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Prologue: Myth, Reality, Cinema

Imagine flying with your arms, effortlessly: like swimming, but in the sky. To soar through the air, as birds do, is an age-old theme in countless dreams, stories and myths that persist in our minds today. The myth of Icarus, for instance, tells the story of a young boy Icarus on exile with his father Daedalus. Imprisoned on an island surrounded by water, Daedalus realizes their only way out is upwards: through the sky. Being a craftsman and an engineer, he sets to work and builds two pairs of wings out of feathers and wax. The Roman poet Ovid, whose treatment of the Icarus myth remains to this day the most referenced, described the father's ingenuity as follows:

“And turning his mind
Toward unknown arts, he transformed nature.”¹

Everything goes well as Icarus and his father fly like gods over sea and land, where a fisherman, a ploughman and a shepherd stand amazed at this miracle unfolding in the sky. But against his father's advice, Icarus flies too close to the sun, which melts the wax, and unable to keep his course the little boy falls into the ocean. Having lost his son to ‘ruinous arts,’² Daedalus will remain forever embittered about his ingenious invention, by which he joined the laws of nature with his own imagination and thus enabled human flight. By copying nature, to use Ovid's formulation: ‘imitating a real bird's wing,’³ a dream transformed into reality.

For centuries, this combined effort of invention and imagination into “unknown arts” underlies the aspirations of many artists and poets alike. From Pieter Bruegel (1525-1569) to Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), from Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) to Paul Valéry (1871-1945), James Joyce (1882-1941) and W.H. Auden (1907-1973), to name but a select few: each speaking from their own time, they have reinterpreted and recreated the ancient Icarus myth well into the twentieth century. An era marked by rapid

¹ Ovid (8 AD). *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company (2010): p. 396

² *Ibid.*, p 398

³ *Ibid.*, p. 397

technological developments and inventions (airplanes, finally!), it also gave rise to a new art: the seventh art – *cinema*. Over the course of a mere 150 years, this art has been pronounced dead and born again with each technological addition that inevitably reinvents it: colour, sound, new formats and a third dimension gradually joined the moving image (analogue or digital). Can the myth of Icarus, today, tell us something about this incessantly evolving and somehow inherently “unknown” art form?

Quite early on in his career as a film critic, André Bazin (1918-1958) references the story of Icarus alongside the technological development of cinema in a seminal essay, entitled “Le Mythe du cinéma total et les origines du cinématographe” (1946). He writes:

Le mythe directeur de l’invention du cinéma est donc l’accomplissement de celui qui domine confusément toutes les techniques de reproduction mécanique de la réalité qui virent le jour au XIXe siècle. C’est celui du réalisme intégral, d’une recreation du monde à son image, une image sur laquelle ne pèserait pas l’hypothèque de la liberté d’interprétation ni l’irréversibilité du temps. [...]

Ainsi le vieux mythe d’Icare a dû attendre le moteur à explosion pour descendre du ciel platonicien. Mais il existait dans l’âme de tout homme depuis qu’il contemplait l’oiseau.^{4, i}

In this remarkable passage, Bazin first understands the origins of cinema from the perspective of a directing myth, “integral realism [*réalisme intégral*],” which he readily aligns with the Icarus myth: these technologies of mechanical reproduction are not determined solely by their invention (the internal combustion engine), but gradually accomplish a more venerable desire (human flight). Daedalus could have created the wings only by *copying* real birds: the feathers and wax are an invention created in imagination. This is what Ovid termed the “unknown arts,” and to which Bazin alludes when he affirms the mythical origins of cinema: an age-old desire for recreation, i.e. to copy nature aided by technological developments and by doing so, ultimately, to transform reality. With his myth of total cinema, Bazin propounds an approach to the history of cinema as a continued effort towards recreating the world in its image: “total cinema,” he calls it, *a dream come true*.

In many ways, Bazin’s critical work is invested in defending the evolution of cinema from the perspective of “unknown arts:” it motivates his detailed and innumerable film analyses, amounting to several thousands of essays, as well as his extensive studies on the

⁴ Bazin, André (1946). “Le Mythe du cinéma total.” *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* Paris: Éditions du Cerf (2008): pp. 19-24

critical notion of realism in cinema. Rightly so, it is with realism that Bazin is most commonly associated, and it undoubtedly accounts for his received position as *the* French post-war film critic. But it is also as a “realist” that he is often irrevocably considered to be a critic of the past. Dismissed as a stumbling block, an empty signifier or a naïve ideal, his realism would be unable to account for the many mutations that undeniably altered the kind of cinema Bazin knew into what it is today. However, Bazin’s repeated mention of myth throughout his oeuvre, in particular the myth of Icarus, suggests that his understanding of integral realism indeed justifies continued reinvention motivated by imagination. Bazin’s usage of myth and integral realism is in fact truly original and groundbreaking, and its successful application in his critical work furthermore demands a contemporary reconsideration, precisely because cinema has changed so much.

By means of an in-depth exegesis of Bazin’s critical work,⁵ I intend to explain the significance of his notion of “myth” in relation to history, technology and perspective by examining several references to religious, scientific and poetic frameworks. Throughout his oeuvre, Bazin develops what he terms a “myth of total cinema” as a critical method that counters canonical film histories, which he crystallizes in the repeated comparison of cinema with a particular mythical figure, namely Icarus. From this perspective, Bazin’s understanding of myth offers an original reformulation of the historiography of cinema, via an affirmation of imagination as the driving force of its evolution.

In the introductory part, “**Myth as Method**,” I closely examine Bazin’s institutional critique to prescriptive aesthetics from the perspective of myth: cinema, first of all, *exists*

⁵ Awaiting the publication of the *Œuvres complètes* later this year (2015) under the direction of Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, an index of Bazin’s critical work can be found at www.bazin.com and <http://bazin.commons.yale.edu>. There are two archives that include all texts: one compiled by Joubert-Laurencin located at the *Institut national d’histoire de l’art* in Paris and another held by Dudley Andrew at Yale University in New Haven. In France as well as abroad, the dissemination of Bazin’s work is highly eclectic, and the on-going English translations, though they are multiplying, still cover no more than a small percentage of Bazin’s critical work. The analyses described in this dissertation are based on archival work at Yale University, where I accessed many original texts that remain unpublished to this day. My study of Bazin therefore offers new insights into generally unknown texts, as well as original readings of his more established essays. In this manner, I hope to substantially contribute to the growing international interest in Bazin by revaluing and deepening his views on myth throughout and beyond the scope of his seminal essay “Le Mythe du cinéma total” (1946).

before any film theory can be composed. Already in his first film essays, Bazin invokes the notion of myth as the “socio-aesthetic fact” of cinema, meaning that cinema’s social foundations supersede its aesthetics. He later on develops this in his famed essay “Le Mythe du cinéma total” (1946) in stark opposition with exhaustive film histories. Bazin thereby lays the grounds of myth in an apology for the anti-elitist practice of film criticism as well as for realism: the “low-grade realism” of the talking film was not, in his view, the decadence of an art form, but rather its vocation.

But what does this mean, really, that a film *exists*? In the second part, “**Cinema Is the Art of Reality**,” I approach the socio-aesthetic foundations of Bazin’s myth from an ontological point of view. More specifically, I elaborate on Bazin’s critical concept of “integral realism,” which he develops as the inimitable association of cinema with the world: ‘la recreation du monde à son image.’^{6, ii} By looking into a series of religious as well as scientific references in Bazin, I argue that he offers an original solution to the dichotomy between image versus reality, or cinema and the world. I look specifically at his essays on exploration film, from which I further develop the analogy between Icarus and the invention, or rather, the *imagination of cinema*.

In the third and final part of this dissertation, “**Perspectives on the Centrifugal Screen**,” I elaborate on Bazin’s notion of the “centrifugal screen” via a selection of allusions in his writing to both painting and poetry. First, following up on the Icarian analogy in the Myth-essay, I analyse a specific reference to Pieter Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1556), through which Bazin situates himself within a tradition of twentieth-century anti-war social thought. This particular painting in fact directly informs Bazin’s views on the poetic interplay between reality and image, and will prove to be fundamental throughout his extensive critical work on the relation between cinema and painting. More specifically, in his essays on the art documentary *Van Gogh* (Alain Resnais, 1948) Bazin further develops what he terms a “new cosmology of film,” alongside a critical reformulation of form versus content. From there on, I reread Bazin’s essay on stereoscopy, dating from 1952, from the perspective of the contemporary discourse on three-dimensional cinema. I intend to approach this discourse, which often centres on notions of spectacle and illusion, from a “more realist” perspective. I will maintain that, rather than turning its back to realism, recent 3-D films,

⁶ Bazin, “Mythe,” p. 23

Adieu au langage (Jean-Luc Godard, 2014) and *Every Thing Will Be Fine* (Wim Wenders, 2015) in particular, put 3-D at use to attain the integration of image with reality.

Bazin initially described the social impact of cinema as a ‘[...] gigantesque courant d’images et de mythes qui circulent à travers les peuples du monde [...]’.^{7, iii} The myth of total cinema conceptualizes this both from a technological and an aesthetic point of view as a particular defence of sound cinema, via which Bazin, as I maintain, more universally reformulates the critical discourse of realism by affirming the poetic interplay between form and content. In his understanding of myth, then, Bazin sees the integration of cinema and reality: as much as he asserts the existence of the world, “integral realism” supports the reality of cinema. By analysing the endurance of the myth of Icarus in a variety of documentary, experimental, animation and feature length films, I will establish the persistence of Bazin’s myth of total cinema and ultimately argue for the validity of his critical notion of “integral realism” for film studies today.

⁷ Bazin, André and Jean-Pierre Chartier. “Peut-on s’intéresser au cinéma?” *Maison des lettres* (December 1942): p. 14