Bazin's Modernism

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ABSTRACT

One of the basic assumptions about André Bazin's theory of cinema has been that his idea of realism stands in direct opposition to modernism. In this article, I further develop a revised account of Bazin's realism that I have offered elsewhere, which rethinks the basic assumptions of ontology and realism in his work. This brings Bazin into a surprising affinity with tenets of high (reflexive) modernism. From this position, a re-examination of his engagement with the films of Orson Welles not only shows Bazin to be wrestling with those issues in his criticism but also provides a way to rethink a number of positions in film theory that have historically been associated with a stringently reflexive modernism.

The past few years have seen a growing number of works aimed at a revisionist understanding of the history of film theory as a series of articles, books, and edited volumes have taken fresh looks at André Bazin, Jean Epstein, Béla Balázs, Rudolph Arnheim, and Siegfried Kracauer (a major Eisenstein re-evaluation took place earlier). These works have sought to expand and transform received understandings, often drawing on writings outside the canonical texts, works in and on other media, social and intellectual history, and more extensive biographical information.[1] The

result has been the beginnings of a better, more complex account of this history.

One of the most ambitious efforts has come from Malcolm Turvey. Taking up the historical opposition between realism and modernism in film theory, Turvey argues that it misses a third tendency, what he calls the 'revelationist tradition'. The theorists and film-makers in this tradition — Epstein, Vertov, Balázs, and Kracauer — are linked by their belief that 'cinema's most significant feature is its capacity to reveal truths about reality invisible to the naked eye'.[2] Turvey connects this tradition to a more general modern interest in visual skepticism, a suspicion about what our senses can tell us about the world.

My interest here is not in the details of Turvey's readings of these theorists, nor in the philosophical architecture that undergirds it, but rather in the way he situates the revelationist tradition within the history of film theory. It is, he writes, 'a distinct tradition within the history of cinema' (DV, 9); it 'constitutes a distinct alternative to the historically dominant [traditions] of modernism and realism' (DV, 10).[3] Although he acknowledges that the revelationist tradition shares features with realism and modernism, he maintains that it 'is distinct from both' (DV, 11).

I'm puzzled by this insistence. When Turvey argues that the categories of realism and modernism cannot sufficiently account for the history of film theory, his solution is simply to carve out space for a new category. There's something missing in this approach, and it has to do with the possibilities of interaction, the way theorists make arguments and take positions from each of the traditions—often within the same work. Bazin, for example, will articulate the basic premise of the revelationist tradition within a foundational text of realist film theory; he writes, 'Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love.'[4] This does not

mean that Bazin — or others — should therefore be included in an account of revelationism. Rather, such moments should prompt us to think differently about how we parse the history of film theory. The various traditions are not distinct, whether we think there are two or three; rather than separate lines or discrete categories, they are more like interwoven threads. Given theorists may incline toward realism or modernism, or even toward revelationism, but they generally employ aspects of all three strands within their critical vision. Tracing out these overlapping threads — both rethinking what each of them means and how they fit together — is a necessary task if we are to recover the depth of their thought.

I hope to begin that work here by taking up the case of Bazin, arguing that within this archetypal realist is a distinct and important modernist thread. Despite the work that has been done in recent years, Bazin is still widely taken to advocate a realist style based on a correspondence (understood in visual or experiential terms) between the world on screen and the world we inhabit in our daily lives. I think this is at best a partial account of his realism, and that a more careful examination of his writings shows a thinker conversant in the style, language, and discourse of modernism. Perhaps even more: Bazin's realism, properly understood, bears an affinity with tenets of high modernism, especially as it was developed and theorized with regard to the visual arts. As I revisit this nexus of concerns, realism and modernism become less opposing positions than two interwoven strands that run through and intersect within Bazin's argument about cinematic ontology, style, and history.[5]

In working within this nexus, I also hope to begin a re-evaluation of the film-makers to whom Bazin is most explicitly linked, and whose reception was caught up in the same readings. In this vein, the second part of the paper takes up Bazin's engagement with Orson Welles, whose style Bazin describes as realist but who is increasingly recognized as possessing a more

modernist impulse. As we come to recognize a more complicated Bazin, we'll be able to see him wrestling with precisely those aspects of Welles's films that are better described as modernist, repeatedly testing his theoretical framework against the complexities of Welles's style. What results is a kind of historical restaging that should be a major part of what it means to do the history of film theory.

I. A Modernist Bazin

There is a strong reason to be suspicious about my approach to Bazin. Put simply, few theorists in the history of film theory are so closely identified with an explicitly anti-modernist position as he is. If I'm going to be able to bring Bazin and modernism together in a productive way, I first need to show that it makes sense to do so.

An initial version of this challenge, then, is fairly straightforward. Bazin either ignores or criticizes the film-makers who were part of the modernist tradition of the 1920s, and who served as precursors for the burgeoning of cinematic modernism in the late 1950s and 1960s. This negative judgment coalesced around German Expressionism and its use of visual distortions to express the inner states of characters, but it also included French and Soviet film-makers who relied — excessively, Bazin thought — on the juxtapositions of montage to create meaning.

More broadly, Bazin seems to posit a historical account of cinema as increasingly moving towards a closer appearance or experience of the real world. In 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema', this amounts to a polemic against those directors who 'put their faith in the image' — in 'everything the representation on screen adds to the object there represented' — whereas Welles and Renoir, along with other privileged directors, 'put their faith in reality' and the ability of film to reveal 'its structural depth (…) the preexisting relations which become constitutive of

the drama.' [6] Developing this line of thinking, the 'Evolution' essay suggests that, by the late 1930s, cinema reached its historically ideal style. Bazin employs a geological metaphor to describe the relation between film style and history: 'By 1939 the cinema had arrived at what geographers call the equilibrium-profile of a river (…) where the river flows effortlessly from its source to its mouth without further deepening of its bed' (ELC, 31). The deep space, long take aesthetic is an historical telos.

But to rest with this conclusion is to miss the depth and work of the metaphor. Rather than a celebration of certain techniques and an objection to others — painted backdrops, an emphasis on montage — Bazin uses it to make a different sort of argument: 'If any geological movement occurs which raises the erosion level and modifies the height of the source, the water sets to work again, seeps into the surrounding land, goes deeper, burrowing and digging' (ELC, 31). This is not a defense of an ideal style but a model of historical change. The dominant historical trend Bazin discerns in the late 1930s is one of increased realism, but his advocacy is based on its increasing prominence and significance within the history of cinema. As a result, when new facts emerge — whether they are technical features or historical events — the dominant style of cinema ought to change as well. Bazin suggests all styles are historically contingent, that cinema is continually being transformed in response to its circumstances. The styles of Welles and Renoir, on this way of thinking, will change in response to future developments.[7]

There are numerous indications within Bazin's writings that suggest he saw precisely those kinds of changes taking place in and around the cinema of his time. At a basic level, it's plausible to think that his increasing interest in neo-realism amounts to a defence of a historically driven shift in stylistic concerns, away from the long-take, deep space aesthetic and towards a

cinema based on fragments, ellipsis, and carefully observed details.[8] Even more, a series of late essays shows that Bazin was attuned to the more radical changes happening around him, or at least that he could have recognized them had he lived to see their full development. Discussing Jacques Tati's M. Hulot's Holidays (Les Vacances de M. Hulot), he notes that '[n]ever before has time been the raw material and almost the subject itself of a film to the extent that it is here'.[9] Or, writing about Chris Marker's Letter from Siberia, he argues that 'the primary material [of the film] is intelligence', and praises the new kinds of montage that Marker develops to juxtapose image and voice.[10] These are all aspects of cinema that have trouble fitting with a realist aesthetic predicated on a basic correspondence model.

There are also a number of places, as we start to look further into Bazin's critical writings, where he praises the styles he rejected in the 'Evolution' essay. He compares neo-realism to 1920s Soviet films as two of the great realist cinemas, and elsewhere entertains the possibility of an authentic historico-materialist realism.[11] In a review of Alfréd Radok's Distant Journey (1950), he even suggests the realist potential of expressionism:

> What is shocking is that here, the most questionable characteristics of
> Expressionism paradoxically find a profound justification, a realist virginity (…)
> All the paraphernalia of this artifice that one had thought to be peripheral imposes
> itself as the most logical, and the most necessary result of a nightmare reality. No
> doubt involuntarily, but through an internal, and in a sense metaphysical, fidelity
> to the universe of the concentration-camp ghetto, the film finds the world of
> Kafka, and more curiously, of Sade.[12]

The historical logic articulated in 'Evolution' is spelled out here — a change in conditions, whether historical or cinematic, requires a revaluation of styles — but given a radically different

orientation. The implication is that any visual style can gain Bazin's approval, given the appropriate conditions and concerns of the film. Perhaps, then, modernist styles aren't anathema after all.

Still, this feels inadequate. Bazin might have been willing to accommodate a wide variety of styles in his writings on individual films, but his core theory nonetheless suggests more restrictive stylistic possibilities. In that case, following Brian Henderson's proposal, it may make sense to separate different strands of Bazin's writing, isolating the historical and critical judgments from the ontological arguments.[13] Although intriguing, I think this gives up too much, not least Bazin's own belief in a connexion between those elements of his thought. If a more flexible Bazin is going to emerge, one who is responsive to modernist concerns, we are going to have to address head-on the relation between ontology and style.

Recent work on Bazin has taken up the central question about what he understands the ontology of film — and, as well, its photographic basis — to be. The most prominent interpretation is still that he describes a photographic image on the model of an indexical sign, in which it is defined by a direct and causal relation to the object it is an image of. When we look at a photograph, we see an image that tells us about what a particular object was like at the moment the image was taken. Against this, several critics — myself included — have argued that the model of the index is insufficient to capture the complexity of Bazin's account of the relation between photographic image and world. His theory does not follow the logic of a sign but offers a stronger account of the relationship between image and reality.[14]

Although this debate is far from settled, what matters for my purposes here is less what Bazin takes the ontology of cinema to be than the consequences — aesthetic, stylistic, even ethical — he understands to follow from it. Bazin, for example, repeatedly insists that the

ontology of the photographic image is intimately related to film style: 'the realism of cinema follows directly from its photographic base'.[15] And critics have generally understood this to mean that the realism of film needs to be based on a correspondence with or resemblance to the world outside the film.[16] That is, if a film is to be true to its medium, it ought to achieve a look that accords with our normal engagement with the world. It's a kind of cinematic modesty, an (ethical) imperative that a film not impose a style on the world.

It is true that Bazin believes that what a photograph is, and what objects in a photograph are, ought to influence what a realist film is like. But rather than a logic of entailment, in which we read style off ontology, Bazin is emphatic that realism is not determined so much as oriented by the ontology of the photographic image, and therefore remains open to a range of styles and genres. As he puts it, 'There is not one but several realisms', and any account of the relation between ontology and style has to account for this imperative.[17] (To my mind, one of the strongest reasons to abandon the model of indexicality is the difficulty it poses for grasping this point: it leaves little space for anything but a single form of realism.)

The deep idea that makes this possible is not commonly associated with Bazin. It is that a film, to be realist, only has to respond to or take into account in some way the ontology of the photographic image. What form this response takes is open to the individual films to achieve; the only requirement is that the style work with — take account of — the reality of the objects and world shown by the image. This model of realism leaves film rooted in its ontology, but also open to the aesthetic variety of films that Bazin wants to call realist. After all, he will talk about realism not only in the films of Welles, Renoir, Murnau, and Dreyer, but also with respect to Bresson, Olivier, even Eisenstein. These film-makers all exhibit different styles, all going beyond a simple correspondence between film and reality. In each case, the aim of Bazin's

criticism is to show both that the style of the film develops in response to the reality of the objects shown in the photographic image and how it does so. Thus, he praises Bresson's evacuation of the image at the end of <u>Diary of a Country Priest</u> for the reason that spiritual transcendence cannot have an external sign — and so, to be true to his subject, Bresson ought to show nothing. He claims that Hitchcock's humour, the 'light realism', serves as a counterweight to the emphasis on the solidity of the world and the sense of the inevitability of narrative. And he argues that, in Rossellini's films, style is organized around the sheer facticity of the people, objects, and events he shows. 'Realism', then, names not a particular style but a successful and productive negotiation with the basic ontological foundation of cinema.

When I've characterized this model of realism elsewhere, I've argued that it is best described as a form of 'acknowledgement', an idea developed in Stanley Cavell's early writings. In contrast to simply knowing something — for example, that someone is in pain — acknowledgment involves a relation to that person in which an action demonstrates one's awareness of this fact. Cavell writes, 'Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I <u>do</u> something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.)'[18] Cavell leaves the terms of this acknowledgment open, avoiding strict definition and emphasizing instead the process by which a relation is generated. And it is just that openness that allows the idea of acknowledgment to change fields from ethics to aesthetics, a move that happened most explicitly in the work of Michael Fried, who used the term to describe the workings of modernist art and aesthetics.[19] I think it can also be used retroactively to describe Bazin's concern to link media ontology to aesthetic variety.

We can make the link more explicit. When Fried adapted acknowledgment for art criticism, he did so within a longstanding dialogue with and criticism of the writings and legacy

of Clement Greenberg. Rather than canonizing programmatic essays like 'Modernist Painting', where an essential condition of the medium was deduced and used to evaluate appropriate styles, Fried points to Greenberg's more nuanced account of specific artworks. In an essay on Morris Louis, Greenberg locates the procedure of acknowledgment as central to the modernist enterprise:

> Louis spills paint on unsized and unprinted cotton duck canvas, leaving the pigment almost everywhere thin enough, no matter how many different veils of it are superimposed, for the eye to sense the threadedness and wovenness of the fabric underneath. But 'underneath' is the wrong word. The fabric, being soaked in paint rather than merely covered by it, becomes paint in itself, color in itself, like dyed cloth: the threadedness and wovenness are in the color.[20]

For Greenberg, Louis's works succeed because they come to terms with the fact that (or the implications of the fact that) they are paintings, and so are based on the same medium properties all paintings share: they have a canvas, a support. Spilling paint is Louis's discovery that he can do something with the knowledge that what he makes is a picture; he acknowledges this fact, and thereby makes it into the subject of his painting and the effect of his style. As Fried critically adopts and revises Greenberg's model, he emphasizes that what matters was not a single stylistic model but rather the method, the relation between style and ontology established by the individual painting.

Obviously, Greenberg's defence of Louis's abstract paintings involves a radically different aesthetic from what Bazin saw in Renoir, Rossellini, or even Bresson. What I want to draw attention to is the similar structure of their arguments. Both posit an essential fact of the medium — reality for Bazin, flatness for Greenberg — and then argue that successful artworks

respond in some way to this fact; that is, both understand a basic, physical feature of the medium as a condition that needs to be taken up and dealt with as part of the work itself. Fried continues this approach, but modified it in a crucial respect: he sees less an underlying essence of a medium than a 'deep convention' that shapes the understanding of an artistic medium at given historical point. Although Fried takes specific artists and film-makers to be exemplary — Pollock, Caro, Stella, etc. — his critical writings suggest that the list of styles that would fulfill this requirement is open-ended.

This structural affinity between Bazin and modernist critics entails a different way of thinking about the underlying idea of medium specificity. Generally, the use of medium-specific arguments in classical film theory is described in terms of constraints: there are a limited number or kinds of styles that can legitimately be employed. Noël Carroll lays out this reading: 'The medium has some significant, often thought to be essential, feature or features that dictate the proper line of development in that medium.'[21] A film is considered good to the extent that it ticks off the checklist of approved features. What we've seen here is a different model, one in which the defining feature does not prescribe the kinds of styles possible within the medium but functions instead to ground or orient the specific stylistic decision being made. Rather than setting out the conditions a film must fulfill, this model focuses on the work being done by a film or artwork: what is being responded to and how. For Bazin, the ontology of the photographic image is a condition that cannot be ignored, yet it does not thereby determine how a film must respond, what it must look and sound like. This conception of medium specificity, derived from the modernist structure of acknowledgment, places him in line with Cavell's claim that 'the aesthetic possibilities of the medium are not givens'.[22] It also means that familiar modernist doctrines like reflexivity indicate not the simple exposure of the physical fact of the medium —

the model of pointing the camera at a mirror — but more complex negotiations of the medium's material and aesthetic possibilities. On this line of interpretation, realism and modernism come to share a similar approach, even if their avowed aesthetic concerns, historically and stylistically, are radically different.

II. Realism and Modernism in Action

It's one of the curious facts of the history of film theory that doctrines of medium specificity have so often been associated with an anti-modernist position. By contrast, in other arts, from painting to sculpture to music, an explicit interest in the basic features of the medium was generally taken to be the hallmark of a modernist aesthetic.

To a large extent, this had to do with timing. When Bazin's essays were finally translated at the end of the 1960s and classical film theory began to be read by a wider English-speaking audience, medium specificity was still a governing feature of modernism — but what the medium was taken to consist in had changed significantly. Where Bazin and others focused on the content of the medium, on what the film showed — often phrased in terms of 'reality' or 'world' — by then the debate had shifted to concerns over the matter of the medium, namely the physical fact of the celluloid itself. Although related to Greenberg and Fried's account of modernism, the result was something far less flexible than their model, focusing on undoing the illusion of cinema tout court rather than working within historically defined conventions and assumptions of the medium.

We can see this in Annette Michelson's review of the Hugh Gray translation of What Is Cinema?, where she puts forward the two basic propositions that would become the standard

reading of Bazin's work: that cinema's ontology was tied to the reality it was showing, and that this 'demanded the effacement of style'.[23] From there, she argues that Bazin's account of 'a cinematic ontology obscured the range of cinematic possibilities in evolution' (WCM, 71) that she understood to be generally modernist in nature. In an essay a few years later, she simply concludes that 'Bazin's theory is fundamentally antipoetic and antimodernist'.[24] Against Bazin's advocacy of an 'illusionist' style, Michelson championed the American avant-garde — Brakhage, Breer, etc. — and Godard as figures whose work broke the illusion of cinematic realism by focusing on the 'technological données of the film-making process itself' (SS, 62). This led to a legacy of work on and with the basic material of cinema itself: attempts to expose the construction of cinematic illusion, to reveal the way films are brought together, and to bring to consciousness the physical nature of the object being watched.

The consequences of this went beyond a reading of Bazin. Because Bazin saw certain film-makers as exemplary of the aesthetic he was putting forward, the reductive account of his work — and the straightforward opposition or realism and modernism — became the framework for the received understanding of their films. Thus, Michelson describes the films of Welles and Renoir as 'expanding and intensifying the illusionism' of space, leading towards an idea of essential ambiguity and spectatorial freedom. And Noël Burch and Jorge Dana argue that, in Welles, 'the long take in itself is in no way opposed to the codes of transparence' — this was in contrast with the modernist long take of Straub and Huillet, Godard, and others — coinciding with their picture of Bazin as 'the veritable theoretician of transparence'.[25]

In what follows, and in light of the more supple account of modernism presented in the previous section, I want to get at a better sense of Bazin's virtues and limits by unshackling his treatment of Welles from these guiding assumptions. The result will be twofold. First, we will

see Welles, even in the films Bazin labels the 'Realist Diptych' — <u>Citizen Kane</u> and <u>The Magnificent Ambersons</u> — as a modernist as well as (or even more than) a realist, a film-maker who does not follow strictures about the 'integrity' and 'ambiguity' of the film world but plays with and works to undo those very assumptions. Second, this account of Welles will in turn allow us to revise his place within Bazin's work: rather than an easy fit, we'll see Bazin struggling to come to terms with the virtuosity of Welles's style. Once we rid ourselves of the assumption that both are committed to verisimilitude and correspondence on principle, Bazin's writings on Welles reveal themselves to be a sustained attempt to wrestle with — to varying degrees of success — an essentially modernist set of concerns within the context of a realist aesthetic.[26]

The standard account of Bazin's reading of Welles is usually taken from 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema', buttressed by the 1958 monograph. In a nutshell, Bazin seems to position Welles as the culmination of a realistic trend that uses technique not to add to but to reveal meaning within the world being shown. Drawing particular attention to Welles's use of deep space and long takes, Bazin argues that they allow viewers to achieve a more 'authentic' relation to the film. We watch a film by Welles in the same way that we look at the world around us, our eyes free to pursue lines of interest within the frame rather than being artificially guided by editing. Welles 'gives back to the cinema a sense of the ambiguity of reality' (<u>ELC,</u> 37).

Two criticisms of this reading are fairly familiar — and, I think, deeply misguided. The first has to do with the way Welles constructs his deep space compositions. Take one of the most famous examples, Susan's suicide attempt from <u>Citizen Kane</u>. Bazin argues that a normal director would have 'split [this] up into at least five or six shots', weaving the various elements — Susan in bed; the bottle of pills; Kane hammering on the door — into a dramatic climax as

Kane bursts into the room.[27] By leaving everything in a single shot, Welles does something different: 'Obliged to exercise his liberty and his intelligence, the spectator perceives the ontological ambivalence of reality directly, in the very structure of its appearances' (OW, 80). However, a careful examination of the image makes clear that the three elements are only brought together by use of a matte. Welles, then, apparently does not respect the 'ontological integrity' of the scene, supplementing reality with technical effects.

It's puzzling to me that this can be taken to be a knock-down criticism, since it presumes that Bazin knows little about the way films are made — and that's a dangerous assumption to make. In fact, Bazin makes no claim about what was actually in front of camera when the film was shot. He does, however, say that Welles produces an effect that allows 'an <u>impression</u> to remain of continuous and homogeneous reality', and that we gain access to the 'ontological ambivalence of reality' by way of the appearance of the image (OW, 77, my emphasis). This is an aesthetic argument, supported but not causally determined by film's ontology: a relation of acknowledgment, in which (as Bazin argues) the tension is mainly established by Welles's creative use of sound that creates dynamic tension within the image.

The second criticism doesn't fall into the same ontological trap. First articulated (as far as I know) by Chabrol and Rohmer in their book on Hitchcock, and later developed by James Naremore, this criticism examines the deep space compositions of <u>Citizen Kane</u> and argues that Bazin's account of the 'freedom' or 'liberty' of the spectator is an illusion.[28] On Bazin's description, scenes like the conversation at the boarding house leave us at liberty to look at each element as we see fit, not guided or driven by the structure of classical <u>découpage</u>. The conversation between the mother, the father, and Thatcher occupies the foreground, but we can also look through the window in the background at Charles playing in the snow. We can even, if

we wish, look around the room furnished in period detail: the absence of cutting means that Welles does not force us to look at any particular thing. And yet — this is the criticism — it's clear that we are not really free to look as we please, since Welles uses stylistic elements to guide our look across the image so that we will look at the right thing at the right time. Charles drops out of the frame as the father gestures in protest, drawing attention to this turn in the argument; later, as the mother signs the document, Charles says, 'Union forever!' at once an ironic comment and a shift in focus to his presence in the frame. What initially appears to be freedom turns out to be another form of control.

Again, I think this is an overly reductive reading. Bazin's claim is that Welles's use of a deep space aesthetic allows us to look at the world of a film in the way we look at the world around us. But it's a mistake to assume that our looking in everyday life is wholly unstructured. If I am going to cross a street, I'm likely to look at and wait for the walk sign. Indeed, I'm supposed to do this: the walk sign is placed in a conspicuous location, designed for me to see it. (The same goes for traffic lights and driving: they are placed, or should be placed, in such a way as to draw my eyes.) The point is that our looks are often guided and controlled. Of course, we can look elsewhere—we have the freedom to do so. It's just that then we risk getting hit by a car, or, in the case of Welles, missing salient details of the plot.

This doesn't mean that Bazin's account of Welles is without problems, but this is not where they are to be found. What troubles Bazin's interpretation is his more general commitment to realism. In an essay on William Wyler, Bazin says that Welles treats 'depth of field [as] in itself an aesthetic end', and suggests that realism is the goal of his films (WJD, 16). The problem with this isn't, as we might think, the influence of non-realist trends like German expressionism on Welles. Bazin was well aware of what he called Welles's 'baroque excesses', and tried to

account for them in various ways (<u>ELC,</u> 34).[29] Instead, it has to do with his deep belief that Welles is committed to the integrity of the worlds he creates (whether that is understood as an ontological or aesthetic principle). And that, I think, is to miss something important in the films

A brief sequence from <u>The Lady from Shanghai</u> gives a sense of what this is. George and Michael, driving toward the dock, are shown approaching a truck; miles away, Elsa reaches forward to press an intercom button; as she does so, Welles cuts back to the car crashing into the truck, injuring George and providing the blood he will use to frame Michael. As George Wilson has argued, the peculiarity of this sequence is that it appears as though Elsa <u>causes</u> the accident to happen, that it is her action that makes the car crash into the back of the truck. What Welles does is to construct an impossible situation — Elsa literally cannot be causing this to happen — that nonetheless matches our general impression of the film's concerns — there is a strange agency moving the machinery behind the plot. And he creates this impossibility with techniques familiar from the language of Hollywood cinema.[30]

The challenge this sequence poses for Bazin is that it rather spectacularly violates one of the underlying axioms of his theory of cinema: that a film creates its own coherent world, one that is separate from and which substitutes for our own world. Though it's a more complex subject than I can treat here, the axiom appears throughout his writings and generally undergirds his theory of realism.[31] In 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', Bazin talks about 'the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own autonomous temporal destiny' (<u>OPI,</u> 10), a claim echoed in 'The Myth of Total Cinema', which describes 'a recreation of the world in its own image' (<u>MTC,</u> 21). (My suspicion is that the category of 'world' is what ties the theoretical projects of these two essays together.) The idea is that the world of a film has its own coherence and integrity: it may be related to our world, but it is not identified with it. In 'Theater

and Cinema', Bazin writes, 'The world of the screen and our world cannot be juxtaposed. The screen of necessity substitutes for it since the very concept of universe is spatially exclusive. For a time, a film is the Universe, the world, or if you like, Nature' (TC, 108–9). A film, that is, 'substitutes' or 'replaces' our world with a new one; they do not mix.[32]

Welles's films systematically break the coherence of their worlds. It's not only the manipulation of narration in Lady from Shanghai. In The Trial, he uses Joseph K.'s movements through doors to introduce radically discontinuous spaces; match-on-action cuts reveal impossibly connected locations, generating a sense of spatial dislocation. And it's the basis of the entire enterprise of F for Fake, from the 'girl watching' at the beginning to the interviews with Elmyr de Hory and Clifford Irving to Welles's curious recollections of his own career. Accounting for and understanding these disruptions and discrepancies is one of the overt challenges of Welles's late works, as he takes the assumption of an ontological boundary that defines the diegetic world of a film and explicitly plays with it. We watch him tell us about his tricks at the same time as we are being captured by them.

It's not just the late works that are at issue here. Welles's first two films — the ones Bazin saw, loved, and promoted as realist — subvert conventions as fully as the later works do, although a little more quietly and with somewhat different ends. We can see this in one of the signature techniques of Welles's early style: the glorious, extended tracking shots that, to Bazin, seemed to constitute a new stage in the history of film style. These tracking shots should be the exemplary realist gesture, since they carry with them a sense of continuous time and space. From early on in Citizen Kane, however, Welles employs forward tracking shots to move through impossible spaces in order to get closer to, see, or discover something thought to be of importance. The first instance is at Thatcher's Library, where the camera follows Thompson as

he walks into the reading room; the door closes, and the camera tracks towards it before executing a quick dissolve that positions it inside the room — and still moving forward at the same pace. To a certain extent, Welles is establishing the camera as having something like an investigative gaze, moving independently to find out information on its own. But equally he is playing with our desire to see, and in particular our desire to see something we'd normally be prevented from seeing: starting with the 'No Trespassing' sign in the first moments of the film, the camera moves past barriers that ought to prohibit our passage.

As with the play with narrative authority in Lady from Shanghai, Welles uses a broader thematic reading to justify something that ought to be impossible within the world of the film. Citizen Kane evokes in us an epistemic fantasy, the desire to know a secret that will explain a mystery — and to be the only ones who know the secret. The continuity of space and time implied by camera movement can then be broken without complaint when the camera passes through the various barriers; we're so deeply wedded to the lure of the investigative gaze that we don't register these breaks as breaks.

The game Welles plays is one where he subverts, takes apart, and exposes the conventions of cinema without pushing us out of the film — modernist reflexivity, to be sure, but of Fried rather than Michelson. Two famous tracking shots, both organized around Susan Alexander's nightclub, show how this works. The first comes immediately after Thompson has been given his assignment. Welles cuts directly from the screening room to a billboard of Susan, lightning flashing and rain falling. Thunder rolls, and the camera lifts up, moving above a rooftop, then tracking forward towards the neon sign of 'El Rancho / Floor Show / Twice Nightly' — somehow passing between the first two lines — and continues onwards towards a skylight behind. As the camera approaches it, we can see the nightclub beneath; the shot starts to

go out of focus, there are several flashes of lightning, and then the camera is suddenly inside the nightclub, still tracking toward Susan seated alone at a table. The lightning flashes, which cover up the dissolve and so make an impossible movement seem normal, are the magician's wave of the hand, a brief distraction of our attention that allows the trick to happen unnoticed.

But that's not enough for Welles. He has to make it clear to us how we're being tricked while at the same time still tricking us into believing what we see. Later in the film, we return to the nightclub, and Welles repeats the virtuosic shot through the skylight. This time, the lightning flash is gone and the second shot — from inside the club — is stationary; the bare bones of the trick are exposed to our view. And yet we still 'fall' for it, we still allow ourselves to be led through the skylight. This is the art of the magician: Welles knows how to manipulate our familiarity with conventions, knows how to show us that we're being manipulated and yet still have us absorbed in the game being played in front of our eyes.

Given this — other examples could be added as well — we might be tempted to simply decouple Welles from the terms of Bazin's criticism, grouping him instead with other modernists. Moving away from the terms of realism would have the advantage, among other things, of allowing us to think more seriously about the ways in which Welles's films work with and against the conventions of narrative cinema. This has generally been the line of inquiry recommended by critics interested in these questions within Welles's work.[33]

Despite the way Welles's style seems to go against the central tenets of Bazin's theory and criticism, I want to resist the urge to leave Bazin behind. Partly, it's that Welles does not eschew realism. The tracking shots serve his purpose precisely because they carry with them the background association of an integral realism. He treats realism as a stable ground, a kind of basic convention against which his tracking shots and other tricks can take shape. But it's also

that Bazin is too good a critic to have missed such important elements in Welles's films. After all, he was still writing about Welles when films like <u>Lady from Shanghai</u>, <u>Mr. Arkadin</u>, and <u>Touch of Evil</u> were released, and it would have been hard not to notice their interest in deception, trickery, and free-floating stories. Indeed, as we press on Bazin's readings, we find that he's interested in — and struggling with — precisely these elements of Welles's films.

One of the difficulties in recognizing this aspect of Bazin's work is bibliographic. The monograph on Welles that's been available (in both French and English) is a 1958 revision of an earlier 1950 book; the later version is less ambitious, less inquisitive, and less original, but it's become the standard text.[34] By contrast, the 1950 book, written following the release of <u>Lady from Shanghai</u>, shows Bazin working to come to terms with the complexity and playfulness of Welles's style. He describes Welles as 'the instigator of a vast bluff', calls him 'the genius of bluff', and repeatedly speaks of the films as 'games' with conventions that resemble forms of 'prestidigitation' rather than realistic representation.[35] He even speaks about the virtuosic tracking shots in <u>The Magnificent Ambersons</u>, the film at the heart of the realistic claims in the 1958 book, as a form of deception. Discussing a scene in which George and Lucy ride in a carriage through the streets of the town, Bazin argues that Welles initially composes it as if with a rear projection but then, at the very end, suddenly allows the camera to pivot away from the couple and reveal a real background. While I'm not entirely convinced by this reading, what is astonishing is that Bazin takes what should be a matter of realism — the eschewal of camera effects in favor of fully realized setting — and treats it instead as a demonstration designed to produce astonishment, a moment of surprise. This scene, he writes, manifests a 'diabolical intention', as Welles constructs the trick 'only for the pleasure of showing that he can [do it]' (<u>OWC</u>, 16–7).

Such examples are found throughout the 1950 monograph — in a wonderful phrase, he calls Lady from Shanghai 'une intrigue policière abracadabrante' (a noir conjuring act) (OWC, 31) — and they address head on the aspects of Welles's cinema that pose problems for his theory of realism. In thinking about Welles' style as being motivated by a desire to show himself as capable of manipulating the audience, Bazin seems willing to allow the films to break the ontological boundary of the world of the film. The films, he acknowledges, work by playing with the boundary that narrative cinema tends to construct as an inviolable principle (OWC, 48–9). His recognition of this aspect of Welles's films, and his need to figure out what it amounts to, is even behind his least convincing interpretation: that the films are less about the fictional characters than they are about Welles himself. Because Welles himself frequently plays the lead character — and, where he doesn't (as in The Magnificent Ambersons), there is an obvious surrogate — and because the plots bear a resemblance to Welles's own life, Bazin sometimes treats them as autobiography. That is, he reads their emphasis on childhood as indicative of self-analysis in cinematic form: the films are the means by which Welles can take up and work through his own past (OWC, 28–9 and OW, 65). In producing this reading, however, Bazin is effectively acknowledging that Welles's films are not self-contained, that they draw on the world outside their own boundaries. The presence of Welles in the films marks his status as both author and subject, crossing the ontological barrier of the fictional world.

This is not to say that Bazin's interest in Welles's persona is without its problems. In particular, it leads him to see too easy an equivalence between the characters Welles plays and his views as film-maker. With Touch of Evil, for example, Bazin had trouble separating Welles from Quinlan, something that Welles himself would later be puzzled by. But even this reading shows his aliveness to the essentially modernist problems that Welles's films present, devising

various interpretive strategies and arguments to account for them.

Does this mean that Bazin should be reconceived as a modernist? That the history of film theory as we know it should be thrown out? Well, no. Bazin is not really a modernist. Or, rather, he's not really a modernist in Michelson's strong sense of the term, an investigator into the materiality of the cinematic image in a way that breaks, once and for all, its illusionistic spell. But then neither was Welles. His films retain the illusions of narrative cinema and then <u>use</u> them for new purposes: realism is the basis for their play with our expectations, desires, and habits. It's a modernism we might designate as 'picaresque' or 'Shandian', citing Cervantes and Sterne rather than Brecht and Duchamp — committed to playing with and exposing the conventions of the represented world without ever forcing us to leave it. If Michelson defined the modernist film-maker with the phrase 'From Magician to Epistemologist', Welles suggests an alternative: 'The Magician <u>as</u> Epistemologist'.[36]

More generally, the encounter between Bazin and Welles suggests that the basic opposition between realism and modernism, one that has structured so much film theory, is fundamentally inadequate. It establishes a stark opposition where there is a more fluid field, creates stable categories where there are contingent negotiations. Realism and modernism were always bound together in the same figures, part of the same histories. If Welles is exemplary of this, we still need Bazin to say how.[37]

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[1] <u>Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and its Afterlife</u>, edited by Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert Laurencin (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011); <u>Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations</u>, edited by Sarah Keller and Jason Paul (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Béla Balázs, <u>Early Film Theory</u>, edited by Erica Carter (Oxford, Berghahn Books,

2010); <u>Arnheim for Film and Media Studies</u>, edited by Scott Higgins (New York, Routledge, 2011); and <u>Culture in the Anteroom: The Legacies of Siegfried Kracauer</u>, edited by Georg Gemünden and Johannes von Moltke *(*Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2012).

[2] Malcolm Turvey, <u>Doubting Vision</u> (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), 10. Subsequent references are given in the text using the abbreviation <u>DV</u>.

[3] See also Malcolm Turvey, 'Balázs: Realist or Modernist?', <u>October</u> 115 (2006), 86–7.

[4] André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' in <u>What Is Cinema? Vol. 1</u>, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967), 15. Subsequent references are given in the text using the abbreviation <u>OPI</u>.

[5] For an attempt to show Bazin's modernist aspirations that focuses more on historical context, see Colin MacCabe, 'Bazin as Modernist' in <u>Opening Bazin</u>, 66–76.

[6] Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema' in <u>What Is Cinema? Vol. 1</u>, 24, 27. Subsequent references are given in the text using the abbreviation <u>ELC</u>.

[7] Compare Clement Greenberg: 'I find that I have offered no other explanation for the present superiority of abstract art than its historical justification. So what I have written has turned out to be an historical apology for abstract art (…) My own experience of art has forced me to accept most of the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived, but I do not maintain that they are the only valid standard through eternity. I find them simply the most valid ones at this given moment. I have no doubt that they will be replaced in the future by other standards' ('Towards a Newer Laocoön' in <u>The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol. 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944</u>, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 37).

[8] See Bazin, 'An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism' in <u>What Is Cinema? Vol. 2</u>, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971), 35–8.

[9] Bazin, 'Monsieur Hulot and Time' in <u>What Is Cinema?</u>, translated by Timothy Barnard (Montreal, Caboose, 2009), 41.

[10] 'Bazin on Marker', <u>Film Comment</u> 39:4 (2003), 44.

[11] See 'An Aesthetic of Reality', 16, 25–6; Bazin, 'The Myth of Stalin in the Soviet Cinema' in <u>Bazin at Work</u>, edited by Bert Cardullo (New York, Routledge, 1997), 23–40.

[12] André Bazin, 'Le Ghetto concentrationnaire', <u>Cahiers du cinéma</u> 9 (1952), 58–60. I owe this reference and translation to Alice Lovejoy.

[13] Brian Henderson, <u>A Critique of Film Theory</u> (New York, E.P. Dutton, 1980), 38–45

[14] For these debates, see my 'Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics', <u>Critical Inquiry</u> 32 (2006), 443–81; Tom Gunning, 'What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs', <u>Nordicom</u> 25:1 (2005): 106–29; Philip Rosen, 'Belief in Bazin' in <u>Opening Bazin</u>, 107–18.

[15] Bazin, 'Theater and Cinema' in <u>What is Cinema? Vol. 1</u>, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967), 108. Subsequent references are given in the text using the abbreviation <u>TC</u>.

[16] See, for example, Noël Carroll, 'Towards an Ontology of the Moving Image' in <u>Philosophy and Film</u>, edited by Cynthia Freeland and Thomas Wartenberg (New York, Routledge, 1995), 68–85 (p. 68).

[17] Bazin, 'William Wyler, or the Jansenist of Directing' in <u>Bazin at Work</u>, 6. Subsequent references are given in the text using the abbreviation <u>WJD</u>.

[18] Stanley Cavell, 'Knowing and Acknowledging' in <u>Must We Mean What We Say?</u> (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969): 238–66 (p. 257). Other places where Cavell develops the idea of acknowledgment include 'The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of <u>King Lear</u>'

in <u>Must We Mean What We Say?</u>: 267–353; and <u>The Claim of Reason</u> (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979): 329–496.

[19] See Michael Fried, 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons' in <u>Art and Objecthood</u> (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998): 77–99 (p. 88).

[20] Clement Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland' in <u>The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969</u>, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1993): 94–100 (p. 97).

[21] Noël Carroll, 'Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video, and Photography' in <u>Theorizing the Moving Image</u> (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996): 3–24 (p. 13).

[22] Stanley Cavell, <u>The World Viewed</u>, Enlarged Edition (New York, The Viking Press, 1979), 31. This is also the position Carroll advocates, even though he argues that classical film theory does not contain it (see Noël Carroll, 'Forget the Medium!' in <u>Engaging the Moving Image</u> (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), 1–9).

[23] Annette Michelson, 'What Is Cinema?', <u>Artforum</u> 6:10 (1968), 70, hereafter <u>WCM</u> in the text.

[24] Annette Michelson, 'Screen/Surface: The Politics of Illusionism', <u>Artforum</u> 11:1 (1972), 61, hereafter <u>SS</u> in the text.

[25] Noël Burch and Jorge Dana, 'Propositions', <u>Afterimage</u> 5 (1974), 55.

[26] For accounts of Welles that emphasize a modernist dimension, see Paul Arthur, 'Out of the Depths: <u>Citizen Kane</u>, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde Impulse' in <u>Orson Welles's Citizen Kane: A Casebook</u>, edited by James Naremore (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004), 263–84; Noël Carroll, 'Interpreting <u>Citizen Kane</u>' and 'Welles and Kafka' in <u>Interpreting the Moving Image</u> (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 153–65, 191–202; James

Naremore, <u>The Magic World of Orson Welles</u> (Dallas, Southern Methodist University Press, 1989); Jonathan Rosenbaum, <u>Discovering Orson Welles</u> (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007).

[27] André Bazin, <u>Orson Welles: A Critical View</u> [1958], translated by Jonathan Rosenbaum (Los Angeles, Acrobat Books, 1991), 78. Subsequent references are given in the text using the abbreviation <u>OW</u>.

[28] Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, <u>Hitchcock, The First Forty-Four Films</u>, translated by Stanley Hochman (New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1979), 95–7; Naremore, <u>The Magic World of Orson Welles</u>, 31–47.

[29] In this I differ from Naremore's assessment.

[30] George Wilson, <u>Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View</u> (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 1–5.

[31] It's clear, for example, that it's behind Bazin's claim that Welles uses depth of field to bring spectators into a more active and 'natural' relation to the film than is possible with montage. Another topic is the extent to which the film world can be approached differently than our world can be: 'But the function of depth of field is not only to allow more liberty to the director and the actors. It confirms the unity of actor and decor, the total interdependence of everything real, from the human to the mineral. In the representation of a space, it is a necessary modality of <u>this</u> realism which postulates a constant sensitivity to the world but which opens to a universe of analogies, of metaphors, or, to use Baudelaire's word in another, no less poetic sense, of correspondences' (André Bazin, <u>Jean Renoir</u>, edited by François Truffaut (New York, Da Capo, 1992), 90).

[32] For similar arguments, see V. F. Perkins, <u>Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies</u> (London, Penguin Books, 1972), 74, and 'Where is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction' in <u>Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film</u>, edited by John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005), 16–41.

[33] See, for example, Arthur, 'Out of the Depths', 275.

[34] For the story of these two versions, see Rosenbaum, <u>Discovering Orson Welles</u>, 62–5. Colin MacCabe has suggested to me that it also has to do with a larger shift in Bazin's criticism following the debate over his essay on 'The Myth of Stalin in the Soviet Cinema'. As MacCabe sees it, Bazin became less adventurous and open as a result. On this debate see Antoine de Baecque, 'Bazin in Combat' in <u>Opening Bazin</u>, 225–33.

[35] André Bazin, <u>Orson Welles</u> (Paris: Chavane, 1950), 14, 18, and see also 32. Translations are my own. Subsequent references are given in the text using the abbreviation <u>OWC</u>.

[36] See Annette Michelson, 'From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov's <u>The Man with a Movie Camera</u>', <u>Artforum</u>, 10:7 (1972), 60–72.

[37] Thanks to Kristin Boyce, Xinyu Dong, Barbara Herman, and Rick Warner for their comments and suggestions, and to Mickey Morgan for many conversations about Welles.