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

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Chapter VI: A Matter of Form

In the wake of his criticism that focussed more on technical elements of film (depth-of-field, lighting, colour etc.), André Bazin was accused of formalism, in particular by Georges Sadoul, who maintained the primacy of content over form, where he himself supported a more synthetic view in which content and form are interdependent. In this chapter, I maintain that Bazin applies this logic directly in his analyses of Le Monde du silence (Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Louis Malle, 1956), in which he emphasizes the sea as a three-dimensional “body” of water, solidified in a reference to Archimedes’ principle of buoyancy, which anticipates his essay on 3-D cinema. In this final chapter, I want to elaborate on floating bodies in relation to Bazin’s particular defence of “realist formalism,” which is how I understand his notion of “integral realism:” the achievement of increased realism inherent in the evolution of forms. I also look at Serge Daney’s famed critique of the popular feature film Le Grand Bleu (Luc Besson, 1988) and his notion of “amnesic, aphasic images” to establish a more general lineage of water in French criticism, specifically relating to the formalist-realist divide. I will argue that Bazin attempts to bridge this gap, and that he saw in relief the materialization of form. From this point of view, I look at the superficiality of form, e.g. shiny surfaces in a series of films in and around swimming pools, in terms of a longing for “content.” Ultimately, I want to step into the on-going debate of three-dimensionality by including Jean-Luc Godard’s recent 3-D essays Les Trois Désastres (2013) and Adieu au langage (2014), as well as Wim Wenders plea for 3-D as a “realist grammar” in Every Thing Will Be Fine (2015). Against Bazin, Sadoul argued that ‘[…] si le cinéma est un langage, c’est d’abord parce qu’il raconte des histoires. Et que, par conséquent, le contenu des scénarios est essentiel, parce qu’il doit commander le style.’ From his side, as I hope to demonstrate, Bazin allows for the language of film to be poetic, i.e. that form and content are synthetic.

6.1 Gravity and Buoyancy

Like in his description of integral realism, Bazin in his work on cinema and painting further develops the Newtonian references as he opposes the screen of cinema to the *centripetal frame* of painting. Where Bazin employed a biological metaphor to indicate the symbiosis between painting and cinema in films on art, his writing on *Van Gogh* presents a comparable interaction in the metaphor he borrows from Newtonian mechanics, more precisely in his description of the cinema screen as *centrifugal*:

Toute peinture se définit par rapport à un cadre, au moins virtuel, qui creuse en quelque sorte dans le monde le trou du peintre, réserve dans le macrocosme naturel, le microcosme de l'artiste. Ce qui revient à constater que le cadre du tableau est orienté de l'extérieur, vers l'intérieur, qu'il définit un espace centripète hétérogène au fond qui l'entoure. Tout au contraire, 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. [...] Ainsi alors que le cadre oriente l'espace clos du tableau vers l'intérieur, l'écran diffuse au contraire l'espace de l'image cinématographique à l'infini: il est centrifuge.²

In his juxtaposition of cinema and painting, Bazin here alludes to Dutch physicist and mathematician Christiaan Huygens (1629-1695), who first proposed the idea of a *vis centrifuga*: ‘Heaviness is a tendency to fall. [...] Thus, when a heavy body is suspended from a string, then the string is pulled, since the heavy body tends to fall away along the lines of the string with an accelerated motion of this sort.’³ However, this centrifugal force, Isaac Newton reminds us later, does not exist on its own; it is instead a reactionary force. In Definition 5, he replies to Huygens and develops his theory of centripetal force:

*Centripetal force is the force by which bodies are drawn from all sides, are impelled, or in any way tend, toward some point as to a centre.*

One force of this kind is gravity, by which bodies tend toward the centre of the earth [...]  

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A stone whirled in a sling endeavours to leave the hand that is whirling it, and by its endeavour it stretches the string, doing so the more strongly the more swiftly it revolves; and as soon as it is released, it flies away. The force opposed to that endeavour, that is, the force by which the sling continually draws the stone back toward the hand and keeps it in orbit, I call centripetal, since it is directed toward the hand as toward the centre of an orbit.\(^4\)

Thus, the most characteristic of centripetal forces is gravity, precisely this force, the “terrestrial chains,” that cinema desires to escape (cf. supra, 4.3 Icare sous-marin: Freed from Terrestrial Chains). Indeed, as Newton maintained about centrifugal force, Bazin too views the centrifugal screen of film as a reactionary force. Therefore, this new aesthetic cosmology of the screen is the opposite of the centripetal force of the frame, which develops throughout Bazin’s writing alongside the theme of gravity, and which he first includes via the figure of Icarus in “Le Mythe du cinéma total,” in his critique of Le Monde du silence as well as via his correlation of cinema and painting with Newtonian mechanics. This particular scientific reference, namely that the screen is centrifugal and the frame centripetal, in fact combines the ontology of the cinematographic image with the myth of human flight, which guides the invention of cinema: overcoming gravity.

Federico Fellini’s opening scene to 8 ½ (1963) immediately comes to mind: with a cord firmly tied around his leg, Guido tries to fly off over an Italian coastline, but then a script supervisor shouts: “Come back down, forever!” (Fig. 1). Andrei Tarkovsky, too, in his prologue to Andrei Rublev (1966) makes explicit reference to Icarus: Yefim soars over the countryside, entangled in the ropes of an improvised balloon, shouting ecstatically: “I fly, I fly! You down there, catch me!” (Fig. 2). As Angela Dalle Vacche writes in her analysis of this scene: ‘The balloon episode is characterized by a double, cross like emphasis on the horizontal plane of the land and the vertical ascension to the sky. These two axes reappear in Tarkovsky’s camera movement and depiction of water.’\(^5\) The parallel between air and water is reinforced by the reflection of clouds in the river, precisely this dialectic that Bazin uses as a structure to his critique of Le Monde du silence, and which he saw embodied in the figure


of Icarus. But it should be noted that Tarkovsky’s Icarus, unlike Bruegel’s, misses the water and falls – flat on his face, the freeze-image seems to suggest – in a field (Fig. 3). In _Brazil_ (1985), Terry Gilliam replaces the sea with a city of skyscrapers and brick streets, which hold Sam’s foot firmly in their grip (Fig. 4).

![Fig. 1 Fellini’s Icarus in 8 1/5](image1) ![Fig. 2 The farmer in _Andrei Rublev_](image2)

![Fig. 3 Icarus falls on land](image3) ![Fig. 4 Terrestrial chains in _Brazil_](image4)

### 6.1.1 On Floating Bodies: Serge Daney and the Case of _Le Grand Bleu_

The fact, precisely, that Icarus fell in _a body of water_ appears to be relevant in Bazin’s ekphrasis, because it is after his fall that the Icarian dream is realized: under water. From this perspective, Bazin invokes a second scientific reference to illustrate this myth of “underwater Icarus,” namely Archimedes’ principle of buoyancy, which states that ‘any solid lighter than
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a fluid will, if placed in the fluid, be so far immersed that the weight of the solid will be equal to the weight of the fluid displaced.\(^6\) Alongside his Newtonian framework, Bazin writes:

Il n’était que d’être affranchi d’abord de cette pesanteur à l’envers qu’est le principe d’Archimède, puis d’être accordé par le modificateur de pression à la pression ambiante pour se trouver non plus dans la situation fugace et périlleuse du plongeur, mais dans celle de Neptune, maître et habitant de l’eau. L’homme enfin volait avec ses bras!\(^7\,\text{iii}\)

Bazin makes it very clear that the water in Le Monde du silence is three-dimensional: ‘Il ne s’agit plus du symbolisme attaché à l’eau superficielle, mobile, ruisselante, lustrale mais plutôt de l’Océan: milieu à trois dimensions, plus stable d’ailleurs que l’aérien et dont l’enveloppement nous affranchit de la pesanteur.’\(^8\,\text{iv}\) And, indeed, as with human flight, there appears to exist in cinema a certain drive to dive. Alfonso Cuarón’s 2013 space odyssey Gravity, for instance, ends like the Icarus myth in water and – this is important – in three dimensions. In water, one can do several things: swim, drift, dive, or drown; but Bazin seems more interested in the experience of weight, rather than weightlessness. Under water, mass does not prevent flight but instead, thanks to the buoyancy principle, enables it. Eureka! Finally, man flies with his arms: ‘le poissoin se fait oiseau.’\(^9\,\text{v}\)

As Bazin points out in his Archimedean reference, water can symbolize either a superficial, shiny surface (le toit des focs) or a three-dimensional “body” (celui des phoques): ‘l’espace d’en bas [qui] est celui de la vie.’\(^10\,\text{vi}\) Bazin’s choice of words in his critique to Le Monde du silence betrays a recurring preoccupation with a poem by Paul Valéry (1871-1945), more precisely Le Cimetièr marin (1920). The poem begins with ‘Le toit tranquille où marchent les colombes,’ and ends on ‘[…] le toit tranquille où picoraient les focs!’\(^11\,\text{vii}\) On


\(^8\) Ibid.


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several occasions, Bazin in fact mentions this particular poem, always in defence of a certain degree of formalism:

Si la nature procède nécessairement de l’intérieur vers l’extérieur, de la cause à l’effet, c’est le privilège de l’art comme de la science d’induire une matière ou de déduire une forme. Valéry construit Le Cimetière marin sur la cadence d’un premier vers.  

And so Bazin’s underwater Icarus is in turn built on a poem that was written based on ‘l’obsession d’un certain cadre rythmique, cadre d’abord vide et qu’il [Valéry] remplit peu à peu par un contenu qu’il croyait librement choisi.’ More specifically, in his interpretation of Cousteau’s underwater exploration, Bazin reformulates Valéry’s vision of the surface of the ocean as the roof of an unexplored part of the universe: ‘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.’ From this perspective, I will maintain that it is not coincidental that pools in cinema generally tend to a polemic that essentially revolves around the notions of surface and depth, understood in terms of “form” and “content,” a discourse in which Bazin, as I will establish subsequently, actively participates. In anticipation of this discussion, I want to delve into Serge Daney’s critique of Luc Besson’s popular feature film Le Grand bleu (1988), which stirred the critical discourse to reconsider this formalist dialectic, because of its highly aestheticized imagery. As Daney writes, ‘la parenthèse (morale) du cinéma moderne étant finie, le cinéma (ou ce qu’il en reste) redécouvre une question de fond: d’où viennent les corps de rêve?’ The question that drives his discourse is indeed an ontological one:

Le cinéma filmé, celui de Besson, hérite des “formes” et non des “corps” (platonicien, pas aristotélicien). Ces formes, assez dérisoires, sont néanmoins la seule mémoire

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These forms without body, Daney argues, are “amnesiac images,” images with memory loss: ‘[…] quand je vois Le Grand Bleu, je ne vois pas la mer, je vois un concept publicitaire de mer qui a définitivement remplacé la mer.’ In short, Daney sees Besson’s “blue movie” as emblematic of a collective aphasia: ‘La fameuse “crise de scénario” dont on nous bassine les oreilles, elle est là: dans la privatisation de l’expérience et dans l’aphasie que cela produit, surtout chez les jeunes.’ There is nothing left to say, nothing is being exchanged: collective apathy reflected in a lack of dialogue.

Indeed, everything in this film is set for a romance that never unfolds: their once in a life-time chance meeting somewhere in the Peruvian middle of nowhere, the man-hunt that leads her from New York all the way to the Mediterranean coast, where finally they reunite. But the protagonist, Jacques Mayol, seems only interested in diving, even when his girlfriend Johanna turns out to be pregnant; even when his best friend Enzo has died, running after the passion for depth. Actually, the only time when he gives her an explanation for his apathy towards life on earth, he reinforces again his aphasia: “you have to find a good reason to come back up, and I have a hard time finding one.” Ultimately, the highly aestheticized, smooth forms of Le Grand Bleu tell the story of suicide, as Jacques choses to be with “the mermaids:”

Do you know how it is; do you know what you’re supposed to do to meet a mermaid? You go down to the bottom of the sea, where the water isn’t even blue anymore, where the sky is only a memory. And you float there, in silence, and you stay there and you decide that you’ll die for them. Only then do they start coming out. They come, and they great you and they judge the love you have for them. If it’s sincere, if it’s pure, they’ll be with you and take you away forever.

It is not a shark this time (cf. supra, Chapter II: The Photograph of Danger: A Shark in the Cinema), but a dolphin where authenticity is sought after. Thus, in Le Grand Bleu Besson provides another angle on the connection between authenticity and death, and he does

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16 Ibid., p. 238
17 Ibid., p. 293
18 Ibid.
so via a certain “pure” formalism traditionally emptied of authenticity: from the point of view of Narcissistic superficiality, rather than the Icarian plunge.

Daney’s critique of Besson’s highly aestheticised imagery inevitably brings us back to Bazin, more specifically to the notion of water in his essays on *Le Monde du silence*. As Joubert-Laurencin writes on the topic of the underwater documentary *Atlantis* (Luc Besson, 1991), ‘à travers Daney, Luc Besson a vu Bazin.’ In *Le Grand Blue*, shiny surfaces, “the sunlit ocean” and wet, dolphin-like bodysuits (Fig. 5-6), are the dreamy clichés that altogether constitute this ‘symbolisme attaché à l'eau superficielle, mobile, ruisselante, lustrale,’ to which Bazin opposes *Le Monde du silence* as a return to origins:

[les images] sont l'accomplissement de toute une mythologie de l'eau dont la réalisation matérielle par ces surhommes subaquatiques rencontre en nous-mêmes de secrètes, profondes et immémoriales connivences.

It is precisely the lack of the latter, the three-dimensional ocean that portrays *Le Grand Bleu* as nostalgia for reality: a bit of a blue movie about having the blues. In a similar vein, many films set in or around swimming pools find themselves at the crux of imagination, memory loss, superficiality and nostalgia. Exemplary of luxury and wealth, swimming pools are the ultimate advertisement settings where image takes the upper hand over reality. Nanni Moretti’s *Palombella rossa* (1988) seems to be the exception affirming the rule, as the swimming pool becomes a political playground (Fig. 7). Juxtaposing it with Besson’s superficiality, Daney defends Moretti’s “refusal of depth.”

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21 Ibid.

22 From this point of view, it is perhaps not coincidental that in French “n’y voir que du bleu” comes to mean precisely the inability to see. Closely entangled with the expression “n’y voir que du feu” - worth the mention, since we are, after all, talking about Icarus - this phrase etymologically goes back to *La Bibliothèque bleue*, which encompasses a series of French early-modern publications from the seventeenth to nineteenth century. Typically distributed in small format, with a blue cover and on low quality paper, these booklets covered a wide range of popular subjects and came to stand for the origins of popular and mass media in France (Chartier, Roger. *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du livre, Tome I*. Paris: Cercle de la librairie (2003): pp. 294-295). From this historical perspective, “blue” gradually came to stand for “dreamy” as in *un conte bleu*, a fairy tale.
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L’eau. Filmé comme jamais. [...] Refus de la profondeur – qui fait de ce film la réponse du cinéma à l’audiovisuel (Le Grand Bleu). L’eau est une surface spéciale qu’il faut sans cesse parcourir, labourer de son corps (boustrophédon).

The water surface becomes workable, blends with Bruegel’s landscape in the foreground: the swimmer Michele becomes his ploughman. However, here again, the protagonist Michele suffers from memory loss, and his continued repeated shouting “I remember, I remember!” shows a narrative that struggles with amnesia. In The Graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967), the swimming pool offers Ben, a recent graduate anxious about his yet undefined future, the perfect escape from the expectations of his parents, their friends and his much older lover Mrs Robinson: “It’s very comfortable to just drift here.” The pool feels like a movie, as does his affair (the drinks, the hotel, the pool parties), and fits perfectly in the narrative of an impasse (Fig. 8). Both as an escape and amnesiac, Nedly in The Swimmer (Frank Perry, 1968) hops from pool to pool, remembering clichéd forbidden desires (the baby-sitter), a love affair gone wrong and actual financial debt, as he swims “home,” all the while gradually realizing that there is no more home (Fig. 9). Swimming Pool (François Ozon, 2003) associates the pool with imagination, mystery and murder, which is also the morbid conclusion of Deep End (Jerzy Skolimowski, 1970), when Mike’s adolescent, obsessive desire for his co-worker Susan is finally answered as they drift together in the pool after having killed her first (Fig. 10).

Amnesia, forgotten bodies, and forms without content: in Le Grand Bleu as well as a series of swimming pool films, something is always lacking, and this lack goes hand in hand with highly aestheticized imagery. If I have argued before that “imperfect” images tend to aid authenticity (cf. supra, 3.2.1 An Assurance in Things Not Seen), here this same logic seems reversed: gain in image equals loss of reality. And indeed, Besson’s Mediterranean sea is nothing like the ocean crossed by Thor Heyerdahl on his raft: in the former, dolphins are our

23 Daney, L’exercice, p 168

“Boustrophédon,” from Ancient Greek literally meaning “ox-turning” as in farming, here refers to a bi-directional text, in which each line is written in the opposite direction as the preceding one. Rather than reading from let to right (as in English, for example), or from right to left (as in Hebrew), these manuscripts need to be read alternately from left-to-right-to-left. As Daney writes, in Palombella rossa Michele “ploughs” the surface of the pool with his body, swimming back and forth, just like an ox works the field or a bidirectional text is read.
friends (Jacques even calls them his family), in the latter, the sharks are a real danger that makes for an authentic, but nevertheless non-existent film. The lack of “body” in Besson, the nostalgia for content and meaning, surfaces in the water-logged, always shiny imagery of pool-films as a longing for “content:” the image exists in all its glory, but it has lost touch with reality. In what follows, I will further elaborate on the relation between form and content throughout Bazin’s writings on depth and three-dimensionality. In the following part, I will reconsider Bazin’s particular interest in three-dimensionality, in a “body” of water, as reflecting his ultimate reformulation of the notions of “content” versus “form.”

Fig. 5 Depth in Le Grand Bleu

Fig. 6 Sunlit surfaces

Fig. 7 Boustrophedon swimming

Fig. 8 The swimmer

Fig. 9 The graduate

Fig. 10 The deep end
6.2 A Perspective on 3-D: “Relief en équations”

“The événement décisif fut sans doute l’invention du premier système scientifique et, en quelque sorte, déjà mécanique: la perspective (la chambre noire de Vinci préfigurait celle de Niepce).”

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The dialectic between form and content leads me, first, to briefly consider the special place Bazin reserves for the notion of perspective in “Ontologie de l’image photographique,” in particular its role in painting as enabling the illusion of content: ‘il permettait à l’artiste de donner l’illusion d’un espace à trois dimensions où les objets puissent se situer comme dans notre perception directe.” While he sees the introduction of linear perspective in fifteenth-century Western painting as a first attempt to mechanically combine ‘l’expression [de la réalité spirituelle] avec l’imitation plus ou moins complète du monde extérieur, [my emphasis],” he clearly denounces its usage in facilitating, for instance, a ‘pseudo-réalisme du trompe-l’œil (ou trompe l’esprit) qui se satisfait de l’illusion des formes.” Whereas formerly, the size, colour and shape of objects on a canvas had been informed by their spiritual meaning, linear perspective reorganizes them according to their relative distance

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25 Ibid., p. 10

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 11

28 See, for instance, Karsten Harries’ notion of “spiritual perspective,” which he juxtaposes with Alberti’s perspectiva artificialis: ‘The spiritual perspective of medieval art would have us look through painting in a very different sense: through the material to its spiritual significance. The mundane is transformed in a divine sign. Alberti’s art is incompatible with this spiritual perspective. A God-centred art gives way to a human-centred art’ (Infinity and Perspective. Cambridge: The MIT Press (2002): p. 85). Harries sees this conflict of perspectives reflected, for instance, in the clash between a growing interest in three-dimensionality in late Medieval painting and the usage of gold. Linear perspective thus becomes entangled with the idea of a fall of man, of a profanity introduced in the history of painting with the invention of linear perspective.

In a similar manner, Dudley Andrew in the biography of Bazin, elaborates on the notion of perspective in painting in “Ontologie” as ‘the golden calf of painters,’ (André Bazin. New York: Oxford University Press (2013): p. 65) thus invoking the theme of vanity and idolatry, which indeed runs through the essay via the double reference to Pascal’s Pensées.
from the spectator. From this viewpoint, Bazin denounces the painterly illusion of depth, when he writes:

[...] l’art médiéval, par exemple, ne paraît pas souffrir de ce conflit; à la fois violemment réaliste et hautement spirituel, il ignorait le drame que les possibilités techniques sont venues révéler. La perspective fut le péché originel de la peinture occidentale.

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Nieupe et Lumière en furent les rédempteurs.29, xxii

As he does explicitly in his argument for a “centrifugal” screen, Bazin again places cinema in opposition to painting, here with a particular focus on perspective and three-dimensionality. Already in the summer of 1943, Bazin would have started to develop his views on perspective through the analogy between cinema and Medieval painting, as Françoise Burgaud recalls that Bazin explained: ‘Je veux vous faire comprendre que la peinture médiéval et le cinéma, c’est la même chose! [...] Ces peintres avaient tenté d’introduire dans leurs œuvres la signification du monde, parce qu’ils ne connaissaient pas la perspective.’30, xxiii These ideas in fact crystallize his view on linear perspective as having changed the history of Western painting, which would from then onwards be satisfied with illusion of forms up until its redemption by the cinematograph: the conflict between form and content, impression and expression, ultimately resolved. In this manner, after the cinematograph, Bazin is able to conclude in an addition the ontology-essay: ‘Et quand, avec [Paul] Cézanne, la forme reprendra possession de la toile, ce ne sera plus en tout cas selon la géométrie illusionniste de la perspective.’31, xxiv With this phrase on Cézanne, Bazin readily aligns his views on perspective with those held by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) in “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945):32


Burgaud’s anecdote indeed makes one wonder whether it was perhaps the very first sketch of the Ontology-essay that Bazin had started to develop that summer of 1943.

31 Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 17

32 As Andrew writes, Bazin was in fact in contact with the philosopher during the time Merleau-Ponty wrote the essay on Cézanne (“Malraux, Bazin, and the Gesture of Picasso.” In:
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[Cézanne] was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without following the contours, with no line to enclose the color, with no perspectival or pictorial arrangement.33

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the painter’s ability to combine expression with form by leaving the illusionist geometry of perspective behind: similar to the medieval painters, Cézanne found expression outside the realm of perspective. The real problem with linear perspective, the veritable “sin of Western painting,” then, is that it inclines to emptied formalism: images cease to express meaning.

In fact, as I will establish throughout the following pages, Bazin’s dismissal of the illusion of three-dimensionality created by linear perspective ties in with his subsequent embrace of “relief.” Though he deals with it explicitly in his later essays, Bazin’s concern with three-dimensionality, in which he finds, again in concert with Merleau-Ponty, a more “realist perspective,” is already present as a constitutive element of integral realism in “Le Mythe du cinéma total:”

Leur imagination identifie l’idée cinématographique à une représentation totale et intégrale de la réalité, elle envisage d’emblée la restitution d’une illusion parfaite du monde extérieur avec le son, la couleur et le relief.

Pour ce dernier un historien du cinéma, P. Potoniée [sic.], a même pu soutenir que “ce n’est pas la découverte de la photographie mais celle de la stéréoscopie […] qui ouvrit les yeux aux chercheurs.”34, xxv

Where linear perspective manipulates colour, size and shape to facilitate the illusion of depth, Niepce and Lumière mechanized it. In the following pages, I suggest that Bazin completes this train of thought in his 1953 essay entitled “Relief en équations,” as he elaborates on stereoscopy as a decisive step towards a “perfect illusion” of reality: synthetic relief integrates form and content, rather than setting them off against each other.

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6.2.1 From a Realist Perspective: “L’Image imaginaire”

“Still, my deepest desire, or biggest hope, is that this future 3-D cinema will in fact ignite a new interest in the act of seeing. In the physiology and psychology of what our eyes and our brains do together, in unison, in the most amazing perfection, To create space, depth, volume and presence. [Original emphasis]”

While Bazin is traditionally ranked among the most realist film critics, his writings on depth-of-field in particular stirred considerable critique in his days. The most direct accusation was made by Georges Sadoul, who argued that Bazin and his colleagues at L’Écran français ‘attachent plus d’importance à la forme qu’au contenu.’ Without wanting to deviate into the specifics of this particular debate, the nuances Bazin provides in his responses are indicative of the ways in which these claims caused him to rethink the realist and the formalist discourse. In “La ‘technique’ et le ‘sujet’ ne jouent pas au cinéma le même rôle que dans les autres arts: la forme et le fond” (1950), he writes:

Depuis deux ou trois ans une querelle divise la critique cinématographique. Il est vrai qu’elle peut sembler n’être que l’ombre de la fameuse dispute du réalisme et du formalisme en art […] Je crois pourtant que le problème du formalisme se pose bien différemment au cinéma et dans la plupart des arts.

Even though it was raised in a very specific context, this assertion in fact summarizes Bazin’s views on the evolution of cinematographic language to a great extent: under the common denominator of a myth of total cinema, Bazin’s criticism oscillates from a “realist” defence of

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36 A concise but clear overview of the debates following “William Wyler ou le janséniste de la mise en scène” (1948) between Bazin and Sadoul has been published under the title “Convergences et divergences sur la profondeur de champ et le sujet” (1895: Revue d’histoire du cinéma, No. 67 (Summer 2012): pp. 126-143), comprising excerpts of six texts that clarify the discussion from both sides.


38 Bazin, André. “La ‘technique’ et le ‘sujet’ ne jouent pas au cinéma le même rôle que dans les autres arts: la forme et le fond.” Radio cinéma télévision, No. 45 (28/11/1950)
sound cinema on the one hand, to a “formalist” treatment of depth-of-field. This dichotomy effectively culminates in Bazin’s embrace of stereoscopy, in which he employs the notion of an “imaginary image” to give body to a synthesis of both tendencies: because a three-dimensional image is formed by mentally combining two slightly diverging perspectives, relief literally imitates our direct perception and creates a “more realist” image that paradoxically exists only in imagination.

In “Relief en équations” (1952) Bazin embarks on a rather technical explanation of three-dimensional cinema in which, beyond prophesying a future ideal cinema, he revives the foundations of the myth of total, i.e. integral realism:

Si le cinéma en relief dépasse un jour comme il est probable le stade de la simple curiosité scientifique, il ne lui suffira pas de nous épater en dirigeant sur la salle la lance d'arrosoir du jardinier. Il devra y avoir aussi loin de ce cinéma futur aux anaglyphes que de l’Entrée du train en gare de La Ciotat à la séquence de la locomotive dans La Bête humaine. Les travaux de M. Spottiswoode et leur application encore expérimentale dans les films du Festival de Grande-Bretagne nous garantissent déjà que le relief se prête aux mêmes interprétations, à un usage aussi concerté et pour tout dire artistique que le cinéma “plat.” Franchissons donc allègrement ce pas nouveau et décisif vers un cinéma total.

While “flat cinema” mechanized and thus “redeemed” Western painting from emptied formalism, it nevertheless relies on a fixed, one-point perspective (Fig. 11): while in reality both eyes (D and G) perceive from slightly diverging points of view, they see on screen one and the same image, captured from the exact same camera lens. In today’s terminology, this

39 Bazin was well aware of the technologies offering stereoscopic vision, as his mention of Georges Potoniée’s Les Origines du cinématographe (1928) in the Myth-essay indicates. Writing in 1953, then, Bazin knew of Louis Lumière’s efforts in stereoscopy and in fact subtly criticizes his disinterested, purely technical approach. The fact that the technology had existed long before it was put to use at the Festival of Britain, where Bazin encountered the poetic use of 3-D, illustrates his argument against the mere industrial demand or scientific invention of film and in favour of myth, which includes the imagination and artistic use of those technologies.


is referred to as a “zero parallax,” meaning that the discrepancy between the two projected images on screen equals zero.\textsuperscript{41} Stereoscopy, then, moves away from this abstract, cyclonic set-up towards a binocular model: the second diagram illustrates a “positive parallax,” where two slightly diverging images are projected simultaneously, maintaining the median distance between the right and left eye (\textbf{Fig. 12}). This procedure is more or less comparable to our actual perception of depth at a great distance, since the axes of each projection run parallel (the discrepancy on screen equals the distance between the eyes). This type of stereoscopy, however, has the disadvantage that objects at close distance will appear blurred, or cause discomfort: ‘Quand je regarde le bout de mon nez, je louche et je fais des efforts désespérés pour voir net. Mais au cinéma, je dois dissocier ces deux mécanismes psychologiques.’\textsuperscript{42, xxviii} Even though the camera is equipped with two lenses, it is nevertheless forced to remain static, since a rapid succession of planes involving different depth cues would tire our brain (which is where the images are put into focus) and enhance such cross-eyed outcome. The true “revolution in relief” that reminds Bazin of the integral realism he had promoted in “Le Mythe du cinéma total,” is the creation of depth in front of the screen: by inverting the axes of projection on screen, a “negative parallax” creates the point of convergence in between the screen and the spectator (\textbf{Fig. 13}). Owing to specific calculations of British film theorist Raymond Spottiswoode (1913-1970), this convergence in the projection could be calculated depending on the actual distance between the camera and the filmed objects. Bazin encountered the results of this invention at the Festival of Britain in 1952, where Spottiswoode had commissioned Canadian filmmaker Norman McLaren (1914-1987) to produce 3-D animations based on these principles.\textsuperscript{43} The resulting films, \textit{Around Is Around} (1952) and \textit{Now Is the Time} (1952) were, according to Bazin, ‘[...] une révolution poétique et géniale’ in animation film: ‘\textit{une peinture abstraite en mouvement et en relief}.’\textsuperscript{44, xxix}

\textsuperscript{41} The parallax is the degree of perspectival difference between two diverging points of view, which lies at the basis of our perception of depth. Because of the distance between our left and our right eye; on different parallax classifications used to create stereoscopic vision, see: \textit{Stereographics Developers’ Handbook}. Stereographics Corporation (1997): pp. 9-10 <http://www.cs.unc.edu/Research/stc/FAQs/Stereo/stereo-handbook.pdf>

\textsuperscript{42} Bazin, “Relief en équations,” p. 5


\textsuperscript{44} Bazin, “Relief en équations,” p. 5
Today, Icarus

When Bazin envisions a future cinema in three-dimensions by comparing Lumière’s train to the sequence in La Bête humaine (Jean Renoir, 1938), he is not merely imagining this train in 3-D for the sake of making a clever film historical reference (admittedly, this is precisely the case with the example of L’Arroseur arrosé from 1897). The train arriving at La Ciotat could have easily been recorded using a positive parallax, because the camera remains static the entire period of shooting. In fact, by 1903 Lumière had already successfully recreated the sequence in stereoscopy (Fig. 14); he had patented his ideas on this technology at the turn of the century, and published an essay under the title “Stereoscopy On the Screen” in 1936, to which I will turn later (cf. infra, 6.2.2 “Will this be the triumph of the fat?”). 45 Renoir’s famed train sequence, quite the opposite with its rapid succession of shots captured by a camera moving at train speed, would only be possible in three dimensions by means of “synthetic relief,” because of its relative axis of convergence, ‘correspondant à l’angle de vision que le spectateur aurait dans la réalité.’ 46, xxx Surprisingly, the more realist the perspective, the more the image becomes imaginary; the synthetic image is, as Bazin writes, “une image imaginaire” that is mentally put into focus in between the screen and the

45 See: Ray Zone, Stereoscopic Cinema, pp. 141-143; Lumière’s essay can be found in Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, Vol. 27, No. 3 (September 1936): pp. 315-320

46 Bazin, “Relief en équations,” p.4
spectator. In short, the image ceases to exist as such and instead gives way to an enhanced realism. The *imagination* of cinema had never felt *so real!*

Bazin’s juxtaposition of these two iconic trains in film history anticipates a series of references that articulate three-dimensionality as the integration of image with reality, or form with content. In the introduction to “The ‘Return’ of 3-D” (2013), appropriately subtitled “Trains of Thought,” Thomas Elsaesser engages in the current discourse on three-dimensionality, which he considers not merely as a special effect, but rather as ‘a different kind of mental image,’47 involving a veritable paradigm change. Like Bazin, he references Lumière and Renoir’s trains, both condensed in a sequence from Martin Scorsese’s 3-D *Hugo* (2011), in which the little boy has a nightmare involving the derailment of a train at the Montparnasse station:

[...] for the cinephile, there is an in-joke within the in-joke within the in-joke. The train seen roaring twice into the station is not just any old train from the 1920s. It is the digitally enhanced proleptic train from Jean Renoir’s 1938 *La Bête humaine*, complete with Jean Gabin’s begoggled sooty face leaning out of the locomotive; Scorsese’s *mise en abyme* of film history in reverse is giving us this train wreck as an in-joke in 3-D, considered as a temporal anamorph rather than an optical effect.48

To add to these on-going cross-references, the visual effects of the train landing in a heap were in fact entirely inspired by the historical photograph of an actual derailment at the Montparnasse railway station that had occurred about a week before the Lumière brothers’ first screening (Fig. 15, 16 & 17).49 From this point of view, Scorsese revisits in this dream sequence the so-oft cited and debunked “origin myth” of cinema: Lumière’s terrified spectator would have been unable to dissociate the moving image of an approaching train from reality. On this topic, Tom Gunning, for example, writes: ‘Far from fulfilling a dream of total replication of reality – the *apophantis* of the myth of total cinema – the experience of the


48 Ibid., p. 217

first projections exposes the hollow centre of the cinematic illusion.'\textsuperscript{50} However, in an attempt to nuance the story’s by now fabled status, Ray Zone adds to its mythical origins that: ‘It seems highly likely that this train disaster may have been on the minds of Parisian patrons viewing \textit{L’Arrivée d’un train} at the Grand Café and affected their response to the motion picture image of an approaching locomotive.'\textsuperscript{51} Imagine a box-office release involving collapsing towers in the aftermath of September 11, or a train crashing into Spanish theatres following the Santiago de Compostella derailment in July 2013: such disastrous events show reality to be stranger than fiction, and shocked reactions to their depictions are perhaps less related to a naive mistaking of fiction for reality, but may instead arise as a result of collective trauma. The implied convergence between history and fiction in Scorsese’s sequence of trains, then, projects new light on the mythical status of Lumière’s train. Hence, another “in-joke” completes this chain of trains in 3-D: Louis Lumière, Jean Renoir, Martin Scorsese and somewhere in between André Bazin, whose notion of stereoscopy as an “imaginary image” now appears more than ever as ‘une hallucination vraie.’\textsuperscript{52, xxi}

This short excursion on the mythical background of trains in cinema brings me back to the core of Bazin’s views on perspective, condensed in the reference to Cézanne and synthesized in his embrace of synthetic relief. While Lumière’s original (2-D) train sequence is arguably already an exercise in “stereoscopic aesthetics,”\textsuperscript{53} the static camera position reveals its reliance on analytic geometry to create depth. Bazin’s elaborate technical explanations suggest, on the contrary, that the “more realist” perspective of stereoscopy, i.e. the mental convergence of two distinct images into one three-dimensional image, is neither


Zone’s anecdote in fact calls to mind Bazin’s notion of film as a social documentary, which highlights the hallucinatory nature of reality and vice versa, cf. supra, \textit{5.1.1 W.H. Auden: Icarus as an Anti-War Statement}

\textsuperscript{52} Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 16

\textsuperscript{53} For a detailed analysis of depth in \textit{L’Arrivée du train}, see Loiperdinger, “Cinema’s Founding Myth,” pp. 102-107
linear, nor is it indeed photographic. In a similar vein, Merleau-Ponty, who may have had Lumières’s train in mind, puts it this way in his essay on Cézanne:

 […] the lived experience, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one. The objects we see close at hand appear smaller, those far away seem larger than they do in a photograph. (This can be seen in a movie, where a train approaches and gets bigger much faster than a real train would under the same circumstances.) 54

From this viewpoint, objects on the “flat” cinema screen appear closer than they really are.55 Here, again, Bazin appears to follow Merleau-Ponty’s description of “lived perspective” when he praises stereoscopy’s perspectival apparatus as “an eye for an eye.” Moreover, the shift from analytic to synthetic relief proposed by Spottiswoode literally does away with the flat surface of the image, which is now mentally “imagined” in between the screen and the spectator: ‘la restitution d’une illusion parfaite du monde extérieur avec le son, la couleur et le relief.’56, xxxii

The reference to the trains in Bazin’s citation, then, is a subtle repetition of the objections he had made against the inventors and in favour of an imagination of cinema (cf. supra, 4.1 Icarus and the Imagination of Cinema). Lumières’s train, even re-shot in 3-D, does not exceed the level of “scientific curiosity,” whereas Bazin envisions a train in full speed and in three dimensions: ‘un usage aussi concerté et pour tout dire artistique que le cinéma "plat."’ xxxii Bazin’s careful dismissal of Lumières’s writing on stereoscopy, or indeed his 3-D version of the arrival of the train, runs along the lines of his myth as the imagination rather than the inventions of cinema. In fact, the contextual reference with which Bazin opens “Relief en équations” is the same text that inspired him, five years earlier, to write “Le Mythe du cinéma total:” Georges Sadoul’s first volume of Histoire générale du cinéma on the invention of cinema. As I will establish subsequently, this is not a coincidence: where the

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54 Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” p. 14

55 On the effects of such distortions during the Lumière projection, see Loiperdinger, pp. 103-104: ‘Every object is reduced in size by the square of its actual distance from the camera’s lens. Objects filmed close up appear larger; those filmed from afar seem smaller than we are used to from human spatial perception. […] This cinematic effect makes the approaching and seemingly rapidly growing locomotive on the screen appear to be accelerating while, in reality, the locomotive arriving at the station is slowing down.’

56 Bazin, “Mythe,” p. 22
first essay is a strong justification of the talking film (cf. supra, 1.1.1 “You must speak!” Total Cinema and the Myth of Charlot), the latter aspires to recall this agenda in support of cinema in relief – a vital component, alongside sound and colour, of integral realism.

![Fig. 14 Lumiére’s arriving train in 3-D](image1.png) ![Fig. 15 Screening Lumiére in Hugo](image2.png)

![Fig. 16 Train crash at Montparnasse](image3.png) ![Fig. 17 Renoir’s train in 3-D](image4.png)

6.2.2 “Will this be the triumph of the fat?”

The dry and scientific tone of Louis Lumière’s essay on stereoscopy illustrates in many ways his more general disinterest in the future artistic possibilities of the technologies he invented.\(^{57}\) His apathy in fact becomes the more striking when juxtaposed to the ideas on the same topic of a visionary such as Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), who in “On Stereocinema” (1947) goes as far as to applaud three-dimensionality as a new artistic form that makes possible the elevation of post-war consciousness. He writes:

\[^{57}\text{In an interview with Georges Sadoul in 1948, Lumière would have stated clearly that his interest in stereoscopy was purely scientific (Zone, Stereoscopic Cinema, p. 143).}\]

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What of consciousness, struggling tirelessly in these post-war years to forge a concrete model of a genuinely democratic international ideal? Are they not clamouring for artistic expression of wholly new, never-before-seen forms and dimensions, far beyond the limits of the palliatives proffered by traditional theatre, traditional sculpture, and traditional … cinema? To be sure, the new, dynamic stereosculture will toss traditional, static sculpture – with its yardstick, still wielded by the likes of Chavance – beyond the limits of dimensions and unique qualities. We must not fear the advent of a new era in art.\(^5^8\)

In what follows, I want to briefly digress into this former discourse via Eisenstein’s essay, because he takes on a similar critical agenda as Bazin did back in 1946. Both critics, I will establish, are offended by an elitist dismissal of a novel technology brought to the cinema screen. Eisenstein begins his elaborate study of stereoscopic cinema with an apology that derides the opposition:

> These days you run into a whole lot of people asking: “Do you believe in stereocinema?” To my mind this question sounds about as absurd as if they were to say: do you believe that it will be night-time at midnight, that one day the snow in the streets of Moscow will melt away, that there will be green trees in the summer and apples in the fall? That today will give way — to tomorrow! To doubt that tomorrow belongs to stereocinema is just as naïve as it is to doubt the very coming of tomorrow! […] How is it, indeed, that we are able to make such bold predictions? The answer is that no species of art is truly capable of survival unless it bears in its essential character some aspect of our deepest yearnings and aspirations.\(^5^9\)

One of those people in disbelief about 3-D was Louis Chavance (1907-1979), French screenwriter and critic at Revue du cinéma, who Eisenstein accuses of “willful obscurantism”\(^6^0\) when he dismissively wrote: ‘is this technological discovery able in some way to heighten the dramatic tension of a scene? Does an actor, represented in three dimensions, find there some additional expressive means? A physical plumpness? … Will this be the triumph of the fat?’\(^6^1\) In reaction to such opinions, Eisenstein interestingly resorts

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59 Ibid., p. 20

60 Ibid., p. 55

61 Louis Chavance (1946), cited in Ibid., p. 55
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to “deep-seated human needs,”62 with three-dimensionality being ‘the most thorough and immediate expressions of such aspirations.’63 Again much like Bazin, Eisenstein argues that this third dimension meets such inherent human needs by integrating image and reality (Eisenstein calls this binary set “Fiction and Reality”), when he writes:

Here these two “partners” are understood as the embodiment of two fundamentally distinct realms, divided by the rampe; the realms of Fiction and Reality.64

And:

Not only had cinema – that ultimate stage in the developmental history of the theatrical art – realized successfully the tendency to reunite spectator and performer, it was also able to merge the realm of Fiction with that of Reality, transformed by an artistic will.65

The parallels between Eisenstein’s praise of 3-D and Bazin’s notion of integral realism appear to bring out the formalist side of Bazin’s realism; conversely, Eisenstein’s ‘social interpretation of reality’66 shows the realist element in his ardent formalism, i.e. fiction as it relates to reality. In a similar vein, Jon Wagner reads in Bazin’s myth of total cinema as ‘a realism formalist in its formation.’67 He puts it very convincingly:

Integral realism; a recreation of the world unburdened by the irreversibility of time; myth: when Bazin describes the genesis of cinema in terms of his realist ideal, and

62 Ibid., p. 26
63 Ibid., p. 21
64 Ibid., p. 47

Eisenstein’s mention of the rampe, which are the footlights that illuminates the actors on stage and thus separate them from the audience, draws parallels between stereoscopy and the theatre. Having been actively involved with the theatre before his career as a film director, it should come as no surprise that a major part of the essay on 3-D seeks the precursors of this novel technology in the theatre.

65 Ibid., p. 49
66 Ibid., p. 26
when this ideal entails illusory representation and temporal recreation, I think he comes close to defining his own formalism.\(^{68}\)

A new technique, three dimensionality adds volume, quite literally more image on screen, and at the same time brings about an increase in realism: it lessens the gap between film and reality. Whereas three-dimensionality was dismissed by some critics as mere “physical plumpness” with no expressive means, Bazin thus considered it a ‘pas nouveau et décisif vers un cinéma total.’\(^{69, \text{xxxiv}}\) From the more realist perspective of stereoscopy, three-dimensionality then ultimately holds the potential to realize Bazin’s myth as an “image imaginaire:” the synthesis of form and content.

\(^{68}\) Ibid.

\(^{69}\) Bazin, “Relief en équations,” p. 5
6.3 Oh langage! The Poetry and Realist Grammar of 3-D

“This perspective fût le péché originel de la peinture occidentale, la technique était son fossoyeur. La conquête de l’espace fit perdre la mémoire à tous.”xxxv

(Jean-Luc Godard, *Les Trois Désastres*, 2013)

In the year 2015, the best defence of 3-D cinema from the perspective of myth is found in cinema itself: with Jean-Luc Godard’s *Adieu au langage* (2014) and Wim Wenders’ *Every Thing Will Be Fine* (2015), Bazin’s twofold wish for an artistic and consorted use of three-dimensionality becomes reality. To conclude this chapter on 3-D, I will argue that each of these filmmakers, adding to an already extensive and established oeuvre, affirms either through drama or as a film essay that 3-D now belongs to the language of film.

In his first 3-D film-essay *Les Trois Désastres* (2013), Godard recites the phrase on perspective from “Ontologie” – ‘La perspective fût le péché originel de la peinture’70 - with yellow streetlights superimposes over an image of the Madonna against a dark-blue background (Fig. 18). Godard is known for his fondness for quoting Bazin,71 (xxxvi) and this specific sequence offers itself as a condensed moment in a succinct scheme for a new cosmology of cinema, in three dimensions. From a contemporary point of view, Godard revisits Bazin’s critique of illusionist perspective, applied to 3-D cinema: “Voyez-vous, Sergei, vous avez senti qu’il n’y a pas d’espace au Kremlin et pas davantage à San Francisco, n’est-ce pas Orson Welles?”xxxvii The fear of emptied formalism, of meaninglessness and memory loss, clearly runs through Godard’s inaugural manifesto for 3-D; or is it its requiem? His rather cynical allusion to *Titanic 3-D* (James Cameron, 1997), “Et alors, la profondeur; la profondeur! Déclare le professeur du Titanic,”xxxviii appears to suggest an overall sarcastic

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70 Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 12


See also the citation in the opening scene of *Le Mépris* (1963), in which Godard claims Bazin would have said that ‘le cinéma substitue à notre regard un monde qui s'accorde à nos désirs.’ While it definitely has some bazinian undertones, specifically in relation to Bazin’s notion of the “social documentary,” this statement was in fact uttered in 1959 by Michel Mourlet, film critic at *Cahiers du cinéma* (see: Joubert-Laurencin, *Le Sommeil paradoxal*, pp. 37-39).
tone vis-à-vis 3-D technology, which is confirmed by a superficial reading of the film’s title: the three disasters. Taken literally, “les trois désastres” indeed appears to be a foreboding for his subsequent 3-D film, Adieu au langage (2014): from three disasters follows an excess of imagery that disables communication and meaning. In Adieu au langage, Godard criticizes the empty, meaningless images that flood our contemporary screens, under the “dictatorship of the digital.” The nostalgia to which he still holds on in Les Trois Désastres, is replaced by rather grim Instagram-aesthetics: iPhones and Google, so he suggests, have replaced our books and our knowledge. Again, superficially, the title gives a negative impression when it comes to the expressive means of 3-D, a goodbye to language for lovers who have stopped talking or listening: “Fais de sorte que tu puisse m’entendre,” she repeatedly says, to which he answers; “fais de sorte que je puisse parler.”

Read differently, “Adieu au langage [Goodbye to Language]” transforms via inter-titles into “Ah Dieu, oh langage [Ah God, oh language];” and indeed more than a farewell, the film is an affirmation of the possibilities to reinvent the language of cinema: as the cinematographer Fabrice Aragno says, ‘we weren’t interested in using 3-D as an effect. The film had to be about using 3-D to express new things.’

Godard includes, among many innovations, nudes descending a staircase in 3-D, and constantly plays with layering, double exposures and superimposition. Changing the parallax degrees, for example, causes the two layers that combined produce the 3-D effect to suddenly split and forces each eye to follow a different image cross-eyed. Godard’s most recent investment in 3-D, then, not only ‘breaks the rules of 3-D,’ but creates new ones altogether. Aragno explains that in order to achieve this, he:

[...] built a rig to separate the images, which happens at several points in Goodbye to Language, and I first did a test with two friends. I had them stand together in a shot, and then I asked the boy to walk away, over to the kitchen. I followed him with the right camera, while the left camera stayed on the girl. You suddenly have two images, with the girl on the left, and the boy on the right, and your brain begins to mix the

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72 Fabrice Aragno in Dallas, Paul. “1+1=3.” Film Comment (November/December 2014) <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/fabrice-aragno-interview>

two. Then I had the boy walk back to the girl, and the 3-D image returns. It hurts a bit when you watch it.74

The result of this experiment has already been termed by the critics “shot of 2014” (Fig. 19), as it pushes the limits of cinematographic language: “It’s montage taken to its logical extreme: in-eye editing. This isn’t simply a great shot—it’s a new kind of shot altogether.”75 David Bordwell, who admits he was wrong when he had previously dismissed the new technique, sees in it the ‘temptation to close one eye, then the other, in creating your own shot/reverse-shot editing.”76

Already in his first 3-D essay, Godard returns to language, more precisely to poetry, when he has an excerpt from Charles Baudelaire’s Le Voyage (1861) whispered over a superimposition of a ferry on the shimmering surface of the ocean and a piano play (Fig. 20), altogether creating some sort of double 3-D:

Nous avons vu des astres
Et des flots, nous avons vu des sables aussi;
Et, malgré bien des chocs et d’imprévus désastres,
Nous nous sommes souvent ennuyés, comme ici.
La gloire du soleil sur la mer violette,
La gloire des cités dans le soleil couchant,
Allumaient dans nos coeurs une ardeur inquiète
De plonger dans un ciel au reflet alléchant.77, xi

The title now becomes “the three stars,” like those in Van Gogh’s Starry Night, which Bazin in a liberal poetic turn described as “three suns,” alluding to the sunflowers as motifs of a new cosmology of film (cf. supra, 5.2.2 Two Revolutions on Film: Geographic Temporality). Not much later, a woman will fall from the sky, impaled by the mast of a sailboat (Fig. 21); or is it, as the subsequent shot suggests, the crane of a camera? The fall of

74 Aragno, cited in Dallas, “1+1=3”


Icarus has gone terribly wrong: boredom, despite unforeseen disasters. “Those who lack imagination,” the voice-over in *Adieu au language* narrates, “seek refuge in reality.” Nevertheless, to dive into the sky, to fly with your arms, affirms imagination as the transformative force of poetry. Baudelaire writes, ‘Nous voulons voyager sans vapeur et sans voile! [We want to travel without wind or sails!],’ to which Valéry adds: ‘Le vent se lève! [The wind rises!].’

With his latest return to fiction in *Every Thing Will Be Fine* (2015), Wim Wenders confirms that his initial interest in 3-D for *Pina* (2011), a dance documentary about the German choreographer Pina Bausch, and for his subsequent documentary on architecture, *Cathedrals of Culture* (2014), was not short-lived. In fact, after years of experimenting with this new technology, Wenders is now one of the most outspoken defenders of 3-D, which he sees, against the big Hollywood studios, capable of a “realist grammar:”
Today, Icarus

Human reality. Our planet. Our existence. Our concerns. But: I am convinced that this is what 3-D was invented for and what it can do. [...] It should—it will—must become the very language of future-reality based movies, documentaries as well as fictional films. It is absurd that the contemporary notion of a “fictional film” means, for more and more people today, that it is not related to any reality. That is a cultural disaster; a tsunami wiping out our imagination. Stories are rooted in myth, and myth is distilled from human experience, from life. [...] 3-D belongs in the hands of documentary filmmakers, of independent writers, directors, authors, of people willing and able to forget limits, rules, formulas, recipes, and enter a whole new age of cinema, where there is more… connexion. Existential connection. 3-D has that connecting power…

Wenders makes a clear statement about putting 3-D technology back into the hands of filmmakers who can reclaim this technology as part of the language of film: to make films speak again. His choice to use 3-D for Pina relied, in the fashion of Eisenstein (cf. supra, 6.2.2 “Will this be the triumph of the fat?”), on concepts that are typically associated with the theatre: an emphasis on a newfound presence and interpersonal closeness. It enables what Wenders calls a connexion, all the while without resorting to what Bazin calls the “hyperbole” of overacting, a direct consequence of the gap between audience and stage: ‘La scène l’incite [l’acteur] donc, le contraint même à l’hyperbole. Seul l’écran pouvait permettre à Charlot d’atteindre à cette mathématique parfaite de la situation et du geste, où le maximum de clarté s’exprime dans le minimum de temps.’ It is therefore no coincidence that ‘the most exciting experience was the simplest one: close-ups.’ The intimate close-ups of Pina Bausch’s dancers are not only the most simple, i.e. least spectacular cinema experience, but also the least theatrical and therefore perhaps the most specific to 3-D. In this manner, they somehow already stand in opposition with the common assumption that 3-D only cares for spectacle, which dance to a certain extent still is. In 2013, then, Wenders wrote that ‘the 3-D I am dreaming of will be pleasant to the eyes, it will not hit you over the head, it will never feel

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78 Wenders, Inventing Peace, pp. 172-173


80 Wenders, Inventing Peace, p. 169
like a roller-coaster ride. It must feel natural and unpretentious. Sincere! The opposite to gimmicky. 81

In his latest film, Wenders takes on these principles of 3-D as a realist grammar, as he returns to fiction after a series of documentary films. The opening scene of Every Thing Will Be Fine shows Tomas in his writer’s shed, sharing artistic struggles with the local fishermen on a frozen lake in Québec (Fig. 22): he writes two pages a day, which is actually not that bad. When he has his girlfriend on the phone, it becomes clear they have diverging expectations and that their relationship is tilting: she wants a child, he simply wants to be able to write. “You’re a good writer, Tomas,” she assures him, but her kind words are quickly dismissed as empty and meaningless. In the car on his way home, he calls her back with an apology: “everything will be different from now on.” And it will be: the road is icy and when two children on a sled cross his path, fate hits inevitably as Tomas accidentally kills Christopher’s little brother Nicolas. From this very moment, nothing will ever be the same, for Tomas, Christopher or his mother Kate. Tomas’ guilt is at first unbearable, but it soon becomes clear that the traumatic event is making him a better writer; perhaps even a better person? When Christopher, who appears to have developed an obsession with the writer, recognizes a scene in his newest best-selling novel as based on their first encounter the evening of the accident, one cannot but wonder: how far can a writer, or a filmmaker, go in fictionalizing someone’s lived suffering? “An author writes partly based on reality and imagination,” Tomas reassures him; and indeed his somewhat naive smile directed to the audience in the final shot of the film, unconventional in its simplicity, conveys consolation and confidence that the two can go together.

Throughout the film, Wenders shuns spectacle. 82 The sequence when Tomas realizes there were in fact two children on the sled expresses the terror of the moment in a way that no

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82 Ironically though, it is precisely for this reason that several critics have labelled Wenders’ latest film as “tone-deaf and structurally haphazard” (Lodge, Guy. “Every Thing Will Be Fine.” Variety (10/02/2015) <http://variety.com/2015/film/reviews/berlin-film-review-every-thing-will-be-fine-1201429546/>), or ironically labelled ‘a fine film!’ (Pattinson, Michael. “Wim Wenders’ Every Thing Will Be Fine is a Major Disappointment.” Indiewire (10/02/2015) <http://www.indiewire.com/article/berlin-review-wim-wenders-every-thing-will-be-fine-is-a-major-disappointment-20150210>).

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crash or obvious blood could have done. Kate’s grief when she sits at the kitchen table feels very real, and the frequent overlays, either superimposing two images or working with mirroring surfaces, convey a most concrete closeness between characters on screen and with the audience. Shooting and editing 3-D, Wenders explains, entirely changes the filmmaking experience as well as the effect of the images on the audience:

3-D has a built-in capacity to involve you in a different way than “flat cinema” does. It even involves different areas of your brain! So one can certainly tell a story differently. In 3-D, I come up with different shots, I edit differently, I look at my actors differently. We are involved differently, myself as well as my audience, so don’t you think an intimate drama could also come out differently?\(^3\)

In fact, the most remarkable “effect” of 3-D in Every Thing Will Be Fine is, precisely, that it immediately feels normal and goes almost unnoticed: natural, yet profoundly moving and intimate. Wenders’ choice for 3-D was a straightforward and deliberate one: to find pictures in reality, and to find reality in pictures. For example, one scene in particular is based on the American painter Andrew Wyeth’s Wind from the Sea (1947) (Fig. 23), in which a laced curtain with embroiled little birds flows lightly into an attic window:

I found some of Wyeth’s pictures, so to speak, in Kate’s house, and it was wonderful that the curtains in the film were moved by real wind, and not by a ventilator, with the yellow soy field in the background and this beautiful tree right in the middle. With that small intimate scene in the kitchen, you could feel that 3-D was dead right for the film and see how it literally “places” you in the emotional space of these people.\(^4\)

Wenders often frames his shots through windows, and their resistance to complete transparency best conveys the real splendour of 3-D. The waving curtains in Kate’s kitchen window are truly awe-some, and together with many shots that include a surface, reflecting windows mostly (or water surfaces in Godard), these are precisely the moments when 3-D feels necessary.


\(^4\) Wenders, Wim. “Every Thing Will Be Fine: An Interview with Director Wim Wenders.” The Upcoming (10/02/2015) <http://www.theupcoming.co.uk/2015/02/10/every-thing-will-be-fine-an-interview-with-director-wim-wenders/>
Like Godard’s active engagement with the linguistic potential of 3-D, Every Thing Will Be Fine reclaims so-called “platitudes.” the title, Wenders explains, conveys ‘something of a fairy tale which we took for something very real.’\(^8^5\) Etymologically derived from the French plat, meaning flat, these sentences regain their depth and meaning, literally in three-dimensionality. From this perspective, the mourning and healing process all the characters go through parallels the enigmatic space in the film’s title, between “every” and “thing:”

It’s my hope that our 3-D Cinemasope images won’t become part of this never-ending and arbitrary avalanche, that they are self-contained, and will achieve what my favourite film philosopher of the 20s, Béla Balázs, said: “Cinema is capable of securing the existence of things.” (This is the main reason why our title also has “everything” written in two words: Every Thing, every single thing must be set right for Tomas, Christopher and Kate.) Despite this flood of digital photos and film, I still think we can make use of composed images and precise storytelling to achieve exactly this: illustrate and preserve the existence of things and people. Images don’t have to be constantly surging waves, they can also be the firm rocks in that sea.\(^8^6\)

If 3-D were to be used only as a tool for spectacle disconnected from reality, Wenders argues, ‘this fantastic language is about to drown in a lack of imagination.’\(^8^7\) Rather than taking part in a wave of meaningless images, 3-D holds the real capacity to put meaning back into platitudes, in Bazinian terms, to ‘sauver l’être par l’apparence [save being by appearance],’\(^8^8\) While everything turns away, it now becomes possible again to promise that every thing will be fine. Having reclaimed this technique as realist grammar, cinema exists as the integration of imagination and reality.

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\(^{8^6}\) Wenders in “Interview,” The Upcoming

\(^{8^7}\) Wenders in Roxborough, The Hollywood Reporter

\(^{8^8}\) Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 9
Today, Icarus

Fig. 22 Ice and surface in *Every Thing Will Be Fine*

Fig. 23 *Wind from the Sea*, Andrew Wyeth (1947)