Today, Icarus: On the persistence of André Bazin’s myth of total cinema

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Chapter III: A Leap of Faith In Reality

Beyond reminding us of the materiality of photography (an image which is always first a negative), Bazin’s analysis of exploration film offers a fundamentally negative relation between the image and reality: the lacunar image of cinematographic testimony are ‘l’empreinte négative de l’aventure, son inscription en creux.’¹ The invisibility of the shark on film proves its real danger. Such apophatic reasoning indeed pervades his thought process. In Le Sommeil paradoxal: écrits sur André Bazin (2014), for example, Hervé Joubert-Laurencin writes:

Le travail du négatif, qui part de la ressemblance dite “objective” pour déboucher sur le dissemblable commence, dans l’écriture de Bazin, avec ses “paradoxes, revers de contradiction,” et finit dans ses analyses de films et dans les thèses qu’il en tire.², iii

Bazin is not particularly interested in perfect resemblance, and often, as is the case in his review of Kon-Tiki (Thor Heyerdahl, 1950), defends flaws in the cinematographic image as a testimony to its authenticity. A similar train of thought concludes Bazin’s discussion of Victoire sur l’Annapurna (Marcel Ichac, 1953), in which mountaineers Maurice Herzog and his companion Louis Lachenal document their climb of the 8000 meters high peak of the Annapurna. The expedition pushed the limits of human endurance: due to frostbite, both climbers lost their toes and Herzog, because he had lost his gloves on the way, his fingers as well as his camera in the midst of an avalanche (Fig. 1). Again, Bazin understands cinematic testimony through the lack of documentation:

De cette montée aux enfers de glace, le moderne Orphée n’a même pas pu sauver le regard de sa caméra. Mais alors commence le long calvaire de la descente, Herzog et Lachenal ficelés comme des momies sur le dos de leurs Sherpas, et cette fois le cinéma est là, voile de Véronique sur le visage de la souffrance de l’homme.³, iii


³ Bazin, “Le Cinéma et l’exploration,” p. 34
In this remarkable passage, Bazin first views the extreme challenges faced by Herzog and Lachenal against a mythical referent: in absence of a camera, the spectator is like Orpheus deprived from looking back. In their physical suffering, Bazin sees parallels between their descent and the stations of the cross, as he takes on one of his many references to Christian relics: in this case, between the cinema screen and Veronica’s veil.\(^4\) Bazin’s reference to Christ’s sweat cloth in this context is anything but random: supposedly the original imprint, i.e. not made with human hands but with blood and sweat, the veil stands at the heart of the Christian discourse on images, which, contrary to several contemporary studies of Bazin, I will consider here relevant in light of Bazin’s ontogeny-argument.

For instance, and to return one last time to the critique of Kon-Tiki, the interplay Bazin establishes there between authenticity and invisibility resonates implicitly with a particular passage in Exodus 3:1-22, namely the theophany of the burning bush.\(^5\) Much like the “photograph of danger,” where documentary authenticity in Kon-Tiki necessitates the invisibility of the shark, the burning bush is an implication of a presence rather than a direct representation, derived from the premise of an invisible God upon which Christian faith is founded.\(^6\) Or, in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy: ‘the relation of faith is thus an access to this

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\(^5\) A theophany is a revelation of God in a state, which is perceivable to man. The scene of the burning bush tells the story of Moses being called by God on mount Sinai to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. While tending a flock of sheep, his attention is caught by a burning bush, which miraculously is not consumed by the fire. Realizing he stood in God’s presence, Moses quickly hid his face out of fear of looking at Him directly. A series of miracles then occur, his staff turning into a snake and his hand turning leprous, as signs of divine presence. Because of this mediated presence, the burning bush scene is in this sense exemplary of negative theology.

\(^6\) The invisibility of God is clearly stated on several occasions in the Bible: for instance, ‘there shall no man see me, and live’ (Exodus 33:20) and ‘no man hath seen God at any time’ (John 1:18, 1 John 4:12). Interestingly, Moses appears to hold a privileged bond with God, as God spoke to him ‘face to face, as a man speaketh to his friend’ (Exodus 33:11), though
"to will itself hidden" as such: an access, consequently, to that which cuts off or withdraws access.7 Without intending to extend the possible analogy between Kon-Tiki’s shark-scene and the burning bush, it does perfectly illustrate the ways in which Bazin understands the ontogeny of the photographic image to have altered the relationship between images and reality, or between representation and its object: in some cases, invisibility is necessary. This command could be read with the same irony as Bazin’s prohibition of montage, and indeed might be its antithesis.

Though this principle of invisibility is most palpable in his texts on exploration film, it undoubtedly finds resonance in Bazin’s discussion of the screen as a mask in “Peinture et cinéma.” ‘Les limites de l’écran ne sont pas […] le cadre de l’image, mais un cache qui ne peut que démasquer une partie de la réalité.’8, v This opposition between the screen and the frame returns in Jean Renoir, published posthumously in 1971:

[…] l’écran n’était que la surface homothétique de l’œilleton de la camera, c’est-à-dire le contraire d’un cadre: un cache dont la function n’est pas moins de dérober la réalité au regard que de la révéler; ce qu’il montre tire son prix de ce qu’il cache, le témoin invisible du film a des œillères, son ubiquité idéale est tempérée par le cadrage comme il arrive à la tyrannie de l’être par l’assassinat.9, vi

Incidentally or not, it is in this exact discussion of a masking screen that Bazin then introduces his oft-cited sartorial image of montage as “stitching together” bits of the “simple cloak” of reality, i.e. the tunic worn by Christ before and during the crucifixion, thereby again alluding to a Christian discourse.10 With obvious references to the abstraction of montage and the continuity of reality, perhaps this seamless garment in fact accurately reflects the “necessary unreality” of cinematic specificity. In his science-fiction epic Solaris (1972), Andrei Tarkovsky clearly employs this image of a seamless dress as a sign of something

his privilege is weakened in other passages where he only saw God’s “back parts” (Exodus 33:23).


10 Ibid., pp. 90-91
unreal, which is only possible on the planet Solaris: the continuous resurrection of Chris’ wife Hari. While Chris wants to take off her clothes, he realises there is no way to untie the dress clothing but to cut it (Fig. 2); and yet, after each resurrection, the dress is again uncut. On the one hand, Hari is “a copy, a print, a mechanical replica,” in professor Snaut's accusatory words, but nevertheless her uncut dress after each resurrection symbolises that ‘[…] “durée” bergsonienne, irreversible et qualitative par essence.' On Solaris, Hari really is “eternally dead-again.”

Fig. 1 Maurice Herzog upon his return.  
Fig. 2 Hari’s seamless dress.

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3.1 No More “Bazinism:” An Apologetic Reading

Veronica’s veil, Christ’s seamless garment and, ultimately, a photograph of his burial cloth in the opening essay of *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?*, which I will discuss presently: at several instances when Bazin articulates cinema’s relation with reality, he certainly draws on a Christian legacy. However, for diverging reasons such a perspective on an inherently modern phenomenon like photography and cinema is almost imperatively apologetic. Marie-José Mondzain, for instance, whose work emphatically invests in resonances of the Christian paradigm with contemporary visual culture, writes on this topic that:12

Les philosophes n’affectionnent guère le recours inlassable aux débats théologiques au sujet de l’image. Prenant acte de l’histoire, celle des hommes, des guerres, des révolutions et des idées, la plupart d’entre eux concluent que la question de l’image et *a fortiori* celle du cinéma, propre au XXe siècle, relèvent d’un tout autre vocabulaire qui ne doit plus rien à ces obscurs byzantins. C’est à partir de Hegel et après lui qu’il faut penser les questions de la modernité et donc l’image.13,viii

What Mondzain describes in general, certainly counts for the bazinian discourse as well. There exists within contemporary scholarship a strong dismissal of religious undertones in Bazin’s understanding of cinema: while from a biographical point of view Bazin’s Christianity is well-acknowledged,14,(ix) its interference with his views on cinema remains to this day highly contested.

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14 In his biography, Dudley Andrew writes that at an early stage in his education, ‘[Bazin] acquired the habit of seeing theological and philosophical implications behind every sort of investigation’ (Andrew, Dudley. *André Bazin*. New York: Oxford University Press (2013): p. 8). Though the French educational system at that time was tilting decidedly towards positivism, especially at the École Normale Supérieure of Saint Cloud, ‘a major bastion of French liberal anticlerical sentiment’ (Ibid., p. 19) which Bazin attended after high school, his interest for religion and theology did not subside, as he joined the study group of mathematician and Christian philosopher Marcel Légaut (1900-1990). He admired Légaut’s dynamism and his efforts in renewing spiritual values in social and educational contexts, but ultimately preferred the assorted orientation of *Esprit*, a cultural journal founded by Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950) which ‘quickly became the liberal conscience of French
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In a repetitive and in some cases rather blunt attempt to contend with such readings, studies that touch upon Christianity in Bazin’s writing are easily ranked under so-called “bazinism:” in the words of Joubert-Laurencin ‘la concrétion abusive qui s’est collée au souvenir de plus en plus lointain et imprécis de son contraire, que je nomme le “texte bazinien”,’ or ‘j’appelle bazinisme la récitation paresseuse et trompeuse des thèses prétendues de Bazin.’ Under this guise, some argue that ‘there are religious allusions in the “Ontology” essay, but in themselves they do not demonstrate that Bazin’s theory of realism derives from a model of religious belief;’ or he is seen as “exemplar of socialist values,” dismissing his assumed Catholicism as “unfortunate.” Another less unanimously labelled bazinist element is the so-called “index-argument” that summarizes a semiotic Catholics and strove in its range and format to provide a model of the integrated culture it preached’ (Ibid., p. 23).

As part of his counter-argument to Christian influences in Bazin, Joubert-Laurencin asserts that a depression in 1940, documented in a letter Bazin wrote to his friend Guy Léger, provides sufficient reason to doubt his Christian faith, which ‘[…] n’informe jamais sa théorie au-delà de certaines métaphores, parfois ironiques. Le registre de son discours sur ces questions est plus proche de celui d’un anthropologue que d’un prédicateur; on y sent que sa formation de normalien a pris le dessus sur son militantisme chrétien’ (Joubert-Laurencin, Le Sommeil paradoxal, p. 26). It was during the war in the military camp in Xaintrailles where Bazin first met Léger, whose badge from the Jeunesse Étudiants Chrétiens immediately caught his attention (Andrew, André Bazin, pp. 31-33). During their stationing, they organized a discussion group and frequented the cinemas of Bordeaux: ‘Through the cinema the two of them had turned the drôle de guerre into one of the happiest and most creative periods of their lives, which only the German invasion overturned’ (Andrew, André Bazin, p. 33). Later that year, Léger went on to fight at the front, while Bazin (who had failed a military test) was forced to stay behind and struck by the flood of war refugees coming from the north combined with a ‘massive sense of personal worthlessness’ (Ibid.,) he became depressed. Despite the fact that Bazin found it difficult to pray during that time, Andrew’s biography does not show any evidence for the claim that Bazin would have lost his religious theological interest, and indeed the body of evidence in his writings suggest that he maintained the desire for social engagement (which he had found in Christianity) into his latter years.

15 Joubert-Laurencin, Le Sommeil paradoxal, p. 8; p.16


The reading of Bazin’s ontology essay: Daniel Morgan, for instance, argues that ‘insofar as the ontology essay suggests an indexical reading, it is only as a moment in the logic of a general argument - a position that tempts us but that we need to go beyond.’ Similarly, Joubert-Laurencin criticizes the prevalent insistence on semiology in favour of Bazin’s own terminology of the imprint, arguing that ‘l’empreinte est un meilleur mot pour rendre compte de Bazin. D’abord parce qu’il fait partie de son lexique.’ To a certain degree, this anti-bazinist mind-set tilts within the Anglo-spheric tradition toward a reconsideration of past translations, such as Timothy Barnard’s extensive notes on découpage in his acclaimed 2009 translation. However, as I will demonstrate, this insisting reluctance towards several biblical references by many scholars today under the guise of an anti-bazinist endeavour produces an equally “abusive concretion” and in some cases a blatantly deceptive reading of Bazin. One such reading, which is openly involved in the bazinist polemic, is Philip Rosen’s claim that the standard English translation, because of its repeated usage of “faith,” tilts the Ontology-essay toward a bazinist-religious reading; instead, Rosen proposes “belief” as a more accurate translation, which he supports - paradoxically, given his insistence on the bazinian text - with a reiteration of the index-argument. In what follows, I want to close-read Rosen’s argument on faith versus belief in tandem with Joubert-Laurencin et al.’s insistence on the notion of the imprint. In so doing, I will follow the call for close-reading the “bazinian text,” however the insistence on the imprint in Bazin’s ontogeny-argument will serve as an apology for the Christian discourse.

Continuing from this, we will see that in specific cases self-proclaimed anti-bazinism easily tilts towards a subtle hypocrisy, as within the “bazinian text” itself words appear to be weighed unequally, so that on the topic of Christian relics, notably the shroud of Turin, Joubert-Laurencin criticizes Mondzain as indulging “dans le marché noir des métaphores

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18 The index-argument springs forth from Peter Wollen’s *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969) in which he applies Charles S. Pierce’s category of the index to Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image.


20 Joubert-Laurencin, *Le Sommeil paradoxal*, p. 43

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crÉtiennes de Bazin, \(^{22, xii}\) even though the tradition of *acheiropoieta*, as I will conclude, speaks clearly to Bazin’s ontogeny-argument. Acheiropoieta, literally meaning “made without hands,” are images believed to be created miraculously, rather than being artefacts painted by an artist. In the Western Christian tradition, the two most important acheiropoieta are the veil of Veronica and the Shroud of Turin, which reserves an ambiguous place in Bazin’s essay collection. Before discussing Bazin’s enigmatic inclusion of a photographic negative of the shroud of Turin in the Ontology-essay, I will first scrutinize Rosen’s polemic, by maintaining in Bazin’s ontological account the notion of the image as imprint and, in extension, of cinematographic realism as *faith* in reality.

\(^{22}\) Joubert-Laurencin, *Le Sommeil paradoxal*, p. 78 (note 159)
3.2 The Imprint versus the Index: Faith and Belief

In an essay entitled “Belief in Bazin” (2011), Philip Rosen criticizes Bazin’s translators, in particular Hugh Gray’s and to a certain extent Timothy Barnard’s usage of the word “faith,” and instead proposes “belief” as more appropriate translation to describe Bazin’s cinematographic realism, supporting his argument with “indexicality” as ‘a key-prop for belief.’ Rosen’s insistence on “belief,” along with his affirmation of indexicality to describe Bazin’s ontological project, carries with it a decided and arguably blunt move away from any possible religious references in Bazin’s ontology, which he puts in plain words at the outset of his essay:

[…] it seems connotatively easier to tilt “faith” toward a religious attitude. Of course, “belief” can apply to religious commitment. Yet it can signify more epistemological generality and less subjective valance.

Assuming a correlation between the bazinist discourse and the possibility of religious undercurrents in Bazin’s oeuvre, Rosen argues that ‘Gray’s translation of croyance as “faith” inadvertently abetted such critiques of Bazin […]’. However, in these specific citations (‘[Ils] croient à la réalité;’ or ‘[…] nous sommes obligés de croire à l’existence de l’objet représenté’) Bazin repeatedly employs the more spiritually connotative “croire à/en” rather than “croire” tout court. Furthermore, in Bazin’s usage of “confidence” [confiance], Rosen

23 Rosen, “Belief,” p. 110
26 Ibid.
then seeks confirmation for what he assumes to be a ‘more neutral or secularized
connotation’ in Bazin’s aesthetics. Another such term, according to Rosen, is fidèle, which
Gray translates as “faithful” (Rosen prefers “the most exact”), not surprisingly in the exact
passage that explains the ontogeny-thesis:

A very faithful drawing may actually tell us more about the model, but despite the
promptings of our critical intelligence it will never have the irrational power of the
photograph to bear away our faith [my emphasis].

[Original: Le dessin le plus fidèle peut nous donner plus de renseignements sur le
modèle, il ne possèdera jamais, en dépit de notre esprit critique, le pouvoir irrationnel
de la photographie qui emporte notre croyance.]

Rosen thus argues that Bazin’s differentiation between fidèle and then croyance gets lost in
Gray’s translation, and he thereby mistakenly assumes “faithful” to bear the same meaning as
“faith.” While a theory derived from potential mistranslations should not prevail over the
careful and thorough examination of the original text, Rosen’s philological analyses here do
touch upon a crucial element in Bazin’s views on cinematographic realism. In the context of
authenticity and resemblance, Bazin’s ontogeny-argument, I will argue, actually confirms

30 Rosen, “Belief,” p. 108

The specific passage Rosen cites is from an article on Renoir (Esprit, 1952): ‘I call
expressionist all aesthetics which […] place more confidence [confiance] in
cinematographic artifices - that is, what is generally understood as “cinema” - than in the
reality to which they are applied’ (Bazin, André. “Les Deux époques de Jean Renoir.”


Rosen cites the ontogeny-passage and Bazin’s usage of fidèle in his writings on adaptation
and mixed cinema, which he understands as ‘an indexical ideal echoing that of the
Ontology-essay’ (Rosen, “Belief,” p. 111). However, where ontogeny and ontology appear
in Bazin’s work as purely cinematic, his work on adaptation comprises the relation between
film and other arts. In this manner, Joubert-Laurencin argues on the topic of ontology: ‘Ce
mot est en somme, par l’importance qu’il a pris dans son lexique, l’opposé d’impureté,”
la autre vocable fondamental et général de son système. En première analyse, l’impureté
regroupe tout ce qui rattache le cinéma aux autres arts; l’ontologie tout ce qui lui appartient
en propre et qu’aucun autre art n’a possédé avant lui’ (Joubert-laurencin, Le Sommeil
paradoxal, p. 24).

32 Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 14

33 From this perspective, Rosen’s essay awkwardly fits within a “bazinist” discourse, despite his
assertion of the opposite, which is reinforced by his insistence on the index-argument.
Gray’s rendering of *croyance*, in spite of Rosen’s more epistemological and objective “belief” in tandem with indexicality.

### 3.2.1 An Assurance in Things Not Seen

To begin with, the difference between faith and faithful in Bazin’s ontological argument cited by Rosen is as significant as the difference between a reproduction and its original. To a certain extent, this distinction in fact echoes precisely the difference between an index and an imprint, as both relate to a diverging knowledge-claim. While belief necessitates verification, as its object can be erroneous (“I’ll believe that when I see it”), faith is predicated upon something that exists without evidence, and hence may seem to follow a more irrational command that needs no proof. In other words, faith is rooted in something, which is, but is not seen, as both the theophany of the burning bush as well as the shark in *Kon-Tiki* suggest. From an historic and theological perspective, to cite from Paul: ‘[…] faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’ (Hebrew 11:1). As such, Jean-Luc Nancy draws from the scriptural distinction between belief and faith that:

> […] faith cannot be an adherence to some contents of belief. If belief must be understood as a weak form or an analogy of knowledge, then faith is not of the order of belief. It comes neither from a knowledge nor from a wisdom, not even by analogy. Faith is not argumentative; it is the performative of the commandment - or it is homogeneous with it. Faith resides in inadequation to itself as a content of meaning. And it is in this precisely that it is truth qua truth of faith or faith as truth and verification. This is not sacrifice but verication. That is, also, the contrary of a truth believed. This faith, above all, does not believe. It is neither credulous nor even believing in the current sense of the term. It is a faith not believed. It is a non-belief whose faith guarantees it as non-believable.34

From this distinction based on a diverging knowledge-claim, we see clearly how the ontogeny-argument supports an argument for faith rather than belief in reality. As is the case with *Kon-Tiki*’s shark, photography can convince us to accept a presence without seeing. Such non-argumentative, non-rational command is, in Bazin’s words, a “psychological fact” which replaces the paradigm of doubt prior to photography by one of a “non-belief,” in the sense described by Nancy, Bazin writes:

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34 Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, pp. 53-54
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Un doute subsistait sur l’image à cause de la présence de l’homme. Aussi bien le phénomène essentiel dans le passage de la peinture baroque à la photographie ne réside-t-il pas dans le simple perfectionnement matériel (la photographie restera longtemps inférieure à la peinture dans l’imitation des couleurs), mais dans un fait psychologique: la satisfaction complète de notre appétit d’illusion par une reproduction mécanique dont l’homme est exclu. La solution n’était pas dans le résultat mais dans sa genèse.35, xiv

It is not the result, i.e. perfect resemblance, which supports the photograph’s connection with reality. The fact that paintings obtained more convincing pictorial qualities did not endow them with the ontological status of photography, which assures us regardless of its aesthetic qualities. In this manner, Rosen’s replacement of “faith” with “belief,” at least in the sense he understands it (i.e. secularized and “neutral”), is itself ‘simply a rhetorical ploy,’36 to use his exact formulation, in an attempt to debunk Bazin’s oeuvre from any religious connotations.

3.2.2 The Irrational Power of Photography

From his side, Tom Gunning asserts in “Moving Away from the Index” that the application of Pierce’s notion of the index to Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image cannot account for its implied faith-argument:

Bazin describes the realism of the photograph as an “irrational power to bear away our faith.” This “magical” understanding of photographic ontology is clearly very different from a logic of signs. In Pierce’s semiotics, the indexical relation falls entirely into the rational realm.37

Gunning’s argument, ultimately, is against medium specificity, i.e. the assertion that the materiality of the medium plays an essential role in the image’s ontology, which is implied by the index-argument.38 In “What’s the Point of an Index,” he departs from what he calls the

36 Rosen, “Belief,” p. 108

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“truth claim of traditional photography,” only to disconnect indexicality from the “visual accuracy and recognisability” of an image:

[...] the manner in which indexicality intertwines with iconicity in our common assessment of photographs. Our evaluation of a photograph as accurate (i.e. visually reflecting its subject) depends not simply on its indexical basis (the chemical process), but on our recognition of it as looking like its subject.39

According to this view, a photograph’s “visual accuracy and recognisability” assures us that whatever it depicts must be true. And because this claim of recognition continues to apply to the non-indexical digital image, Gunning argues against indexicality as it limits cinema to a material basis. While Gunning’s endeavour beyond medium specificity certainly rhymes with Bazin’s mythical paradigm, his insistence on resemblance, however, cannot account for Bazin’s apophatic reasoning. Instead, the index-argument is made obsolete by the bazinian text itself, as a couple of recent studies have shown. For instance, following Fernão Pessoa Ramos,40 Joubert-Laurencin convincingly criticizes the all-too formalist index-argument and its association with resemblance, which he in turn considers to be yet another, perhaps the bazinist myth withholding the bazinian text:

On peut dire que Bazin n’est si important dans le discours sur le cinéma, dans toute l’histoire de la critique, toutes époques et tous pays confondus, et cela d’une manière à la fois évidente et confuse, que parce qu’il a tout simplement réussi à détourner vers le cinéma le flux discursif le plus traditionnel de l’histoire de l’art, celui de la mimèse. Mais on peut aussi soutenir que le discours dominant a besoin de maintenir Bazin à cette place afin qu’il incarne le Mimétique, D’où son rôle de bouc-émissaire théorique (sacralisé, liquidé), l’oubli de la lecture de ses textes, l’atermoiement infini de la publication du détail de son apport à l’histoire de l’art. Sa relation à une pensée de l’empreinte est beaucoup plus probante dans la réalité de l’ensemble de ses textes, mais moins acceptable dans l’ordre du discours.41, xv

The imprint, Joubert-Laurencin argues, partakes in a paradigm which is not limited to a previous theoretical framework (e.g. Pierce’s semiotics), nor to a specific art form (i.e. the  

39 Ibid., p. 41


41 Joubert-Laurencin, Le Sommeil paradoxal, p. 45
medium specific argument, photography/cinema) but is rather embedded in ‘une pratique ancestrale et des techniques ayant traversé l’histoire de l’art […].’

Following this mind-set, I will disregard such insistence on the index-argument; however, the categorical rejection of the Christian metaphors employed by Bazin, on the contrary, appears to be the lesser convincing argument of the self-proclaimed “anti-bazinist” movement. When it comes to Christian relics in Bazin’s oeuvre, alongside the veil of Veronica and the seamless garment, there is a third elephant in the room: in the final version of “Ontologie de l’image photographique,” published in 1958 as the opening essay of Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?, Bazin includes the photographic negative print of the shroud of Turin, Christ’s alleged burial cloth. This image, to which I will turn subsequently, wholeheartedly fits within his apophatic notion of the negative imprint and the ontogeny-argument (incidentally, he articulates it in plain words, again, in 1958); and yet, his words on the shroud are understood to be those of “an amused ethnographer.”\(^{43}\) In the following pages, I will follow the call for reading the bazinian text, but this call itself will serve as an apology for tipping into the “black market of ideas,” as this Christian discourse is uneasily referred to from the anti-bazinist point of view.\(^{44}\)

\(^{42}\) Ibid., p. 44

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 78, note 159

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
3.3 The Photographic Image as *Acheiropoieton*

Bazin’s focus on the natural creation of the photographic image, i.e. his ontogeny-argument, places photography and cinema in direct line with the so-called *acheiropoieta*, literally meaning images that are “made without hands.” The first written account on this category of images dates back to the sixth century, more specifically to the writings of Evagrius Scholasticus on the story of the Mandylion,\(^{45}\) which lies at the basis for relics like the image of Edessa or Mandylion in the Eastern orthodox church, and Veronica’s veil, or the shroud of Turin in the West, the latter of which Bazin includes a photograph in the opening essay of *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* in 1958. More precisely, the specific illustration is in fact the photographic negative developed in 1931 by Giuseppe Enrie, nicknamed “Christ’s photographer,” which followed Secondo Pia’s original 1898 photograph in the early days of photography. While developing his pictures, Pia discovered that the cloth appeared to carry the negative imprint of the face of a man: to use Bazin’s formulation, ‘par la vertu d’une mécanique impassible,’\(^{46,\ xvii}\) a face which had previously remained obscure was now clearly visible.

In the aftermath of this discovery, the photographic apparatus had a great impact on most scientific studies of the shroud, attempting to attest or disprove the authenticity of the image as being the actual burial cloth of Christ. Paul Vignon (1865-1943), co-founder of “sindonology” (a scientific discipline devoted to the study of the Shroud), writes:

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\(^{45}\) According to Evagrius Scholasticus’ account of the story of the Mandylion, otherwise known as the image of Edessa, King Agbar received an imprint of Christ’s face, which would cure him from leprosy. The Mandylion is believed to be the first image that was not made by human hands, as it was an imprint of Christ’s face onto a linen cloth dipped into water. As Mondzain writes, this original *acheiropoetic* image stands at the crossroad of two Christian traditions: the Byzantine and the Greek Orthodox, the former marked by ichonomacy (or: “image struggle”) and iconoclasm, the latter excused by an “iconic tolerance” that justifies iconography by advancing the Mandylion as the model for its icons (see: Mondzain, Marie-José. *Homo spectator*. Paris: Bayard (2013): pp. 194-195).

\(^{46}\) Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 14
The shroud is a mysterious enigma, only to be read with a magical key. Since 1898 the key is ours. Photographic apparatus and a sensitive plate have revealed to us, by inversion, the true solution.  

Though initially Pia’s findings were contested, Enrie’s photographs of the front, the back and a detailed close-up of the wrist, eventually confirmed the theory of the shroud carrying a negative imprint of a human body. A subsequent stream of scientific studies on the shroud focused solely on determining the process of its image creation, all reporting clear evidence against the shroud being a cunningly crafted artefact, a hypothesis that remains to this day unproven. Several scholars concerned with visual culture have indeed established the link between the shroud and the history of photography, for instance Georges Didi-Huberman, who does so at the outset of his analysis of the imprint and its relation to dissemblance: 

Let us recall that the historic impetus that rendered the shroud of Turin visible – or more precisely, figurative – is found in the history of photography. When Secundo Pia immersed in the chemical bath his last attempt to produce a clear photograph of the holy shroud – his earlier attempts had all been underexposed– this is what happened: there in the dark room, the moment the negative image took form (the inaugural glimpse), a face looked out at Pia from the bottom of the tray. A face he had never before seen on the shroud. A face that was, he said, unexpected. And seeing it he almost fainted. The event took place during the night of the 28th to the 29th of May, 1894. 

Ever since Pia’s photograph at the turn of the previous century, the existence of the shroud has been discussed and analysed in relation to photography and other visual apparatuses, as Enrie’s photographs showed it ‘as if the cloth were a piece of film.’ 

With the inclusion of the photograph in the opening essay of Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?, Bazin appears to place cinema in continuation with acheiropoieta, an allusion that has not left film studies untouched. Following Bazin, Annette Michelson, for instance, builds her analysis of Dziga Vertov’s Three Songs about Lenin (1934) as a “kinetic icon” on an elaborate comparison of the Byzantine icons with film, via their acheiropoetic qualities: 


These images not made by (human) hands, not painted, but allegedly created by contact with and emanation from a sacred personage – rather like those crafted by the Pencil of Nature and later, in the closing years of the nineteenth century, animated in movement by the brothers Lumière. Upon the faith in a special status of the nerukotvornyi [Russian orthodox term for acheiropoietic] image in a paradigmatic instance, the shroud of Turin, André Bazin, as we know, constructed his cinematic ontology.50

Bazin himself is rather brief in his explication of the shroud in the ontology-essay, but his affirmation in a footnote that it ‘réalise la synthèse de la relique et de la photographie,’51, xviii explains clearly the importance of such an image within the ontology argument. Via Bazin’s mention of the “mummy complex” at the outset of his essay, the urge to ‘sauver l’être par l’apparence,’52, xix the medium of photography indeed rhymes with the Christian themes of resurrection and eternal life. As such, the ontology essay is implicitly in line with the cult of relics. Marie-José Mondzain, for instance, argues that the photographic underpinnings of the shroud illustrate the way in which:

[…] a technical object with an attendant group of optical and chemical procedures should have become the providential instrument for the revelation and proof, both objective and material, of the presence of the divine and the sacred, of death and resurrection.53

Regardless of the controversy pertaining to the shroud’s spiritual significance, which reverberates in several contemporary studies of the shroud in relation to visual culture, this particular cloth and the image cult it implies nevertheless became historically and materially entangled with the medium of photography:

And so the fetish (the photograph) of a literal fetish (the shroud), serves as a kind of blessing for Bazin's four-volume project. But it's a mixed blessing, so to speak, for by 1958 everyone knew the shroud to be fake and the photograph only a document of a


51 Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 14

52 Ibid., p. 9

53 Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, p. 192
hoax, or at least of a wild superstition. What could Bazin have had in mind in suggesting or permitting such an image to color our reading?\textsuperscript{54}

As Dudley Andrew affirms, Bazin’s motivation for including this print in Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? exceeds a blind acceptance of a religious hoax. Incidentally, it is the exact same passage on faith in the photographic process versus the faithful drawing to which Andrew points as Bazin’s motivation for including this photograph:

Why wouldn’t a “faithful” drawing of the dead Christ not match this impoverished photograph in its psychological power? By now, we know the answer: Bazin argues that the iconic properties by which a photograph imitates the visual layout of its referent are far less compelling than the photograph’s physical relation to the referent, its status as decal.\textsuperscript{55}

Andrew’s analysis appears to tilt away from the enigma of the shroud itself, and elaborates more specifically on the importance of the photograph of the shroud.

Giuseppe Enrie’s photograph of the shroud in 1931 was indeed followed by a period of invested research in syndonology, which set out to attest to or disprove precisely its acheiropoietic qualities, rather than building an argument upon carbon-dating research: though this procedure had been possible since 1946 (which might explain Andrew’s interpretation of the reference as a “mixed blessing”), it was performed on the shroud no sooner than 1988. Given this time frame, the main argument at that time against the shroud’s authenticity was that it had been painted by an artist in the Middle Ages, an argument that was put forth first in the late fourteenth century. Following this hypothesis, Mondzain ultimately accepts the demystification of the shroud and argues against its acheiropoietic nature: ‘the shroud,’ she writes, ‘is a work of art, bearing all characteristics of a fraud designed to provoke popular piety and to obtain all the familiar benefits of pilgrimages to miracle-working relics.’\textsuperscript{56} However, as I will maintain, the argument that the shroud would have been a work by an artist, and this informed Bazin’s line of thought, is untenable both from an historical and scientific point of view.


\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 138

\textsuperscript{56} Mondzain, \textit{Image, Icon, Economy}, p. 204
Even though carbon-dating analysis might have solved the question of the cloth’s age,\textsuperscript{57} the enigma of its image nevertheless remains to this day unsolved. In fact, several scientific studies are conclusive of the shroud’s non-artifactual character: a detailed medical examination of the physiological accuracy of the bloodstains on the shroud, for instance, indicates ‘a departure from artistic tradition,’\textsuperscript{58} and extensive image formation analyses conclude that ‘the image does not reside in an applied pigment.’\textsuperscript{59} Moreover, it is by means of its nonrepresentational qualities that Vignon argued for the shroud’s authenticity as an acheiropoieton:

However extraordinary it may seem that the two surfaces of a human body should be found thus marked on the Shroud, there is no ground for supposing that they were drawn, stained, or painted by man. A glance shows us how difficult it would have been for an artist to produce such an effect by pictorial work. Moreover, the result could never have satisfied those who might have instigated such extraordinary work.\textsuperscript{60}

Vignon’s reasoning here is based on the same premise as Bazin’s ontogeny argument: as we have seen with the shark-attack on film, it is because of rather than despite its dissemblance that this category of images created in absence of human agency gains in authenticity.

\textsuperscript{57} For more on the carbon-dating analyses of 1988, see: Damon et al. “Radiocarbon Dating of the Shroud of Turin.” \textit{Nature}, Vol. 337 No. 16 (1989). This study concluded with ‘a calibrated calendar age range with at least 95% confidence for the linen of the Shroud of Turin of AD 1260-1390 […]’. These results therefore provide conclusive evidence that the linen of the Shroud of Turin is medieval’ (p. 614). Though this particular study appears to solve the mystery of the shroud, dating it to medieval times, and thereby implicitly confirms the artefact hypothesis, recent research by Raymond N. Rogers scrutinizes the validity of its results: ‘The disappearance of all traces of vanillin from the lignin in the shroud indicates a much older age than the radiocarbon laboratories reported. […] It is thus very unlikely that the linen was produced during medieval times’ (Rogers, Raymond N. “Studies on the Radiocarbon Sample from the Shroud of Turin.” \textit{Thermochimica Acta}, Vol. 425 (2005): p. 191). Moreover, based on an examination of the sample that was used for carbon dating, he concludes that ‘[…] the material from the radiocarbon area of the shroud is significantly different from that of the main cloth. The radiocarbon sample was thus not part of the original cloth and is invalid for determining the age of the shroud’ (Rogers, p. 193).


\textsuperscript{60} Vignon, \textit{The Shroud of Christ}, p. 18
Rather than viewing Bazin’s reference influenced by an irreverent aftermath of carbon-dating procedures, then, it is historically more accurate to understand his inclusion in light of its contemporaneous discourse surrounding the shroud that was then often spiritually motivated, such as *Toi qui es-tu?* by Paul Claudel (1936), a text with which Bazin might in fact have been familiar.  

About the photographed shroud, Claudel writes:

> More than an image, it is a presence! […] More than a presence, it is a photograph […] For a photograph is not a portrait made by human hand. It is difficult to believe that this detailed, negative impression of Christ’s body […] is a phenomenon that is purely natural.

From his side, Bazin indeed clearly addresses the non-artifactual nature of the photographic image:

> Tous les arts sont fondés sur la présence de l’homme; dans la seule photographie nous jouissons de son absence. Elle agit sur nous en tant que phénomène “naturel,” comme une fleur ou un cristal de neige dont la beauté est inséparable des origines végétales ou telluriques.

Bazin never delves into the spiritual aspect of the shroud’s origins, but rather points to its shared ontogeny with the photographic image, and in no way mounts an apology for the authenticity of the shroud. Instead, he appears to make a more modest claim: photography is a “natural phenomenon” created in absence of human agency, and the shroud of Turin functions in the ontology argument as its iconic precedent. Where Claudel’s devout Catholicism pervades his reception of the shroud as not merely a natural phenomenon and thereby hints at the divine (‘It is difficult to believe that [it] is a phenomenon that is purely natural’), Bazin is without a doubt less pious in his argument on the psychological power of relics in relation to photography: he stresses the natural creation rather than the divine, and correspondingly steps away from an “anthropocentric utilitarianism” of the painted portrait:

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> From his side, however, Joubert-Laurencin maintains that Bazin’s reference to the shroud is ironic and that it pertains to the study of psychology, rather than following Claudel’s religious enthusiasm.


La fabrication de l’image s’est même libérée de tout utilitarisme anthropocentrique. Il ne s’agit pas de la survie de l’homme, mais plus généralement de la création d’un univers idéal à l’image du réel et doué d’un destin temporel autonome.64, xxi

Bazin thus appears to have a very specific reason for including the photograph: we can now confirm that the implied connection between the shroud of Turin and the medium of photography lies precisely in the particular genesis of the image as acheiropoieton.

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64 Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 10
3.4 Accidental Beauty: the Principle of Doubt and Organic Effects

In his rejection of the index-argument, Tom Gunning supports a counter-essentialist interpretation of Bazin; similarly, the acheiropoetic ontology of the photographic image supports the return to an ancestral creation myth. Furthermore, its affinities with the ontogeny-argument proves to be better suited in Bazin’s mind-set than the “visual accuracy and recognisability” alternative. From this perspective, the ontogeny-argument does not as a matter of course prohibit montage or computer generated imagery, since the relationship between image and reality, as I have argued, is best understood in terms of a wager: a gain in one, involves the loss of the other.

The case for the ontogeny-argument in a digital context can be made, for instance, in relation to the visual effects in The Tree of Life (Terrence Malick, 2011), which were indispensable but which Terrence Malick, known for his emphatic rejection of artificial light for instance, found ‘intellectually hard to see as appropriate in his films.’ For instance, when shooting the dinosaur scene, which for obvious reasons necessitates the use of CGI, Malick insisted the primeval animals be created to exceed the limits of the frame, so as to enhance their natural feel (Fig. 3). Furthermore, the backgrounds used for these CGI simulations were shot without prescribed positions for the dinosaurs in mind; in fact, many were taken from different periods in Malick’s career, some film material dating back to the 1970s and had been stored in friend’s refrigerator. For the film’s most enigmatic sequence, the formation of the earth (Fig. 4), Malick rejected CGI and instead embraced the so-called “organic effects” created by visual effects coordinator Douglas Trumbull, who also worked on 2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) to name but one of his science-fiction projects. Combining the unpredictability of chance events with natural formations, these

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66 Glass, Dan. “Making of The Tree of Life.” YouTube (13/06/2013) [Accessed 28/05/2014] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsqslqHDuCs>
effects were intended to ‘create elements, not shots,’ a principle that proves effective in recreating the formation of Earth (Fig. 5-6):

[Malick] continued to be very interested in what I call “organic effects.” And I said: “I think that we can do some of the things you want, using liquids and cloud-tanks and things like that.” And he said: “Yes, that’s the way I’d like to go!” What I saw in the very first day of shooting with Terry was that he was looking for what he calls “the doubt;” the unexpected, mysterious, beautiful, circumstantial event that would occur that none of us could plan; he couldn’t plan it, I couldn’t plan it. And I realized what I had to do was create a circumstance where it can occur, or something unusual can occur. So I would just say: “Let’s just try something on a sheet of glass, with water running over, and we’ll sprinkle paint on there. I don’t know if it’s going to look like a galaxy or stars, or if it’s going to look like some exploding supernova. We don’t know what it’s going to be, or how we’re going to use it, but I’ll try to create a whole pallet of events that we would shoot with a phantom camera with about 1000 frames a second.”

The entire film’s aesthetics flow from this principle of a “benefit of the doubt:” from the narrative structure, which is overtly built on the notion of a wager, an accidental butterfly caught on screen, to the entire set, which was constructed in such a way that the camera could at any moment change its prescribed movement, if necessary. By using water- and cloud tanks, creating patterns with liquids, paint and smoke such organic effects enhance chance and eliminate predictability, which accompanies the design:

Everybody’s converted to CGI and I’m totally into organic effects and so one of the things that, for me, came about as a result of working on The Tree of Life was a complete conviction that it’s definitely the way that I want to go, because mysterious,


69 The opening lines, for instance, are taken from Job 38: 4-7, citing a line from God’s answer to Job (“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”), who had questioned his faith after repeated misfortune despite his piety. Grace’s story mirrors Job’s misfortunes and the entire narrative of the film further develops around the notion of a wager between the way of Nature symbolized by the father, and the way of Grace: the mother.

70 “Making of The Tree of Life.” YouTube (13/06/2013) [Accessed 28/05/2014] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsqslqHDuCs>
unexpected things occur that you can’t design, and you can’t think of, or you can’t draw. And they remain exciting on the screen.\textsuperscript{71}

Here, Trumbull reasons like Bazin: no matter how faithful the drawing, because of its inscribed anticipation it cannot convey the eventuality of organic effects, or in bazinian terms: natural phenomena. The formation scene in \textit{The Tree of Life} thus combines several elements that altogether extend the natural phenomenon of photography into a contemporary digital context: authentic because unpredictable, and acheiropoietic, both on an ontogenetic level (the organic effects) as well as on the level of the subject (the ancestral world created before mankind).

\begin{center}
\textbf{Fig. 3} The ancestral creation myth
\textbf{Fig. 4} CGI dinosaurs out of frame
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Fig. 5-6} “Organic effects” shot with high-speed cameras using cloud tanks and smoke
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{71} Trumbull, “Featurette,” \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeaVwcypiSs}
The principle of doubt in *The Tree of Life* echoes the previously discussed documentary authenticity as Bazin understood it: unpredictable and irreproducible, Malick’s aesthetics follow the qualitative logic of cinematic specificity. It comes to the foreground, for instance, in Bazin’s appreciation of chance and reality itself as catalysts for an authentic cinematic event, which he articulates in a paragraph on *Paris 1900* (Nicole Vedrès, 1947), as he comments on the coincidence of impressionist aesthetics with a grainy archival image of Claude Monet:

Pourquoi la transposition de valeurs involontaire exclusivement due à l’émulsion de la pellicule utilisée à l’époque et au contre-type, rend-elle le coin de jardin où Monet est en train de peindre exactement semblable aux plus impressionnistes des tableaux du peintre?

Je m’adresse maintenant aux metteurs-en-scène: pourquoi pleut-il précisément quand on dégrade un sergent et quand Déroulède prononce son discours? Pourquoi le ciel se met-il tout seul à l’unisson de l’événement plus sûrement que la plus subtile ambiance de studio? En un mot, comme en cent, pourquoi le hasard et la réalité ont-ils plus de talent que tous les cinéastes du monde?  


73 Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 16

In 1945 Bazin already formulated the answer to this question, as he introduces the first in a series of logical reversals that guide the Ontology-essay: “Sur la photographie, image naturelle d’un monde que nous ne savions ou ne pouvions voir, la nature enfin fait plus que d’imiter l’art: elle imite l’artiste.”  

But it is not only impressionism, which Bazin sees in nature’s creativity. In “Le Film scientifique: beauté du hasard” (1947), later reprinted in *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* under the title “À propos de Jean Painlevé,” he praises the scientific films of the biologist filmmaker Jean Painlevé (1902-1989) and applies the same logical reversal from a surrealist perspective, describing what he terms “accidental beauty:”

C’est à l’extrême pointe de la recherche intéressée, utilitaire, dans la proscription la plus absolue des intentions esthétiques comme telles, que la beauté cinématographique se développe par surcroît comme une grâce surnaturelle. Quel cinéma “d'imagination” eût pu concevoir et réaliser la fabuleuse descente aux enfers de la bronchoscopie, où toutes les lois de la “dramatisation” de la couleur sont naturellement impliquées dans les sinistres reflets bleutâtres dégagés par un cancer visiblement mortel? Quels trucages optiques eussent été capables de faire naître le
ballet féerique de ces animalcules d'eau douce s'ordonnant par miracle sous l'oculaire comme en un kaléidoscope? Quel chorégraphe de génie, quel peintre en délire, quel poète pouvait imaginer ces ordonnances, ces formes et ces images? La caméra seule possédait le sésame de cet univers où la suprême beauté s'identifie tout à la fois à la nature et au hasard: c'est-à-dire à tout ce qu'une certaine esthétique traditionnelle considère comme le contraire de l'art. Les surréalistes seuls en avaient pressenti l'existence, qui cherchaient dans l'automatisme presque impersonnel de leur imagination le secret d'une usine à images.\textsuperscript{74, xxiv}

As a biologist and filmmaker, Painlevé continually promoted cinema both as a tool for scientific research and a means to popularize science, presenting his work to the Académie des sciences, whose members remained highly sceptical throughout his career, and lay audiences alike.\textsuperscript{75} From the formation of liquid crystals (\textit{Cristaux liquides}, 1978), the voracity of freshwater microorganisms (\textit{Assassins d'eau douce}, 1947), the love life of an octopus (\textit{Les Amours de la pieuvre}, 1967), to an impersonation of F. W. Murnau’s expressionist Nosferatu by a vampire bat (\textit{Le Vampire}, 1945): in the cinematic universe of Painlevé, the camera literally becomes nature’s pencil, of which Bazin writes that ‘qui n'a pas vu cela ignore jusqu'où peut aller le cinéma.’\textsuperscript{76, xxv} Chasing after the ephemeral and the unintentional, the script for his films depended entirely on the aleatory cinematography of nature:


\textsuperscript{75} In 1928, Painlevé screened his first film \textit{Œufs d'épinoche} at the Academy and in so doing followed the example of the medical doctor, inventor of microphotography and precursor of scientific cinema Jean Comandon (1877-1970), who was the first in France to shock the scientific community with ‘entertainment for the ignorant,’ as Georges Duhamel put it (Painlevé, Jean (1982) in Hazéra, Hélène and Dominique Leglu. “Jean Painlevé Reveals the Invisible.” Trans. Janine Herman. In: \textit{Science is Film: The Films of Jean Painlevé}. Eds. Andy Masaki Bellows, Marina McDougall and Brigitte Berg. Cambridge: The MIT Press (2000): p. 172). The struggle against elitism ties Painlevé to Bazin, who in his very first cinema-essay dating from 1942 defended its social aesthetics against the dismissal of literary criticism (see: Bazin, André and Jean-Pierre Chartier. “Peut-on s’intéresser au cinéma?” \textit{Maison des lettres}, December 1942). Criticized by the Academy but praised by the avant-garde, Painlevé would often edit three versions of the same film: ‘So with my films, I made one version for scientists, a second for universities, and a third, which was shorter and set to music, for general audiences. You must sort out your audiences. But the real question is: is it your right to do this or is it your obligation?’ (Painlevé, cited in “Painlevé Reveals the Invisible,” p. 179). Undoubtedly, both Bazin and Painlevé understood this popularization by film (of science, but also theatre and literature) as the filmmaker’s duty.

\textsuperscript{76} Bazin, “Painlevé,” p. 39
The great disappointment is the inability to immediately record unexpected events, rare and fleeting occurrences that leave one flabbergasted: a butterfly striking a female with its wings and treading upon her to give her a foretaste of home life; an octopus, swimming backwards, right into the mouth of a conger.\textsuperscript{77}

In these specific instants, Bazin understands natural aesthetics to assimilate and even surpass both the impressionist painter as well as the surrealist artist. Comparable to Malick’s organic effects and his principle of doubt, Painlevé seeks the excitement of cinema in the mysterious revelation of natural phenomena: ‘there is an infinite field of magnificent and continual joys that prevents us from completely elucidating the mystery or the miracle.’\textsuperscript{78}

In fact, by viewing photography and cinema within the tradition of acheiropoieta, one not only does justice to the “bazinian text,” which speaks of relics, imprints and the image as a natural phenomenon; the reference to an age-old paradigm also supports Bazin’s counter-determinist conception of the invention of cinema. From this perspective, Bazin’s reference to the shroud speaks clearly to his ontological argument concerning cinema as the art of reality: ‘la création d’un univers idéal à l’image du réel,’ which prefigures the description of integral realism in his subsequent essay of \textit{Qu’est-ce que le cinéma}? To conclude this series of chapters on the world and its image in Bazin, I will return again to his notion of a myth of total cinema, which I understand to be the backdrop for a repeated interest in exploration film, and through that for his ontological argument.


\textsuperscript{79} Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 10