

## THE ONTOLOGY OF A FETISH

DUDLEY ANDREW SCRUTINIZES A HITHERTO-UNPUBLISHED  
TYPESCRIPT FRAGMENT BY ANDRÉ BAZIN

Stacked nearly a meter high in my attic are photocopies of all—or nearly all—Bazin’s published writings. This amounts to over 2600 items, of which, scandalously, less than seven percent are available in French or English.<sup>1</sup> With such a treasure of material that he sent out for the world to read, why am I fascinated by a single sheet he typed but never published, one I cannot even date with accuracy? I discovered it while preparing the forewords for the re-edition of *What is Cinema?* (University of California Press). Glancing through material I had gathered thirty years earlier when working up Bazin’s biography, I carefully opened Sartre’s *L’Imaginaire*, the yellowed volume that had been on the bookshelf above Bazin’s deathbed and that Janine, his widow, had let me choose as a souvenir in 1974. There weren’t many books to choose from (I’ve never discovered what sort of library he maintained), but at the time I was excited to have irrefutable proof of his interest in Sartre. *The Psychology of the Imagination* (as it was called in English until recently) had been important to me in my undergraduate days, and it was gratifying to know that the inclinations of my own line of thought converged with his.

But until I reopened this fragile volume in 2004, I hadn’t known just how central it was to him. There on pages 38 and 39 were penciled underlinings of passages that he indubitably reworked for the essay that would anchor his career and make his reputation, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” Even without his mark-up, certain shared phrases leap out, especially those concerning the “magic” and “irrational” nature of the image. In the very first paragraph of the French original, Bazin develops the psychoanalytic role of images. He writes of “the arrow-pierced clay bear to be found in prehistoric caves, a substitute for the living animal that will ensure a successful hunt.” Now listen to Sartre: “the effigy of wax pierced with a pin, the wounded bison painted on the walls

to make the hunt more fruitful.” Or look at Bazin’s daring assertion: “the image proceeds from the ontology of the model; it is the model.” This scandalous claim seems more defensible when set beside what Sartre had written (and what Bazin underlined): “The portrait of Pierre acts on us—almost—like Pierre in person . . . I say ‘This is a portrait of Pierre,’ or, more briefly: ‘This is Pierre.’” Both men employ as a key example the portrait of a king. Concerning “the image-portrait” of King Charles VIII in the Uffizi Gallery Sartre says, “The object is posited as absent, but the impression is present. Here we have an irrational synthesis . . . the dead Charles VIII is there, present before us. It is he that we see, not the picture. And yet we posit him as not being there. We have only reached him ‘as imaged’ by ‘the intermediary’ of the picture. One sees that the relation that consciousness posits in the imaging attitude between the portrait and its subject is [properly speaking] magical.”<sup>2</sup> Bazin used a different king, Louix XIV, and a different painter, Charles Le Brun, to evoke the same irrational synthesis. Western civilization’s way of preserving its noble leaders on painted canvas is but a variant of Egyptian mummification, though, as opposed to Sartre, Bazin sees an evolution whereby painting has passed beyond an earlier phase when art’s mission was tied to magic. We know that Sartre occasionally attended Bazin’s ciné-club near the Sorbonne in 1943. Did they ever discuss the fetish power of the image?

This physical object produced by La Librarie Gallimard in Spring 1940, this book Bazin purchased when he was twenty-two, became my fetish when it fell into my hands. I can’t but read the dozen marginalia and underlinings as scars in the struggle between student and master philosopher. (Bazin’s wonderful piece on Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* [1940], for instance—his inaugural contribution to *Esprit* in 1945—lights up when set beside pages 40–44 of *L’Imaginaire*.) But there was far more of Bazin in this volume. As I slowly turned the pages in summer 2004, looking for additional scribbles, a folded sheet fluttered out: Bazin’s writing that had been stuffed inside the body of Sartre’s.

## PHOTOGRAPHY: "REPRESENTANT ANALOGIQUE," "ANALOGON" (SARTRE)

Photo-souvenir and photo-art: the first has a simple function (that of a vehicle); the second plays on the ambiguity of its nature; insofar as it is a mechanical product, it refers to the real of which it is the fixation; insofar as it is a visible form, it tries to hold our attention on the visible aspect of itself. A bizarre angle suffices to grab the eye in this way, on its form, before the eye can escape toward the reality that it aims at.

That which is fixed is the real. The photograph of Landru's oven takes on an emotive force thanks to the immediate confidence that one accords the photograph. Through this representation of the object, it is the object that moves us, not the representation. The object itself would move us even more.

If a piece of newsreel should, perchance, restore for us this object within the event which made it memorable and moving, that is, if this oven, which moves us because it evokes certain tawdry news-items of which it was the pivot, should be rendered present in its real coordinates by virtue of cinematic recording, then the rubric "représentant analogique" that we have given to the photograph is enlarged. The family photo may be the family immobilized in a here and now; but a film renders the fluidity of its space and of its time. The photo was a *document*, the film is a *documentary*.

Now let us imagine this film broadcast on live TV. Then the documentary becomes contemporary with the spectator, as the spectator is led to participate in an event which is displayed to him through the work of cinematographic technique.

[Translated by Dudley Andrew]

When did he take the time to type up this sheet? When backlit, the page reveals a watermark, "Maton-Paris," Maton being a city in Alsace known for paper manufacture. Short of carbon-dating, however, there seems no way to tell when Bazin turned the platen and rolled this sheet into position, then started hitting the keys. The example he dwells on, a photograph of Landru's oven, could suggest 1947, since that year he wrote of Bluebeard (Landru) in his review of *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947). A later date is urged by the reference to television, since Bazin's first essay on TV came out in 1951. But André Malraux had already brought up TV in his "Esquisse d'un psychologie du cinema" back in 1940, and we know how important that piece was for Bazin, since

he explicitly cites it in the "Ontology" essay.<sup>3</sup> Like Malraux he could easily have been speculating in 1940 on a phenomenon that was in the science news of the time, one that put cinema in perspective.

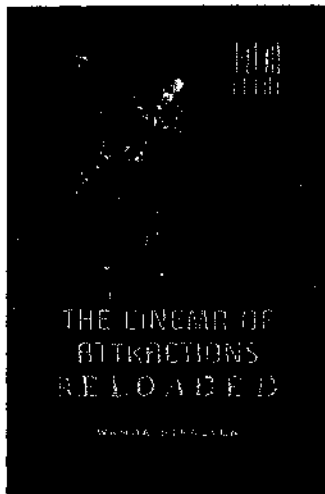
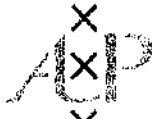
No matter what its date, this page shows Bazin struggling with the specificity of three technological media. Like a surveyor, he triangulates cinema's position between photography and television, and, after first isolating the valence of technological images for reality, he does so in three successive paragraphs.

1. Bazin calls the photograph a *document*, a term he underlines. In the French context, this edges him close to Georges Bataille (whose journal *Documents* featured disturbing photographs not different from the one Bazin brings up, Landru's oven that incinerated the bodies of eleven humans). The Surrealists collected and produced bizarre photographs; they may well have relished this very example.<sup>4</sup> Breton's 1928 *Nadja* weaves its dreamy narrative around Boiffard's unalterable photos. About the same time Dalí's obsession with "precisionism" found its best examples in photographs, as alien signs that confront us with a reality outside the human. In 1943 some of his acquaintances averred that Bazin was a practicing Surrealist. Just look at the last page of the "Ontology" essay where he calls a photograph "une hallucination vrai." Sartre, who loathed surrealism, would never have countenanced this formulation that haunted Bazin's view of cinema ever after.

2. From the *document* to the *documentaire*. Bazin next imagines the photograph coming alive within an "actualité" (filmed newsreel) whose subject expands from an object to an event or a state-of-affairs. Whereas Sartre concentrated on the relation of the *analogon* to the image-consciousness it automatically provokes, Bazin is more concerned with the relation of the *analogon* to the situation from which it was "captured." In Sartre's view, while every object maintains an indefinite number of relations to neighboring objects, and is in fact made up of an infinite number of elements itself, the photograph cuts the *analogon* off from these relations, fixing it as material for the imagination to play with as it wills. Bazin, on the other hand, cares that the photograph offers clues about its situation, inviting acute inspection. A film greatly enlarges this impulse since its *analogon* delivers not just one or even several objects but the relations of those objects to their spatio-temporal surround. We can scan the screen for details that the sequence may contain unbeknown even to the cinematographer ("a reflection on a damp sidewalk, the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it . . ."). Film, as opposed to photography, "is no longer content to preserve the object enshrouded

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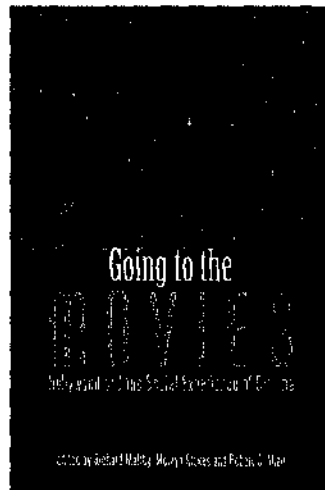
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(including movies) recorded earlier. But as the sports matches, the nightly news, the Olympics, the Oscars, and other live broadcasts attest, TV is essentially distinct from cinema. André Bazin's philosophy of the image can be found within that distinction.

Reading his reading notes I recognize two Bazins. On the one hand stands the sunny, textbook Bazin, for whom cinema reveals reality. This is the Bazin for whom films are the monstration of the world's self-presentation, offering epiphanies to the vigilant. On the other hand, as has become increasingly evident, a darker Bazin prefigures several philosophers in the post-Sartrean French context right up to our own day (Derrida, Deleuze, Nancy, Rancière). This is the Bazin of lag and deferral ("cinema as a mirror whose tain retains the image," he would later write in anticipation of Derrida<sup>5</sup>), the Bazin of the off-screen and the invisible, and of whatever is not fully given, or is given ambiguously, or withdraws into itself. Television, for this Bazin, presents or simulates the way the world looks; cinema, by contrast, points to an absent reality through shadowy traces and echoes of recorded sound.

But I didn't need to interpret these notes to understand what in fact they palpably exemplify, because Sartre's *L'Imaginaire*—this particular copy in my hands—and the typed sheet buried like a mummy within it, conjure Bazin as present in his absence. They constitute—precisely and potently—a fetish.

1. *Cahiers du Cinéma* has rights to all Bazin's published writings. They hope to bring out a complete works some day.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: a Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 23.
3. André Malraux, "Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma," *Verve* 8 (1946). Translated as "Sketch for a Psychology of the Motion Picture," in Susan Langer, *Reflections on Art* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958). In the French version of his "Ontology" article Bazin directly cites Malraux's "article de *Verve*."
4. Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) reproduced this photo linking Landru to Aragon and to the Surrealist sensibility.
5. Louis-Georges Schwab, "'Hain' or Bazin beyond Existentialism," lecture at Yale University, 3 December 2005.

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**ABSTRACT** This article includes a translation, facsimile, and analysis of a typescript fragment by Bazin, which is evidence of his engagement with Sartre's *The Imaginary*.

**KEYWORDS** Bazin, Sartre, Barthes, documentary, photography