Today, Icarus: On the persistence of André Bazin’s myth of total cinema
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Chapter V: Cinema and Painting

“[…] l’écran, en dépit d’une apparente similitude avec le cadre du tableau, entretient avec l’image des rapports essentiellement opposés. L’écran de cinéma n’est pas un cadre, mais un cache, il ne sert pas à montrer, mais à réserver, à isoler, à choisir.”

To explain the notion of an “image-fact” in more detail, André Bazin introduces a definition of cinema that references a sequence from Jean Cocteau’s *Le Sang d’un poète* (1930). In the second episode of the film, the poet and a statue are stuck in a room, from which there is only one exit: the mirror. Against common sense, the statue tells him: “Indeed, but you have written that one does enter mirrors, and still you don’t believe it! Try it!” After diving into the mirror, he floats (or flies) through a boundless space (Fig. 1). He then arrives in the hallway of the *Hôtel folie dramatique* with a series of closed doors that, despite his firm efforts, remain closed. So he looks through the keyhole, and sees and hears a variety of things: a slow-motion execution of a Mexican in rewind, a Chinese shadow play, a little girl’s flying classes, a hermaphrodite, etc. (Fig. 2). From this sequence, Bazin concludes that:

On admettra du moins que tout ce que nous voyons au cinéma est perçu comme réel, c’est-à-dire comme participant d’un espace uniformément étendu ou, en d’autres termes, d’un univers. L’une des plus justes définitions du cinéma est celle de Jean Cocteau: “la réalité vu à travers un trou de serrure.” Ce que la serrure nous cache ne cesse pas pour autant d’exister en dehors de notre champ visuel.

The episode of *Le Sang d’un poète* condenses two aspects that Bazin considers fundamentally cinematographic, i.e. centrifugal: the screen as a mirror and as a mask (*un cache*). That which is not visible on screen (or in the mirror and through the keyhole) still exists in reality. To think otherwise would be like assuming that nothing exists behind a door because it is closed. From this perspective, the doorknob, according to Bazin, is the opposite of cinema’s centrifugal image:

[...] c’est encore le contraire de la mise en scène genre “bouton de porte” où la couleur du ripolin, l’épaisseur de la crasse sur le bois à hauteur de main, le brillant du

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2 Ibid., p. 7
métal, l’usure du pène sont autant des faits parfaitement inutiles, des parasites concrets de l’abstraction qu’il siéra d’éliminer.3,iii

Being the opposite of the shot [plan], which I have previously discussed as fundamentally alien to Bazin’s views on integral realism (cf. supra, 2.4 Integral Realism: Reality and Cinema “Ultimately Equal”), the centrifugal image gives way to and assumes what lies beyond the screen, whereas the painterly image thanks its existence to the surface of the centripetal canvas. Cocteau’s poet embodies this paradigm shift: where a mirror implies the superficial gaze of Narcissus, the surface here gives way to a three-dimensional world. As I hope to demonstrate throughout the following pages, Bazin’s studies on cinema and painting develop alongside a comparable shift in perspective, in which the surface of a painting is transformed into a universe that takes on the spatial properties of lived, three-dimensional perception.

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5.1 “How Everything Turns Away:” Bruegel Cinematographer

By way of introduction to the extensive topic of cinema and painting in Bazin’s body of work, I want to first look at one particular painterly reference in his critique of *Le Monde du silence*: Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1556), around which he then constructs his entire analysis (Fig. 3). He writes:

Dans l’admirable tableau de Breughel, Icare tombant à l’eau dans l’indifférence agreste préfigure Cousteau et ses compagnons plongeant au large de quelque falaise méditerranéenne, ignorés du paysan qui gratte son champ en les prenant pour des baigneurs.4,iv

Bazin’s description of the masterpiece pinpoints precisely the fundamentally centrifugal aspects of the cinema screen: reduced to a detail, the tragedy of Icarus loses its prominence in the painting (his feet and some feathers are its only reminders). Moreover, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* also offers a significantly original take on the classical myth, which ‘perd toute son importance à côté de cette nouvelle conception du cosmos.’5 In fact, Bazin’s description noticeably centres on those elements of the painting which are originally and uniquely Bruegel’s, of which Charles De Tolay wrote:

[…] il n’y a pas de doute que Bruegel n’ait recouru directement au texte [d’Ovide] car il est le premier à avoir représenté le paysan au labour, le Pasteur appuyé sur son bâton, le pêcheur la ligne à la main. Mais il le fait en reversant ce même texte: au lieu de contempler avec étonnement Dédale et Icare volant dans le ciel pareils à des dieux, le paysan insouciant pursuit son travail, le Pasteur tournant le dos à Icare, regarde fixement devant lui dans le vide et le pêcheur reste absorbé par sa pêche; la perdrix même, à qui Ovide fait battre des ailes pour railler éternellement Dédale, reste ici


imobile sur sa branche; mieux encore, le navire près duquel se déroule la catastrophe prend le large, voiles gonflées, vers le soleil.\(^6\)\(^,\)\(^7\)

Admittedly, Bazin’s ekphrasis in the critique of *Le Monde du silence* is rather brief and at first sight perhaps isolated from the painting-cinema question, but the fact that he reiterates the indifference of the peasant as well as the ignorance of Icarus’ tragedy unfolding in the background strongly suggests that he picked up on a more general contemporary interest in the old master’s work, which reinterprets the painting and the myth of Icarus from a modern perspective. The resonances between the painting, Bazin’s citation and its recent reiterations allow us to view in Bruegel’s work a particularly cinematographic ontology. In this manner, the brief citation becomes instrumental in what Bazin describes in his essays on painting and cinema in terms of a “new cosmology of film,” just like Bruegel’s painting that, as his critics generally agree, offers a “new conception of the cosmos.”\(^7\)

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\(^{6}\) Ibid., p. 29

\(^{7}\) On Bruegel’s “cosmology,” see for example: Alpers, Svetlana. *Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1983), in particular her analysis of the “mapping impulse” in his paintings (pp. 133-136), which she relates back to the Alexandrian astronomer Claudius Ptolemy’s ideas from the *Geography* (145 AD). From a cinematic perspective, Tom Conley in *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) first looks at Bazin’s Icarus anedote to construct his general argument: ‘to each film its map’ (p. 5), and in a later chapter also refers to the work of Ptolemy in a specific discussion of maps as they appear in *The Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2002).

Ptolemy’s work is indeed intriguing when it comes to the “new cosmology” or worldview in cinema. In his astronomical study, the *Almagest* (150 AD), Ptolemy describes the apparent motion of the stars and planets based on observations, and lays the foundations for a cosmology that holds earth at the centre of the universe. His calculations fit within ancient Greek physics that intended to “save the appearances [sozein ta phainomena],” as the French mathematician Pierre Duhem (1861-1916) famously wrote (*Sūzein ta phainomena: essai sur la notion de théorie physique de Platon a Galilée*. Paris: Librairie scientifique A. Hermann et fils, 1905). With the Copernican revolution in the Sixteenth century, the Ptolemaic cosmological model was replaced by a heliocentric worldview. It seems to me that Bazin might be tipping into these issues, when he writes at the outset of his Ontology-essay that it is a photographic image’s primordial function to ‘sauver l’être par l’apparence’ (Ontologie, p. 9); in any case, the notion of “cosmology” clearly guides his analysis of Vincent van Gogh’s aesthetics transformed on screen, cf. infra 5.2.2 *Two Revolutions on Film: Geographic Temporality.*
5.1.1 W.H. Auden: Icarus as an Anti-War Statement

“La première fois que tu t’es retrouvé devant ce tableau, ton œil avait été attiré immédiatement par le chemisier rouge du laboureur; plus tard, en découvrant Icare, à droite de la composition, tu avais souri. Aussitôt, une étrange litanie a commencé à résonner dans ta tête. Ça a duré toute l’après-midi: un homme laboure son champ; un berger regarde le ciel; un bateau navire lentement vers un port; la mer est calme; un homme se noie.”

(Claudio Pazienza, Tableau avec chute, 1996)\textsuperscript{vii}

During the course of the twentieth century, Bruegel’s version of the Icarus myth has gained remarkable attention, following the initiative of the Anglo-American poet W.H. Auden’s \textit{Musée des Beaux-Arts}, written in December 1938 during a visit to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels and published the following year. Auden begins his poem with the more general approach of the Old Masters to the theme of human suffering in an always apathetic setting, and then picks up the Bruegelian indifference in the Icarus painting:
About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.\(^8\)

Auden reinterprets the painting within the zeitgeist of the period, shaded by social apathy and anxiety following the Great War, as a wakeup call: as Alexander Nemerov argues, ‘this is Bruegel’s aesthetic lesson to other artists of the 1930s and 1940s about the incorporation of social content’.\(^9\) Following Auden, several poets and painters have repeated the reference to Bruegel’s Icarus, giving it an enduring significance in relation to the contemporary concerns of a century marked by wartime: ‘in both the original work and modern versions, life continues – the fall of Icarus fails to disturb the harmony between man and nature.’\(^10\) The

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Nemerov reads *Musée des Beaux-Arts* against the backdrop of *Journey to a War* (published in 1939), in which Auden and Christopher Isherwood recount their travels to China during the Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945) as they witnessed an air raid on the city of Hankow: ‘Aerial machines, squinting upwards, innocent victims - these experiences so fresh in Auden’s mind must have given the fate of Bruegel’s falling boy a contemporary resonance’ (Nemerov, p. 785).

shared interpretation of Bruegel’s Icarus as an address to social apathy in wartime implicitly builds on a lesser-known etching by the painter, which portrays the fall of Icarus in a much more dramatic setting. In *Man of War Sailing to the Right; Above, the Fall of Icarus* (1561-1562), Daedalus is there, witnessing his son’s tragedy as it happens, and instead of “calmly sailing on,” the ship is caught in a stormy ocean (Fig. 4). The title of this etching deliberately frames the mythic tragedy from the point of view of war: in Bruegel’s time, the man-of-war was a vehicle of war, armed with canons and driven by sails rather than oars, which were the usual propellers of combat ships like galleys for example. The ship is in fact identical to the one in *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*: by the look of the wind in its sails, we know now that this ship is going to war. Where in Bruegel’s etching, then, Icarus’ tragedy is dramatically aligned with the implied sufferings of wartime, his subsequent painting depicts war, in Auden’s words, from a “human position; how it takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.” These recent reiterations of Bruegel’s interpretation of Icarus indeed raise pertinent questions regarding the social impact of documenting epic tragedies (like war or indeed a little boy falling from the sky), while elsewhere life goes on. As the old proverb, often associated with Bruegel’s painting, has it: “no plough stands still just because a man dies.”

Bazin, too, was sensitive to such apathy imbued by times of war, and the reference to *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is in that sense fully in line with the twentieth-century revived interest in the Icarus myth. In it, the prevalence of painting in Bazin’s oeuvre finds


12 We know from the correspondence with his close friend Guy Léger in 1940 that Bazin’s depression caused by the German invasion of France had everything to do with his ‘guilt at being so far from the front, but he realized that his urge toward self-sacrifice was hardly patriotic. It stemmed, he said, from a massive sense of personal worthlessness’ (Andrew, Dudley. *André Bazin*. New York: Oxford University Press (2013): p. 33). Later that year, as Andrew writes, Bazin actively engaged with others in ‘sorting out the political, philosophic, and moral disaster that had fallen on their country and was being accepted with disgusting effortlessness’ (Ibid., p. 34). From this perspective, Bazin’s firm belief in a fundamentally social aesthetic of film can thus be viewed in light of a cultural movement that sought in the arts the moral re-armament against social apathy.
itself especially concerned with cinematographic realism. In fact, the phrase in Auden that most pertinently describes this indifference – he writes: ‘how everything turns away’ - already carries the kernels of Bazin’s invention of the “image-fait” in post-war neo-realist cinema (cf. supra, 2.4.1 No moment suprême: Bazin Opposes Ellipsis (and Photogénie)). In his extensive studies on cinema and painting, to which I will return later on in this chapter, Bazin further develops this view in terms of a “centrifugal screen” of cinema. In Bruegel’s Icarus, everything turns away from the centre of the drama: all the characters and even the sheep in the foreground have their backs turned to Icarus. In this manner, the painting presents the tragedy of mythical proportions as a fait divers of no bigger or lesser importance than a ploughman, shepherd, fisherman and some sailors going about their everyday business. In the Bruegel example, we see clearly that unlike the so-called “pregnant instant” of painting, its realism derives from the ontological equality of events, which is inherently cinematographic. In Bazin’s words, cinema is ‘une imprimerie de la réalité’, rather than a succession of front-page events.

Fig. 4 Man of War Sailing to the Right; Above, the Fall of Icarus, Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1561-1562)

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The interplay between front-page news and *faits divers* surfaces in Claudio Pazienza’s documentary film *Tableau avec chute* (1997), which captures the implications of Bruegel’s message well: dressed in a red shirt, like the dutiful ploughman, and with a print of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and a camera at hand, Pazienza sets out to ask the Belgians (his own parents, professors, the prime minister, his neighbours, those on social welfare) what they see in this painting (Fig. 5). “Icare nage, des deux côtés de la frontière linguistique.” Most people do not notice Icarus, either taking him for a bather or, perhaps, someone is drowning. “But this happens here as well,” a Flemish woman remarks: “Sometimes people are just looking, and something happens and they don’t do anything either.” By setting the documentary against the background of several nationwide revolts in the nineties, Pazienza explores the social and political involvement of a people in specific historical events: Bruegel’s painting of Icarus poses the question concerning “la distance entre celui qui regarde et ce qui est regardé.” Why do certain events make us instantly drop whatever we are doing, while others leave us cold; and what role do images play in our closeness to tragedies that, to take on a French phrase, “ne nous regardent pas” (Fig. 6)? Against social apathy, Pazienza’s interpretation of *Icarus* follows the centrifugal principle of human reality: the documentary as “un hymne à l’homme aux pieds ancrés sur terre.” Pazienza’s take on *Icarus* aligns perfectly with Bazin’s statement that ‘tout film est un documentaire social!’  

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14 E.g. large-scale strikes against educational reform, the child abuse cases of Julie and Melissa, An and Eefje and Sabine and Letitia, the nationwide “white march” following the dismissal of their investigating magistrate Jean-Marc Connerotte: these current affairs put the finger on injustice and flaws in the judicial system that mobilized the Belgians to speak out against the government.

This declaration directly follows from the ontological equality of events on screen (Bazin’s notion of *image-fait*) combined with an acknowledgment of the wide-ranging mythic proportions these may take on in the media. In his documentary, Pazienza extends the place of television and current affairs in relation to Bruegel’s Icarus, via the surrealist painter René Magritte’s image of a pipe (which is *not* a pipe) to discuss the (sur)reality of these mediatized images in our contemporary society: “Même à tes yeux, tout ça a fini par ne plus être réel. Pourtant, tout est là, et tout est irréfutablement vrai.”

Bazin, from his side, writes that:

La distinction logique de l’imaginaire et du réel tend à s’abolir. […] La photographie représentait donc une technique privilégiée de la création surréaliste puisqu’elle réalise une image participant de la nature: une hallucination vraie.  

Bazin further develops this inherent surreality in his article “Tout film est un documentaire social” (1947):

The realist destiny of cinema – innate in photographic objectivity – is fundamentally equivocal, because it allows the “realization” of the marvelous. Precisely like a dream.

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It is in this strange overlap between fiction and reality that Bazin locates the “secret reality” of film: ‘The oneiric character of cinema, linked to the illusory nature of its image as much as its lightly hypnotic mode of operation, is no less crucial than its realism.’ Bazin’s description of film as a “social documentary” asserts both the reality-claim inherent to photography as well as its hallucinatory, dreamy existence: as Marco Grosoli puts it in his analysis of this essay, ‘again this is the paradox of realism as and through illusion.’ To reformulate the famed example of Magritte, a photograph of a pipe is both an image and a pipe: the ontology of the photographic image forces us to accept the combined existence of object and image.

Tackling the same issues at stake, the surrealist writer André Breton (1896-1966) includes in First Papers of Surrealism (1942) a cut-out that reinterprets Bruegel’s Icarus in the context of the Second World War, with a particular reference to a news report on excessive bombings on Düsseldorf (Fig. 7). This print is featured in the section “On the Survival of Certain Myths and on Some Other Myths in Growth or Formation,” and clearly positions Bruegel’s Icarus in a new light. Breton radically changes the original composition: he eliminates the sky, the sun, the ocean and the field, and in doing so urges the viewer to combine all the characters involved into one diagonal strip, with the city at the top. Anna Blume describes Breton’s composition as follows:

Breton cuts out this detail in the shape of the plowman’s foot. By doing this Breton leads us to wonder what the relationship might be between bombs at Dusseldorf, the single step of the plowman, and the falling Icarus.

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18 Ibid.
21 Breton, André and Marcel Duchamp. First Papers of Surrealism. New York: Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies (1942)
22 See Anna Blume’s full discussion of this cut-out in “In the Wake of Production: A Study of Bruegel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” In: The Delegated Intellect: Emersonian
“Detail: Bruegel,” the print’s subheadings reads. By aligning one detail (Icarus falling) with another (the ploughman’s foot), Breton pushes the analogy of the image-fait as fait divers: a devastating war takes the form of an unimportant, almost banal instant; and vice versa. Taking into account the other textual element in the composition, Breton furthermore explicitly frames the tragedy of Icarus in an address to the role of news reporting media: “Düsseldorf has been bombed yesterday for the fiftieth time. (The Newspapers).” When in reality, to use Auden’s phrase, “everything turns away,” Breton’s reorganization as well as Pazienza’s documentary film allude to the role of reporting media in our assessment of reality as image. From an historical, ontological and mythical point of view, then, the myth of total cinema shows itself to be particularly concerned with the place of cinema in our assessment of image as reality, but also of reality as image – a really existing hallucination.

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23 Given the implied opposition in Bazin’s notion of “image-fait” with Jean Epstein’s “photogénie” (cf. supra, 2.4.1 No moment suprême: Bazin Opposes Ellipsis (and Photogénie)), it is worth mentioning here that in an essay on television, “À la recherche de la télé génie” (1955), Bazin’s develops a third concept, which he terms “télégénie:” ‘The cinema will never film a biography of my concierge or my grocer, but on my TV set they can be admirable and astounding. Just as we stand all equal before death, all men are equal before television’ (“In Quest of Télégénie.” Trans. Dudley Andrew. In: André Bazin’s New Media. Oakland: University of California Press (2014): p. 46). In this case, Bazin appears to blend the ontological equality pertaining to the image-fait with the magnifying force of photogénie, a dialectic that certainly accompanies the current discussion.
There are two implications proceeding from Bazin’s short reference to *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* that both concern the notion of the “centrifugal screen” of cinema, which I will discuss subsequently. First, it acknowledges that the centrifugal qualities of a particular sixteenth-century painting prefigure the cosmology of the cinema screen. In what follows, I maintain that such anachronistic influence between painting and cinema, suggesting that Bruegel would have painted according to a particularly cinematographic aesthetic, is not exceptional in Bazin’s views on art history, and indeed supports his notion of myth. Secondly, it is important to note that the fall of Icarus is the only mythical theme painted by Bruegel, whose usual subjects were either biblical or everyday sceneries, and that he interprets the myth in such a way that it decreases the mythical proportions of its traditional treatment: in short, and using Bazin’s terminology, he interprets a fundamentally painterly and centripetal subject in a centrifugal manner. As Judith Bernstock argues, ‘twentieth century artists generally revive ancient myths as part of their search for a common
ground accessible to all, and so the Icarian theme provides a platform for universal anti-war statements. For Bazin to step into a contemporary revival of the Icarian theme, no matter how brief, in his critique of *Le Monde du silence*, is fully in line with the notion of “mythical reality” which, as I will explore in the following sections, emerges from his critical essays that cover the relation between cinema and painting.

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24 Bernstock, “Classical Mythology,” p.156
5.2 A New Cosmology of Film

The prominence of painting in Bazin’s oeuvre is exemplified by the contextual framework it sketches from the first version of “Ontologie de l’image photographique,” published in a collected volume Problèmes de la peinture (1945), where he assigns to painting the undeniable significance as a counter-reference to cinema. Photography and in extension cinema have changed painting because they freed ‘les arts plastiques de leur obsession de la ressemblance.’ The initial interest in painting thus accompanies Bazin’s film criticism from the very beginning and culminates in his later essays, where he further develops this thesis in support of an impure cinema into a series on cinema and painting (1949), its relation to theatre (“Théâtre et cinéma,” 1951) and literature (“Pour un cinéma impur,” 1952). As with Bruegel’s Icarus, which had been picked up by poets and artists alike in a critique to social apathy, so too do these studies fit within a post-war endeavour to renew artistic forms and to revive its social implication. From this perspective, Bazin’s particular concern with cinema and painting is informed by both his views on the mythical origins of cinema as well as its social dimension, which crystallize in his encounter with the French existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) and Swiss biologist Adolphe Portmann (1897-1982).

5.2.1 Debates on Contemporary Art: Bazin, Marcel and Portmann

In “Pour un cinéma impur,” Bazin firmly embeds his anti-essentialist mind-set in the existentialist lemma, “existence precedes essence,” a common denominator under which Jean-Paul Sartre places himself alongside Marcel, despite the latter’s outspoken Christian perspective. While it is in these Sartrian terms that Bazin’s general views on film history

Today, Icarus

can be explained (cf. supra, 1.2 Methodological Prudence: Existence Precedes Essence), his association with Marcel, as a literary critic, playwright, philosopher and, indeed, as a Christian remains to this day unconfirmed. Indirectly, Bazin’s affinity with Marcel is implied by the latter’s notion of “ontological exigency,” which Angela Dalle Vacche opposes to the Claude Mauriac’s views on “medium specificity,”28 and Dudley Andrew provides in his biography of Bazin the setting this plausible influence:

Only recently did I [Andrew] learn that Marcel and Bazin conducted a dialogue on cinematographic art, which was broadcast on the radio in 1948. This doesn’t surprise me, as Marcel, a philosopher-playwright, like Sartre, who eagerly engaged the cinema, was also close to Bazin’s friend Amédée Ayfre.29

Chairied by the poet Emmanuel Clancier, the roundtable discussion was in fact recorded at the Rencontres internationales de Genève around the necessity of renewal in the history of art.30 The theme of the talk was fully in line with a general demand for change after the Second World War, as Clancier points out in his introduction:

Depuis des années les peuples ont tellement soufferts qu’ils aspirent tous au changement. Chacun de nous, me semble-t-il, insatisfait du monde malheureux qui l’entoure, attend et souhaite plus ou moins que ce monde change. Il me semble que ce


29 Andrew, André Bazin, p. xxx

The exact broadcast Andrew references, is from 20 September 1948 on Tribune de Paris, which featured a debate between Bazin, Marcel and Swiss zoologist Adolphe Portman. The debate was held in the context of the third Rencontres Internationales de Genève on contemporary art, to which both Marcel as a keynote speaker and Bazin contributed.

The conference in Geneva was organized to provide an interdisciplinary platform that fosters discussion on the role of contemporary art in post-war society. I have already elaborated on the importance of Bruegel’s Icarus from this historical perspective (cf. supra, 5.1.1 W.H. Auden: Icarus as an Anti-War Statement), and it is indeed in cinema’s particular interest in painting, more precisely in the post-war art documentary, that cinema at best shows its capacity of passport to other, perhaps less popular art forms. As Dalle Vacche writes: ‘By associating the art documentary with an avant-garde orientation, Bazin theorized the relation between cinema and painting with the hope that art and cinema together could generate a sensibility more open to the value of spirituality in daily life.’ Precisely because of its popular character, film can bring about not only a renewal of artistic forms, but also a revived popular interest in other arts. In “The Art Documentary in the Postwar Period,” Dalle Vacche continues:

After 1945, in order to avoid paralyzing pessimism and endless revenge, the hope and need for human outreach called for a communal effort towards good will, despite the echoes, the mistakes, and the loose ends from the past. […] Well aware of social struggles, religious divisions, and cultural boundaries, [Bazin] underlined cinema’s universal and egalitarian address. After 1945, there was a feeling of urgency about peace on earth. […] His hope was that well-made art documentaries could inspire audiences with new humanist, anti-anthropocentric values that would bring about a more tolerant, less greedy, and more self-critical mass culture.

In fact, a closer examination of this particular debate, which I provide subsequently, clearly shows that Marcel, Portmann and Bazin share distinctive ideas on the fundamentally social character of cinema, as well as the cross-influence between different art forms (literature, theatre, painting, photography and cinema).


33 Ibid., p. 299
The relevance of this encounter for Bazin’s later work, comprising a large amount of essays on cinema and other arts, is indicated by the fact that most of his essays on these topics were published after this debate, i.e. the body of work which Andrew refers to as Bazin’s “ontogeny”-essays. In fact, Bazin’s general film historical orientation (‘Le cinéma n’est pas encore inventé!’) aligns with the research interests of Portmann, the third member of this roundtable discussion and at the time zoology professor at the University of Basel, which was invested in the physiological prematurity of man (man is “an animal born too early”). From this biological perspective, Portmann fully embraces the suggestion to renew the arts: ‘Je suis tout à fait sûr que l’art doit se transformer, parce que l’art, et le sens esthétique, est une fonction humaine profondément enracinée dans tout notre être […].’

A similar biological undercurrent is clearly present in Bazin’s description of the interaction between cinema and painting, when he writes on Alain Resnais’ *Van Gogh* (1948):

> Comme un lichen né de la symbiose de l’algue et du champignon, la combinaison du cinéma et de la peinture a donné ici naissance à un être esthétique nouveau, son ontologie nous éclairera peut-être sur quelques lois fondamentales de l’existence de la peinture et du cinéma.

As Dalle Vacche notes, underlining Bazin’s adherence to a biological framework: ‘The critic’s scientific vocabulary, here, is crucial: the lichen is the paramount example of organic or intermedial symbiosis.’ From this frame of reference, Bazin’s views on painting and cinema, more precisely the new aesthetics born from their combined ontology, coincide with an art critical discourse on the necessity or possibility for artistic forms to renew themselves. Marcel, from his side, initially looks at the avant-garde for fulfilling this desire


37 Bazin, “Van Gogh,” p. 1

38 Dalle Vacche, “The Art Documentary,” p. 296

39 From this point of view, the biological resonances in the term “ontogeny”, Portman’s primary research area, need not oppose the mechanism described by Joubert-Laurencin (Joubert-
for change in the avant-garde artist rather than the general public, but later on, in his keynote lecture at that same conference, explicitly aligns himself with Bazin:

Il est extraordinairement intéressant de constater, comme le disait très justement André Bazin, qu’ici le maintien d’une communication entre l’art et le peuple est une condition absolument vitale; c’est une condition faute de laquelle, étant donné les conditions de financement, le cinéma ne peut même pas exister. C’est pour cela que nous pouvons, je ne dis pas simplement concevoir, mais connaître, mais désigner des œuvres qui sont considérées comme belles par les artistes, dans l’ordre du cinéma, et qui peuvent parfaitement toucher un public populaire.40, xx

Bazin, who is always straightforward and univocal when it comes to this topic, states: ‘le cinéma fait lire les romans et il popularise les pièces de théâtre. Je me place sur ce plan très matériel: le cinéma donne passeport au théâtre et au roman.’41, xxi Cinema, then, is able to bring out the socio-aesthetics of any art, in particular of painting which is, compared to literature and especially theatre, traditionally more removed from a broader audience. From this perspective, Andrew writes about Bazin’s first defence of such a hybrid film, namely Rubens (Paul Haesaerts & Henri Storck, 1948), that:

[…] the film operates both on the painting and on the spectator by forcing an aesthetic conjunction that tells us something about painting, about cinema, and about spectatorship. “Who can complain of this?” [Bazin] innocently asks, preempting the scoffs he knew would come from art scholars.42

As Andrew continues, one of those art scholars Bazin may have had in mind was André Malraux, who occupies an ambivalent place in Bazin’s ontology-essay, specifically in


See note 3, Chapter II: The Photograph of Danger: A Shark in the Cinema. Instead, possible influences from this debate on Bazin might well explain the need for “belated accuracy” in Bazin’s usage of the term.


relation to painting. From Malraux’ “Esquisse d’une psychologie du cinéma” (1940), Bazin appears to adopt the idea that photography introduced an abstraction in the development of modern painting (e.g. cubism, impressionism): ‘Libéré du complexe de la ressemblance, le peintre moderne l’abandonne au peuple qui l’identifie désormais d’une part à la photographie et de l’autre à la seule peinture qui s’y applique.’\footnote{Bazin, “Ontologie,” pp. 12-13} But, as Joubert-Laurencin suggests,\footnote{On the role of painting in Bazin’s ontology-essay, see for example, Joubert-Laurencin, \textit{Le Sommeil paradoxal}, pp. 63-67} Bazin’s eventual addition in 1958 of a reference, directly preceding this Malrauxian line, to Pablo Picasso’s abstract painting as a \textit{myth} questions the idea that Bazin blindly adopts Malraux’ historical orientation: ‘C’est au XIX\textsuperscript{ème} siècle que commence véritablement la crise du réalisme dont Picasso est aujourd’hui le mythe et qui mettra en cause tout à la fois les conditions d’existence formelle des arts plastiques et leurs fondements sociologiques.’\footnote{Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 12; on Bazin versus Malraux in relation to \textit{Le Mystère Picasso}, see Andrew, “The Gesture.”} As I will demonstrate, Bazin’s distance from Malraux was already confirmed in the nuances he brings in the discussion, again via a particular reference to “myth.”

While Marcel and Portmann appear to follow the Malrauxian argument, namely that the invention of photography has changed painting,\footnote{Portmann states: ‘[…] l’art tout à fait quelconque, l’art de tous les jours n’est-ce pas, qui s’exerçait pendant longtemps à faire le portrait du citoyen, cet art-là a été en grande partie transformé et remplacé par la photographie. Je pense aux illustrations de nombreux livres, livres scientifiques, livres biologiques, où la photographie a en grande partie également rendu presque inutile, superflicue l’activité de l’artiste’ (“Art contemporain”). In the Ontology-article, Bazin appears to follow a similar line of thought in a footnote on book- and journal illustrations, but reverses the order of causality: ‘Il serait intéressant de suivre de ce point de vue la concurrence, dans les journaux illustrés de 1890 à 1910 entre le reportage photographique, encore à ses origines, et le dessin. Ce dernier satisfaisant surtout le besoin baroque du dramatique (cf. \textit{Le Petit Journal illustré}). Le sens du document photographique ne s’est imposé que peu à peu’ (“Ontologie,” p. 11).} Bazin takes a different orientation. He elaborates on the particular influence of cinema on painting, as he sees the impressionist painter Edgar Degas (1834-1917), who from an historical perspective \textit{precedes} the invention of cinema, nevertheless mythically influenced by cinematographic realism:

\begin{quote}
Il me semble que si nous approfondissons de plus près la véritable influence ou inter-influence de ces arts, nous soyons amenés à prendre une position plus souple et plus douteuse, et qui serait celle-ci, peut-être: c’est que l’influence, si il y a bien une
\end{quote}
influence du cinéma sur les autres arts et je crois en effet qu’elle est flagrante, entre autres dans le roman et pour la photographie sur la peinture, si il y a bien eu une influence, elle n’est pas de cause à effet, ce n’est pas une influence qui serait que à partir d’un certain moment les peintres voyant des photographies se seraient mis à se dire: “il est absurde de faire des portraits, je vais faire autre chose que du portrait, je vais faire des choses qui n’ont plus besoin de ressembler à la nature,” ce n’est pas cela. D’ailleurs, historiquement il se trouve que l’histoire de la photographie est au contraire une histoire des influences de la peinture sur la photographie. En effet, les premiers photographes se sont ingénisés à essayer de ressembler aux peintres. C’est bien plutôt [...] une influence de la sensibilité de l’époque, d’un besoin profond de l’époque. C’est ainsi que Degas par exemple construit ses tableaux exactement comme une fin de séquence à l’écran. Or, il a fallu au cinéma cinquante ans pour retrouver le style de Degas à l’écran, et pour tout naturellement à travers l’évolution de son langage construire son cadrage cinématographique comme Degas faisait un tableau. Mais ceci est parce que Degas était prophétique à son époque, et sentait à travers ce 19ème siècle scientifique et mécaniste, sentait le besoin de représenter la réalité saisie en quelques dans une espèce de synthèse réaliste et dramatique en même temps, que le cinéma retrouvera très tard. Donc, si il y a bien, on pourrait parler d’une influence du cinéma sur Degas, mais non pas historique, puisque Degas est antérieur au cinéma, mais en quelque sorte d’un mythe du cinéma encore subconscient à l’époque, et qui à travers un artiste aussi sensible que Degas l’a influencé [My emphasis].

According to Bazin, Degas is mythically influenced by cinematographic realism, despite the historical anachronism; a similar argument underlies the reference to Bruegel, as well as his more comprehensive view on the relation between perspective, cinema and medieval painting, to which I will turn later (cf. infra, 6.2 A Perspective on 3-D: “Relief en équations”). In this manner, where Bazin initially opposes cinema and painting, more precisely in his notion of the centrifugal screen versus the centripetal frame, ‘c’est qu’en effet le cinéma se peut définir par l’écran et le tableaux par le cadre,’ this dichotomy is always overruled by an interest in their shared aesthetics. In what follows, I want to show that Bazin’s interest in cinema and painting conforms with a conviction that form and content in art mutually inform each other: a particular painter’s aesthetics had already been cinematic (e.g. Bruegel, Degas), and a painting’s influence on film brings about a “new aesthetic cosmology” to the screen.

47 Bazin, “Art contemporain.”

48 Bazin, “Van Gogh,” p. 1


5.2.2 Two Revolutions on Film: Geographic Temporality

"C’est au XIXe siècle que commence véritablement la crise du réalisme dont Picasso est aujourd’hui le mythe et qui mettra en cause tout à la fois les conditions d’existence formelle des arts plastiques et leurs fondements sociologiques."

With the mention of the crisis of realism alongside Picasso’s Cubist aesthetics, Bazin introduces in the Ontology-essay the conflict between formalism and realism that, ultimately, he attempts to bridge via the combined notions of myth and integral realism. Based essentially on the ontological equality of instants, integral realism assumes the ultimate equality of image and reality (cf. supra, 2.4.3 The Asymptote of Reality: Reality ≃ Cinema). In a similar vein, and from an explicitly Bergsonian perspective, Bazin reinterprets the relation between form and content in his analysis of Henri-Georges Clouzot’s Le Mystère Picasso (1956), which shows Picasso at work, in terms of “pictorial duration [la durée picturale]:” “Ce que révèle Le Mystère Picasso, ce n’est pas ce qu’on savait déjà, la durée de la création, mais que cette durée peut être partie intégrante de l’œuvre même, une dimension supplémentaire, bêtement ignorée au stade de finition. From this point of view, Bazin differentiates between “the picture [le tableau]” and “painting [la peinture]:” “On voit bien que déjà la notion de tableau se subordonne ici à la notion plus intégrante de peinture dont le tableau n’est qu’un moment. Clouzot films Picasso at work by placing the camera alternately either behind his back or behind the camera, capturing the strokes as they appear through the cloth. Against the time-constraints of depleting film stock, the process of painting unfolds its dramatic suspense in real-time:

Car, enfin, pas un trait, pas une tache de couleur qui n’apparaissent – apparaître est le mot – rigoureusement imprévisibles. Imprévisibilité qui suppose, inversement, la non-explication du composé par le simple. Cela est si vrai que tout le principe du film en tant que spectacle même, plus précisément, que “suspense,” tient dans cette attente et cette surprise perpétuelle. Chaque trait de Picasso est une création qui en entraîne une


51 Ibid., p. 196
autre non comme une cause implique un effet mais comme la vie engendre la vie.\textsuperscript{52}

Each trait, each moment is ontologically equal to the previous stroke and therefore the images that appear on screen arise from mutations of previous forms (\textbf{Fig. 8-9}): ‘Le spectacle en tant que tel est alors la fascination par le surgissement des formes, libre et à l’état naissant.’\textsuperscript{53, xxxi}

Content is literally induced by form: ‘[…] le poisson se fait oiseau et l’oiseau devient une faune.’\textsuperscript{54, xxxii}

\textbf{Fig. 8-9} A fish becomes a bird in \textit{Le Mystère Picasso}

While \textit{Le Mystère Picasso} comprises an essentially temporal revolution in the hybrid form of painting and cinema, this was, according to Bazin, preceded by an initially spatial revolution in Alain Resnais’ \textit{Van Gogh}, in which ‘tout se pose comme si la peinture ne devenait réellement soluble dans la durée qu’après avoir subi une mutation de ses structures spatiales sous l’action du cinéma.’\textsuperscript{55, xxxiii} Clouzot challenges the painterly \textit{moment suprême} by transforming each moment in painting into a cinematic \textit{image-fait}; Resnais, as I will demonstrate now, turns the centripetal frame centrifugal.

\begin{flushright}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid., pp. 193-194
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 198
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 194
\item \textsuperscript{55} Bazin, “Van Gogh,” p. 1
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
Resnais’ short documentary on Van Gogh is entirely composed of shots inside paintings: the camera’s gaze wanders from painting to painting as if the painted world of Van Gogh became real. In Bazin’s words:

Grâce au cinéma, le "monde" du peintre n'est plus une métaphore, "entrer dans son univers," le privilège du spectateur sensible et cultivé, l'imaginaire pictural est devenu la réalité de notre perception.\(^{56, \text{xxxiv}}\)

Resnais attains this assimilation of the imaginary and real perception by ignoring the frames surrounding the paintings. The house in Nuenen, the city of Paris, the yellow house in Arles, the bedroom and the café, the courtyard in the asylum, and a field with crows: the camera combines all these places into one geographical space, rather than separating them off in different paintings.

\[\text{[\ldots] le montage reconstitue une unité temporelle horizontale, géographique en quelque sorte, quand la temporalité du tableau - pour autant qu'on lui en reconnaisse - se développe géologiquement, en profondeur.}\(^{57, \text{xxv}}\)

This sort of directional inversion, from a geological temporality to a geographical temporality, occurs each time the camera “enters” painting: under the influence of the camera, Van Gogh’s universe is now turned centrifugal.

In his text on *Le Mystère Picasso*, an art documentary by a director mostly known for his suspenseful films, Bazin already emphasized the dramatic potential of painting in film, and indeed the cinematic interest in painting often exceeds a purely documentary purpose. For example, the opening sequence of the rather graphic, violent thriller *The Stendhal Syndrome* (Dario Argento, 1996), and incidentally the first Italian film to use CGI in this exact scene, clearly addresses the interaction between painting and cinema. For reasons she does not yet remember, a police inspector on a rape and murder case called Anna visits the Uffizi gallery in Florence on what looks like an ordinary busy day. Once inside, a montage sequence accompanies the paintings with soundtracks as they appear to come to life: impalements and crossbows in the *Battle of San Romano* by Paolo Uccello (1436-1440), suddenly interrupted by a tourist taking its picture. In the Sala del Botticelli, there are *Venus*

\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 7

carried by the Zephyr wind and La Primavera (1481-1482). Anna longs to touch the flowers surrounding the feet of the three graces, but she is stopped by the alarm as if an invisible screen reminds her that it is a painting, that there is a surface. She then enters the Sala delle carte geographiche, where maps and globes surround the space. Caravaggio’s Medusa (1595-1598) makes her dizzy: there are paintings everywhere, on the walls and ceiling. Anna is about to lose her sense of orientation at the very moment when the sequence culminates in Bruegel’s Icarus. After seeing his legs still peeking above the surface of the water, she falls and busts her lip, dives underwater into the painting and encounters a strange fish, before floating back to the surface and regaining consciousness on the floor in the museum (Fig. 10-15). The busted lip leaves a noticeable bloodstain on her white shirt, which, as I will argue now, figures in the subsequent scenes as a temporal disruption proper to painting, and in doing so, offers a novel take on what Bazin calls “geographic temporality.”
Anna has the Stendhal syndrome, a psychosomatic condition that causes certain people to become dizzy, hallucinate or faint under the overwhelming effect of art and great beauty.\textsuperscript{58} After the fall in Florence, she cannot remember who she is, and why she happens to

\textsuperscript{58} The Stendhal syndrome is named after the French writer Stendhal who had first reported it after his visit to the Basilica of Santa Croce in 1817. In his diary, Stendhal describes the experience as follows: ‘Absorbé dans la contemplation de la beauté sublime, je la voyais de près, je la touchais pour ainsi dire. J’étais arrivé à ce point d’émotion où se rencontrent les sensations célestes données par les beaux-arts et les sentiments passionnés. En sortant de Santa Croce, j’avais un battement de cœur, ce qu’on appelle des nerfs à Berlin. La vie était
be in that city; with a bloodstained shirt, she hurries back to the hotel room that matches the key in her purse. Her name is written on a prescription for sleeping pills: she is Anna Manni, a police inspector from Rome. After taking her pills, while resting on her bed, it happens again: this time, she is caught up in a reproduction of Rembrandt’s Nightwatch (1642). The camera cuts from drums to feet, faces to arms and accompanied with the soundtrack of a crime-scene, the paint fades as Anna enters into a murder scene in the streets of Rome (Fig. 16-23), where a rapist and serial killer left the police with yet another case for Anna and her colleagues to solve; it now becomes clear that she will have to travel to Florence to catch the murderer. Even though the crime scene develops as if Anna’s Stendhal syndrome was nothing but a bad dream, at best a flash-forward offering a glimpse of her future manhunt in Florence, the bloodstain on her shirt is still there in Rome; or, the stain was already there. As is the case often in painting, when a single figure is presented multiple times in the picture plane to portray a chronological succession of events within a single frame, Anna’s bloodstain here functions as a refracted temporal element when she walks inside the painting and literally invades the frame. Once she enters the universe of the painter, the narrative takes a fascinating turn: whereas, logically, one could think that either the opening scene in Florence was a prophetic dream, or the sequence inside the Nightwatch had been a flashback, the bloodstain on Anna’s shirt prevents us from adopting one or the other interpretation. Much like in Resnais’ Van Gogh, Argento transforms the space of painting into the real streets of Rome, but the geological temporality of painting somehow affects the horizontal temporal unity of cinema.


59 The interplay between cinema and painting which Argento incites here, has been claimed more recently by Peter Greenaway in his series of animated paintings: using light projections combined with sound installations, Greenaway’s first revision was Rembrandt’s Nightwatch at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the result of which is very close to Argento’s.
In fact, the discourse of Anna’s stain in *The Stendhal Syndrome* is reminiscent of a remark made by Bazin in his critique of *Van Gogh*, which further explains this interaction between geological and geographical temporality in terms of space. When filming the *Starry
Night (1989), he writes, Resnais refused to simultaneously show the trice repetition of the sun, but chose instead to reorganize the space on screen following a “new aesthetic cosmology:”

Le paysage de Van Gogh écarte la nature pour s'y substituer trois soleils à la fois, s'il plaît au mentor de les assembler dans la suite de ses images qui tournaient irréfutablement dans cette nouvelle cosmologie esthétique.60, xxxvi

Bazin’s description of a “new cosmology,” an idea that, as I have established previously, had also been used by critics to describe Bruegel’s Icarus, draws parallels between Van Gogh’s suns and his sunflowers. Anna’s bloodstain in The Stendhal Syndrome can thus be understood as a “new aesthetic cosmology,” in which the spatial-temporal qualities of the screen and the frame are altered under the combined influence of painting on film and vice versa. The three “suns” to which Bazin makes reference are in fact stars, but behind this seemingly careless mistake there lies an array of literary references, which also inform Resnais’ particular sequence in the film (Fig. 24-26), that align Van Gogh’s approach to nature with his painted sunflowers, as well as his questioned insanity. Bazin’s commentary on Van Gogh, which I discuss subsequently, proves that he had carefully examined two seminal studies on the painter: Georges Bataille’s “La Mutilation sacrificielle et l’oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh” (1930) and Antonin Artaud’s “Van Gogh, ou le suicide de la société” (1947). From these perspectives, I want to analyse the centrifugal ontology of film by close-reading a particular reference in Bazin to Van Gogh’s ear mutilation.

Fig. 24-26 Stars and sunflowers in Van Gogh

60 Bazin, “Van Gogh,” p. 7
5.2.3 Van Gogh’s Ear: Mythic Reality Becomes Flesh

“L’oreille coupée de Van Gogh existe quelque part dans ce monde qui nous requiert inévitablement.”

Bazin briefly calls to mind the particular image of Vincent Van Gogh’s cut off ear when he discusses Resnais’ art documentary, and this particular reference, as I will show, demonstrates the spatial-temporal difference between cinema and painting. In the advent of Christmas 1888, Van Gogh cut off his right ear lobe with a razor, supposedly following an argument with his colleague painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), with whom he maintained a tumultuous friendship. Van Gogh had been waiting for him in Arles, hoping to start an artist community in the yellow house, but when Gaugin announced his premature departure, Van Gogh supposedly lost his mind. Gaugin’s version of the story was that Van Gogh had threatened him with the razor, after which he cut off his own ear in a flare of madness and brought it to a prostitute named Rachel later that evening, with a request to ‘keep this object carefully.’ Gaugin’s portrayal of his friend as a madman turned against his person, however, is contested: ‘[Gaugin’s] behaviour during their final days together and in the later attempts to vindicate himself through condemning Vincent were hardly those of a friend.’ Both Bataille and Artaud, we will see, reject the idea that Van Gogh was mad, and with his reference to the ear-incident, Bazin aligns himself with these authors in a defence of “mythic reality.”

The lineage to Artaud’s study of Van Gogh is previously established by Andrew, who points out that these ideas must have reached Bazin via French educator Fernand Deligny (1913-1996), known for his research into special needs education. Andrew writes that Bazin and Deligny shared an office at Travaill et culture and that:

61 Ibid., p. 7
63 Ibid., p. 179
64 Andrew, “Gesture,” p. 162

Thus, it is from a pedagogical context that Bazin may have been drawn to discussing Van Gogh in relation to cinema. Pedagogy being one of Bazin’s major points of interest before
Deligny was moved to assemble an imaginary dialogue between Van Gogh’s letters and Antonin Artaud’s book on Van Gogh’s suicide when Artaud died in 1948. This occurred just as [Chris] Marker’s friend Resnais was bringing to a close his film on the artist. There must have been innumerable discussions among these men since Bazin had found Deligny an apartment in the same building.\(^{65}\)

Artaud’s main argument in “Van Gogh, ou le suicide de la société” (1947) is that Van Gogh’s self-mutilation (e.g. burning his hand to catch the attention of his cousin and love interest Kee, or slicing off his ear lobe) has nothing to do with madness: ‘As for the cooked hand, that is heroism pure and simple; as for the severed ear, that is straightforward logic […]’\(^{66}\)

Ultimately, Artaud recognizes the suicide as an organized crime: as the title of the article reads, Van Gogh was “suicided,” murdered by society:

[…] Van Gogh could have found enough of the infinite to last his whole life if the brutish consciousness of the masses had not wanted to appropriate it to nourish their own orgies, which have never had anything to do with painting or poetry.\(^{67}\)

Thus, Artaud understands the ear-mutilation as a logical consequence of a painter whose relation with the world has been continually denied as impaired by a people in their attempt to safeguard a collective “sick consciousness.”

What most interests me in the connection between Bazin and Artaud on Van Gogh, is the fact that Artaud frames the disagreement between Van Gogh and Gaugin, generally understood to be the cause for the ear incident, in terms of a conflicting conception of myth and reality. On the occasion of a Van Gogh exhibition at the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris, Artaud writes that the relationship between both painters was troubled by:

[…] a profound human division between the two natures of van Gogh and Gaugin.

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65 Andrew, “Gesture,” p.162


67 Ibid., pp. 510-511
Today, Icarus

I believe that Gaugin thought that the artist must look for symbol, for myth, must enlarge the things of life to the magnitude of myth, whereas van Gogh thought that one must know how to deduce myth from the most ordinary things of life. In which I think he was bloody well right. For reality is frightfully superior to all fiction, all fable, all divinity, all surreality. All you need is the genius to know how to interpret it. Which no painter before poor van Gogh had done, which no painter will ever do again, for I believe that this time, Today, in fact, Right now, In this month of February 1947, Reality itself, The myth of reality, mythic reality itself, is in the process of becoming flesh.68

Thus, the supposed madness at the root of the ear-incident and ultimately Van Gogh’s suicide, fundamentally relates to what Artaud calls “mythic reality.” Where Gaugin painted from “imagination,” Van Gogh “[…] neither ignored nature, nor slavishly followed it.”69 Instead, he found that in reality fiction and myth “become flesh,” a view Bazin must have considered relating to his myth of total cinema. Furthermore, as was the case with the reference to Bruegel’s treatment of the Icarus myth, Artaud emphasizes the contemporary value of myth in combination with a turn to the everyday, “becoming flesh.”

The suggestion made by Andrew, namely that Bazin and Artaud would have shared their views on Van Gogh, finds solid support almost a decade later in the critique of Vincente Minelli’s Lust for Life (1956). Firstly, Bazin criticizes the overly biographic attempt to provide reasons (a fight with Gaugin? Missing his brother?) for Van Gogh’s “madness:”

Il ne s’agit pas de nous expliquer pourquoi Van Gogh était “fou” et quel était le rapport nécessaire entre cette folie et sa prédilection pour le jaune, par exemple, mais de nous faire approcher au plus près de ce point d’incandescence spirituelle où la transmutation nous sera rendue sensible par son rayonnement.70, xxxviii

68 Ibid., p. 491


70 Bazin, André. “La Vie passionnée de Vincent Van Gogh.” Éducation nationale (02/07/1957)
Like Artaud, Bazin de-emphasizes the relation between madness and the preference for a certain aesthetic, but rather accepts it as a justification for Van Gogh’s painterly soundness. Secondly, Artaud asserts that Van Gogh’s paintings permanently alter reality:

[...] these flowers of bronze gold are painted; they are painted as sunflowers and nothing more, but in order to understand a sunflower in nature, one must go back to Van Gogh, just as to understand a storm in nature, a stormy sky, a field in nature, it is henceforth impossible not to go back to Van Gogh. 71

Artaud’s argument here comes close to the transformative potential of art, which Bazin conceptualizes as the “asymptote of reality” (cf. supra, 2.4.3 The Asymptote of Reality: Reality ≈ Cinema). Bazin indeed repeats this line of thought in a critique of Minelli’s all too painterly characters: 72 (xxxix)

C’est faire ressembler la nature à l’art, selon le mot de [Oscar] Wilde, qui n’est vrai qu’a posteriori. Van Gogh a transformé notre vision des tournesols mais avant qu’il ne les peigne, les tournesols n’étaient pas encore des “Van Gogh.” 73, 74

Here, again, Bazin’s reading of Lust for Life takes on remarkable similarities with Artaud’s argument that ‘[...] even external nature, with her climates, her tides, and her equinoctial storms cannot, after van Gogh’s stay upon earth, maintain the same gravitation.’ 74 Both Bazin


72 See also Joubert-Laurencin, who elaborates on the anti-mimetic formula by Oscar Wilde, namely that “nature imitates art,” to Alain Roger’s notion of “artialisation,” i.e. the intervention of art in nature via both “modelling [modélisation]” and “anticipation:” ‘Si, par ailleurs, le réalisme ontologique, dans la leçon de Rohmer (grand cinéaste météorologique, des quatre saisons), dit que “l’art est dans le modèle,” au sens où il est dans le paysage, et l’artialisation d’Alain Roger dit que l’art fournit au paysage ses modèles, alors le cinéma est la double détente: d’une part, en tant que machine de reproduction automatique, il capture les schémes fournis par les autres arts, d’autre part, en tant qu’art, il en fournit à la nature’ (Le Sommeil paradoxal, pp. 78-79).

73 Bazin “La Vie passionnée de Vincent Van Gogh,” p. 26

74 Artaud, “Van Gogh,” p. 484


170
and Artaud suggest that Van Gogh’s paintings are not the symptoms of a man’s madness, but rather that their “cosmology” altogether changes the commonplace conception of reality.

It is not coincidental, then, that Bazin finds in Resnais’ documentary on Van Gogh, which would have initiated Artaud and Bazin’s shared interest in the painter, the kernel for his notion of a “new cosmology” of film. Based on the sequence of the triple suns, and in combination with the a posteriori sunflower-transformation, Bazin’s reading follows the film’s commentary, which reads: “Ce n’est pas pour rien que les tournesols s’appellent des soleils.” This line from the film is an almost literal adaptation from a passage from “La Mutilation sacrificielle et l’oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh,” written in 1930 by Georges Bataille (1879-1962):

[…] pour représenter l’importance et le développement de l’obsession de Van Gogh, il est nécessaire de rapprocher des soleils, des tournesols. […] Cette fleur est aussi bien connue sous le nom même de soleil et dans l’histoire de la peinture elle est liée au nom de Vincent Van Gogh […].

The commentary here relates the sunflowers to a new worldview, a connection Bazin readily incorporates in his critique. Incidentally, the link between the sun and the sunflowers, as well as the a posteriori influence on reality that guides both Artaud and Bazin’s texts, equally leans on an argument put forth by Bataille in a later essay entitled “Van Gogh Prométhée” (1937):

Si l’on tient compte de ces données, il faut dire qu’après la nuit de décembre 88 quand son oreille eut reçu dans la maison où elle échoua un sort qui reste ignoré (on peut imaginer qu’obscurément le rire et le malaise qui précédèrent quelque obscure

(December 1984): pp. 86-103. Based on meteorological records, Whitney writes that ‘all the elements of the sky in Starry Night were on view through van Gogh’s window at one point or another that spring. They were not all in view at the same time, but we need to give up the notion that he painted the scene as a snapshot. I think he assembled his own sky from impressions gathered over an interval of a month or so’ (p. 358). From his side, Boime connects the swirly stars in the painting to popular drawings of spiral nebulae dating from 1845, which illustrated the popular publications of the French writer and astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842-1925) (p. 89). These two studies suggest that the Starry Night was not, as is often assumed, painted from memory (and therefore believed to be a concession to Gaugin’s aesthetics), but rather that it is in fact painted from nature and thus an inherently realist work.

Bataille furthermore relates Van Gogh’s cosmology to the sunflowers, the suicide and the ear: ‘comment ne pas voir se former la chaîne de nœuds qui rejoint si sûrement l’oreille, l’asile, le soleil, la plus éclatante des fêtes et la mort.’ And so, rather than affirming the supposed madness of Van Gogh, Bataille and after him Artaud and Bazin all relate the self-mutilation, via the sunflowers, to his cosmological intelligence. Just as Artaud views the ear injury as “straightforward logic,” so too does Bazin ground the “new cosmology of film” as a logical consequence of the ontological difference between painting and film, and he does this, as I suggest throughout the following pages, via the ear-reference.

5.2.4 Self-portraits with Bandaged Ear: Mirror and Mask

“[…] c’est folie que de l’imaginer [le cinéma] comme un élément isolé qu’on pourrait recueillir sur une lamelle de gélatine et projeter sur l’écran au travers d’un appareil grossissant.”

As Artaud and Bataille frame their studies on Van Gogh against his assumed insanity, so too does Bazin indirectly present the centrifugal foundations of cinema as straightforward logic, the opposite of madness. When he writes, ‘Van Gogh’s cut off ear exists somewhere in this world, which inevitably beseeches us,’ Bazin is making a strong statement about the ontology of film as well as the influence of art on reality. I will now juxtapose the ear covered with a bandage in the series of self-portraits by Van Gogh painted after the incident, to the eerie phenomenon of the missing ear in two films: the particular scene from Minelli’s Lust for Life that moved Bazin to write about the ear, and a sequence from David Lynch’s

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77 Ibid., p. 499


Blue Velvet (1986), possibly the most referenced and original cinematic treatment of Van Gogh’s severed ear.

In January 1889, Van Gogh completed a series of self-portraits in which he painted himself with a bandaged ear (Fig. 29): having severed his left ear, both portraits ‘being mirror images, […] show the bandage on the right side.’\(^{80}\) In his depiction of the incident, Minelli places Van Gogh literally in front of a mirror (Fig. 27): after a short pause, he then moves out of frame and cuts off his lobe (Fig. 28), after which he returns to the mirror with one ear too few. So, Minelli copies the spatial organization of Van Gogh’s mirrored portraits, but with this difference that he shows the left ear damaged. In doing so, this particular scene combines the “mirror”\(^{81, xlv}\) and the “mask.” Both images, as shown previously in the reference to Cocteau’s Le Sang d’un poète, summarize the spatial principles of the centrifugal screen, which Bazin describes as follows: ‘L'écran de cinéma n'est pas un cadre, mais un cache, il ne sert pas à montrer, mais à réserver, à isoler, à choisir.’\(^{82, xlvii}\)

In Blue Velvet, Van Gogh’s ear is the catalyst for a detective adventure into a dark and sickening world of sexual violence and abuse. On his way home from a visit to his father at the hospital, Jeffrey discovers a human ear, which he wraps in a brown paper bag and brings to the police (Fig. 30): “that’s a human ear, alright!” says the police inspector. And because an ear does not exist without a corresponding body, there is no doubt that somewhere in

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\(^{80}\) Lubin, Stranger on Earth, p. 156

\(^{81}\) In “Théâtre et cinema” (1951), Bazin most explicitly develops the metaphor of the screen as a mirror: ‘Le XIXe siècle, avec ses techniques objectives de reproductions visuelles et sonores, a fait apparaître une nouvelle catégorie d’images; leurs rapports avec la réalité dont elles procèdent demanderaient à être rigoureusement définis. […] C’est également au niveau de l’ontologie que l’efficacité du cinéma prend sa source. Il est faux de dire que l’écran soit absolument impuissant à nous mettre “en présence” de l’acteur. Il le fait à la manière d’un miroir (dont on accordera qu’il relaie la présence de ce qui s’y reflète) mais d’un miroir au reflet différé, dont le tain retiendrait l’image’ (Bazin, André (1951). “Théâtre et cinéma II.” Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? Paris: Éditions du Cerf (2008): p. 151-152). In a subsequent part of this research I will return briefly to the relation between cinema and theatre to address the notion of presence in relation to three-dimensionality (cf. infra, 6.2.1 From a Realist Perspective: “L’Image imaginaire”). When Bazin writes that ‘comme le théâtre par la rampe et l’architecture scénique, la peinture s’oppose en effet à la réalité […]’ (Bazin, “Peinture,” p. 188), he compares the difference between painting and cinema alongside its opposition with the theatre stage. However, just as his interest ultimately lies in the combined aesthetics in filmed painting, so too is his embrace of 3-D largely based on a symbiotic relation between cinema and theatre.

\(^{82}\) Bazin, “Van Gogh,” p. 7
Lumberton a man must be missing his ear. Even though Jeffrey was explicitly asked not to inquire after the on-going investigation, he starts his own with the help of the detective’s daughter Sandy. They find out that the ear belongs to Don, the husband of a nightclub singer Dorothy, mother of little Donny. A dangerous man named Frank keeps Dorothy’s husband and their young child hostage, while forcing her to partake in all sorts of abusive practices: “Stay alive, baby. Do it for Van Gogh,” she is told. So where Van Gogh cut off his own ear for assumed reasons, either ‘[…] to sacrifice himself, to kill a part of his own body, and turn his friend Gaugin into a murderer,’ the husband’s ear is used as a leverage. The final scene in Dorothy’s apartment actually shows Don, tied on a chair with the left ear cut off (Fig. 31); like Minelli’s version, Lynch shows the mirrored image on screen. Despite the real possibility that these are merely continuity errors, the parallel with the series of self-portraits as mirror images is noteworthy: the camera appears to have entered the painterly world of Van Gogh’s self-portrait with bandaged ear.

To assume, as Bazin does, that Van Gogh’s cut off ear “exists somewhere in this world,” even though one might not see or find it, is indeed not far-fetched an idea: one does not need to bring in neurological evidence for the experience of phantom limbs to understand the beseeching relation between a particular ear and the person to which it belongs, regardless of its visible presence. In Lust for Life, we do not see the actual deed, but we hear his scream off-screen; similarly, in Van Gogh’s self-portrait, the ear is covered with a bandage. In fact, the ear in these particular portraits is missing, obviously, in two senses: first from a logical point of view, they were painted after the mutilation, and secondly from an ontological perspective, there is no evidence that a painter would in fact have included a layer depicting an ear underneath the bandage. In this manner, the comprehension of the screen as a mask conceptualizes the major ontological difference between painting and cinema. With painting, there is no reason to assume that that which is invisible on the surface (e.g. out of frame, covered either by clothing, hair or, in this case, a bandage) is actually there or has been painted somewhere: logically speaking, there is nothing to mask, because the canvas shows all there is in paint. On film, on the contrary, it would be completely irrational, madness even, to see the image on screen as separate from the reality to which it refers: cinema and reality, Bazin affirms, are thick as thieves in the same way that we know sensibly that an ear covered by a hat or a bandage exists somewhere, regardless of the fact that it remains hidden to us.

83 Lubin, Stranger on Earth, p. 176
Today, Icarus

The existence of Van Gogh’s ear off-screen, somewhere in the world, perfectly aligns itself with the centrifugal principles of cinema, which comprise a temporal and spatial ontological equality between cinema and reality. Where the painterly canvas is traditionally pure surface, the cinema screen is a surface much like the skin: as Paul Valéry wrote, ‘la peau est ce qu’il y a de plus profond en nous.’\(^{84,\text{xlviii}}\) From this point of view, Bazin’s fascination with surgical images and X-rays on screen further explains this necessary link between the centrifugal image on screen and the universe beneath the skin: ‘To view the X-ray of a beating heart in the cinema is already a marvel,’\(^{85}\) he writes, reaffirming his praise of science films in which ‘cinema reveals that which no other procedure of investigation, not even the eye, can perceive.’\(^{86}\) Van Gogh’s ear then materializes the centrifugal ontology of cinema: mythic reality becomes flesh. In what follows, I will demonstrate that Bazin’s plea for increased realism, in particular his embrace of stereoscopy, as a crucial step towards total cinema, is an endeavour to literally give “body” to cinema.

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\(^{84}\) Paul Valéry, cited in Timothée Gerardin’s short but insightful essay, entitled “A la surface” (Le Rotor*, No. 10 [Accessed: 20/02/2015] <http://lerotor.free.fr/article.php3?id_article=91>), in which he takes Valéry’s citation as a starting point to discuss Bazin’s ontology argument, more precisely the mummy complex as well as the shroud of Turin, from the perspective of a “profondeur à fleur de peau.” As I will argue later on in this dissertation, Valéry’s views on depth and surface, in particular his poem Le Cimetière marin, will prove instrumental, if not indispensable, to understand integral realism as a reformulation of the conventional notions of form and content (cf. infra, Chapter VI: A Matter of Form).


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Fig. 27 Van Gogh’s mirrored portrait

Fig. 2 Off-screen mask
Fig. 29 *Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe*, Vincent Van Gogh (1889)

Fig. 30-31 Van Gogh’s ear in *Blue Velvet*