisenstein's images remains the essay's most vulnerable point, since it threatens to reduce the obtuse meanings to no more than subjective impressions or personal musings. "What else is there to say about what one loves except, I love it?" Barthes asks elsewhere (*RF* 286). Indeed, for Barthes, as for Nietzsche, evaluation is never simply a matter of "saying what one loves," but instead calls for the *creation of values*.[80] In his 1980 volume, *La Chambre Claire*, Barthes not only produces an evaluation of the photographic image – the force that it poses to thought – but confronts the central challenge of evaluation as a critical practice: namely, how to extract the value of an image without plunging the discourse into a realm of subjective appreciation? Instead of simply "saying what one loves," how

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[79] In *S/Z,* Barthes asks: "What texts would I consent to write (to rewrite), to desire, to put forth as a force in this world of mine?" (4). "The Third Meaning" suggests how the image becomes increasingly "writerly" as opposed to "readerly" (to use Barthes's terms from *S/Z*). Indeed, the notion of writing as a *production* which comes to the fore in *S/Z* relates closely to the practice of evaluation.

[80] See Barthes's essay "Languages and Style" where he warns that "evaluation cannot be reduced to appreciation" (*RL* 119). On the philosophical task of creating values, see Nietzsche's "Beyond Good and Evil," section 211.

to produce the *value* of that love—to "openly and actively affirm a value and produce a valuation?" (*RF* 284).

A Non-indifferent Discourse

Barthes's professed goal in his last major work on the image may strike us as antiquated, perhaps hopelessly so. "I wanted to learn what photography was in itself," he writes at the outset of *Camera Lucida* (3). And yet, Barthes invokes the traditional philosophical quest for essences, only to subvert it, asking not "what is photography?" but "what is photography for me?" Rather than suggesting a retreat to subjectivity, this question signals a critical shift away from the *adiaphoria* of science and towards the Nietzschean practice of evaluation. In an essay on Bataille's "The Big Toe," Barthes describes the difference between "knowledge" and "value": "Knowledge (*le savoir*), says of everything, 'What is this? What is the big toe? What is this text? Who is Bataille?— but value, following the Nietzschean expression, extends the question, "What is this for me?" (qtd. in Ungar 58). While "science goes on indifferent (= without difference) as to what is valid in itself, as to what is valid for everyone," it becomes a generalized discourse, spreading itself over a greater and greater diversity of situations and reducing them to the same (*RF* 278). It is against this reduction of photography under the gaze of an indifferent science, and moreover, against his own reduction to the position of the indifferent scientist, that Barthes resolves to make his individuality the "heuristic principle" of *Camera Lucida*:

I decided to consider only those photographs which give me pleasure or

emotion . . . . Instead of following the path of a formal ontology, I stopped,

keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief; the anticipated

essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the

"pathos" of which, from the first glance, it consists. I was like that friend

who had turned to photography only because it allowed him to photograph

his son. As Spectator, I was interested in Photography only for

"sentimental" reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme)

but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, I think. (*CL* 21, 26)

The sentience of the body—of Barthes's particular body—is thus the "non-

indifferent" starting point of *Camera Lucida*. Indeed, the question "what does my body

know of photography?" drives the first half of the book, in which Barthes develops his

theory of the *punctum*. Like the obtuse meaning, the *punctum* refers to that point in the

image that "pricks" him (*ce qui me point)*, that he "loves," and that cannot be referred to

existing cultural meanings (the *studium*). Barthes thus devotes the first half of the book to

developing a typology of the *punctum*, believing that it is here that he will find the

essence of the photograph. And yet, while the *punctum* plays a vital role in the first half

of *Camera Lucida*, we must remember that Barthes abandons it midway through the

book, deciding that it is finally inadequate to his task. What explains this curious choice?

Barthes tells us that while the *punctum* allows him to dispense with any illusion of an

"objective" science, it veers too far in the other direction, suggesting a "subjectivity

reduced to its hedonist project" (*CL* 70). Finally, the *punctum* is a means for Barthes to

say "what he loves" in various images, but, he discovers that saying "I love it" is not enough. In seeking an alternative to the "objective" meta-language of science, Barthes encounters another form of sterility in the realm of "I like and I don't like"; he thus resolves to make the second half of *Camera Lucida* his "recantation," his "palinode" (*CL* 60).

"Now one November evening shortly after my mother's death, I was going through some photographs …" (*CL* 63). Barthes begins the second half of the book not by evacuating his subjectivity but by following it in another direction, no longer seeking the essence of photography but the essence of his mother (the two quests, we will see, can hardly be separated). Barthes recounts sorting through his collection of photographs only to realize that he was looking for something in particular, the essence of that "face that I had loved" (*CL* 67). He finds this "irreplaceable quality" in an image of his mother as a young girl in a Winter Garden; yet he discovers something more in this image: until seeing the Winter Garden photograph, Barthes had been "indifferent" to an aspect of the photograph that now strikes him with a sudden force—a quality he calls "the intractable" or the "that has been" (*ça a été*). It is precisely this "intractable" quality of his mother that the Winter Garden image gives him, and from which he decides to derive the essence of all photography.

But in what sense does this quality comprise the "essence" of photography? Barthes acknowledges that the essence he discovers "emerges according to a paradoxical order, since usually we verify things before declaring them to be true" (*CL* 77). Rather

than deriving this essence, Barthes draws attention to his own role in "conferring" it upon the image in the moment that he encounters the Winter Garden photograph. Once again, we must look to Nietzsche to appreciate Barthes's notion of essence here. Deleuze explains that for Nietzsche, "essence … is a perspectival reality and presupposes a plurality. The essence of thing is discovered in the force which possesses it and which is expressed in it … *essence is always sense and value*" (*NP* 77). Barthes is clear that he discovers photography's essence in the moment that it "compels him to believe that its referent had really existed," when it gives rise to the "unique emotion" of the "that has been." Here, the essence of photography has less to do with what photography *is* than with the particular affect it unleashes, and in this sense, the essence of photography remains inseparable from the point of view that grasps it in a moment of affective intensity. Finally, the "that has been" suggests not the absolute essence of photography, but the possibility of a "sense and value"; it suggests not the eternal truth of photography, but the "truth that it deserves."[81] "All the world's photographs formed a Labyrinth," Barthes writes. "I knew that at the center of this Labyrinth I would find nothing but this sole picture, fulfilling Nietzsche's prophecy: 'A labyrinthine man never seeks the truth, but only his Ariadne'" (*CL* 73). Indeed, the Winter Garden photograph is Barthes's Ariadne, since it reveals to him "the thread which drew (him) towards Photography" (*CL* 73); it reveals the value that lies beneath his love.

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[81] Deleuze writes that in Nietzsche's thought, "we have the truths that we deserve depending on the place we are carrying our existence to, the hour that we watch over and the element that we frequent … Every truth is a truth of an element, of a time and a place. The minotaur does not leave the labyrinth" (*NP* 102).

Thus, in the second half of *Camera Lucida,* we begin to distinguish a new typology. Displacing the *punctum*, the "that has been" becomes the aspect of the image that Barthes will elaborate and ultimately defend. He discovers what photography is "for him"; and yet, the "that has been" suggests more than his pleasure in individual photographs. Instead, it comprises the "astonishing" affect—the emotion-value—that photography and photography alone can give him. What, then, is the value that Barthes accords to the "intractable" or the "that has been"? Barthes describes the "that has been" as a "second *punctum*" that is not confined to the detail but reverberates across the entire image: "This new *punctum*," he tells us "is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ("*that has been*"), its pure representation" (*CL* 96). Amid the "daily flood of photographs," the "that has been" of the photograph is usually experienced with indifference, yet this indifference extends to Time itself, which is measured according to a homogenous flow of images, the "generalized image-repertoire in which we live" (*CL* 118). If the image-repertoire produces a time without differences, where one cliché follows another, it requires the force of a different time—Time experienced as a *wound* and not from the perspective of indifference—to break the flow and "return us to the very letter of Time" (*CL* 119). The Winter Garden photograph gives Barthes not just his mother's singularity, then, but the *value of the singular*, the intractable moment that cannot be equated with any other, and that carries him to its particular place. The wounding encounter with the singular quality of his mother (her *noeme*) thus coincides with the essential value that Barthes bestows upon photography: the value of the singular as such.

Barthes's evaluation of photography finally remains inseparable from his own encounters with individual images—from those intractable moments that produce, for him, the value of photography. "Every truth is a truth of an element, of a time and a place …" Deleuze writes of Nietzsche, and in this sense, we should not take *Camera Lucida* as Barthes's final or absolute word on the image. Indeed, Barthes writes several other evaluations of photographs and films in the late 1970s, including essays on Richard Avedon, Daniel Boudinet, Lucien Clergue and Michelangelo Antonioni, each one emerging from a distinct encounter with the image—from something particular that "advenes" or sparks his desire.[82] To conclude then, I want to turn to one of Barthes's last published writings: an open letter to Michelangelo Antonioni. While Barthes had frequently expressed his resistance to the cinema as the most ideological of mediums, in Antonioni's cinema Barthes discovers a type of image that "troubles" meaning rather than relentlessly replicating it, and that suggests a value of the image to be found in cinema and photography alike.

"Beyond" the Image

While Barthes recognized the cinema's potential to suspend meaning and thus to challenge the "ideolects" of society, he more frequently approached it with skepticism as the consummate realm of ideology. "The image captivates me, captures me," he writes in 1975. "I am *glued* to the representation, and it is this glue which establishes the

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[82] Barthes's essay on Avedon appears as "Thus and So: Roland Barthes on Richard Avedon," trans. Richard Howard, *University Art Museum Berkeley* (February 1980), 11. "Daniel Boudinet" appears in *Roland Barthes, Le Texte et L'image* (Paris: Pavillon des Arts, 1986). Barthes wrote the preface to Lucien Clergue's *Langage des Sables* (Mareille, 1980). "Cher Antonioni" appears in *OC* V 900–905.

naturalness (the pseudo-nature) of the filmed scene … the Ideological would actually be the image-repertoire of a period of history, the Cinema of society" (*RL* 348). The dogmatism of the cinema is comprised not only by the clichés, the "stereotyped rhetoric" of film, but by the apparatus itself, which compels the subject to identify with a "reality" that relentlessly unfurls. While the stillness of the photograph opens a space of "pensiveness," a foothold for critique, the cinema confronts the viewing subject with "a continuum of image": "Like the real world," Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, "the filmic world is sustained by the presumption that, as Husserl says, 'the experience will constantly continue to flow by in the same constitutive style'" (*CL* 89).[83] Yet in Antonioni's cinema, and specifically in his long takes, Barthes discovers an image that is not only "pensive" but acquires a specifically cinematic force, since the *duration* of the shot defines its power. Barthes describes this power as that of a "scandalous look," a look that regards things "radically": "I can imagine that you are a filmmaker," he tells Antonioni, "because the camera is an eye that is constrained, by its technical disposition, to look. What you add to this disposition... is to look at things radically, until their exhaustion" (*OC* IV 904).

Indeed, in the penultimate shot of *Profession Reporter* (*The Passenger*), we see the pensiveness of Antonioni's look, as the camera pulls away from the protagonist (who has adopted another man's identity and now is fleeing from unknown enemies) and lingers on a courtyard beyond his window. During the course of the seven-minute shot, a series of uncertain signifiers float in and out of the frame, (a little boy, the wandering

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[83] Barthes echoes this idea in the section titled "Saturation of the Cinema" in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* 54.

figure of "the girl," a dog, a succession of automobiles). We are kept in suspense as to the

fate of the protagonist, as the camera opens its gaze onto a world of passing details that

seems to have lost its narrative coordinates. Barthes describes the "crisis of meaning" that

results, as if the camera's prolonged look *undoes* the world that it regards. "There is true

uncertainty … Your last films carry this crisis of meaning to the heart of the identity of

events (*Blow Up*) or people (*Profession Reporter*)" (*OC* V 902). Barthes reminds us that

a careful technique is required to produce this "vacillation of meaning" (*syncope du*

sens), which does not simply reject meaning but catalyzes a process of "making meaning

subtle." Finally, it is in this "subtlety of sense" that Barthes locates the political stakes of

Antonioni's cinema:

> Why is this subtlety of meaning decisive? Precisely because meaning, the
>
> moment that it is fixed and imposed, the moment that it is no longer
>
> subtle, becomes an instrument, a stake of power. To make meaning subtle
>
> is thus a secondary political activity, as is any effort which seeks to
>
> dissolve, to trouble, to undo the fanaticism of meaning. (*OC* V 903)

Once again, Barthes defends a certain "fissuring" of meaning as the necessary critical

tactic, while suggesting that this activity is never an end in itself. Barthes is drawn to

Antonioni's images not only insofar as they trouble meaning, but also insofar as they

suggest the possibility of "what lies beyond meaning" (*OC* V 901). This "beyond" does

not suggest an absence of meaning (since for Barthes, meaning has no "outside"), but

rather, a utopic space of possibility – a space from which it becomes possible to imagine

"the new world." "Your concern with our times is not that of a historian, politician, or

moralist," Barthes tells Antonioni, "but rather that of a utopian who seeks to perceive the new world in precise ways, because he desires this world and because he already wants to be a part of it. The vigilance of the artist, which is yours, is the vigilance of love, of desire" (*OC* V 901). Indeed, in refusing to signify dogmatically, Antonioni's images contain within themselves a utopic "beyond," a "blind field" (*hors-champ*) that is both outside and inside the image, absent and present, suggesting worlds of sense that await discovery.

Finally, I would suggest that this *beyond* is the point that Barthes desires in images, not because it stands "outside" of meaning, but because it "launches his desire" beyond the given towards new possibilities for meaning. "The New is not a fashion," he writes in *Pleasure of the Text*; "it is a value, the basis of all criticism" (*PT* 40). Indeed, crucial to Barthes's conception of criticism is that it not simply seek the fissures of meaning, but that out of these fissures it produce new forms of discourse—that it imagine *possibilities for sense beyond the given*. In the images he loves, Barthes's discovers a visible realm that is charged with the force of the not-yet-named. It is from this realm that he launches his language beyond what it knows in order to *create* values rather than finding them where they already existed. Barthes's embrace of this utopic dimension of images takes us a great distance from his earliest writings on film and photography, where he dwells upon their ideological content and their most determined meanings. And yet, perhaps this dual valence of the image as both over- and under-determined is precisely what draws Barthes to film and photography, and what makes them such difficult and productive zones of writing. In his notes for an exhibition by the

photographer Daniel Boudinet, Barthes identifies a certain "fatality that unites the writer and the photographer": "The photograph is like the word," he writes, "a form that wants to say something right away. Nothing to do about it: I am constrained to go right to the sense—at least to a sense" ("Daniel Boudinet" 74). Finally, the challenge posed by images coincides with the challenge posed by words, and the writer, photographer and filmmaker share a struggle: to resist the certainty of their mediums, to challenge the "truth" of language and of images, to joyfully know that "the world signifies only that it signifies nothing" (*OC* I 944). Far from a black hole of meaninglessness, this *nothing* describes a space of possibility, the site from which Barthes begins, and begins again the task of his critical practice.

The Signs of Thought: Gilles Deleuze's Untimely Film Theory

When they appeared in the mid-1980s, Deleuze's two volumes on the cinema (*L'image-movement, L'image-temps*) bore witness to a startling originality. Employing none of the familiar categories of either semiology or psychoanalytic theory, Deleuze's works instead introduced a host of new terms and references, from "movement-image" to "noo-sign," from Henri Bergson to Serge Daney. At first glance, Deleuze's project seemed to blaze the trail of a new "film-philosophy" that owed little to what came before it. Indeed, Deleuze undertook his engagement with the cinema not as a film theorist but as a philosopher who, as he would say, was drawn to film "for his own reasons."[84] And yet, we should be as wary as Deleuze himself was of the notion of new beginnings. "We always begin in the middle of something," he remarked. "And we only create in the middle by extending lines that already exist in a new direction, or branching off from them" (*RM* 216). Indeed, the inventiveness of Deleuze's books remained inseparable from a deep engagement with a wide range of thought on the cinema that preceded them, and they derived their force as much from the new concepts they introduced as the old ones they drew from, extended, modified, or displaced.

In the middle of what, then, did Deleuze begin? On the one hand, his books bore the marks of a lineage of criticism associated with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, both in terms of

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[84] Deleuze writes that philosophy and art "come into relation of mutual resonance and exchange but always for their own reasons" (*N* 125).

their privileging of European art cinema and in terms of what Jean-Michel Frodon describes as their "posture d'engagement amoureux" (13). Deleuze admired the journal's Bazinian legacy of forefronting the singular achievements of directors, and he would speak of his books as being comprised, in part, of "monographs of auteurs" (*MI* x). But on the other hand, if Deleuze possessed the sensibility of a cinephile and a critic, it was on a terrain laid out by *theory* that his books intervened. Above all, his study took off from a question that had defined the particular province of theory: *what is cinema?*

In the mid-1980s*,* no question could have been more untimely. Indeed, if "the usefulness of theoretical books on the cinema (had) been called into question," as Deleuze remarked*,* it was undoubtedly because speculation on cinema's "nature" or "essence" could hardly have seemed relevant in an age when "the proportion of disgraceful works called its most basic goals and capacities directly into question" and when film continued to carry out its social function impervious to such seemingly abstract thought (*TI* 164). It was in light of this situation that film theory since the 1960s had increasingly sought a critique of the cinema and its ideological functions. But Deleuze would not take this tack; instead, to the untimely question "what is cinema?" he would propose a thesis that was even more untimely: "My argument is simple: the great *auteurs* of film are thinking, thought exist in their work, and making a film is creative, living thought" (*TI* 220). Or, as he put it more strongly in *The Time-Image:* "the essence of cinema—which is not the majority of films—has thought as its higher purpose, nothing but thought and its functioning" (*TI* 168).

Deleuze was not the first to propose this notion of a "thinking-cinema." As we have seen, this concept stood at the heart of Epstein's evaluation of the cinema, and Deleuze would point to several other "pioneers" of cinema who had echoed it in their own ways, including Eisenstein and Elie Faure. Deleuze identified a certain optimism that united these early theorists, who staked the promise of the new art on the hope that it might transmit a new, revolutionary mode of thought to the masses. And yet, if Deleuze excavated this thesis, it was not simply to import it into the present. Instead, he would bring this thesis "back from the dead" in the form of a certain problem. It was no longer possible, he suggested, to believe in the universal thought that the pioneers ascribed to the cinema, much less to share their optimism about the cinema's revolutionary potential. From the vantage point of history, the cinema had not only failed to become thinking but arguably had become its opposite—a repository of clichés that did not liberate or open new pathways for thought but directed it down the most banal paths. Indeed, it would seem that the cinema's promise as thought had been utterly drained.

In this sense, the methodological imperatives of contemporary film theory had been justified: because the cinema was not thinking, theory had to think for it. Because it had become a terrain of clichés and a "false imaginary," theory had to demystify it. And yet, while Deleuze acknowledged this fate of the cinema and the pessimism it may have warranted, he once again pursued a much different path from that of mainstream theory: while the majority of cinema knew only clichés, he argued, there was in fact a "soul" of cinema that had never stopped thinking, that continued to think, even as thought became its greatest problem. This thought was not universal, nor could it be assumed, but rather it

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had to be discovered through the act of "tearing real images from clichés."[85] How to escape the clichés that have invaded the image? How to "tear a real image from cliché" in order to once again become thought and thinking? (*MI* 214, *TI* 168) To the extent that the modern cinema both posed these problems and began to find solutions, Deleuze discovered in it the renewed possibility of a *pensée-cinema.*

In contrast to the dominant critical pessimism of the time, then, Deleuze would bring back from the dead a certain untimely optimism. Most cinema had failed to become thought, he argued, but there was a soul that continued its secret life; in the midst of its own evisceration, cinematic thought continued to look for a way out. But what were the consequences of this wager for film theory, and specifically, for a theory of film that had found its *raison d'être* in a task of demystification, or thinking "for" the cinema? On the one hand, Deleuze's intervention was marked by a shift of focus toward a tradition of European art cinema that had been central to the pages of *Cahiers* but marginal to the mainstream of contemporary film theory. He thus revived the questions of art and aesthetics that had been displaced by theory in order to carry out an alternative critical task: no longer to unmask clichés or decode the cinema's dominant meanings but to extract the cinema's particular manner of thinking, to classify its singular images and signs. But on the other hand, this shift in his object of study spoke to a deeper violence his books carried out upon the whole edifice of theory—a displacement and reformulation of the very concept of film theory as it had emerged since Metz. That is, while theory had taken itself as a means of reflection on the cinema, holding itself

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[85] Deleuze borrowed this phrase from Godard (see *MI* 214),

"above" the cinema in order decode, analyze or explain it, Deleuze's project proposed a fundamental reversal: to the affirmation that the cinema is thinking, Delezue adds: but are we thinking? We who think about cinema, who think about anything? What is called thinking? What is philosophy?

These were the questions that traversed Deleuze's entire oeuvre, comprising his particular "philosophic cry."[86] But they were also the questions that his books posed to film theory, and that lay at heart of his intervention on its terrain.[87] Indeed, if his books proposed a revitalized concept of the "thinking-cinema," they no less raised the problem of *thinking the cinema:* "So that there is always a time, midday midnight, when we must no longer ask ourselves, "What is cinema?" but "What is philosophy?" (*TI* 280). These are the intertwining questions of his books, the force of which remains to be extracted. For if they marked Deleuze's particular adventure in film-philosophy, they also continue to unleash a violence upon our engrained images of both cinema and theory. What is the nature of this violence? What new possibilities does it release? On the one hand, we encounter a notion of *pensée-cinema* that "comes back from the dead to confront the worthless of most cinema" (*N* 71). On the other hand, this concept of cinema remains inseparable from a concept of theory that emerges with it and through it. Indeed, these are the oscillating images that appear, one in the other, throughout Deleuze's books and together comprise the essence of his untimely theory.

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[86] Deleuze speaks of "philosophic cries" that mark particular philosophers. La voix de Gilles Deleuze en ligne. 10/30/84.

[87] In his introduction to *The Brain is the Screen,* Gregory Flaxman writes: "For both film studies and philosophy… the cinema books constitute a duel, an affront, a defiant and "untimely meditation" (Nietzsche)…The moment for a cinematographic philosophy was .. boldly selected, though not to appeal to an audience; instead, Deleuze chose a moment in order to enter a given milieu, to affect the inclination of its forces, tendencies, and even habits." (8).

The Semiologist's Mask

Before turning to Deleuze's concept of a thinking-cinema, we must ask how he comes to engender it. As Deleuze says, concepts do not come "ready-made" but rather must be created—a task he bears this out across his cinema books (*HI* 15). The specific concepts he creates emerge in relation to a terrain that film theory has laid out, and which Deleuze "begins in the middle of." How then does Deleuze carry out his specific intervention? How and in what sense does he approach the very question of cinema?

When Deleuze began a series of lectures on cinema in the early 1980s, the project of semiology, despite its continued dominance in university curriculums, had started to wane.[88] In particular, its attempts to treat cinema as a language had been subject to extensive critique, so that by 1977, even Metz himself had admitted that " as a school of thought, semiology has had its day. It may, and even should retire" (Mitry, *Semiology* 21). Deleuze was no less skeptical of attempts to locate a cinematic "grammar." "Any reference to a linguistic model always ends up proving the cinema is something else" (*N* 65). And yet, despite his rejection of linguistics, it is nevertheless as a certain untimely "semiologist" that he begins his engagement with cinema:

> What led me to start writing about film was that I had been wrestling with
> a problem of signs for some time. Linguistics did not seem particularly apt
> to deal with it. I turned to film almost by accident because it is made of
> movement-images and thus engenders the proliferation of all kinds of

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[88] From the fall of 1981 through to the beginning of 1985 Deleuze gave a series of lectures on cinema at Univeristy of Paris VIII. Transcripts can be found at: http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/

strange signs. Film seemed to demand a classification of signs that

exceeds linguistics in every respect. (*TR* 219)

The problem of signs had occupied Deleuze since his early work on Proust*,* extending to

his engagement with Stoic philosophy in *Logique du sens* and his co-authored work with

Felix Guattari (*Mille plateaux),* where he sought a notion of sense not adjudicated by

structuralism and its categories. His turn to the cinema would in many ways suggest a

continuation of this project, as he worked out a new theory of signs in relation to the

cinema's singular forms. But his cinematic project was also marked by a deep awareness

of the problems opened by film semiology, and it is on this terrain that he intervenes.

Rather than a negative critique or a direct polemic against Metzian semiology, Deleuze

carries out something far more subtle. He infiltrates semiology, begins "in the middle" of

its problems, even borrows some of its features, but only in order to give birth to a

different critical practice: semiology under a different sign.[89]

Above all, Deleuze approaches the terrain of semiology according to a method

that he defines as the extraction of problems. In his book on Bergson, Deleuze had

described how works of philosophy should not be taken as ready-made meanings but

instead enfold problems: the task of any new philosophy, then, is not so much to provide

answers but to locate problems that remain "hidden and so to speak, covered up," and it is

according to this method that he approaches the work of Christian Metz (*B* 15).[90] While

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[89] In his book on Nietzsche, Deleuze writes: "A force would not survive if it did not first of all borrow the features of forces with which it struggles" (5).

[90] Deleuze writes in *Bergsonism:* "Stating the problem is not simply uncovering, it is inventing. Discovering, or uncovering has to do with what already exists, actually or virtually; it was therefore sooner to happen sooner or later. Invention begins being to what did not exist; it might never have happened" (15).

Deleuze only devotes several pages of his cinema books directly to Metz, it is evident from his lectures that he read him carefully and with deep respect, particularly for the manner in which he approached the problem of the "filmic fact." Deleuze praises Metz for practicing a form of neo-Kantianism in the relation he seeks to draw between film and language; that is, rather than treating this relation as a given, he establishes it only as a "condition of possibility," asking at the outset *how* and in *what sense* the cinema is a language (*La Voix* 2/26/85).

From Metz's initial gesture, Deleuze extracts two problems, each of which is contained in the other. On the one hand, Deleuze tells us, the *analogy* or principle of resemblance between the image and language with which Metz begins gives way to a form of *identity* when it is put into practice. It is as if Metz "forgets" the conditional nature of his wager and *equates* the image with language—more specifically, with the form of the utterance. Deleuze thus points to a strange circle: semiology "assumes that the image can in fact be assimilated to an utterance, but it is also what makes the image by right assimilate to the utterance" (*TI* 26). But there is a second problem that appears in light of this assumed identity, and which defines the manner in which it is established: Deleuze points to a "slight of hand," where the identity image = utterance is carried out through a very specific effacement of *movement.* "At the very moment it is identified with utterance the image is given a false appearance, and its most authentically visible characteristic, *movement*, is taken away from it" (*TI* 27). But how is this effacement carried out? Deleuze draws attention to a strange passage in Metz's essay, "'Le cinéma: langue ou langage?," where he attempts to establish the difference between the cinema

and photography. Discussing the particular way in which we make "sense" of moving images, Metz writes, "it is as if a kind of induction current were linking images among themselves, *whatever one did*, as if the human mind (the spectator's as well as the filmmaker's) were incapable of not making a connection between two images" (*FL* 46). Cinema differs from photography, Metz concludes, because "going from one image to two images is to go from image to language" (*FL* 46). If Deleuze lingers on this passage in his lectures, it is because it gets to the heart of a condition that determines the course of Metzian semiology, as well as its hidden problem. That is, images do not pass from one to the other because they move themselves; it is rather *narration* that moves images. "It is to pass from narration to language, it is to pass from the image to language since the image already was language (*La Voix* 2/26/85).

Deleuze's claim is at first glance rather obvious. Moving images are, in fact, *moving*. But Deleuze does not just "uncover" movement as an essential or authentic feature of the images; "stating a problem," he tells us, quoting Bergson, "is not simply uncovering, it is inventing," and it is in fact from Bergson that he draws the constituents of the new "first concept" of movement-image (*B* 15). It was Bergson, Deleuze tells us, who in the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* posits "an absolute identity of motion-matter-image" that describes the essence of cinematic movement (*MI* 47). That is, the cinema does not produce an image of movement, but instead produces a self-moving image, an *image-movement* that defines a plane of absolute variation.

But what is at stake in this reinstatement of movement into the image? In what sense does the movement-image reconfigure the terrain of semiology or define a new

starting point? At first glance, the concept of movement-image seems to take us far away from semiology's concern with cinematic meaning. Yet here, too, Deleuze begins to extract a certain problem of cinematic sense from "in the middle" of semiology's terrain. Specifically, Deleuze tells us, from the moment Metz equates the image with an utterance at the expense of movement, he also confines "sense" to its linguistic determinants, and thus does away with the notion of the sign. Indeed, in limiting the sign to its linguistic and Saussurian basis, semiology gives priority to the signifier, so that the film appears as a 'text' into which narration flows as an "evident given" (*TI* 26). But conceived as movement-image, doesn't the cinema in fact give rise to all sorts of strange signs, exceeding linguistics in every respect? "Cinema is built upon the movement- image… that's how it is able to reveal or create a maximum of different images" (*N* 46).

In order to account for this difference, Deleuze turns to Charles Sanders Peirce, who carried out a classification of signs that was not beholden to linguistics: "Peirce's strength … was to conceive of signs on the basis of images and their combinations, not as a function of determinants which were already linguistic … this led him to the most extraordinary classification of images and signs" (*TI* 30). In Pierce, Deleuze thus finds the basis for a *semiotics* of the image that contrasts with Metz's linguistically-based semiology. And yet, if Deleuze ultimately goes beyond Pierce, it is because Pierce is unable to account for the *genesis* of signs. Like Metz, Pierce in his own way relies upon a givenness of images, where instead of deducing them he "claims them as a fact" (*TI* 31). If the movement-image restores the difference of the image from language, then, Deleuze's concept of the sign will propose its genesis and its differential production of

sense. "Signs do not pre-exist but must be created," he writes (RM 286); as "images seen form the viewpoint of their composition and generation," "they themselves are the features of expression that compose and combine images, and constantly re-create them, born or carted along by matter in movement" (*N* 65, *TI* 33).

We have arrived at a crucial point of Deleuze's intervention, since it is here that the cinema appears no longer as a field of *application* but as a terrain of "creative, living thought" (*TI* 220). For Deleuze, cinematic images are in no way given, nor are they characterized by anything they "universally present" but instead "by (their) internal singularities" (*N* 65). Images and signs are subject to invention and renewal. We hear echoes of both Epstein and Bazin, thinkers concerned above all with the inventiveness and specificity of the cinema, and it is the manner in which Deleuze brings this aesthetic lineage into relation with the semiologist's impulse of classification that unfolds a new direction for theory. His goal, he tells us at the ouset of *L'image-movement,* is to "interweave concrete analyses of images and signs with the monographs of of the great directors who have created or renewed them," but above all to produce a taxonomy or classification of images (*M* ix) Now, semiology had its own form of classification that Metz described as a "descriptive science" of cinematic signs. But we must differentiate Deleuze's classification, once again by grasping a certain problem that it both illuminates and responds to. In Metz's model of classification, the elements to be classified, whether signifier, syntagm, or paradigm, appear as self-evident objects of *recognition.* We see this model at work in Metz's analysis of *Adieu Phillipine*, where the film immediately

becomes intelligible in light of certain recognizable "laws" of discourse.[91] Deleuze, by

contrast, will carry out a classification that owes nothing to recognition but that takes

signs as the object of an *encounter*. Deleuze had developed his concept of the encounter

in *Difference and Repetition*, and it is in *Proust and Signs* that he brings it into relation

with a new concept of the sign.[92] Deleuze credits Proust with proposing a notion of the

sign that is neither clear nor recognizable but ambiguous and filled with mystery and that,

above all, appears as the object of an encounter. "It is the sign which constitutes the

object of an encounter, and which works this violence upon us. It is the accident of the

encounter which guarantees the necessity of what is thought" (*P* 16). While recognition

presupposes a goodwill of thought and thus gives rise to the "explicit and conventional

significations" we are prepared for, the encounter also gives rise to the demand for a

certain act of deciphering, where signs do not conform to any pre-given categories of

thought but instead propel the very *act* of thought (*P* 29).

  What would it mean, then, to displace the recognition of signifiers with the

encounter with signs, to abandon the search for "intelligibility" in favor of the violence of

signs and their encounter? For Deleuze, the signs of cinema demand a certain

"apprenticeship"; there is no telling "what an image can do," or where it will lead.[93] Yet

this does not suggest an impressionism or chain of subjective associations, but rather, a

radically transformed semiology that draws inspiration not only from Proust but from

Nietzsche. Indeed, Deleuze identifies Nietzsche as the first thinker for whom "the whole

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[91] See Metz, *FL* Chapter 7.

[92] See *DR* 139.

[93] Deleuze often invokes Spinoza's claim that "we don't yet know what a body can do."

of philosophy is a symptomotology and a semiology" (*NP* 3). For Nietzsche, signs appear

not as signifiers but as symptoms, and as such they demand a certain creative act of

interpretation that takes the form of a "symptomotology." "We will never find the sense

of something, if we do not know the force which appropriates the thing, which exploits it,

which takes possession of it, or is expressed in it" (*NP* 3). Syptomotology thus interprets

phenomena, treating them as symptoms whose sense must be sought in the forces that

produce them (*NP* 75). It is finally in this light we must read Deleuze's interpretation of

the "break" between classical and modern cinema, since it is here that his classification of

signs gives way to a symptomotology that will take us beyond the movement-image, but

also here that we can begin to discern Deleuze's project as itself symptomatic of a new

critical will.

According to Deleuze, the Second World War marks a dividing line between two

regimes of images, which can be distinguished insofar as they bear witness to

fundamentally different forces. Specifically, in postwar cinema Deleuze discerns a

reversal in the relations between movement and time, where time, having remained

subordinate to movement in the classical cinema, begins to appear "for itself." In post-

war cinema we thus encounter empty spaces, deserted landscapes, characters waiting,

characters who wander—direct images of time. But this reversal is itself symptomatic of

deeper forces at work in the image—specifically, a break in the "sensory-motor-schema"

that had coordinated the extension of "perception-images" into "action-images" and

grounded narration in the image. What provokes this break? Deleuze points to the war

and its atrocities as giving rise to "situations that we no longer know how to react or

respond to"(*TI* xi). Whereas in classical cinema characters tend to respond to the situations in which they find themselves ("perception-images" extend into "action-images"), the modern cinema, and above all Italian neo-realism, features characters who have witnessed something intolerable and who can no longer react (perception no longer extends into action) but instead occupy a new interval of pure optical and sound situations ("op-signs" and "son-signs").

Now, it is precisely here that Deleuze's project has been called into question. "How can a classification among types of signs be split in two by an external historical event?"[94] Deleuze's summoning of the events of history in the midst of his classification of signs seems to turn him into an unwitting historian ("this book does not set out to produce at history," he had cautioned at the outset of the *Movement-image*) and to thus bring an element of contradiction to his project (*MI* ix). But this reading fails to grasp both the nature of Deleuze's classification-as-symptomotology as well as the specific sense he brings to the time-image. Far from giving rise to a contradiction that would unravel it, it is here, in his extraction of the time-image, that Deleuze's classification in fact gathers a consistency and force that begins to reveal the secret essence of a new semiologist, a figure who bears no resemblance to the structuralist or the historian, even as he has worn the mask of both. That is, if the time-image bears witness to forces of history, history appears here not as a "given" (or signified) value but as an *interpretative* value. The events of history may flow into the image and contribute to their sense, but the image also intervenes upon history as a sign that *interprets* it in a new manner, producing

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[94] Ranicere asks, "Can history, taken as a given at the beginning of the *Time-image* do anything but sanction a crisis that is internal to the regime of images, itself wholly indifferent to the tribulations and horrors of war?" (114)

a fundamental disjunction in its very concept. Isn't the world expressed by the time-image a world where it is no longer possible to believe in history either in its sense as "progress" or as "representable time?" Isn't it *time* that in fact breaks free from this conception of history at the very moment that history's event's bring thought to the limits of representation, producing a "time out of joint"?[95]

With the time-image, Deleuze neither describes an objective content of the cinema nor invokes an objective history; if he displaces the semiologist's application of concepts, he also undoes the description of the historian, who takes epochs and times for granted. Instead, the time- image constitutes an *interpretation* which is no less an act of creation: "a classification scheme is essentially a symptomologoly, and signs are what you class in order to extract a concept, not as abstract essence but as event" (*TR* 286). A concept extracted from signs, the time-image itself appears as a sign bearing Deleuze's signature, and is a symptom of the particular "time" in which he thinks—no longer the time of representation but of the "event." Perhaps, finally, it is to the extent that Deleuze shares this time of thought with the modern cinema that he grasps it with an affinity that had always eluded Metz, and marks the fundamental difference that he unleashes in relation to semiology. [96] We cannot forget that Metz too held a deep sensitivity toward modern forms, a love that emerges "between the lines" of his analysis but sometimes unexpectedly rises to the surface of his prose. In a passage from his 1966 essay "Modern Cinema and Narrativity," Metz evokes the singular beauty of Antonioni's cinema:

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[95] Deleuze borrows this phrase from *Hamlet*.

[96] Deleuze writes of Nietzsche's thought: "there is more or less affinity between the object and the force that takes possession of it" (*N* 6)

He excels in showing us the diffuse significance of those moments of everyday life that are considered insignificant; integrated within the film, the dull moment is reborn to our perception. And surely the most important thing about Antonioni—and about the best films of the cinema-direct—is that he was able to gather together within the skein of a more subtle dramaturgy all those *lost significations* of which our days are made. Even more: that he was able to prevent them from being entirely lost, without however, marshaling them—that is to say, depriving their significates of that shimmering indecision without which they would no longer be lost significations; that he was able to preserve them without "finding" them. (*FL* 194)

This passage, its own sort of "lost" moment in Metz, interrupts a long polemic against the notion of a "free a-grammatical originality" that some would ascribe to the modern cinema. To this notion of total creative freedom, Metz will oppose the "fundamental requirements of filmic discourse," which, despite its originality, the modern cinema must obey (*FL* 211). But what then becomes of the "lost significations" of Antonioni's cinema? No sooner does Metz open their secret than he encloses them within the semiologist's task; nothing is "preserved," but everything is "marshaled" toward a decisive end: "examples of the great syntactic flexibility and richness of the modern cinema should be gathered and more extensively analyzed" (*FL* 227). Only in this way, as Metz states elsewhere, can semiology begin to account for the "glimmerings" that define the "living cinema"; only in this way can it "reduce the distance, initially enormous, commonplace,

and distressful, that separated the emotion or the conviction from its clarification, the language of film from its meta-language" (*FL* 187).

It is finally here, against Metz's longing and persistent will to clarity, that Deleuze's difference comes into its sharpest relief. If Deleuze does not strive to assimilate or clarify the modern cinema, it is because his semiology knows that Metz's "lost significations" are also a loss of *signification;* if he succeeds in preserving the "shimmering indecision" of the time-image, it is because, like the characters who wander the post-war screens, he knows how to extract "the part that cannot be reduced to what happens: that part of the inexhaustible possibility that constitutes the unbearable, the intolerable, the visionary's part…" (*TI* 19). With the time-image, then, we arrive "in the middle" of Deleuze's project but also at a certain beginning, where the "cry" that the time-image enfolds as its deepest symptom appears as his own. Indeed, it is not because the modern cinema is more "beautiful" that Deleuze shares an affinity with it, but because he shares its condition. The intolerable does just appear in cinema but is everywhere, in thought and in language… "the 'healthiest' illusions fall" (*MI* 206). And yet, this fall or failure also brings a new condition: a time that is endured, undergone—"a little bit of time in its pure state"—which is what is left when thought surrenders its goodwill and its will to mastery. On the terrain of semiology, Deleuze carries out his progressive disjunctions—from the identity of the image to its difference, from the recognition of signs to their encounter, from description to the creative act of interpretation; but it is here, in the time-image, that we encounter the very condition under which Deleuze

thinks: a thought that, released from the legislation of *representation* acquires the

necessity of a *search*.[97]

Pensée-Cinéma

We set out in search of something; half the time, we don't know what we seek…

There is a Proustian sensibility, a new feeling for signs that lies at the heart of Deleuze's

cinema books; even as he rigorously lays out the elements of a new classification of

signs, his analysis is cut through by the building sense of a search. "I am not saying that if

I manage to achieve this classification it will change the world," he tells his class at the

outset of his lectures, "but it may change me, and that would really be a pleasure " (qtd.

in Dosse 411). Can we locate a certain intuition that guides Deleuze's engagement with

the cinema? We begin to think only according to a certain force or necessity, Deleuze tells

us. "It is not that on just says one day, 'look, I'm going to invent such and such a

concept,' no more than a painter says one day, 'look I'm going to make a painting like

this,' or a filmmaker, 'Look, I'm going to make such and such a film!' There must be a

necessity, as much as in philosophy as elsewhere, or there is nothing at all" (*HI* 15).

Having surveyed the elements of Deleuze's classification, we must ask: what is the

necessity that drives his search? What is the intuition that gives rise to it?

At different points, Deleuze suggests reasons that he "couldn't help" but

encounter the cinema. He gestures not only to the problem of signs, but to the question of

movement ("I had always been drawn to philosophers that privilege movement … How

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[97] Paola Marrati suggests that for Deleuze as for Proust, "every truth is truth of time" (83).

could I not encounter cinema which introduced "real" movement into the image?" (*TR* 282-3) as well as the cinema's proclivity for showing spiritual life. But it is above all the question of *thought* that comprises his particular "ariadne." Like "the real" for Bazin, it emerges as a thread that runs through Deleuze's cinema volumes, and with it, we can begin to trace the line of a certain argument. We have seen that Deleuze, from the outset, attributes to the cinema a certain power of 'thought" insofar as it invents new signs, thus reviving a lineage that extends from Epstein to Bazin. But if for Deleuze, "the essence of a thing never appears at the outset, but in the middle, in the course of its development, when its strength is assured" (*MI* 3), it is precisely in the middle of his volumes that a new notion of the relation between cinema and thought begins to emerge—the concept of a cinema that has thought as its primary vocation. On the last pages of the *Movement-Image,* Deleuze declares that cinema faced a crisis after which it "had to become thought and thinking," and it is in the middle of the *Time-Image* that we encounter his thesis in its definitive form: "The cinema has thought as its essence… nothing but thought and its functioning" (*TI* 168).

But how and in what sense does Deleuze develop this concept? In his lectures leading up to the *Time-Image,* Deleuze excavates a forgotten thesis surrounding the cinema's potential as a form of thought—a "psychodynamics" of the cinema that he credits to the early thinkers of cinema. "The cinema always wanted to construct an image of thought, the mechanisms of thought. And this is never abstract, on the contrary" (*PP* 91). Specifically, Deleuze draws attention to "the splendid declarations, those of Eisenstein, those of Gance, those of Epstein… those who went the farthest in this way:

the cinema as a new manner of thinking" (*La Voix,* 10/30/84). And yet, Deleuze admits,

when confronted with these theories today we can only laugh, "with tenderness and

respect and admiration, but laugh nonetheless." What has happened? In fact, we have

"given up on the ambitions of the first age of cinema:"

> Here is an art that, at its beginning, never stopped situating itself in
>
> relation to thought, and today, if you take count among the copious
>
> writings on the cinema books that engage the problem of the relations
>
> between cinema and thought? To my knowledge, you'd find, at least in
>
> France, only two. You'd find the collection of articles by Serge Daney, and
>
> you'd find the extraordinary book by (Jean-Louis) Schefer, *L'homme*
>
> *ordinaire du cinéma.* (*La Voix,* 10/30/84)

Drawing inspiration from both Schefer and Daney, Deleuze will thus revive the

question of a "thinking cinema," but only in the form of a problem. For Deleuze, thought

can never be taken for granted but always presupposes an "image of thought": "an image

thought gives itself of what it means to think." To the pioneers' proposal of a cinematic

thought, then, Deleuze asks, *which* thought? Thought according to which image? He

goes on to define this image on four levels:

> From a qualitative point of view, the pioneers proposed a new
>
> thought...From a quantitative point of view...it was an art and thought of
>
> the masses...From the point of view of relation, the cinema was a universal
>
> language. From the point of view of modality, the cinema forced thought

to take off from a simple possibility, the possibility thinking under a

necessity to think. You couldn't help but think. (*La Voix* 10/30/84)

Now, it is precisely this notion of a universal thought of the masses that has been

radically thrown into question since the first age of the cinema. In one sense, Deleuze

argues that the pioneers had already accepted the conditional status of their own thesis,

recognizing that cinema's "shock to thought" exists only as a *possibility*—that the

"spiritual automaton" in fact must be born in thought.[98] But in another sense, from the

vantage point of history, Deleuze tells us, the very possibility of a cinematic-thought has

been demolished. On the one hand, the "quantitative mediocrity" of the cinema has

sublimated the shocks of the "image and its vibrations" into "blood red arbitrariness"

while on the other hand, as Daney demonstrates, the twin forces of fascism and state

propaganda have mobilized the cinema towards their own *mise-en-scenes*, converting the

spiritual automaton to "state dummy" and "fascist man" (*TI* 164).

Given the forces working against it then, in what sense might the alliance between

cinema and thought be renewed? On the first page of *The Time-Image,* Deleuze begins to

propose an answer by confronting Bazin's arguments about neo-realism with an

alternative thesis. Rather than producing a new image of the real, neo-realism, he argues

marks an intervention on the level of thought. "If all the movement-images, perceptions,

actions and affects underwent such an upheaval, was this not first of all because a new

element burst on the scene which was to prevent perception begin extended into action in

order to put it in contact with thought?" (*TI* 1) In particular, Deleuze finds in neo-realism

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[98] In particular, Deleuze credits Eisenstein with theorizing the conditional nature of the "spiritual automaton" that the cinema gives rise to, and the struggle thought must go through to be born cinematically (*TI* 158).

a cinema of "seers" rather than agents, (*voyants non plus d'actants*), and of pure optical

and sound situations (op-sigs and son-signs), that together bear witness to "something too

powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful" which provokes a sensory-

motor-helplessness (*TI* 2,18). But in what sense does this bring the cinema into relation

with thought? If the pioneers assumed an identity between the cinema and a "universal"

image of thought, this is nowhere to be found in the modern cinema. And yet, Deleuze

asks, can we can discern another *encounter* between the cinematic image and an image of

thought—specifically, an image of thought that is no longer characterized as "universal"?

"Could it be that in its short history the cinema may have confronted two very different

images of thought?" (*La Voix* 10/30/84)

What then defines this new image of thought? At first glance, the modern cinema,

where characters come face to face with "limit situations" that outstrip their capacities for

representation, evokes the Kantian sublime. And yet, while the gap that Kant opens

between sensation and understanding in the sublime is mysteriously mended by the

intervention of Reason, which comes to occupy it, it is precisely this gap or interval that

remains open in the modern cinema. The "intolerable" event is not assimilated, but

instead gives rise to break that doesn't mend. This is why Deleuze says that if the cinema

encounters a new image of thought is it the image defined by Artaud: " a powerlessness

to think at the heart of thought" (*TI* 166). Indeed, it is precisely this *impower* (*impouvoir)*

that is expressed in the sensory-motor helplessness of the seers of modern cinema, but

also in the thought of Heidegger and Foucault (and Deleuze himself) among others, all of

whom think from the point of a certain "failure" of representation."[99] But what brings

these images into relation, the cinematic image on the one hand, and a philosophical

image of thought on the other? If they encounter one another, Deleuze says, it is "for a

simple reason":

> It is because the image of thought had itself suffered the same shock. The
> propaganda of the state…the organization of fascism, if they didn't leave
> the cinematographic image in tact, neither did they leave the philosophic
> image of thought in tact. And on the basis of this double ruin was formed a
> renewed alliance between the new cinematographic image and the new
> image of thought. (*La Voix* 10/30/84)

We should be clear that if Deleuze brings cinema into relation with this philosophical

image of thought it is in no way to "explain" the cinema by recourse to philosophy. The

cinematic image is not absorbed by the philosophical image of thought, but rather, it is a

matter of two distinct images encountering one other on the basis of a common shock. So

Deleuze asks, "by what means does the cinema approach this question of thought, its

fundamental powerlessness and the consequences of it?" (*TI* 168). On the one hand, the

majority of cinema responds by "filling in the gap." The fact that the sensory motor links

of the image have weakened in the postwar period, opening an interval between

perception and action, does not preclude the continued production of "sensory-motor"

films. In fact, what we encounter in the majority of cinema after the war is an intense

proliferation of "sensory-motor-images," or clichés, which suggest both a habitual

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[99] In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze writes that "modern thought is born from the failure of representation." modern thought begins from the break of representation" (xix).

"filling in" of the interval that had been opened and a certain normalizing function that directs perception down the expected paths, giving images a "rubber stamp" (*N* 43).

But on the other hand, and in the midst of all this, Deleuze points to another possibility—a cinema where the interval is not occupied but instead prolonged. Beginning with neo-realism but extending through a "minor" lineage of European cinema, Deleuze notes a certain internal necessity by which the cinema begins to reconsider its whole mechanism, no longer passing smoothly from perception to action but instead producing a space between them that "releases powerful forces of disintegration" (*TI* 19). Deleuze gives the example of Godard. If the sensory-motor cinema normalizes images and thus "always makes us see less" of them, Godard's art, Deleuze tells us, is to "make us see more … giving back to images all that belongs to them" (*N* 43). Godard achieves this replenishing of the image through his novel use of the static shot (in *Six fois deux*, for instance), where rather than cutting away when the action might "demand" it, he instead produces a prolonged and lingering image. It's precisely at this point, Deleuze says, that we no longer simply see what we are "supposed" to see, what the central rubber stamps and our own sensory motor systems always extract from situations, but instead a "real" image, the "whole image without metaphor" (*TI* 20). Thus, amidst a "civilization of the cliché where all the powers have an interest in hiding images from us … or hiding *something* in the image from us," Godard produces an interval that allows a "real" image to emerge; he "tears a real image from cliché" (*TI* 21, *N* 43).

Deleuze thus adopts Daney's argument that the cinema combats its own disintegration by adopting a new critical function: "if cinema was to survive after the war,

it would have to be based on new principles, a new function of the image, a new politics, a new artistic finality" (*N* 39). But this new critical function no less renews a certain link with thought—no longer a "triumphant universal thought but *a precarious, singular thought that can be trapped and sustained only in its powerlessness…" (N 71)*. This is a thought that, in Artaud's words, "can only think one thing: the fact that we are not yet thinking," but that from this powerlessness also draws "its higher power of birth" (*TI* 168). It is precisely here, Deleuze argues, that cinema and thought once again intersect as they both confront a powerlessness that is also the very point from which they begin to renew themselves. The concept of pensée-cinema gives expression both to this encounter between cinema and thought and the prospect of a specifically cinematic-thought that "comes back from the dead to confront the worthlessness of most cinema" (*N* 71).

But what is at stake in this concept of *pensée-cinéma* in relation to the established project of film theory? Theory too had developed a notion of the critical function of cinema after the war with its various concepts of the "counter-cinema."[100] From Metz's discussion of the "syntactic flexibility" of the modern cinema we can trace a line of thought that, despite theory's dominant concern with the ideological function of film, acknowledged a strain of resistance amidst its overall conformity. And yet, if Deleuze's concept of a thinking cinema bears little in common with this line of thought it is on two important fronts: first, to the extent that mainstream film theory remains grounded in a structuralist paradigm it confines itself to a *negative* conception of the cinema's critical function: it points to the presence of counter-codes, counter-ideology, and counter-

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[100] See for example, Peter Wollen's essay "Counter-Cinema: Vent d'est"

narratives in the work of certain favorite directors (such as Eisenstein and Godard), but it fails to account for the *positive* power of forms, to grasp what they might entail *in themselves,* beyond their disruptive function (one consequence is that this line of thought effaces the differences between directors as singular as Eisenstein and Godard, grouping them under the uniform label of counter-cinema). It is precisely this problem that Deleuze's concept of cinematic thought addresses, since it determines the positive form in which cinema "thinks" and gives rise to a theoretical activity of extracting those forms of thought, or what Deleuze calls "cinematic ideas."

Here we begin to approach the second front on which Deleuze departs from the mainstream of theory and carries out a certain violence upon its manner of thinking the cinema. After the war, film theory too had developed a new function, abandoning the aesthetic project of classical theory in order to become a "science" of film that would illuminate its social, psychological and aesthetic functions. From the early efforts of filmology to the psychoanalytic theory contemporary with Deleuze's own time, film theory had increasingly come to assume a certain "watchdog" function in relation to the cinema, approaching it as an object in need of demystification. It is precisely this model that Deleuze departs from when he postulates an alliance, rather than relation of subordination, between thought and cinema. It is not only that he treats filmmakers as thinkers in their own right ("How can one not treat, for example Resnais as a thinker, Godard as a thinker, Visconti as a thinker?"), but that he situates cinema and thought on the same plane, where thought is no less immune to the forces of power—the clichés, propaganda, and rubber stamps—that invade it (*La Voix* 10/30/84). Theory had attempted

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to confront the problem of clichés in its own particular fashion by separating itself from the plane of images which it then sought to isolate and explain. But there is a time, "midday-midnight," when even this "critical distance" is cast doubt upon, when thought itself appears as an image among others with no special priority, and when we live our lives like a "bad film" (*MI* 208). Indeed, Deleuze tells us, the genetic makeup of the cinema—the perception, action, and affection images that compose it—is no less our own makeup, each one of us a consolidate of images among others, so that we cannot say where the image ends and "I" begin, and at every moment face the demands of a powerful sensory motor system (*MI* 66).

What then is the path of resistance? How do we find a way out? If the cinema participates in the propagation of clichés, it also begins find a way to break free of them, and it is in Godard's question, "how to tear a real image from cliché?" that Deleuze discovers a certain "pedagogy of images."

> If images have become clichés, internally as well as externally, how can an Image be extracted from all these clichés, 'just an image,' an autonomous mental image? An image *must* emerge from
>
> the set of clichés … with what politics and what consequences? What
>
> is an image that would not be a cliché? Where does the cliché end
>
> and the image begin? (*MI* 214)

The problem of the cinema is no less the problem for thought, and here, it might be that the cinema proposes a solution for theory rather than the other way around. For it is not just new images but new thoughts that we need. Thought too must find the interval—the

space between its own images where it does not operate smoothly but instead begins to stutter, and thus to *engender* thought. There is thus a certain "lesson in images" that Deleuze extracts from the cinema, a pedagogy that his books internalize as they weave the course of their own singular thought. But don't his books in turn engender their own pedagogy, a lesson in *theory* that takes reflection on the cinema beyond its model of "science," and negative critique toward a task of positive creation? It is at this point that Deleuze's discovery of a precise and vital link between cinema and thought gives way to a *strategy* in which theory stands to discover in cinema the elements of its own renewal: the very conjunction of *pensée-cinema*.

Having an Idea in Cinema[101]

What does Deleuze mean when he speaks of "having an idea in cinema?" (*avoir une idée au cinéma*). We might begin by asking what the very notion of an "idea" entails for Deleuze. First, he does not consider ideas in a Platonic sense, associating them with pre-given or ideal forms, but instead gives them the sense of an *event* (an uncommon one at that, "a sort of celebration") (*HI* 14). Second, ideas are never "general" events but always take place in a specific domain: "ideas must be treated as potentials that are already engaged in this or that mode of expression and inseparable from it, so much so that I cannot say that I have an idea in general" (14). Finally, Deleuze tells us that ideas must be distinguished from communication, a far more common event, which involves "telling" us something or giving us information. Ideas do not "tell" us anything; in fact, it

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[101] The title of a 1991 lecture gave at FEMIS [*École nationale supérieure des métiers de l'image et du son*]. The published essay "Having an Idea in Cinema" is part of that lecture.

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is precisely this function of communication that they resist insofar as they reflect nothing but their own event. Once again, Deleuze learns from Godard:

> Godard has a nice saying: *not a just image, just an image*. Philosophers ought also to say: "not the just ideas, just ideas" and bear this out in their activity. Because the just ideas are always those that conform to accepted meanings or established precepts; they're always ideas that confirm something even if it's something in the future, even if it's the future of the revolution. While "just ideas" is becoming present, a stammering of ideas, and can only be expressed in the form of questions that tend to confound any answers. Or you can present some simple thing that disrupts all the arguments. (*N* 38)

We can approach Deleuze's notion of "having an idea in cinema" in precisely this way— not as a "just idea," but "just an idea." Something quiet simple, it nevertheless "disrupts the arguments" about film and its relation to theory, giving rise to new, unforeseen ideas. We can thus begin to extract the force of this idea and see where it leads.

Deleuze's phrase (*avoir une idée au cinéma*) contains two sides. On one side, Deleuze defines the way in which cinema itself has ideas insofar as it thinks according to its own means, in blocks of movement/duration. He gives the example of the sound/sight disjunction that we find in the modern cinema, where "a voice speaks, something is spoken of, and at the same time we are made to see something else… and finally, what is spoken of is *under* what we are made to see…" (*HI* 16). But what makes this a cinematic idea? On the one hand, it can only be carried out in cinema according to its specific

means (if another art found a way to carry out this idea, Deleuze tells us, they would be borrowing from the cinema) (*HI* 16). But on the other hand, the cinematic idea is not reducible to its technical means ("technique only makes sense in relation to ends which it presupposes but doesn't explain" (*N* 58). These ends or potentials are carried by the signs of cinema, which are not reducible to their "significations" but instead have the function of "realizing ideas" (*N* 65).

But how are these ideas grasped in other domains—for instance, in philosophy? This brings us to the second side of the phrase "having an idea in cinema," which does not suggest an application of philosophical ideas to the cinema, or even the act of having an idea "about" the cinema, but rather the possibility of having an idea "in the realm of" cinema (*au cinéma).* Deleuze thus suggests a very specific form of conjunction, where cinema is not subordinated to philosophy but rather philosophy comes into relation with cinema to generate ideas, but always for its own reasons, always according to its own needs. So what is an example of an idea Deleuze "has in the cinema"? We can return to Deleuze's own example of the sound/sight disjunction, which he considers above all in relation to the films of Straub-Huillet and Marguerite Duras, but that he also discusses throughout the *Time-image* as an idea particular to the modern cinema. How does Deleuze go about grasping the potential of this idea—a potential that its "technique presupposes but doesn't explain"? In his chapter "Components of the Image," Deleuze considers the relation of image and sound in the classical cinema. Drawing a distinction between the silent and talking picture in terms of the relation between visual and verbal components, he nevertheless extracts a common feature that is symptomatic of the

classical era. In the silent film, speech takes the form of text or "second function of the eye," while in sound cinema, speech becomes a component of the image; but in both cases, speech and vision exist in a relation of conformity or complicity, mutually affirming one another. In both cases, sound and vision refer to a unified Whole, a world which they continuously work together to actualize, so that even if a voice comes from out of field, it can always be assumed to come from the same world, and if it effects a change in the image, this change occurs within a changing Whole (*TI* 179).

Now it is precisely this Whole, Deleuze tells us, that the modern cinema throws into question at the moment that it tears sight and sound from their relation of conformity to give them their own ("hautonomous") framings. In the opening sequence of Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*, for instance, we hear a voice, we see an image, but they each express a different truth. And which is the true world? No longer expressing a relation of conformity between sound and vision, the image gives rise to a fundamental uncertainty that bears witness to an "obliteration of a whole or of a totalization of images" (*TI* 187). And yet, if this disjunction breaks the image apart, it also invests each component with new powers. Sound no longer validates what is seen but instead realizes a "founding speech act" or storytelling function *(legender)* and thus becomes creative of the event (*TI* 243). Meanwhile, what is seen becomes "readable" *(lisible)*, which does not mean that it signifies but rather that it develops an aesthetic power of "making seen"; it becomes "stratigraphic" (*TI* 256). Finally, if the components of the image each take on their own powers, they do not cease to relate but instead become subject to a specific re-linking. It is no longer a power of identity that links them together (cinema of the IS) but rather a

disjunctive relation (cinema of the AND), which produces "a continual re-linking over a break or crack" (*TI* 180). Finally, in Deleuze's rendering of Straub-Huillet's film *Moses and Aaron,* we encounter each of these consequences of the sound/sight disjunction—the story-telling function of speech, the stratigraphic image, and the non-totalizable relation between the two:

> … speech rises into the air, while the visible ground sinks farther and farther. Or rather, while this speech rises into air, what it speaks of goes under the ground…Deserted ground is the only thing that can be seen, but this deserted ground is heavy with what lies beneath…but what is known about what lies beneath? It is precisely of this that the voice speaks. It is as if the ground buckles with what the voice tells us, and with what comes, in its time and place, to reside underground. And if the voice speaks to us of corpses, of the whole lineage of corpses that come to reside underground, at this very moment the slightest quivering of the wind on the deserted ground, on the empty space under your eyes, the slightest hollow in this ground—all of this becomes clear. (*HI* 17)

We hear echoes of Foucault here, and indeed, Deleuze will draw a relation between the modern cinema and the thinker who carried out a whole "breaking open" of words and things but also gave rise to their new conditions. For Foucault, the "sayable" is not what we say but the very conditions of saying, and the "seeable" is not what we see but the shimmering that gives rise to it, and "what we see never lies in what we say."[102] But it is

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[102] In *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault writes: "It is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never lies in what we say." (10)

no less on the itinerary of Deleuze's own philosophy that the question of seeing and speaking develops in its own fashion. How to speak and to how to see? Aren't these the questions that the modern cinema asks and that Deleuze both extracts as a cinematic idea and undertakes as his own "lesson in images"? If the cinema brings sound and sight into a relation of disjunction, it also rarifies them, bringing each to its particular limit where it no longer appears as an innate exercise but discovers a certain liberation. And isn't this Deleuze's discovery—an exercise of seeing and speaking that does not simply rest in words and things as they are but becomes a form of *resistance*, "prevent(ing) speech from being despotic and the earth from belonging, being possessed, subjected to its final layer"? (*TI* 255)

If Deleuze discovers this pedagogy of seeing and speaking in the cinema, he also *creates* a particular pedagogy, his books comprising their own singular exercise of seeing and speaking that puts into question the common sense of film theory. For finally, doesn't the exercise of theory rest on an assumption of being able to *say what we see?* It is not simply a matter of the equivalence between image and utterance that Metz drew, but of an entire schemata of assimilation that knows how to apply frameworks and concepts, to demystify and explain—but do we know how to see? Moreover, do we know how to speak when "what we see does not lie in what we say"? This was the problem that Barthes lived, and that Deleuze poses again to a theory that "has preferred the peace of recognitions to the shock of encounters" (*P* 26). How to see? How to see the whole image without metaphor? But also, how to speak when it is no longer *of* we see*?* Indeed, it is precisely in this disjunction, when what we see tears away from what we can say of it,

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that a new exercise is born. On the one hand, this disjunction gives rise to an act of *preservation,* which does not represent the image but "keeps watch" over the "beauty or thought that the image itself preserves," and thus continues its life (*N* 78). On the other hand, if this life is preserved, it is only through a speech act that rises up from the seeable, that does not speak of what it sees but of what the image calls us to, what it "summons us to or enables us to release."[103]

It is finally here, at the moment that words are pushed to their limits by an encounter with what can only be seen, that language discovers its visionary function. *What I had hoped to do was to invent sentences that function like images, to 'show' the great works of film* (*TR* 220). There is a whole becoming-visible in Deleuze's text, but far from an adequation, this illustrating function proceeds only through the most profound disjunction, finding in the visible a pushing off point for language, and in language a function of making seen. Indeed, in Deleuze's books we find crystals of language in which films become visible, but never simply as what they are, always as something else. His language thus becomes its own terrain of signs, bearing witness to the singular zig-zag of his encounters while at the same time generating new ones. "What I set out to do in these books on cinema was not to reflect on the imaginary but something more practical: to disseminate time crystals. It's something you can do in cinema but also in the arts, the sciences, and philosophy. It's not something imaginary, it's a system of signs" (*N* 67). If the "times are not right for theory," the signs that Deleuze leaves us nevertheless

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[103] In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze speaks to the greatness of philosophy in these terms (34).

begin to create theory for another time; singular and precarious, it comes back from the

dead.

Epilogue: What is Called Theory?

There has been much talk about the death of theory in recent years. In the realm of film scholarship, it was David Bordwell and Noel Carroll's 1996 volume *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* that declared this death most loudly. And yet, rather than going "beyond" theory, Bordwell and Carroll carried out a reclaiming of theory, sweeping aside the Grand Theory that had dominated the previous decade and offering a new definition of the term. Here are some of the re-definitions that they offered:

> "Theories are general hypotheses about how best to explain a definite phenomenon, argued as proposed answers to a specific question" (xiv).

> "A theory of film defines a problem within the domain of cinema …and sets out to solve it through logical reflection, empirical research, or a combination of both. *Theorizing* is a commitment to using the best of inference and evidence available to answer the questioned posed"(xiv).

> "Theorizing is most fruitful when its conclusions are tested against logical criteria and empirical data" (69).

"We should countenance as film theory any line of inquiry dedicated to

producing generalizations pertaining to, or general explanations of, filmic

phenomena, or devoted to isolating, tracking an/or accounting for any

mechanisms, devices, patterns and regularities in the field of cinema" (41).

In redefining theory, Bordwell and Carroll sought to dismantle the "monolith" of Grand

Theory and what they took to be its ideological "Party Line," and thus, to open the field

to a range of new perspectives: "to let a variety of mid-level theorists compete in the

field," as Bordwell put it (xv). And yet, with these new definitions of theory, they also

made a very particular *claim* for theory; they proposed a very particular view.

It has been increasingly noted that this view presupposes a model of knowledge

drawn from the natural sciences, where "hypotheses," "logical reasoning," and

"clarification of error" are all put in service of a better or more "clear" understanding of

the object.[104] In this sense, Bordwell/Carroll's Anglo-analytic theory extends and even

intensifies the knowledge project that film theory ushered in during the 1960s, as it set

out to make film the "object of a positive science" (Lowry 169). It is not surprising, then,

that this Anglo-analytic theory has started to suffer the same critique that was leveled at

Grand Theory, particularly insofar as it seems to remain cut off from the "pleasures and

enthusiasms" of film and unresponsive to its aesthetic power (except, perhaps, in order to

explain it).[105] In an article published in *Film Comment,* Bordwell recently tried to defend

film theory against this growing impression of its anti-cinephilia. Grand Theory may

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[104] Rodowick has noted that Bordwell and Carroll remain invested in an "epistemological ideal of theory revived from natural scientific methods" ("Elegy" 97).

[105] Mark Betz speaks of the "impulses and the pleasures, the enthusiasm and the excitement" that film studies lost somewhere along the way ("Little Books" 340).

have "driven a wedge between scholars and cinephile intellectuals" he writes, but the "mid-level theory" of the Anglo-analytic school offers a complementary approach: "The cinephile-essay is strong on evaluation and appreciation; the academic piece stresses theory-driven application and interpretation"… "Perceptive appreciation and analytical explanation" are not at odds but "can enhance each other" ("Never the Twain" 40-41). A reader's comment in the following issue of *Film Comment*, however, tells another story:

> Reading David Bordwell's article "Never the Twain Shall Meet: Why can't cinephiles and academics just get along?" made it easy to answer that question. I don't remember the exact moment I drifted away from his article, but I know why. Academics writing about film make film boring. The more Bordwell wrote, and the more I read, the more detached I became until I surrendered and moved on to the (next) article.[106]

This response comes from outside the academy but mirrors sentiments increasingly expressed in the field. Scholars are not only mourning the "loss of wonder" at the cinema but the insularity of an academic discourse that does not seem to move anyone besides other academics. Reading Bordwell's article, we get a sense of why this may be. It is not *Bordwell* who is boring; it is discourse that remains locked in its own conventions—a language that has become heavy with a certain "idea" of theory. Analytic theory calls for a renewed "empirical" activity of theorizing, but it also legislates that activity, producing different studies with different conclusions but always the same results: a monolithic academic language.

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[106] Margaret Daly, *Film Comment*. Vol 47. 4 (July/August 2011). 8.

If film theory is perishing, then, it has not been at the hands of Grand Theory

alone (if anything, as Adrian Martin suggests, the writings of the 1970s increasingly

appear as a sort of "mad poetry" that is still worth returning to) ("Future" 120). No, if

theory is dying, it is because it has lost the sense of conflict that might give birth to it.

Indeed, returning to Bordwell and Carroll's definitions of theory, don't we encounter a

doxa just as rigid as that which they ascribe to Grand Theory? As they profess to open the

field to a range of new perspectives, don't they also solidify it ever more firmly into a

single view? Paul de Man reminds us that in its original use, *theoria* designated a

privileged collective of individuals charged with a task of "seeing and telling" when it

came to important events, the function of which was to set a standard of "truth" against

rival claimants:

> They were summoned on special occasions to attest the occurrence of
>
> some event, to witness its happenstance, and to then verbally certify its
>
> having taken place. In other words, their function was one of seeing and
>
> telling. To be sure, other individuals in the city could see and tell, but their
>
> telling was no more than a *claim* that they had seen something, and it
>
> needed some authority to adjucate the authority of such a claim. The city
>
> needed a more official and more ascertainable form of knowledge it if was
>
> not to lose itself in endless claims and counterclaims. The *theoria*
>
> provided such bedrock of certainty. (xiv)

This definition of the *theoria* pervades Bordwell and Carroll's practice of theorizing or

"seeing and telling." Not only do they remain invested in a Comptian notion of truth or

"certainty," but they distinguish their own form of seeing and telling from the "sophistry" of rival claimants, above all those Continental theorists whose "remarkably unconstrained assertions," "associationist reasoning," "bricollage of parallels, interpretive leaps… and unsupported conclusions" are the very obstacles to "authentic theorizing" (23, 24, 41). And yet what is "authentic theorizing"? In whose name is this theory carried out? The supposed neutrality of Bordwell and Carroll's discourse, like the meta-language of semiology that Barthes struggled so hard to resist, speaks to a will to truth that continues to pervade theory, and ever more returns it to form of self-evidence.

If we are returning to figures such as Barthes who learned to speak in their own name, it is perhaps because we need them. We need them to once again begin to restore a sense of conflict to theory—to discover its "other names." While Carroll may view the history of film theory as a gradual "clarification of error," it in fact ever more appears as a vast repertoire of concepts, modes of "seeing and speaking," and lineages of ideas that have yet to be exhausted (*PP* 11). We can thus return to the archive of theory to discover its other claimants, but also to trace new lines of thought into the present. The lineage we have followed from Epstein to Deleuze continues to develop in the "figural analysis" practiced by Nicole Brenez, the synthetic criticism of Adrian Martin, and the school of film-philosophy that seeks to think "with" films rather than about them, for instance.[107] Neither cinephilia nor rigid methodology, these engagements extract the singular potentials of film and re-inspire belief in its "endless possibilities."[108] But finally, if this

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[107] See Brenez, *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier;* Martin, "Towards a synthetic analysis of film style"; Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film.*

[108] Deleuze wrote to Serge Daney, "You find … that film itself still has endless possibilities, and that it is the ultimate journey" (*N* 78).

lineage remains so vital, it is because these theorists do not take off from a static image of theory but provoke the very question of theory. With them and through them, we discover not only the visionary power of cinema —its potential make us see and speak differently —but the visionary vocation of theory when it dares to speak of what it does not yet know, and finds in the cinema a means of propelling language toward the task of its own invention. This is no longer theory as "truth" telling, or "seeing and telling" according to predetermined forms, but theory under a new sign: film-thought, language-making, or the creation of concepts.

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