**Andre Bazin: The Ontology of the Photographic Image**

Bazin begins with a metaphor that is meant to represent the function of photography for the living beings who use it: to preserve what no longer exists. Bazin is framing the invention of and interest in photography as part of a long-sought goal of the living: to stop the erasure (death) that time imposes on us. Bazin calls this “the preservation of life by a representation of life.” [10]

Originally, this was a religious goal, tied to the hope/need for something that *remains after death* (an **afterlife**). Eventually this impulse leaves the somewhat *literal* religious pursuit that led the Egyptians to embalm the dead. Eventually it is enough that a statuary remains.

These developments have, in the modern world, led to something new: what was originally “the making of images [to serve] an anthropocentric, utilitarian purpose” was now in service of a “larger concept[:] the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny.”[10]

Bazin then situates a modern crisis that “overtook modern painting” in the middle of the 18th century, which took classical objectives of the plastic arts (painting, sculpture) and turned them in service of “plastic realism” (representation of things that *exist,* where *realism* in the representation was the objective).

What is contrasted with the *realist objective*?

Answer: *representation as* ***symbolic***. Spiritual realities, which attempted to represent what is spiritual, and hence can only be unavoidably *symbolized through representation* (because they are not *of this world*), required symbolic representations in the plastic arts, and these **cannot imitate** spiritual realities.

What, then, led to this movement to attempted *imitation of real-world things*, rather than art-as-symbolic in nature?

Answer: the development of new means of representation that could **reproduce features of ordinary perception**: e.g., **use of perspective in painting**. (JP: note that this was always possible in sculpture, and that is why classical sculpture tends to represent the realist approach to art [you don’t get sculpture that is reaching for something *otherworldly* until modern experiments where purely aesthetic features in which purely formal features of natural objects can become the guiding principle of sculpture (e.g., Henry Moore, Clement Greenberg)

While Bazin thinks that painting after this transition was “torn between two ambitions: one, primarily aesthetic, namely the expression of spiritual reality wherein the symbol transcended the model; the other, purely psychological, namely the duplication of the world outside.”[11]

But “[t]he satisfaction of this appetite for illusion merely served to increase it till, bit by bit, **it consumed the plastic arts.**”[JP emphasis, since this appetite for realism *in movies* now often overwhelms the more aesthetic/spiritual possibilities of symbolism in film {e.g., Lynch, Bergman, Antonioni, Tarkovsky, et al.}]

The pursuit of illusion in visual arts is tied, for Bazin, “in the proclivity of the mind towards magic.” (cf. Welles’s obsession with making films as more akin to a magician’s act than to the documentation of real life)

Upshot: the tension between ‘pursuit-of-realism’ and ‘pursuit-of-the-spiritual/aesthetic’ is brand new and a consequence of technical developments in art representation that tempt us to engage in *fooling the eye, the ear, the mind* in order to achieve a **heightened version of reality based on illusion**. The medieval painters/sculptors did not have this problem, since there was no ambition to play around with two-dimensional modes of representation to *fool the eye* or *ear*. The main reason for this: technical means were *too crude* to make this a reasonable objective. (Bazin: “No matter how skillful the painter, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity. The fact that a human hand intervened cast a shadow of doubt over the image.”[12]

JP: Perhaps this is *another* way in which the advance of the scientific comprehension of the natural world affected the arts: the subjectivity of art (which doesn’t exclude a *capacity for conveying* ***true things*** *about ourselves and the world*) comes into contact with the sometimes jarring contrast with *the pursuit of* ***objective*** *knowledge* that is implicit in the project of scientific explanation of ourselves and the world (where common sense *seems to often fall for* ***illusion***, and the scientific version of the same phenomena is seen to ***replace common sense***.

Key: “the essential factor in the transition form the baroque to photography is not the perfecting of a physical process (photography will long remain the inferior of painting in the reproduction of color); rather does it lie in a psychological fact, to wit, in completely satisfying our appetite for **illusion by mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part**.” [12; JP emphasis]

Upshot: Bazin thinks that illusion is certainly an *unavoidable element in the production of art*, it was formerly something that naturally comes with the necessary contribution of a **filter: the artist themselves**. That filter bears the stamp of the artist: their personality, interests, ways of seeing/hearing/touching/interpreting, and those who experience the artist’s work take it as unavoidably reflecting the intervention and influence of the artist on whatever *is lifelike/real* in the product. After photography, the image takes on a ***credibility*** which confers a “transference of reality from the thing [photographed] to its reproduction.” [14]

“…painting is, after all, an inferior way of making likenesses…” [14]

“…. Photography does not create eternity, as art does, it **embalms time**, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption.” [14]

**Conclusion**: “the cinema is objectivity in time…. Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their curation, change mummified as it were.” [15]

“By the power of photography…nature at last does more than imitate art: **she imitates the artist**.” [15]

“….photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it….. [e.g.] the surrealist does not consider his aesthetic purpose and the mechanical effect of the image on our imaginations as things apart. For him, the logical distinction between what is imaginary and what is real tends to disappear. **Every image is to be seen as an object and every object as an image.**”

JP: This helps account for my transition from being unable to watch simulated violence onscreen to regarding it as **just a movie/trick/make-believe**. I began by taking what I saw onscreen as a *simulation of a real event* (which is natural given the nature of photography according to Bazin), only to eventually realize that the it was possible to treat the objects/scenes captured on film *as chimera* rather than as *real-world things and events*. Thus photography, and then cinema, allows us to move from art as the simulation of the world to art **as the world** (but a world we can treat as **not the world**: “**It’s only a movie!’**).