

# André Bazin's Eternal Returns: An Ontological Revision

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## Abstract:

The recent publication of André Bazin's *Écrits complets* (2018), an enormous two-volume edition of 3000 pages which increases ten-fold Bazin's available corpus, provides opportunities for renewed reflection on, and possibly for substantial revisions of, this key figure in film theory. On the basis of several essays, I propose a drastic rereading of Bazin's most explicitly philosophical notion of "ontology." This all too familiar notion, long settled into a rather dust-laden couple ("Bazin and ontology") nonetheless retains its fascination. Rather than attempting to provide a systematic reworking of this couple along well established lines, particularly those defined by realism and indexicality, this article proposes to shift the notion of ontology in Bazin from its determination as actual existence toward a more radical concept of ontology based on the notion of mimesis, particularly as articulated, in a Heideggerian mode, by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. This more properly ontological concept, also paradoxically and radically improper, is shown to be at work already in Bazin's texts, and it allows us to see that far from simplistically naturalizing photographic technology, Bazin does the contrary: he technicizes nature. If Bazin says that the photograph is a flower or a snowflake, he also implies that, like photographs, these are likewise a kind of technical artifact, an auto-mimetic reproduction of nature. Bazin likewise refers to film as a kind of skin falling away from the body of History, an accumulating *pellicule* in which nature and history disturbingly merge. This shifted perspective on Bazin's thinking is extended further in reference to Georges Didi-Huberman on the highly mimetic creatures known as phasmids, insects that mimic their environment. I extend this into the dynamic notion of eternal return, an implicit dimension of Bazin's thinking, clarified here in reference to Giorgio Agamben and the "immemorial

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## André Bazin's *Eternal Returns*

image” which, like Bazin’s “Death Every Afternoon,” presents an eminently repeatable deathly image, an animated corpse-world that can be likened to hell.

**Keywords:** André Bazin; ontology; mimesis; film; Georges Didi-Huberman; eternal return; Giorgio Agamben.

André Bazin has been making a come-back. Within the past ten to fifteen years, a sizable number of publications have appeared that have helped to place Bazin in a more complete and newly complex light, in ways that attempt to do greater justice to his texts and to the image of his thought than was the case for most of the fifty years between his death and the emergence of these efforts in the first decade of this century.<sup>1</sup>

By far the most important of these recent publications is the enormous and astonishing *Écrits complets*, edited by Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, which became available in January 2019. This event constitutes the true return, as eternal as one can be in book form, of André Bazin, the writer, critic, and thinker of cinema. This massive collection, a product of decades of work by Joubert-Laurencin, together with Dudley Andrew, collects all of Bazin’s previously published books, along with literally thousands of essays and articles that had been scattered in the dozens of periodicals for which Bazin wrote during his short career of barely fifteen years (essentially 1944 through 1958). It consists of a box of two hefty volumes of in total around 3000 very thin pages and represents at least a ten-fold increase in Bazin’s available corpus. In that respect, it’s about the size of Marcel Proust’s oversized novel – except that it is in fact at least double that length, since the tiny print in two columns makes each page the equivalent of two or three pages of an ordinary book.

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1. In addition to sympathetic treatments (or conceptual extensions) in major books by Rosen (2001), Doane (2002), Mulvey (2006), and Andrew (2005), there is also the remarkable collection *Opening Bazin*, edited by Andrew and Joubert-Laurencin (2011), an important reassessment of Bazin’s realism by Morgan (2010), and a book of essays on Bazin by Joubert-Laurencin (2014). I count at least four special issues of journals devoted to Bazin, including *Film International* (2007), *Angelaki* (2012), *Paragraph* (2013), and most recently the French journal *Critique* (2018). This latter was conceived to accompany the recent publication of the *Écrits complets*, edited by Joubert-Laurencin (discussed here). Lee Carruthers (2011; 2016) has contributed discussions on Bazin and time. We can also include in this activity multiple new translations into English by Bert Cardullo and Timothy Bernard. For a more critical view on this resurgence, and more generally on the importance accorded to Bazin as a figure in cinema studies, see Le Forestier (2017).

There is something by definition rather obsessive about this project, as its editor readily admits, and Joubert-Laurencin's other writing on Bazin makes it clear that he is in part fighting a battle against what he calls "Bazinism," a ready-to-hand reduction of Bazin's work to a few fixed and often uncritically repeated positions and tropes.<sup>2</sup> This battle, which goes along with a sincere call to "open Bazin" – meaning of course to "read Bazin!" – has led to this remarkable completism.<sup>3</sup> One senses in it the heretofore frustrated desire to set the record straight once and for all, finally to provide the basis for an inclusive reading of Bazin, in an almost defiant gesture, as if to say: You think you know Bazin? Well, get to know this...<sup>4</sup>

In this giant block of text, then, something between a sublime resuscitation and a fitting tomb in the grand style, Bazin has returned with a vengeance. Who, henceforth, can claim to represent Bazin's thinking without qualifying any assertions with a caveat – depending on how much of this collection one has managed to work through – that other essays may reveal something unknown and unexpected, something that might modify our image of his thought.

Let me be clear from the beginning that I am neither critical nor cynical about this somewhat provocative come-back; on the contrary, I would tend to celebrate it, and my purpose here is to join in its efforts – but to do so on the one hand with some caution and circumspection, and on the other hand with a sense of philosophical ambition, however preliminary, that may well reach beyond or around its object. My aim is also to approach Bazin with a sense of open-ended textual playfulness, of metaphorical richness and associative linkage, a sense of the density of metaphorical thought itself, which surely constitutes both the tremendous strength and the frustrating weaknesses of Bazin's texts. Bazin was of course not a philosopher, and he more than anyone was aware of this fact. But his texts have a persistent and uncanny

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2. See Joubert-Laurencin's *Le sommeil paradoxal* (2014), in the "Avant-propos" and elsewhere; and the "Introduction par Hervé Joubert-Laurencin" in the *Écrits complets*.

3. "Lisez Bazin!" is the first section title in the "Avant-propos" of Joubert-Laurencin (2014, p. 5).

4. It should be noted that the claim, itself often repeated without much specific evidence cited (so self-evident does it appear to be), that Bazin was pushed aside or eclipsed beginning in the 1960s, has been contested by Le Forestier (2017). See also the debate between Le Forestier and Joubert-Laurencin (Le Forestier, 2012; Joubert-Laurencin, 2012). This is not the place to enter into the details of Le Forestier's often tendentious and contrarian arguments, which go against the grain of the recent works cited above, at times productively, at times rather gratuitously.

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philosophical traction that goes beyond, or at least is not entirely contained within, any positions or patterned conceptual schemes that one finds in them. I believe that this traction, or this philosophical resonance, one might say, is what makes these texts so fascinating, despite their lack of systematic coherence or their often shifting conceptual sands. My sense is that this fascination has to do with Bazin's insistence on forming throughout his work a dense conjunction of temporal paradoxes (often evoking death and absence, compulsion and return) in relation to mimetic processes and mechanically produced images meant for mass consumption – that is, meant for repetition – , all within a context of postwar reckonings with the place and value of artistic and cultural productions in general, and of cinema in particular. Which is to say, too, that it is situated within an ongoing anxiety over the possibility of authentic experience in a world governed, virtually beyond control, by the historical processes of massified technicity. Bazin clearly strives in this direction, toward a vanishing (or indeed already vanished) possibility of something like an authentic but technically mediated experience, continually improvising on the possibility of a grounded and coherent relation to the real; the fact that he so obviously fails in this only bears witness to the subtle rigor that shaped his work, a rigor of openness and receptivity which, after all, embraced the deep artifice (the proliferating technical forms) of the late modern image-world, and that refused totalizing conclusions even as his questions continually ricocheted, as it were, off of projected totalizing limits. I want to propose here that in Bazin's case, the looming question of totality is one that raises the specter of the world itself as a totality of images. And it is in that regard that we can link him with a number of important philosophical questions and experiences.

Before moving on to these questions, let me reiterate, then, that my purpose is neither to rehabilitate Bazin with respect to his theses – that is, to find a systematic articulation of these theses that would allow us to posit them as viable positions (as for example Daniel Morgan has done, already some years ago, with such clarity, precision and circumspection) – nor, concomitantly, to work through Bazin toward a more solid and reliable articulation of cinema's relation to the real. As sympathetic as one may be with these projects, my sense is that they are not viable in the end. I find myself rather in agreement with Gregory Flaxman, who argues with disarming melancholy that, put simply, it is just too late for that (Flaxman, 2012). Our image-world is already too suffused with digital manipulation, *in potentia* and in fact, to have much hope of rescuing the real by way of photography and cinema. I also share with him the concern that the renewed and growing interest in Bazin may

be a symptom of this melancholy itself.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it seems clear that there are other ways to approach this problem than one oriented by the desire for a direct form of rescue. Flaxman's own proposal, to turn to the "out of field" or the off-screen, presses the issue into a fruitful paradox, and turns the problem away from visible correspondences and toward something stranger, a kind of constitutive invisibility (or perhaps a para-visibility) that places cinema within an open and indefinite world of space and time regardless of how digitized this world's images may be. In a sense it is the very persistence and perversity of such a paradox that draws one to it, as though to something inevitable (and so perhaps toward the real in a more Lacanian sense – the real as always exceeding the "frames" of reality), and that may allow us, in turn, to read Bazin with a sense that something else is at stake besides questions of verifiable reality or indexical tracing – though these certainly do remain in play. Let me stress too that the question of that tracing is far from liquidated and one can only be glad of that; many, many cameras do still take many, many pictures of real things, indeed more than ever, and so it is that we still experience these pictures, by and large and very often, as traces and images of the world, however complex and elusive this tracing structure has always been. Such widespread practices and attitudes prove nothing, of course, and it may be that the qualitative transformations associated with digital media may, in a way, have been a question of quantitative shifts all along. Digital photography in itself changes very little with regard to photography's ability to record reality, but the factual frequency and ease of manipulation or of the wholesale creation of images obviously does substantially alter our relationship to the image landscape. In any case, I don't think that the ontology that has been so extensively discussed in relation to Bazin need hinge on the kind of verifiability that such discussions appear inevitably to lead to, for there is another way to conceive of this ontology, based directly on, but also in tension with, his most explicit characterizations.

### **Bazinian Ontology: A Revision**

The main point I would like to begin with, then, concerns the term "ontology." It will be necessary to be brief and somewhat peremptory on this enormous question: it seems to me that, from a strictly philosophical

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5. Flaxman writes: "There are good reasons to return to Bazin, but I suspect that behind a great many of them lies the promise of a cinematic saint resurrected to deliver us from new media, as if his ontology could redeem the cinema as the cinema once redeemed the visual" (2012, pp. 121–122).

point of view, this term, ontology, has been used rather too loosely, not to say abusively, not only in recent discussions, but in Bazin himself, beginning of course with the "Ontology" essay – an essay which in this regard, and to obliquely paraphrase that text, is the original philosophical sin in the textual body of Bazin's thinking, insofar as this text introduces a number of highly problematic and ambiguous theses that have burdened Bazin's reception from the beginning.<sup>6</sup> I should stress that my aim is not to redeem this sin, but to make it even more profound and problematic, while also perhaps redrawing its contours – less in the form of a naive or precipitous or incoherent realism, than as a philosophical superficiality.

It is quite clear that what Bazin means by "ontology" is rather, simply, the real *existence* of specific objects. When he claims that in a photograph there is a "transfer of reality from the thing onto its reproduction," when he says that because of the mechanical and impersonal or inhuman nature of photography, the photographic image "proceeds by its genesis from the ontology of the model," and then says indeed that "it is the model," what he means is that it proceeds, or rubs off, from, that it "participates in" the *existence* of the singular and once-existing model. This is not the same as an "ontology," which, if only in order to introduce some specificity into the discussion, I propose that we bring back to a more radical and more restricted (and yet maximally generalized) philosophical meaning, namely: as the inquiry that asks the question "what is being *as such*?" An ontology, in that sense, is not something like a structure of predication (wherein a thing that "is" can be said thereby to "have an ontology" in which another thing could share, or not). Ontology is rather a form of discourse, a *logos*, asking about the foundations, origins, conditions, or (to use a Heideggerian term) the originary "opening" of a world structured by some "understanding" of being as such and in general. In this light, the question of the reality of a trace transferred from one existing object to another, however direct or indexical, is not an "ontological" question at all. Though it is a question about real existence which certainly may fall within the interrogations of ontology.

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6. André Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique" in Bazin (2018) vol. 2, 2554–2557. This is the revised, definitive version published in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma*, edited by Bazin just before his death and published in 1958 (hence its placement at the end of volume 2 of the *Écrits complets*, in a section titled "Ouvrages posthumes"). The first version of the essay, originally published in 1945, is now available in Bazin (2018) volume 1, 108–111. All quotations given here in English are my translations based on the later version.

Of course the term “ontology” can have different determinations, philosophically speaking, and moreover the word has often simply come to mean this sort of question of existence in many of its more common uses: ontology implies being, which means the being of some thing, which means the positing of its existence, its reality. I would simply like to propose that by shifting the perspective in the way I have suggested, something important occurs: namely, we also shift the philosophical register of the discussion, drastically altering its terms in the direction of a more penetrating ontological question regarding photography and cinema. This could mean many things, but the main suggestion I would like to make is that a properly ontological question regarding photographic and cinematic images does not bear on, or in any way provide a criterion or control for, the reality of what those images represent (though it might have something to say about the reality of those images as such, as images).<sup>7</sup> Rather, it moves us into a level of questioning that precedes, or goes beyond, any question of correspondence or (again as Heidegger would say) adequation. It does not ask about the specific existence of represented objects, or about the causes, mechanical or otherwise, of such representations, but about, to put it this time in a Kantian mode, the conditions of possibility of their appearance in general, and this as part of a question about the conditions of possibility of any appearance whatever. For example, one could ask: how do photographic or cinematic images show the fact that, or the conditions under which, phenomena as such are possible?<sup>8</sup> This type of question is extremely elusive; it is perhaps, ultimately, a sterile dead end, though it may also have very important things to tell us about our originary modes of habitation with images. What is clear in any case is that it could in no way decide on the relevance, the nature, the function, or the correctness, much less the privileged reality, of anything like an index, in the sense that has often been fastened to Bazin’s thinking about cinema. Rather it would bear on how things

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7. Going further, one might bring this question to bear on the work a thinker such as Maurice Blanchot, whose discourse on images considers the latter in such an immanent fashion that it shows little concern for their material basis or substrate. In that sense one could say that in his texts on images, Blanchot poses the question of images as such, insofar as they open a world that he calls “literary space” – which is not the world, but a world, precisely, of images alone, on which, paradoxically, the world “itself” originally depends. See Fort (2018).

8. This Kantian language begs a difficult question concerning a term that I am deliberately avoiding: is this “fact” or are these conditions “transcendental”? I would hazard to say that there is still a place for this term, but perhaps only in a sense that is very perverse and neutered, to echo Blanchot again, with respect to the regulatory sovereignty traditionally attached to it.

show themselves at all, including in the overtly “technical” form of something called photography or cinema.

Have we already overshot Bazin's seven-page inaugural “ontology” essay (or rather formerly inaugural, now being number 38 of nearly 3000 total in the *Écrits complets* – and moreover one written at the ripe old age of 25)? It would certainly appear so, and indeed one might well suspect that this brief essay was long ago overburdened by its readers with intellectual ambitions it was not prepared to bear. And yet, strangely, I do not believe that we have entirely overshot it. Here too I must move quickly and summarily. One way to develop this more properly ontological question would be to cast it in terms of a generalized mimesis, a word that Bazin does not use, as far as I know (for alas I cannot yet claim to have read all three thousand pages of the complete Bazin...), but that he certainly does evoke in numerous ways, including, most obviously, in the image of a “total cinema” that would be nothing more or less than “the world in its own image” (Bazin, 2018, p. 2559), and so a kind of totalized “world-wide” mimetic field, so to speak.<sup>9</sup> I propose that we push this conception just a bit further and think of this world-as-image as one way to apprehend, simply, *the world*, the world of phenomena as a whole, but transposed across an indiscernible gap of mimetic self-coincidence. In other words, a world that, before *appearing* simply to coincide with itself – to “be” what and how it is – has been invisibly pried away from itself in an opening structured in part as a kind of image-formation, an opening that also *constitutes the possibility* of imaginary, representational, and conceptual abstraction, as well (therefore) as the possibility of seeing things, including simply *things themselves*, as resemblant, as copies. One articulation of this process of image-formation with phenomena of resemblance and copies can be located at the precise moment when Heidegger turns to photography in an attempt to explicate just such a productive (or “transcendental”) imagination as we encounter in Kant. In Heidegger's exposition, photographic reproduction gives the image of a “schema” (or schematism) that lies at the basis of the opening of the visible world as such.<sup>10</sup> This is, in turn (though Heidegger does not quite say this), a world that can make visible its own radical condition of possibility in a condition of reproducibility and as a primary condition of visibility itself – regardless of how extensive or perfected that reproducibility may be, technologically and historically speaking – placing this condition in a ground of image-formation that is

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9. On Bazin's use of this idea, see the helpful and insightful article by Gunning (2011).

10. See Heidegger (1997), section 20, “Image and Schema.”

not narrowly subjective but is operated by and in phenomena as such. Put more simply, being, in the penury and emptiness of its “openness” or “opened-ness”, is seen necessarily to repeat itself, endlessly so, and this tireless repetition is strangely shown in the images that it itself makes of itself, in a generalized estrangement that simply is the world in its visibility.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, then, the world, as a phenomenal totality, manifestly already is “the world in its own image,” that is: a world already determined as mimetically potentiated, already always appearing in a generalized mimesis “of itself,” a mimesis that makes it be what it is in the first place, though this place is “first” only problematically, since it can no longer be considered as simply primary.<sup>12</sup>

Here I am drawing on the thought of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, for whom mimesis is virtually another name for nature insofar as nature produces itself, in a “poietic” process that is in some sense thoroughly technical, arising from pure negativity, from a gift of nothing. As Lacoue-Labarthe writes in his analysis of Diderot’s “Paradox of the Actor,” nature gives itself to the actor capable of “being anything” as a:

gift of impropriety, the gift of being nothing, even, we might say, the gift of nothing... the gift of the thing itself... nature’s gift of itself, not as something already there, or already present... but more essentially, as pure and ungraspable poiesis... The natural gift—the gift of nature—is consequently the poietic gift. Or, what is the same thing, the gift of mimesis. (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, p. 259)

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11. Here too I am obliquely echoing Blanchot (1971, pp. 54–55), who links technology and repetition with the “penury of being” in his essay “*Le mal du musée*” from 1957.

12. Another way to explicate this generalized estrangement is to say that the apprehension of things as themselves necessarily occurs against the ontological ground of their always possible duplication – the necessary structural possibility of these things “themselves” as being doubles, of something. The Platonic apprehension of the world of sensibility as a mere copy of more durable Forms is one version of this experience; if this version has, historically speaking, circled back around onto a world no longer seen as derived from independently existing ideal models but rather immanently grounded in the conditions of sensibility itself, that circle nonetheless remains, however empty and invisible it may be, in the form of an auto-relation, a gap of sameness passing through a detour of abstraction both imaginary, or representational, and conceptual. This auto-relation is thus necessarily haunted by auto-reproducibility, that is, by a strange mimesis that precedes things as they are and manifests itself precisely in their apparent sameness to themselves. “Being” is thus necessarily riven by its own fundamental reproducibility; what this means at the level of phenomena is that all things can be apprehended as reproducible, as copiable, even as being already copies, but copies of nothing, copies in and of themselves.

And he specifies further: “Art is this gift... a pure gift in which nature gives itself up and offers itself in its most secret essence and intimacy” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, p. 260). In other words, “nature,” in its own proper and radical “impopriety,” its never merely being what it is, gives itself up as pure productive negativity, as the presentative *technê* of itself, and the logic of this paradox (nature’s intimacy merging with *technê*), “is always a logic of *semblance*, articulated around the division between appearance and reality, presence and absence, the same and the other, or identity and difference” (p. 260: original emphasis). Lacoue-Labarthe concludes this portion of his argument with a statement that knots its contraries into the pure form of the paradox in question: “The same, in its sameness, is the other itself, which in turn cannot be called ‘itself,’ and so on infinitely...” (p. 260). Nature presents itself most intimately as its apparent contrary, an alienated intimacy of “poietic” production, a *technê* of nothing that gives rise not so much to a particular “product,” as to an infinite movement of semblance: ontology as mimetology. We might already stop here to wonder what this “poietic” logic of mimesis might have to do with what Bazin calls the poetry of cinema in what he takes to be its realist vocation, the ability of cinema to render the world not so much “as it really is” as in its poetic force; but a prerequisite for approaching this question, which I will not be able to do here, would first be a reading of the ontology articulated in Bazin’s texts, by asking whether there is legible in these texts something other than their explicit uses of this word. Is there an auto-mimetic and thus “technical” productivity of “nature” discernible in Bazin’s notion of photography and cinema?

It turns out that Bazin does in fact articulate, at this more radical ontological level, such a self-production of the world “in its own image.” For indeed in the “Ontology” essay that is exactly what he says photography is, and does, in its nature as an artifact, so to speak, and in the effect that it thereby produces. Because of its automatism, which crucially excludes human intervention, so the familiar argument goes, photography, says Bazin (2018), “acts on us as a ‘natural’ phenomenon, like a flower or a snowflake [*un cristal de neige*] whose beauty is inseparable from its vegetal or telluric origins.” Setting aside for the moment the crucial quotation marks around “nature” in this sentence (which subtly turn nature “itself” toward or into its other), I believe that in reading the author who audaciously (some would say foolishly) writes in the same essay: “the photographic image [...] is the model,” we should take this statement entirely literally. Photographs, too, find themselves among the flowers, snowflakes, stones, grass, leaves, bark, or flaking skin of “nature,” of the world as it makes itself “in its own image.” We could say that they are a hyper-mimetic form of these “natural” productions – one

difference being precisely that this photographic production bears its technicity openly, and along with this comes the crucial fact that these natural-technical objects are themselves highly variable images of the world that made them: *re*-productions, in a graphic or iconic sense – though conversely, and symmetrically, we are moving toward a sense that other “naturally” reproduced objects – leaves, snowflakes – might also be seen as reproductions in this sense. Photography, then, not only as a “general equivalent” of representation, but as the form of representation that renders itself visible as such, as a matrix of image reproducibility. And it is precisely here that Bazin confirms the totalizing mimesis-image I have evoked by claiming that “the *existence* [my emphasis] of the photographed object concretely [*réellement*] adds itself to natural creation instead of substituting another one for it.” How are we to read this striking statement? Does it somehow distinguish substitution from supplementarity, or the usurpation of illusory copies from the “gift” of an endlessly multiplying surplus? On the one hand, this statement can be, and certainly has been, read as “naturalizing,” not to say mystifying, the production of photographs as a god-given natural phenomenon among others, folded “miraculously” into the inscrutable natural order of Creation; but Bazin’s emphatic insistence on technology in this essay and elsewhere indicates another reading: namely that “nature” itself – a nature separated from its “self” by the indiscernible difference of quotation marks – is already a thoroughly technical process; it encompasses a mimetic self-production along the lines of photography, that is: far from being devoid of artifice, it is grounded in a structure of “genetic” and technical reproducibility. Photographs do not “substitute” for nature – as Bazin claims mere *trompe-l’oeil* imitation attempts to do, based on a deep-seated “need” to stow the world away and preserve it as an image – because its reproductions are not different in kind from the other ones he cites – leaves, snowflakes – but rather simply add another phenomenal manifestation of mimetic reproduction along this continuum. Far from a Platonic scale of reality gradations, far too from a humanistic and pragmatically manageable border between real things and their simulations, I would argue that we are climbing rather into a disturbing indistinction in which model and copy begin to lose any metaphysical basis of differentiation.

In this strange auto-techno-mimetic supplementarity, then, have we found a paradoxical (and by that very token more genuinely ontological) point in Bazin, the thinker of realism and the filmic privileging of reality – a point where “nature” is *technê* all the way down? And a point where the world, insofar as it appears at all, is thus shown to be – shows itself as – its own automatized mimetic production, and thus appears

across the invisible fissure or gap that makes possible the visibility of things insofar as they appear simply (and yet still paradoxically) as themselves? Are we finding a strange “natural world” caught up in processes of internal doubling and driven, as it were, to deposit within itself a durable layer of image-sedimentation, an uncannily fixed and yet mobile stratum of images, even a kind of endlessly circulating image-eternity? But here I am getting ahead of the demonstration, in order to reorient it in the direction of a turning and returning of images in which photography and cinema may have a crucial, and perhaps a disturbing, role to play.

### Desquamation: Peeling off the Layers

This image of an auto-mimesis of the world – in a continuum that is both simply continued, isomorphically, and paradoxically supplemented across a presentative difference by photography and film, in the form of a “natural” or “physical” production – appears in another essay, from 1946, and does so in a way which, as we will see, introduces an almost science-fiction type of strangeness one does not usually associate with Bazin, a sinister bodily transformation of the world itself that is figured as a kind of moulting, shedding, or exfoliation. Elsewhere Bazin does invoke such figures, especially that of moulting (*la mue*), which in some respects can be placed in some relation to the recurrent image of Veronica's veil, and which often seem to imply the sort of quasi-sacred naturalization of image production mentioned above; in this case, however, the tone is completely different, allowing us, I believe, to place the entire iconography of image-as-nature implied by such a metaphor in a very different light. For here we are no longer dealing with a simple metaphor, or with an analogy safely posited across the secure difference of its terms.

The essay in question is one devoted to the wartime newsreel series “Why We Fight.” In it Bazin focuses on how these and many other newsreels manipulate their footage by introducing misleading voice-over and editing. Such a critique is hardly surprising, coming from Bazin, but the image that he uses to project on a mass scale (a word that will begin to take on its multiple meanings here) the compulsive practice of newsreel filming confirms the intuitions I have been developing. Evoking a “need to witness History” that arguably parallels the obsessive need for substitutive copies and *trompe-l'oeil* illusions posited in the “ontology” essay, Bazin declares (2018, p. 153) that “an age of total war gives rise irresistibly [*fatalement*] to an age of total History” (“*Aux temps de la guerre totale répond fatalement celui de l'Histoire totale.*”) – as though a destructive totalizing drive were violently attaching

itself to the spectacle of the modern world as a whole. Here is how he describes this process:

We live in a world more and more stripped bare [*dépouillé*] by cinema. A world that tends to shed [or moult, *faire la mue de*] its own image. On hundreds of thousands of screens we are made, when it is time for the newreels, to witness [*assister à*] the formidable *desquamation* sloughed off each day by tens of thousands of cameras. *Hardly has the skin of History formed when it falls away in a thin layer of film* [en pellicule]. Which prewar newsreel was it that bore the title “eye of the world”? This title is hardly presumptuous today when countless Bell and Howell lenses are on the lookout, at every intersection of events, for the picturesque, curious, or terrible signs of our destiny. (2018, p. 153; my emphasis)

The natural-technical mimetic process described above is here extended, through this strange word “desquamation” (which exists in both French and English), to the body of History, to historical events as a whole, in a form of filmic exfoliation or descaling not dissimilar to nature’s auto-production in and through leaf-like photographs, as evoked in the “Ontology” essay. It is fascinating to note as well that the word *dépouille*, as a noun, can designate a corpse, the superficial image-thing sloughed off by a soul after death – or, to speak with Hamlet, that “shuffled off [...] mortal coil” which in “that sleep of death” may return as a dream. In another register, this image also quite strikingly resuscitates the ancient Lucretian doctrine of simulacra, whereby objects continually produce thin layers of themselves as their own image, the very means and medium of their visibility, actualized only when they happen to encounter an eye to see them (in other words, they are produced even when no one sees them). As both Rosalind Krauss (1978) and Tom Gunning (in an essay on spirit photography from 1995) have pointed out, this doctrine was reactivated in the nineteenth century in part as a response to the uncanniness of photography, and to the paradox of its being both materially precise and strangely dematerializing, notably by Balzac, who feverishly described his belief to Nadar, and wrote of it in a novel (*Le Cousin Pons*, 1847). It is not possible here to develop this fascinating connection, except to say that in the present context, and in a more political register, it suggests that Bazin’s image of a nature-*technê* simulating itself unto totality strangely erodes the difference between “History” and its image in a way that Guy Debord would surely recognize as part of the “spectacle” of late capitalism. In addition, the becoming-image or becoming-spectacle of reality as a way of transforming it into its own occluded poetry – one of the features that Bazin ascribes to neo-realism – here takes on rather the sinister quality almost of a kind of

torture, a flaying or self-flaying of the visible world, or perhaps (to push the image a bit) a kind of diseased self-devouring, one layer of skin at a time, given over to all those avid lenses and eyes – the world-becoming-image in a strange cumulative deposit, a voracious archive of visibility.<sup>13</sup>

### Phasmatics

It is no doubt in this perspective that we might radicalize the troubling image-schema emerging here and begin to locate a thinking of eternal return in Bazin. It is one that passes, by way of a generalized techno-historical mimesis, through this rather disturbing phase – or one might say this “phasma”. I evoke this term in reference to Georges Didi-Huberman’s brief essay which opens his book of that name (the essay is called: “*Le paradoxe du phasme*”), through which I would like to take a detour here, in order to provide a concrete illustration of the “natural” image-shedding at issue.<sup>14</sup> For it turns out that nature does in fact produce and emit the very kinds of auto-mimetic images that are animated in Bazin’s ontology.<sup>15</sup> Didi-Huberman’s essay begins by asking about the difference between what is merely “apparent,” which remains relatively fixed and as such almost unnoticed, and “the event of something-appearing” (*l'événement de l'apparaissant*), which first of all requires dissimulation. This latter, as the word *phasma* indicates, we can call an apparition, in the strong sense. Now what is interesting is the example that Didi-Huberman gives, which is that of a foggy glass tank in the

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13. The terms of this discussion bring to mind a number of intriguing resonances with Siegfried Kracauer’s evocation of “skin and hair” in his notebooks from 1940, as presented by Miriam Hansen (1993, p. 452). Kracauer speaks not only of “historical residues,” of the “dregs” and “refuse” swept up by (in, as) film, and not only of a (rather Bazinian) “death’s head” beneath the filmed human face (p. 447), he writes, precisely in reference to newsreels, of a “blizzard of photographic images” that is “indifferent toward the particular referent” (p. 455). To the imagery of skin and hair, then, can be added that of snow, but in a more menacing, massified form. All of this might also be drawn back to what Kracauer (1993 [1927]) had earlier called, in his important essay on photography, “the warehousing of nature,” its “general inventory,” subject now to radical disintegration and to the disorder of its “detritus.” In this same passage he adds: “The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film.” At stake in these figures is a strange and uneasy convergence of nature and history, as well as an iconography that could be linked with the historical trauma of the Holocaust, an element on which Hansen insists in her discussion. For Bazin, this context is far less foregrounded, but it is arguably present and calls for more attention.
  14. Didi-Huberman (1998). See also the insightful discussion of this essay by Alloa (2018).
  15. Roger Caillois’s essay from the 1930s, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” (Caillois, 1984), not cited here by Didi-Huberman but surely known to him, enters into very similar territory. For a somewhat longer French version see Caillois (1938).

“vivarium” of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, the indoor section of the zoo where reptiles and insects are kept. Unlike the other habitats on display there, in which some animal or other, or the absence of any animal, can be discerned upon careful inspection, the one marked “phasmes” appears to have no animals in it, but that is only because these cases display animals that resemble their surroundings to such an extent that, after an interval of uncertain perception, they make their own invisibility uncannily visible. We are talking here about the astonishing camouflaged insects known in English as stick or leaf insects, also ghost insects, classed in the order of *phasmatodea* or *phasmids*.

The word *phasma*, Didi-Huberman reminds us, is Greek and has a number of related meanings, including *apparition*, *omen*, *prodigy* or *monstrous* appearance, or, he adds: a “simulacrum.” After evoking the same Lucretian notion that we find less literally indicated in Bazin, Didi-Huberman goes on to describe the uncanny experience of a world that “mimetizes itself” to such a point that it reveals its own dissimulation in its very “apparition,” its being an image drawn from the surfaces that surround it, while also literally becoming what it devours, what it lives in and on, and thus becoming an image-thing identical to what it is an image of: becoming the model, as it were, of its own body-image. Didi-Huberman, in language that is all too Bazinian (whether deliberately or not), describes this phenomenon as he recalls standing amazed before it (emphases are his):

The phasma makes of its own body the setting [*le décor*] in which it hides itself, by incorporating [both assimilating and embodying] this setting in which it is born. The phasma is *what it eats and is what it lives in*. It is the branch, the twig, the shrub. It is the bark and the tree. [Even...] the rotten leaves turning brown [...] were also living phasma. And the whole thing slowly quivered all over as in a nightmare. (1989, p. 18: original emphasis)

In specifying the paradox that emerges in this auto-mimesis of a natural world, which he describes as a radical form of anti-Platonism (though he suggests in passing that it might also be the essence of Platonism), Didi-Huberman claims, again in remarkably Bazinian language, that

by realizing a kind of imitative perfection, [the phasma] ruptures the hierarchy implied by all imitation. Here there is no longer a model and its copy: there is a copy that devours its model, and the model no longer exists, while the copy alone, *through a strange law of nature, enjoys the privilege of existing* [my emphasis]. The imitated model becomes an accident of its copy—a fragile accident in danger of being engulfed—and no longer the contrary. The less-being / the minus-being [*le moins-être*] has eaten being, possesses being, *it is in its place*. (1989, p. 18)

Techno-nature's auto-mimesis proliferates like so many devouring insects gnawing at, and indiscernibly taking the place of, the very kernel of being. Is this the "ontology" that Bazin asked us to contemplate in the uncoiling leaves of the photographic image and in the moulting skin-image of every *pellicule*, or, beyond that, in the awakened corpse of the cinematic world as it gradually or, as Bazin might say, asymptotically, becomes indistinguishable from the world *tout court*? In any case we might well say that these image-insects are the slowly developed photographs of the "nature" that produces them, in which they are both absorbed and radically estranged.

It is worth noting that this is indeed what Roger Caillois had said already in 1935, in not only comparing but actually assimilating the natural reproduction of forms to photography. One quotation from the essay already cited makes this clear, and I give it here in all its suggestive complexity:

Morphological mimicry could then be, after the fashion of chromatic mimicry, an actual photography, but a photography of form and relief, a photography on the level of the object and not on that of the image, a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids: a sculpture-photography, or better a *teleplasty*, if one strips [*dépouille*] the word of any meta-psychical content. (1984, p. 23, trans. slightly modified, and 1938, p. 102)

A closer commentary on this essay would require a separate analysis. Suffice it to say for now that it goes further than the present relatively restricted remarks in the direction of a strange action-at-a-distance, which Caillois also calls magic, and which Bazin, too, gives us reasons to investigate under that term, frequently used by him; and, finally, to point out that this stripped or *dépouillé* word "teleplasty" leaves just the sort of animated-cadaverous residue that Bazin saw everywhere in film.

### The Return as Cadaverous Image

In order to tighten this association between nature's own proliferating image-mimesis and a virtually eternal movement of reproduction and bodily, not to say cadaverous, return, I would like to look briefly at a quotation from Giorgio Agamben that allows us to deepen the Bazinian resonances of these associations. Agamben poses the question of "the eternal return of the same" as a particular problem of the image, and he does so against the background of a more traditional theological problematic of the resurrection of the corpse – which is in turn, it appears, the corpse of the world as a whole. Pointing out that the *gleich* in Nietzsche's formulation ("*das ewige Wiederkehr des gleichen*") is

etymologically linked with the German word for corpse, *Leiche*, Agamben remarks that “there is [therefore] in the eternal return something like an image, a resemblance,” indeed, “something like a total image” – or one could say, using a word similarly derived, a total likeness of the world as image, but that this corpse, cadaverous image-world, embodied for example in the death masks the Romans referred to with the term “*imago*,” and indicated in the widespread belief in phantasms, ghosts, larvae, and, Agamben adds, “*phasma*” – all images and likenesses that “obsessionally return” to the world of the living, he refers to the shades of the Homeric underworld, along with the repetitive punishments of Greek mythology, and concludes this section of the essay with the following one-sentence paragraph:

The inferno of the ancients appears in this perspective as an inferno of the imagination: that images cannot have done, that semblance is inextinguishable, this is, in fact and properly speaking, what hell is. (Agamben, 2005, p 335)<sup>16</sup>

Didi-Huberman referred to his “phasmic” experience of an all-devouring originary mimesis as a “nightmare.” Here Agamben reminds us that endlessly circulating and indelible images constitute hell in its “proper” (properly improper...) sense. What does this say about the “total cinema” that Bazin evokes or, moreover, about the unhinging of the world that occurs in its very “ontological” foundations – like a machine that primes its own endless repeatability and drives the ceaseless return of its ineliminable residues?

With these questions in mind we might wonder whether it is so easy to be the anti-Platonists we all more or less pretend to be – unless we do not pretend this at all but in fact embrace the realities with which our representations fill the familiar world (or worlds) we live in. But it is indeed extremely strange to think, in terms that have continually returned through Bazin’s influence into our thinking and experience of images (in the Roland Barthes of *Camera Lucida*, for example), that in doing so we are embracing a corpse – or at least the thin filmy ungraspable skin(s) of one, as our very world, its own *dépouille*.

With this image, I will conclude by making one last return to Bazin, and to a properly cinematic example of eternal return that appears to have troubled him no less than the desquamation of History in the unspooling

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16. To my knowledge, this essay has not been translated into English. There is a French translation (Agamben, 2011). However, the brief paragraph I quote here was omitted from this translation.

*pellicule* of the modern mass spectacle. Numerous are Bazin's uses of the word "eternal," often in a literary mode reminiscent of Mallarmé, as Joubert-Laurencin has pointed out (2014, p. 153 ff.). But we also find it coupled more disturbingly with his keen sensitivity to the larger meanings legible in cinema's capacities for the precise repetition of what it has recorded, including phenomena considered intimately unique, existentially unreproducible: "Death Every Afternoon," as Bazin remarks in the essay with that title, is a paradox that cinema introduces into ordinary time, and into even the most singular of experiences. In explicating this paradox, Bazin uses terms that resonate clearly with the present discussion.

Death is only one instant that follows another, but it is the last one. Doubtless no lived instant is identical to the others, but instants *can resemble each other like the leaves of a tree*; hence it is that their cinematographic repetition is more paradoxical in theory than in practice: we admit it, in spite of its ontological contradiction, as a sort of objective replica of memory. (Bazin, 2018, p. 796; my emphasis)

The use of the word "ontological" here might well make us wonder whether it is simply a synonym for "existential," and thus a way to avoid this latter term even as the essay draws quite overtly on the thinking that fell under its banner, never more identifiably than in 1950s France. More compelling is the notion that the instant of death itself can be infinitely repeated as an image, and that these images grow from the world as do the leaves of a tree. The death of a bullfighter, or of a group of Chinese men charged with espionage and executed on camera, images that are precisely repeatable "every afternoon" (and now, via the internet, as often as one wishes), opens the space of images to a kind of "ontological obscenity," says Bazin, a grave-robbing and thieving of time's singularities, and thus, as he writes in a homophonic play on words, these deaths become "*morts sans requiem, éternel re-morts du cinéma!*" that is: the dead without requiem, without peace, the eternal re-deaths, or remorse, of cinema. Stored and repeated death as the gnawing bad conscience of the cinematic medium. But perhaps this ontological obscenity is just what ontology at bottom is: the abrogation of absolute singularities through radical reproducibility, and the gateway to an "eternity" that never "is" but only ever returns.

This is an eternity not entirely unlike, in another register and in another medium, the thousands of pages of a long dead writer, scattered into far-flung repositories but finally, irresistibly, rejoined and rebound (rebounded), driven by obscure forces, into a singular but reproducible

thing called a book, a synoptic treasure and, inseparably, a commodity with a price.

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