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

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Chapter IV: Myth, Invention and Imagination

“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, de la photographie au phonographe. C’est celui du réalisme intégral, d’une recréation du monde à son image, une image sur laquelle ne pèserait pas l’hypothèse de la liberté d’interprétation de l’artiste ni l’irréversibilité du temps.”1,1

André Bazin’s repeated reference to exploration films like Kon Tiki (Thor Heyerdahl, 1950) and Victoire sur l’Annapurna (Marcel Ichac, 1953) reflects their importance in his body of critical work. It is especially striking that, each time, Bazin praises the film’s pictorial imperfection: from the perspective of a natural image, he seeks the directing myth of cinema’s invention in the venerable desire for the “recreation of the world in its own image.” That Bazin takes recourse to relics pertaining to selected scenes from the road to Calvary is thus not surprising, since the notion of the image, the negative imprint and dissemblance all play a crucial role in Christian faith.

Bazin deepens the analogy between the biblical discourse on images in his description of the myth of cinema, which he formulates as a retake of the imago dei into an exposé on integral realism: corresponding to a departure from anthropocentrism (‘God created mankind in His own image,’ Genesis 1:27), cinema is the ‘recreation of the world in its own image.’2 From this perspective, the Ontology-argument then announces a New Testament, so to speak: as a natural image it is redeemed from linear perspective, which Bazin condemned as ‘le pêché originel de la peinture occidentale.’3,ii As I will argue subsequently, Bazin’s discourse on the natural image of cinema, combined with his interest in exploration film, invokes the biblical theme of idolatry and the old testament embargo on “graven images,” which reads:


See also my analysis of the notion of perspective in the ontology-essay, cf. infra 6.2 A Perspective on 3-D: “Relief en équations”
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Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (Exodus 20:4)

Bazin explicitly charges cinema with the task of recreating, precisely, the world in its image, which explicates the importance of the theme of exploration in Bazin’s œuvre. In this manner, from a philosophical point of view, Tom Gunning understands the myth of total cinema against the “expansive” background of the world:

The worldhood of the world forms the ultimate referent of the myth of total cinema. Thus total cinema does not posit a Hegelian universal totality but rather the phenomenological image of the world as bounded by a horizon, and it is in the nature of a horizon to be expanded.

The limits of cinema, Gunning suggests, are ever expanding – as is the universe; and the desire to extend those limits guides the argument Bazin develops throughout “Le Mythe du cinéma total” in terms of a combined inventive and imaginative driving force. In exploration films like Kon-Tiki and Victoire sur l’Annapurna Bazin saw the reconciliation of reality (or the world) with its image, and his essays on the topic of exploration film are therefore fully in line with the ontological argument as well as his myth of total cinema, which could in fact be termed “the myth of the graven image.” In his review of Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Louis Malle’s Le Monde du silence (1956), Bazin most clearly describes the evolution of film in a direct analogy with human exploration:

Assurément il y a un aspect dérisoire dans la critique du Monde du silence. Car enfin les beautés du film sont d'abord de celles de la nature et autant donc vaudrait critiquer Dieu. Tout au plus de ce point de vue nous est-il permis d'indiquer que ces beautés, en effet, sont ineffables et qu'elles constituent la plus grande révélation que notre petite planète ait faite à l'homme depuis les temps héroïques de l'exploration terrestre. On peut aussi remarquer que, pour la même raison, les films sous-marins sont la seule nouveauté radicale dans le documentaire depuis les grands films de voyages des années 20 à 30.

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The linkage between cinema, the graven image and human exploration, as I will maintain, is on-going throughout Bazin’s oeuvre: having explored the earth beneath, the great voyage films of the 20s and 30s, Bazin praises the new discoveries of Cousteau and Malle in the water under the earth. A very similar aspiration toward unexplored territories underlies the age-old dream of human flight in heaven above, which Ovid calls the “unknown arts” to which Daedalus turns in his narration of the Icarus myth. In the following pages, I hope to demonstrate that Bazin repeats the analogy between cinema and Icarus both in his Myth-essay as well as his critique of Le Monde du silence, and he does this in affirmation of imagination as the venerable driving force of the invention of cinema.

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4.1 Icarus and the Imagination of Cinema

In “Le Mythe du cinéma total,” Bazin develops this argument from a technological point of view, against the dictates of industry and war. These technologies that enable the continuation of human exploration, namely ships, U-boats and so-called “frogmen”, but also more recently airplanes and space rockets, could arguably be attributed to an imperialist and cruel combat-machine, which would draw parallels between cinema and war (or cinema and imperialism). But Bazin clearly distances himself from such an approach, and argues that cinema partakes in a much more ancient myth of human flight, namely the myth of Icarus:

Certes, on trouverait sans doute d’autres exemples, dans l’histoire des techniques et des inventions, de la convergence des recherches, mais il faut distinguer celles qui résultent précisément de l’évolution scientifique et des besoins industriels (ou militaires) de celles qui, de toute évidence, les précèdent. 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.  

Bazin’s mention of the myth of Icarus in this passage is anything but anecdotal, and indeed in itself crystallizes his ontological project. Portrayed here as preceding the antiheros of a technological invention, driven either by financial profit (the Lumière brothers and Thomas Edison) or scientific achievement (Marey et al.), Bazin places Icarus among those “fanatics, the maniacs, the disinterested pioneers” who had first imagined cinema.  

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7 See primarily Paul Virilio’s War and Cinema: Logics of Perception in particular his chapter entitled “Cinema Isn’t I See, It’s I Fly” in which he argues that ‘Since the battlefield has always been a field of perception, the war machine appears to the military commander as an instrument of representation, comparable to the painter’s palette and brush. […] For men at war, the function of the weapon is the function of the eye. It is therefore quite understandable that, after 1914, the air arm’s violent cinematic disruption of the space continuum, together with the lighting advances of military technology, should have literally exploded the old homogeneity of vision and replaced it with the heterogeneity of perceptual fields [original emphasis]’ (Trans. Patrick Camiller. London: Verso (1989): p. 20).

While industry usually shows itself particularly interested in warfare, the myth of Icarus in Bazin’s writing posits a radically different view on the origins of cinema as combining a technological invention with an age-old dream of human flight.

8 Bazin, “Mythe,” p. 24

9 Ibid.
is an inherently mechanical art, but Bazin subordinates the technological inventions, which gradually attain ‘l’imitation intégrale de la nature,’ to the power of imagination: ‘Tous les perfectionnements que s’adjoint le cinéma ne peuvent donc paradoxalement que le rapprocher de ses origines. Le cinéma n’est donc pas encore inventé.’ To solidify these views, Bazin relies on the Icarus myth, which links cinema with dreams of human flight and the history of aviation.

“Airplanes are not tools for war. They are not for making money. Airplanes are beautiful dreams. Cursed dreams… waiting for the sky to swallow them up,” declares the Italian aircraft designer Count Caproni in Hayao Miyazaki’s critically acclaimed animation film, The Wind Rises (2013). The film tells the story of Jiro, a Japanese boy who dreams of flying airplanes, but his poor eyesight might keep him from realizing this dream. In the opening scene, he flies a small airplane over the city and countryside when, suddenly, his view is disturbed by a colossal, war-like flying machine. The goggles do not fit over his thick glasses and, cross-eyed, Jiro falls like Icarus back to earth (Fig. 1). After an imaginary conversation with his mentor Caproni, he realizes he can be an engineer instead of a pilot, as

\[10\] Ibid., p. 23

\[11\] Ibid.

\[12\] Incidentally, about a decade after Bazin’s Myth-essay, the French philosopher and anthropologist Edgar Morin evokes the same dream of human flight in the opening chapter of Le Cinéma, ou l’homme imaginaire (1956), entitled “L’Avion, le cinéma.” ‘As the nineteenth century dies it bequeaths us two new machines. Both of them are born on almost the same date, at almost the same place, then simultaneously launch themselves upon the world and spread across continents. They pass from the hands of the pioneers into those of operators, crossing a ”supersonic barrier.” The first machine realizes at last the most insane dream man has pursued since he looked at the sky: to break away from the earth. Until then, only the creatures of his imagination, of his desire—the angels—had wings. This need to fly, which arises, well before Icarus, at the same time as the first mythologies, seems to all appearances the most infantile and mad. It is also said about dreamers that they do not have their feet on the ground. Clement Adler's feet, for an instant, escaped the ground, and the dream finally came to life’ (The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man. Trans. Lorraine Mortimer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2003): p. 5). Morin in fact cites a passage from Bazin’s “Le Mythe du cinéma total” in this same chapter, and pushes the affirmation of imagination even further: ‘But is not the inventor himself possessed by his imagination before he is hailed as a great scientist? Is a science nothing but a science? Is it not always, as its inventive source, daughter of a dream? [...] The technical and the dream are linked at birth.’ (p. 9).

Bazin’s influence is clearly tangible here, and he in fact considered this book to be ‘le plus important de la bibliographie française d’après guerre’ (“L’Homme imaginaire et la fonction magique du cinéma.” France observateur (09/13/1956): p. 17). He furthermore argues that Morin lays bare the mythical appeal of cinema: ‘Avec le cinéma, la civilisation est revenue au plus près du mythe archaïque et peut-être le plus universel’ (Ibid.).
“engineers turn dreams into reality,” as Daedalus did. Against the background of the Second World War, Miyazaki views the human desire for flight from an openly pacifist mind set: where bombs only add weight to already bulky aircrafts, Jiro wants to design airplanes light as air (Fig. 2). Partly fictionalized from a novel by Hori Tatsuo, *The Wind Has Risen* (1936-1937), from which Miyazaki borrows the title (itself being a line from Paul Valéry’s *Le Cimetière marin*), the two protagonists of the film are based on historical figures: Italian aircraft designer Giovanni Battista Caproni (1886–1957), whose company built bombers for the Italian air force, and Jiro Horikoshi (1903-1982), known for designing the Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighter that was used in the Pearl Harbor attacks in 1940. From this perspective of “airplanes that don’t return,” Miyazaki questions the perversions of wartime all the while affirming the pacifist force of imagination, as Bazin does in the reference to Icarus. The film gradually merges Jiro’s dreams with the harsh reality of a devastating war and personal loss, as his wife Naoko dies from tuberculosis. In the final sequence, Jiro meets Caprino again in his dream world, which is now a land covered with plane wrecks under a sky clouded by burning cities: “it’s the land of the dead.” Valéry’s poem clearly guides the film from beginning to end: “entre les tombes,” despite such disasters, out of the clear blue sky “le vent se lève” and Jiro must try to live!

Bazin’s choice for the history of aviation speaks for itself, as it is a history of trial but mostly error, including “bird-men,” tower jumping, and strap-on wings. Not only did these

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13 As I will argue extensively later on, it is around this particular poem that Bazin constructs his critique of *Le Monde du silence*, ultimately making the formalist statement that accompanies his Myth-argument (cf. infra, Chapter VI: A Matter of Form).
attempts to defy gravity precede their development as war-technologies, but they were indeed
driven by a similar imaginative force, on which Blaise Pascal, whose *Pensées* directly inform
Bazin’s Ontology-essay, wrote:

It is that deceitful part in man, that mistress of error and falsity, the more deceptive
that she is not always so; for she would be an infallible rule of truth, if she were an
infallible rule of falsehood. But being most generally false, she gives no sign of her
nature, impressing the same character on the true and the false. I do not speak of
fools, I speak of the wisest men; and it is among them that the imagination has the
great gift of persuasion. Reason protests in vain; it cannot set a true value on things.\(^{14}\)

Following imagination, as Daedalus did when he decides their escape should be through the
sky, there is always the risk involved of melting wings, to use Ovid’s formulation: of
“unknown arts” turning into “ruinous arts.”\(^{15}\) Cinema, then, is not only the story of its
technological invention: ‘Niepce, Muybridge, Leroy, Joly, Demeny, Louis Lumièrefont des
monomanes, des hurluberlus, des bricoleurs ou, au mieux, des industriels ingénieux.’\(^{16,\,\text{viii}}\)
Bazin’s affirmation of imagination also implies the combined effort of Daedalus’ ingenuity
and the audacity of Icarus, who against his father’s advice flew too close to the sun which
melted his wings. The story of Icarus symbolizes the blind courage of ‘les fanatiques, les
pionniers désintéressés,’\(^{17,\,\text{ix}}\) like Franz Reichelt foolishly jumping off the Eiffel tower, or
explorers like Heyerdahl, Herzog and Lachenal, who each in their own way took a “giant leap
for mankind.” While their audacity did not, as Reichelt’s did, take their lives, the toll of
Herzog and Lachenal’s endeavour was high, as they both returned physically exhausted by
the almost inhumane conditions, such as lack of oxygen and extreme frostbite, that announce
what mountaineers call the “death zone” beyond 8000 meters. Their descent is telling: with
amputated fingers and toes, unable to walk and carried by Sherpa’s, their journey pushed the
limits of human exploration to a new height, after which Herzog famously exclaimed that ‘il
y a d’autres Annapurnas dans la vie des hommes!’\(^{10}\)

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\(^{15}\) Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, p. 398

\(^{16}\) Bazin, “Mythe,” p. 19

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 24
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4.2 On Other Annapurnas

“This qui compte davantage, c’est l’ouverture probable sur de nouvelles connaissances et de nouvelles possibilités techniques, c’est le courage et les vertus personnelles de Gagarine, c’est la science qui a rendu possible l’exploit et tout ce que, à son tour, cela suppose d’esprit d’abnégation et de sacrifice. Mais ce qui compte peut-être par-dessus tout, c’est d’avoir quitté le Lieu. Pour une heure, un homme a existé en dehors de tout horizon - tout était ciel autour de lui, ou, plus exactement, tout était espace géométrique. Un homme existait dans l’absolu de l’espace homogène.”

This memorable passage combines the virtues of human recklessness alongside technological advancement against the background of a launching space age. These words are from Emmanuel Lévinas, not from Bazin; yet, in some ways they could have been his. As I maintained earlier, these three elements combined, namely exploration, audacity and technological progress, are equally constructive of Bazin’s myth of total cinema. From a film historical point of view, then, Bazin’s myth of total cinema agrees to a similar orientation toward technology, which accounts for the prescience of the myth of Icarus in contemporary cinema: facing new challenges “on other Annapurnas,” beyond the safe haven of the earth’s atmosphere.

Bazin died only a couple of years prior to the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin’s legendary orbit around the earth in 1961, but he wrote the “Le Mythe du cinema total” in November 1946 against the backdrop of a very specific unmanned space-mission in the aftermath of the Second World War that finally included the heavens above into the camera’s reach. More precisely, on 26 October 1946 a V2 rocket successfully captured approximately 1.600.000 square miles of the earth’s curvature on 35 mm film (Fig. 3), this very rocket that was originally designed by German scientists as an instrument of war to target cities such as London, Antwerp and Liège. After this rocket film, even at this early stage, space

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exploration was evincing influence from Bazin’s Icarian myth: first, in a robotic photograph of the crescent of earth, followed by the famed “earth-rise” colour picture and the most widely distributed photograph in existence, nicknamed the “Blue marble.” From Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), at the time of release a remarkably accurate science-fiction film, to the three dimensional spectacle of Gravity (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013): the heavens above now fully partake in our imagination.

To return to the context of documentary and exploration film, which has been my point of entry into Bazin’s myth of total cinema, I want to invoke an image from Andrei Ujica’s Our of the Present (1999), a documentary made with found footage shot by cosmonauts Sergei Krikalev and Anatoli Artsebarski on one of their missions in outer space. Their return to earth after 310 days in space shows remarkable parallels with Herzog’s descent: practically paralyzed due to muscle atrophy, they are pulled out of their capsule like rag dolls and carried around in portable hospital chairs. When a Soviet officer wipes Krikalev’s forehead, the circle is complete (Fig. 4): decades after Bazin, here again, ‘le cinéma est là, voile de Véronique sur le visage de la souffrance de l’homme.’

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Fig. 3 First photograph taken by a V2 rocket
Fig. 4 Veronica’s veil in Out of the Present

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4.3 Icare sous-marin: Freed from Terrestrial Chains

Bazin is not the first to take recourse to a mythical paradigm in an argument against a prematurely proclaimed decadence of art.\textsuperscript{21} Centuries before him, Alberti took on a similar challenge applied to painting, by circumstantially crediting Narcissus for the invention of painting: ‘[…] I had the habit of telling my friends that the inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus.’\textsuperscript{22} In “The Inventor of Painting” (2010), Hubert Damisch further elaborates on Alberti’s claim, as he assigns to the myth of Narcissus a similar methodological purpose:

Alberti is not interested in the historical origins of painting. […] the fable of Narcissus […] is only invoked in De Pictura for theoretical reasons, and not for narrative of picturesque purposes. Alberti had little concern to know when and where painting appeared for the first time, and did not much care to have empirical evidence of its beginnings or to learn of its first concrete developments. What mattered to him was to expose what this art consisted of and to offer a working definition of it to painters.\textsuperscript{23}

Though Alberti’s critical method was inherently prescriptive and in so being can be said to differ from Bazin’s, the myth-paradigm functions in both cases as a critique to the historical approach.\textsuperscript{24} We know by now that Bazin rejects a technologically determinist framework, and

\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, a large portion of Bazin’s critical work is invested in understanding realism, via the acceptance of the sound film, as a gradual fulfilment of cinema’s vocation rather than its decadence (cf. supra, 1.1.1 “You must speak!” Total Cinema and the Myth of Charlot).


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 309

\textsuperscript{24} According to Damisch, Alberti’s De pictura was intended to be prescriptive rather than historical: ‘Alberti does not write on painting: he endeavors to produce an “art” or, as [Erwin] Panofsky accurately translated it, a “theory,” which would be useful for painters who were his audience’ (Damisch, “The Inventor of Painting,” p. 309).

Bazin’s myth of total cinema is motivated by an aversion to encyclopaedic and exhaustive film histories comparable to Alberti’s; the latter’s intention to compose a working definition of painting, furthermore, is reminiscent of Bazin’s views of film criticism as symbiotic with filmmaking (cf. supra, 1.1 Myth versus Histoire générale).
it is the combination of the exploratory spirit and the subsidiary role of technology which inspires him to view not Narcissus, but Icarus as the inventor of cinema.

It is ultimately in *Le Monde du silence* that Bazin then sees the fulfilment of his anecdotal mention of Icarus in “Le Mythe du cinéma total,” as the film’s aesthetics derive from ‘la satisfaction d’un immémorial désir humain: l’affranchissement de la pesanteur. Il se pourrait que le rêve d’Icare ait commencé avec sa chute dans l’océan. Le ciel était à nos pieds; il commence de nous révéler ses merveilles.” However, Bazin does not do away with technology completely. His argument is less straightforward: while bulky airplanes eventually enabled a certain freedom of terrestrial chains, it is in the ocean that man, finally, “flies with his arms:”

J’indique seulement qu’il ne s’agit pas du symbolisme attaché à l’eau superficielle, mobile, ruisselante, lustre, mais plutôt de l’Océan: de l’eau considérée comme une autre moitié de l’univers, milieu à trois dimensions, plus stable et homogène d’ailleurs que l’aérien et dont l’enveloppement nous affranchit de la pesanteur. Cette libération des chaînes terrestres est aussi bien symbolisée au fond par le poisson que par l’oiseau, mais traditionnellement, et pour des raisons évidentes, le rêve de l’homme ne se déployait guère que dans l’Azur. Sec, solaire, aérien. La mer scintillante de lumière n’était au poète méditerranéen qu’un toit tranquille où marchent les colombes, celui des focs et non des phoques.

C’est finalement la science plus forte que notre imagination qui devrait, en révélant à l’homme ses virtualités de poisson, réaliser le vieux mythe du vol, bien davantage satisfait par le scaphandrier autonome que par la mécanique bruyante et collective de l’avion aussi béte qu’un sous-marin, aussi dangereux qu’un scaphandrier à tuyaux et à casque.

The scuba set [*scaphandre autonome*], for instance, was one of many inventions that came from the world’s first diving club *Les Sous l’eau* (pun intended), founded by Yves le Prieur and Jean Painlevé, whose father, Paul Painlevé’s scientific work both on fluid mechanics and aviation might have fuelled the filmmaker’s outspoken admiration for the subaquatic


26 Bazin, “*Le Monde du silence,*” n. pag.

universe. In order to accommodate his continued underwater exploration and his scientific
curiosity, technology was indeed indispensable. In “Le Cinéma scientifique” (1955), for
example, he praises high-speed filming, magnetic sound recording, and filmed radioscropy,28
and in “Les Pieds dans l’eau” (1935) he writes that ‘whatever improvements had been made
were quickly cancelled out by new needs. Just like airplanes, the cameras we construct are
obsolete the moment we try to use them.’29 Similarly, Bazin claims that technology does not
determine what cinema is (our desire for flight existed the moment we first observed birds),
but innovations do provide further advancements toward the gradual fulfilment of this desire,
often in an almost counter-intuitive, accidental manner (under water, not through the air). In
Bazin’s words, ‘[…] tous [changements] qui ont une importance réelle et qui enrichissent le
patrimoine cinématographique sont en étroite liaison avec la technique: et celle-ci en
constitue l’infrastructure.’30, xv

The human desire for flight and the figure of Icarus form the backbone, either
implicitly or explicitly, for a great portion of Bazin’s œuvre: seemingly anecdotal in “Le
Mythe du cinéma total,” Icarus becomes the protagonist in a significant portion of Bazin’s
writings on exploration film. In the following chapters, I propose that the desire for flight
implicitly supports Bazin’s rigorous analysis of painting and cinema, in which he further
develops a “new cosmology of film,” largely based - quite literally - on a change of
perspective.

Paul Painlevé (1863-1933) was a mathematician and acclaimed scientist, known for the his
excellent work in solving differential equations that would inform his interest in mechanics
as well as his study of human flight. He also accompanied Wilbur Wright on his first
passenger-flight and became France’s first minister of aviation (Berg, “Contradictory
Forces,” p. 5).


30 Bazin, André (1948). “William Wyler ou le janséniste de la mise en scène.” Qu’est-ce que le